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# AUTO SHOWCASE

## Canada sits as next auto giant

By Sara Silver  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

For a time, Mexico wasn't a country. It was a threat — the "giant sucking sound" of industries moving south to reap high profits on low wages.

Today, the No. 1 exporter of cars and trucks to the United States is no longer Japan. The new champion has created 28,000 high-paying jobs at border plants rushing to supply American car buyers.

Mexico, right? No, it's Canada.

Canada's auto strike forced General Motors to idle more than 19,000 workers in the United States and Mexico — and made many Americans take notice that the Great White North looks a lot more like Detroit.

Almost three years into the North American Free Trade Agreement, which many feared would send the U.S. auto industry to Mexico, free trade is having the opposite effect of what was expected.

To prove it, look south again. Mexico — which most Americans believe is gaining jobs through trade, an Associated Press poll showed — steadily slashed its auto manufacturing work force until 1996, and replaced those jobs with \$1-an-hour employees on piece-work assembly lines, known as maquiladoras.

And the United States actually gained jobs in the auto industry, though not the higher-paying jobs everyone wants.

Canada has just a 10th of the population of the United States; it is far from the minds of many Americans (only 38 percent of those polled by the AP guessed that Canada was gaining jobs).

"Everyone ignores Canada, and we like that," said Dennis DesRosiers, a Canadian auto industry consultant in Richmond Hill, Ontario outside Toronto. "It means we can ship millions more vehicles to the United States than we buy, and not get beaten up like the Japanese."

In fact, Canada has doubled the number of cars and trucks it exports to the United States since 1989. Last year, it sold \$11.1 billion more in vehicles to the United States than it bought.

But auto tariffs were lifted long before NAFTA — in a trade agreement that was anything but free.

The 1965 agreement known as the Auto Pact set the stage for the industry's climb. It effectively erased the border between the United States and Canada, and eliminated tariffs on automotive products. In exchange, U.S. automakers agreed to assemble a car in Canada for each one they sold there. This excess capacity was quickly put to use when car sales took off in 1994.

By June of this year, Canada employed almost 60,000 workers assembling mostly U.S. parts into motor vehicles — about 85 percent of which were exported to the United States, DesRosiers said.

"You could say we're shipping parts to Canada and buying back assembled vehicles," said Bill Moller, an international auto trade expert and former business professor at the University of Michigan.

But wasn't that supposed to happen in Mexico, where labor is cheap?

It turns out Canadian labor is low-cost, too — one-third less than in the United States — and the quality and productivity are equal or better than that of the United States.

Automakers save at least \$200 for each car they make in Canada because of its national

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## TEST DRIVE



1997 Ford Explorer

### Explorer is great in two-wheel configuration



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After spending time in a two-wheel drive Ford Explorer, I'm puzzled as to why so many people opt for the four-wheel drive version.

Four wheel drive isn't that necessary in this area. We don't get that much snow and areas to go four-wheeling aren't plentiful. But folks like it because, well, it's expected in an SUV.

Most SUVs are offered in two

wheel drive configuration, but they are becoming hard to find. That's why I was surprised when my two-wheel drive Explorer — in Eddie Bauer trim — was dropped off. I kept looking for the buttons to engage the system but found none. OK, so its all-wheel-drive and I don't have to push anything, I thought. Not. It was a lowly two-wheel drive.

But as I said. There's not much need in this area for a 4X4, so the system wasn't missed. What I was glad to see was the 5.0-liter V8, which was new last year. It's the same pushrod engine that powered the Mustang GT for what seemed like forever. When the pony car went for the 4.6-liter modular V8, Ford shoe horned the 5.0-liter mon-

ster into the Explorer.

If the Explorer had a weakness it was the old V6 — 160 horsepower didn't cut it. The V8's 210 horsepower output and 275 pounds-feet of torque are welcomed, indeed. Take off is still a little sluggish, but the car gets rolling quickly. Press the gas pedal and you feel a brutish rush while you hear a deep throaty gurgle that sounds great.

The suspension handles the extra power pretty well, but Ford may need to work on the ride quality. Smooth pavement isn't a problem, but the slightest imperfections make the ride feel jiggly. It's more truck-like than the GM or import vehicles, but it's not bad.

Where the Explorer has all those vehicles beat is its versa-

tility. There seems to be more passenger room for three people in the rear than in the GM midsize SUVs. There is certainly more storage space. There's enough room to store a ton of stuff with the back seats occupied. The rear bench is a 60/40 split design so you can fold one or both seats if necessary to carry more stuff.

The back gate has a dual-lift design. You can either open the back glass to quick toss in small items, or you can open the whole thing. While you're in back, you can lock or unlock the doors.

The front seats are very comfortable as well. Driver and passenger are well supported. They are easy on the back and rump on a long trip. The seat belts are height adjustable for

a better fit. Also, dual air bags are standard, something you still can't get on the midsize GM trucks.

The Explorer also gets high marks for its interior design. The dash got a serious redesign in 1995. It's easy on the eyes and ergonomically correct. The audio and climate controls are big and within easy reach.

Speaking of audio, the optional JBL sound system is still superb. It has to rank as one of the best original manufacturers equipment decks in the business. The speakers are great, offering sparkling clarity and rich, resonate bass. It sounds especially good with the optional six-disc CD changer, which is mounted in the center console. My only gripe is that when you press shuffle, it will only shuffle songs a particular disc, not the entire magazine.

My test vehicle was loaded to the gills. Leather seats, power windows, door locks and mirrors; electric moon roof with sun shade, luggage rack, anti-lock brakes, trip computer with fuel usages, average speed and system check read out, lighted vanity mirrors, fog lamps, two-tone paint, rear window defroster, wiper and washer and CD changer. The only major option missing was a cellular telephone. It wasn't missed but would have been nice. Stepping up to the Limited gives you the phone as standard equipment. The test price was about \$35,000.

My only other complaint with the Explorer is the gas mileage. 14 city — 18 highway was the best I ever got. That's not bad for a SUV, but there has to be a way for these things to improve in that area.

Yep, my two-wheel drive Explorer experience was good enough to let me know that's about all you need in this climate. An ice or snow storm could change my mind, but until then, this is about all you need.

## French warming to minivans despite high fuel cost, streets

By William J. Kole  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PARIS — In this land of narrow cobblestone roads and \$5-plus-per-gallon gasoline, it's easy to see why Europeans long shunned the minivan.

Not any more. Today's minivans are smaller, easier to park, handle better and guzzle less gas. An American favorite has captured the continent's imagination — and it's selling briskly.

"I've been seduced," French race car driver Jean Alesi gushed at the recent Paris Auto Show, where new models like Renault's Megane Scenic, Citroen's Berlingo and Grand Large, Fiat's Multipla and Toyota's Picnic FFV were introduced.

Although sedans and sports cars still outsell minivans by wide margins, Europeans bought 250,000 in 1995, a 47 percent jump from the previous year. This year, they're expected to snap up 300,000, nearly quadruple 1990 sales.

That's far fewer than the 1 million-plus minivans sold annually in the United States, and analysts say the pace here is slacking. Even so, the minivan remains a bright spot in a bleak European auto market just now emerging from a four-year slump.

It's come a long way since 1984, when Renault's pioneering Espace drew just nine orders in its first month on sale. Now there are more than half a million Espaces on the roads.

State-owned Renault says it dominates the European minivan market because it's made each successive Espace model drive less like a truck. The 1996 Espace's chassis is similar to a sedan's, so it handles a parking garage or a narrow village road with equal ease.

The jury's out on whether Renault went too far in slimming down the Scenic, the third generation of the Espace. With its standard gas-sipping 1.4-liter engine and five-speed manual transmission, the seven-seater is noticeably smaller. Critics say it's more like a station wagon than a minivan.

"I just don't like the lines," said Frederic Precloux, window shopping at the Paris show. "It's a smart idea to make a hybrid vehicle that's a cross between a minivan and a little city car, but it's utopian."

Toyota is challenging the Scenic with its new Picnic FFV, which stands for Family Fun Vehicle. It has a 2-liter engine, six seats and goes on sale in Europe in January.

American models are on the market, too, and in rising numbers:

- Chrysler Corp., the second-largest minivan maker in Europe, has a new assembly plant in Austria that's been turning out 47,000 Voyagers a year.

- Ford Motor Co. and Volkswagen AG are making minivans in Portugal in a joint venture launched in 1995 and dubbed Autoeuropa. In May, they rolled out their 100,000th minivan, sold by Ford as the Galaxy and by VW as the Sharan.

- General Motors Corp.'s Opel unit this fall begins selling its

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## Prairie View students refine sun car

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"We're not going just to finish in the top three," said DeLeon Bennett, 22, of Houston.

But winning next summer's Indianapolis-to-Colorado Springs "sun-car" race will be a tall order.

In the most recent of the biennial Sunrayce contest, Prairie View A&M finished 36th in a field of 38. The university's Sunpanther I was the only Texas entrant in the race won by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Prairie View team was slapped with an eight-hour time penalty because Sunpanther I arrived in Indianapolis with batteries that didn't conform to rules.

The goal of the 10-day, 1,200-mile race is to foster teamwork and raise interest in advanced technology. The car with the lowest cumulative time wins.

In June, Sunpanther II faces entries from leading schools such as MIT, Purdue University and California Polytechnic Institute at Pomona, not to mention Texas A&M, Prairie View A&M's big brother to the north. About 70 cars already are vying for 40 race slots.

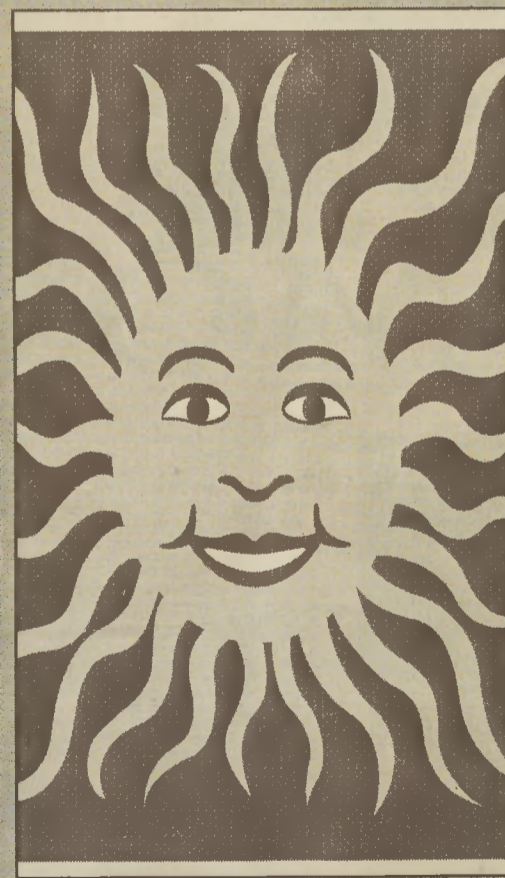
The contest has no spending limits. Sunpanther I cost about \$100,000, including the estimated price of donated materials and services.

To hold Sunpanther II to roughly the same budget, the team ruled out building a new car and is recasting the tall, clunky-looking first-generation car into something lighter, sleeker and more refined.

Team members say their 1995 car weighed a third more than competitors' and pushed too much air.

"It just wasn't aerodynamic at all," said Rondo Guillory, 25, of Port Arthur. "Winning the race comes down to weight and aerodynamics."

Working on the solar-powered car counts toward graduation as a senior-level engineering class. The project is handed off to a new team between semesters.



PRAIRIE VIEW, Texas — Prairie View A&M engineering students don't want to hear "nice try."

In last year's national solar-powered car race, Prairie View A&M was outspent, out-designed and outrun. The 48 students building the Sunpanther II vow 1997 will be different.

"No one is out of reach for us," said project leader Edwin Lloyd, a 23-year-old senior from Dallas. "We can do it."

This time around, Prairie View A&M promises to win.