

URBAN PICKS



Ford Escort/Mercury Tracer, *Top Urban Pick*

For more than 15 years, the Ford Escort has proved a perennial best-seller, but not necessarily a favorite among entry-level car buyers. Spartan and bland, early versions defined the traditional image of cheap transportation. But oh, how things can change. The newly redesigned Escort and its sister, the Tracer, redefine the image of inexpensive, according to our Urban Picks panel. "A car that proves inexpensive doesn't have to mean ugly," suggests *AAOW* Editor Warren Brown. "[They] top this class for their exceptional ride and handling," adds Editor-in-Chief Randi Payton. Ford's goal was more car for less money, and the company actually cut prices on several versions of the Escort and Tracer, while adding some attractive new features. These include a smoother and more powerful 110-horsepower 2.0 liter engine. You'll find a lot more kick, whether you're racing off at the green, or merging into freeway traffic. The '97 models—which actually made their debut last spring—are slightly larger and notably more quiet than before. Inexpensive, yes, but plenty of car for the money, and our Urban Pick winners.

ECONOMY CARS UNDER \$12,000

*Small don't have
to mean cheap*

By Paul A. Eisenstein

Who says inexpensive has to mean cheap—or plain? Or that an entry-level car can't come with some luxury class features? Sometimes, less is more, or so we discovered pulling together this month's Urban Picks.

Our list of passenger cars priced less than \$12,000 is a long one, a total of 15 different nameplates (if you count the Dodge and Plymouth Neon twins as two), both imports and domestic. Better yet, they come in a total of 33 different "flavors," packages and body styles that include sedans, coupes, hatchbacks and even a station wagon. So there's a car here for every lifestyle.

For auto manufacturers, this long list translates into a lot of competition. And the only way one brand can stand out from the crowd is to offer a better value. For consumers, that means more room, more features, more power or better styl-

