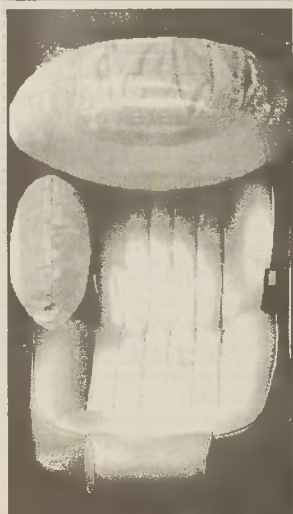


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AUTO SHOWCASE

Driver side air bags less harmful

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



WASHINGTON — Nearly two-thirds of drivers in crashes of air bag-equipped cars were injured by the deploying bag, according to an analysis by University of Michigan researchers.

Most of the injuries were minor scrapes and bruises, but 3 percent of the drivers — or 18 — suffered broken bones in the forearm or hand, according to the university's Transportation Research Institute, where researchers studied 540 crashes.

The fractures were caused by the deploying air bag, the air bag cover, or the air bag flinging drivers' arms and hands into the instrument panel or windshield, Donald F. Huelke, a lead researcher, said in a telephone interview.

Several of the breaks happened during a left-hand turn when a driver's right hand was over the steering wheel, where the air bag deploys, Huelke said.

Nearly two-thirds of the drivers had injuries to the arms, hands, face or upper body and most injuries were minor scrapes, bruises or cuts, Huelke said. "They are primarily scuffs and scrapes to the forearm or face," he said.

Air bags have saved more than 1,700 lives, according to government estimates, but have been blamed for the deaths of 38 children and 24 adults.

The researchers found that 38 percent of the drivers suffered forearm and hand injuries while one in three drivers sustained a facial injury, according to papers they published this year.

Huelke and other researchers at the institute in Ann Arbor, Mich., looked at 540 crashes involving the deployment of driver-side air bags in a variety of vehicles through mid-1996. Most of the crashes were in Michigan; about one-fifth were in other states, mostly the Great Lakes states.

About 2 percent — or 11 drivers — sustained eye injuries from air bag deployment, primarily scuffs on the eyeball or some blood in the eye, Huelke said. "In almost all the cases, the driver recovered from the injury and there were no long-term effects," he said.

However, a report published in March that reviewed five cases of air bag injuries treated at the University of California, Los Angeles, ophthalmology trauma center concluded air bags could be hazardous to the eyes.

"The study highlights that air bags need some changes in design," said Dr. Edward E. Manche, the paper's lead author and director of cornea and refractive surgery at Stanford University Medical Center.

See AIRBAGS Page 13B



Winfred B. Cross

Do you remember when Cadillac tried to offer an entry-level car in the '80s called the . . .

ssssshhh. I almost said it. The company is still trying to forget that car, which was little more than a Chevy Cavalier.

That was the '80s. This is the '90s and entry-level luxury cars are called near-luxury and made by the likes of Lexus, Infiniti, Acura and Mercedes. All of the offerings range from great to spectacular.

With everyone else doing so well, Cadillac has decided to re-enter the fray with the Catera. Ironically, it starts with a C, as did the . . . sssshhh, I almost said it again.

There is no cause for alarm, however. The Catera is every bit as good as its competition — and then some.

Much like the competition, the Catera isn't built on these shores. It's a joint effort



1997 Cadillac Catera

Catera shines in Cadillac lineup

between Cadillac and Adam Opel AG of Germany. Actually, it's an Americanized Opel Omega, which has been in Europe for a number of years. Cadillac beefed up the standard equipment list to include power seats, keyless entry and automatic climate controls — not a big deal here, but not common on European cars.

Cadillac also slapped its distinct egg-crate grill up front, adorned with a traditional crest encircled with a wreath. The tail lights stretch the width of the trunk.

From stem to stern the Catera is a bland looking car, especially in slate, the color of my test vehicle. It didn't turn a single head. A few people asked if this was the new Chevy Prizm. Not good for a car that runs way past the \$30,000 mark.

But looks are only skin deep. The car's interior more than makes up for the exterior's shortcomings. The dash is

ergonomically correct, offering large gauges and well-placed air vents. Buttons and switches work with a silky, expensive feeling. Dual air bags are standard as are steering wheel-mounted radio controls.

The radio is mounted a little low, under the climate controls. I would have done it the other way, since the heat and air conditioning can be selected automatically. But that's a minor faux pas.

The gear selector looks much like a five-speed. Alas, it isn't. The Catera is offered only with a four-speed automatic. Another minor faux pas.

There is pace a plenty. Driver and passenger are treated to generous leg and hip room. Head room is compromised a bit by the sun roof, which operates with a dial instead of a switch. Rear seat passengers should find it very comfortable, even for three. The leather seats are a joy

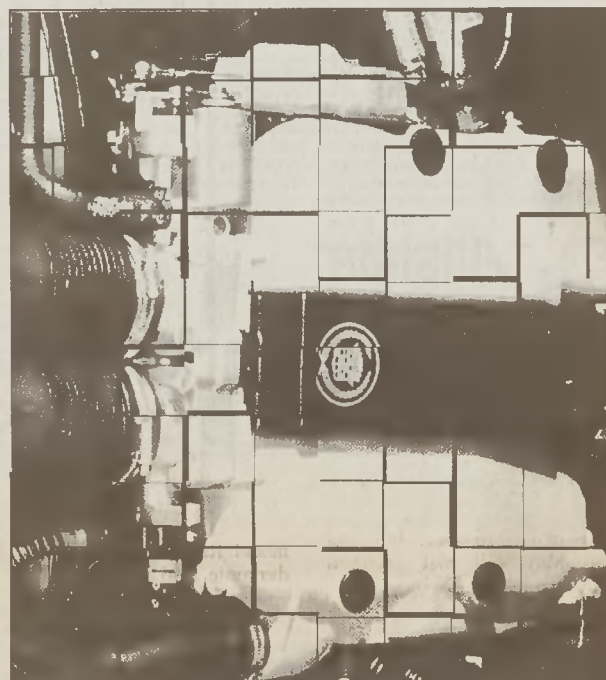
So is the engine. It too is

made by Opel, a 200-horsepower dual overhead cam V6 which is more than willing to rev, but oh, so quietly. Torque is 192 pounds-feet at 3,600 rpm. That's generous. It's achieved through a three-stage multi-ram induction system. Dual-platinum-tipped spark plugs, extended life coolant and a long-life cam belt should prevent the need for a tune-up until 100,000 miles.

The four-speed transmission works very well with the engine. It shifts with the silkiness of a Lexus — high praise indeed.

Some Cadillac buyers have complained of the car's ride. Too stiff, is what some current Caddy owners have told me. Yes, it's stiff, but what German car isn't? The Catera is built to communicate road conditions to the driver. That means a stiff suspension. It isn't harsh, but it is firm.

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Catera's 24-valve V6 engine produces 200 horsepower.

Town Car drops boxy styling in favor of contemporary looks

By Terril Yue Jones
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Seeking to attract younger buyers, Ford's Lincoln-Mercury division on Wednesday unveiled the 1998 Lincoln Town Car, a sleeker, more powerful version of the popular luxury sedan.

The new Town Car is shorter and sports wraparound headlights and rounded corners giving a more contemporary look to the automaker's best-selling luxury car and the flagship of North America's limousine fleets.

David Lewis, an automotive historian at the University of Michigan Business School, said Lincoln officials have to contend with the luxury car's image.

"They have the stamp of an old fogey," Lewis said. "Middle-aged people who have one in their driveway have to defend their purchase," he said. "Having a Cadillac or Lincoln was a statement: you've become somebody. But with younger people, they have to overhaul the image."

The Town Car, one of the few remaining rear-wheel drive sedans, is the top-selling Lincoln, ahead of the Continental and Mark VIII. It accounts for 80 percent of the world's limousine fleets.

The average age of Town Car buyers is 67, and their numbers are dwindling, Lincoln officials acknowledge.

They thus hope to tap into the much larger ranks of baby boomers who are entering their 50s.

This consumer group has seen the Town Car as "too big, as my grandfather's car," said Joseph Philippi, senior automotive analyst at Lehman Brothers in New York.

"To a guy who's in his 50s, driving this car has not sent the youthful, vibrant message he wanted to send," Philippi said. The 1998 Town Car represents a "transition" toward younger buyers, he said. Cadillac is reaching out similarly with its new Catera, a German-made entry-level luxury sedan intended to woo younger buyers.

The 1998 Town Car is 80 percent new, said Jim O'Connor, general manager of the Lincoln-Mercury division. It retains its prominent grill, though it is rounded instead of squared off. Engineers



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NY Auto Show opens Saturday



1998 Lincoln Navigator

By Brian S. Akre
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Chevrolet showed off its 1998 Prizm subcompact sedan, the first to carry the Chevy bow-tie logo in place of the import-sounding Geo name.

Mazda, meanwhile, displayed the next generation of its 626 sedan and B-series pickup as the media preview of the New York International Automobile Show, concluded Thursday.

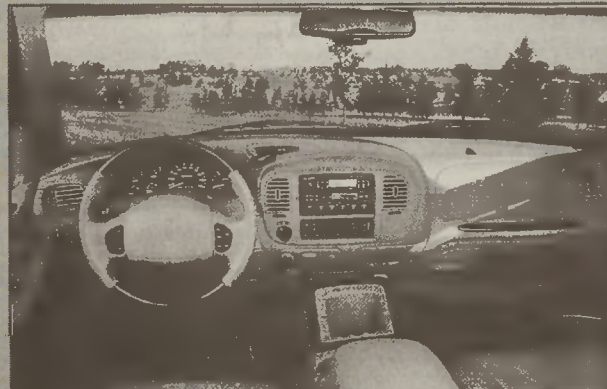
General Motors' Chevrolet division announced in

drop the Geo name from the three small vehicles that carried it and rebadge them as Chevrolets starting with the '98 model year.

Geo was created in 1988 to lure import buyers into Chevy showrooms. It was felt the separate "umbrella" name was needed to distance the

then-Japanese-made model line from Chevrolet's then-tarnished image.

Today, Geos are made in North America in joint ventures with Toyota Motor Corp. and Suzuki Motor Corp. And Chevrolet says its improved image means its nameplate



Lincoln Navigator's interior features wood steering wheel.

December that it planned to See AUTO SHOW Page 13B