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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

## THE DRIVER'S SEAT

*Which car is right for you?*

BY PATRICIA MARX

Lately, the news out of Detroit is slightly un-bad, and not only because Toyota keeps recalling things. Sixty billion bailout dollars later, American auto companies are posting profits and hiring workers—fifty-five thousand jobs gained last year versus three hundred and thirty-four thousand lost the year before. When President Obama visited car factories in Detroit two weeks ago, he sounded like a proud father whose child is no longer getting F's in school, thanks to the expensive new tutor and the cash-for-flunkers policy. "We got more work to do," he said at a Chrysler plant, "but I have confidence in the American worker. I have confidence in *you*. I have confidence in this economy. We are coming back!" At G.M., Obama was so confident that he test-crawled a new electric Chevy Volt about ten feet, as Robert Gibbs exhibited press-secretary humor by asking whether the car had an airbag.

An AP-GfK poll recently found that after many years in which Americans opted for Asian-made cars, thirty-eight per cent of us now think that the United States turns out better products (versus thirty-three per cent who still favor Asian-made). Shall we just not tell these people that so-called American cars are often made from a lot of non-American parts, or that in 2010 foreign companies will assemble more cars in this country than are produced by the Big Three?

In any case, this turns out to be a fine time to buy a vehicle—maybe it's even the car event of a lifetime, as they say in the automotive world, when what they mean is "If we don't clear a hundred units off the lot today, we're up shit creek." Manufacturer's discounts are 3.8 per cent higher now than they were at this time last year. And don't worry about not getting a dealer-assisted loan. The automobile dealers lobbied hard to make sure that they didn't fall within the purview of the newly formed Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. (Give them

an inch and they take an exemption!)

Over several weeks this summer, I visited New York car dealerships, where I heard lots of variations on a similar spiel and clocked many miles, test-driving Jeep Grand Cherokees, Smart cars, Bentleys, and other conveyances that begged to be budgeted. After whirling up the West Side Highway and bouncing over downtown cobblestones, I was ushered into assorted cubicles, there to have a series of pretend-frank dialogues.

You're not supposed to feel sorry for car salesmen, but I do—even if the Better Business Bureau did report that new-car dealers are the fourth-most-complained-about business in the country. (Used-car dealers were No. 7.) Sure, they can be hyperbolic, but can you blame them? A car salesman's salary is based largely, if not entirely, on commissions, which typically amount to two hundred and fifty dollars per sale.

After the salesman has done his job, by which I mean thoroughly confused you, a sales manager in a spiffy suit will appear. He will offer you a beverage and inquire what he might do to insure that you drive away with the car of your dreams. Despite the hearty handshake, this guy is the bad cop to his underling's good cop. How does he know so much about what you and your salesman have been talking about? The cynical explanation is that when the salesman excused himself to use the rest room he spilled the beans to his boss. The even more cynical theory is that the sales cubicles are bugged. A friend of mine who has bought a lot of cars sums it up like this: customers are liars, salesmen are bigger liars, and sales managers are the biggest liars. (But can we trust my friend?)

"My boss wants to know why a New Yorker is interested in writing about cars," a spokeswoman at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said to me when I called to find

out whether the national incidence of crash fatalities was on the rise or the decline (41,501 victims in 1998; 37,261 in 2008). The question was not unreasonable. Though residents of the greater New York area owned half of all cars registered in the country in 1905 (John Jacob Astor owned thirty-two), by 2000 New York City had the lowest rate of vehicle owner-

insurance, and roadside assistance.) As of 2008, Hertz also has a car-sharing service, Connect by Hertz, with rates comparable to Zipcar's.

The Zipcar branches around here don't rent the va-va-voomy new Mustang GT, though, so if you want to take a look at that or another Ford, or anything made by Lincoln, Mercury,

peak. O.K., but has the Rover ever seen a New York pothole (manufacturer's suggested retail price, \$52,900)? However, with all such prices, don't forget to add on the cost of options you can't live without, such as the Porsche crest embossed on the leather headrest of the Boxster (\$285), and the Rolls-Royce Phantom coupé's sixteen hun-



*The Prius, along with the Ford Fusion and the Mercury Milan, handles so well that you'll swear that you're still destroying the planet.*

ship in the nation. Fifty-six per cent of New York households are car-free, compared with a national average of ten per cent. In Manhattan, seventy-eight per cent of households claimed no vehicles. And still it's impossible to find a parking space.

One remedy for the car-free household is Zipcar, the world's largest car-sharing company, which offers rentals by the hour. But, honestly, how many inches do you think you can travel in an hour in this town (where the word "gridlock" was coined in 1980)? According to an analysis by the New York City Department of Transportation, the weekday traffic in Manhattan from Sixtieth Street to the Battery moves at an average speed of 9.5 miles per hour, which the *Times* compared to the speed of a sprinting chicken. (Zipcar, 445 locations in Manhattan; \$50 annual fee, \$8 and up per hour, including gasoline,

Mazda, Jaguar, etc., head over to the Manhattan Automobile Company (787 Eleventh Avenue, at 54th Street), the largest car retailer in New York City, and the supplier of most of the city's taxicabs. This square-block multiplex of showrooms comprises eight acres of retail space, plus a service shop, a Starbucks, a thirty-foot atrium complete with fountain, and a climbing wall. It seemed fitting that Kelvin Nodarse, the gentleman who showed me around the site, was almost seven feet tall. Nine stories above street level, there is a rooftop off-road test track, where Nodarse took me for a hair-raising ride in a seven-passenger LR4 Land Rover, inching the S.U.V. up a seven-foot-high, twenty-five-degree ramp and, later, maneuvering us over mounds of rocks. "Two of our wheels are off the ground," Nodarse informed me as we perched atop the craggy

dred handset pinpoint lights on the ceiling that simulate the night sky (\$12,100).

I'd gladly be stuck in a ditch if it meant that I got to spend more time in the botanical-green Jaguar XJ, being treated to a massage, courtesy of the jiggling front seat, which, like the steering wheel, also comes with a heating function (\$78,500; seat options are part of the \$4,000 luxury package). Automobile sages used to say, If you buy a Jaguar (correctly pronounced "jag-you-are"), make sure you acquire a fleet of them, because a few will always be in the shop. But that was in the old days, when Jaguars had electrical problems and owning pretty much any car was like having a hundred leaky roofs. Today, nearly every brand on the market is reliable, needing little more than regular oil changes and tire rotations in its first hundred thousand miles. As John Zallo,

BRUCE MCCALL



the owner of Ye Olde Volks Haus, a used-car business in Mount Vernon (99 William Street), told me, "Two hundred thousand is the new one hundred thousand."

Isn't the Smart car adorable? Doesn't it look like a lunchbox (Smart Center Manhattan; 536 West 41st Street; M.S.R.P. from \$11,990)? Just under nine feet long and only five feet wide, this peanut can be parked anywhere. Owners of Smart cars have adorable vanity license plates, too. "ASA WHIP," "ASA FOX," and "ALEC" are a few that are out there. Nicolas Hayek, the late wristwatch mogul who invented the Swatch, came up with the idea for an itty-bitty city vehicle, which is why it was initially known as the Swatchmobile. In 1994, several years after Hayek's inspiration, the vehicle was designed by Daimler-Benz, making the two-seater a baby cousin of the Mercedes. It is the most fuel-efficient non-hybrid car on the market, getting thirty-three miles per gallon in the city and forty-one miles per gallon on the highway, but, despite the reassurances of the boyish sales representative who chaperoned my test-drive, maybe you should think twice about the highway. Automotive reviewers say the lightness of the car makes it vulnerable to wind gusts. Still, in a collision with a disabled kite the Smart car would probably triumph. (For safety ratings on all new cars, see [safercar.gov](http://safercar.gov) and [iihs.org](http://iihs.org).)

To my mind, cuter than the Smart car is the Mini Cooper, which one Web site accurately described as looking like a toddler's high-top sneaker (Mini of Manhattan, 555 West 57th Street; M.S.R.P. from \$19,500). Best of all is the car's palette. This might not matter to you, but, to me, a handsome British racing green, a horizon blue, or a striking chili red is more important than a silly detail like steering. And, like, I care about torque? By the way, the blazing-white roadster with black trim was beautifully behaved when I took it for a spin.

A study by Austrian researchers concluded that an overwhelming majority of people prefer cars whose faces (that is, the front portion, encompassing the grille, the windshield, the headlights, and so forth) appear masculine, aggressive, arrogant, and angry. The BMW 5 Series, whose inward-tilting headlights

apparently suggest a scowl, is consequently very popular, whereas the happy-go-lucky, gentle-looking Prius scores dismally (BMW of Manhattan, 555 West 57th Street; M.S.R.P. from \$44,550; Manhattan Toyota, 645 Eleventh Avenue, at 47th Street, M.S.R.P. from \$22,800). There are no doubt many other reasons that account for the poor sales of the Dodge La Femme, which was offered in 1955 and 1956. This she-coupé was upholstered in a pink-rosebud tapestry fabric and appointed with a raincoat, a compact, a lipstick holder, and a cigarette case. And did you know that historians partially attribute the failure of Ford's Edsel to the fact that its front grating looked too much like a pudendum?

Maybe I'm being obtuse, but, with a few dashing exceptions, don't most automobiles look the same these days? Sedans and coupés resemble deformed jelly beans; S.U.V.s, vans, wagons—daddy, mommy, and baby manatees. But perhaps it's just foolish romanticism to think that it was ever otherwise. Remember the preponderance of chrome and fins in the fifties? There was a reason for that, and it had nothing to do with aerodynamics. According to Jamie Kitman, the New York bureau chief for *Automobile Magazine*, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties the Big Three—which aren't quite so big these days—secretly shared their design plans with one another, to avoid manufacturing a product that was too fanciful.

Ford's reputation is especially high right now. The biggest of the Big Three and the only one to forgo bailout money, Ford has posted profits for the past five quarters. Among the top cars chosen by *U.S. News & World Report* were the Ford Fiesta (affordable small car), the Ford Taurus (affordable large), and the Ford Fusion (hybrid). Chevrolet's Corvette and Camaro also topped the list, in the categories of luxury sports cars and muscle cars, respectively; so did G.M.'s Cadillac CTS Sports Wagon and the Escalade, for luxury wagon and luxury S.U.V.



If there is a car, somewhere it is on a list. The Dodge Journey was deemed the safest car for a pet; the Porsche Boxster, the grooviest car to have a midlife crisis in; and the Ford Aspire won the gold in the competition for stupidest name. Why the oxymoronic Dodge Ram didn't place first on the cars.com list, though, makes me think there's something fishy going on. Did you know that, in Japan, there was a time when you could buy a Honda Life Dunk?

Let's not forget the Other Big Three—BMW, Audi, and Mercedes. BMW is the jock of the group, built for those whose fantasies include twin-turbo injection, sporty suspension, and corner-hugging, instead of, say, the perfect driver's-side cup holder (BMW 3 series, from \$33,150). Audi is the sensitive aesthete who swears that it's what's inside that counts (629 West 54th Street; Audi Q5, \$37,350). Brian Redding, a product specialist at the Audi Forum, on Park Avenue, told me that the company cares so much about its cars' interiors that it not only assigns researchers to ride inside the trunks; it asks them to inspect the inside of the cars while blindfolded. Mercedes-Benz is the big man on campus (Mercedes E-Class, from \$49,400). Well-rounded, it gets good marks for looks, luxury, and safety. "The Mercedes fits my self-image," a friend who has five of them told me. "It's high quality, well engineered, reliable, and unexciting." Even if you don't drive, you may want to visit the Park Avenue Mercedes showroom, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and looks like a mini Guggenheim Museum (430 Park Avenue, at 55th Street; 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street).

I test-drove a Tesla Roadster one weekday because, like many moneyed residents of the city, the designated showroom car goes to the Hamptons on summer weekends—for, ahem, promotional purposes, I was told (511 West 25th Street; M.S.R.P. from \$109,000). This super-duper all-electric no-emissions sports car, which looks, to my girl eyes, like a Porsche 911 trying to be a Ferrari, is powered by a version of the lithium-ion battery found in your cell phone. (But if you had that much charge in your phone you could call the moon.) The interior is no five-star hotel room: the mirrors are manually oper-

ated, and, to get into and out of the sunken cabin, I recommend a forklift. Like all electric vehicles, it is eerily quiet. (Why can't Tesla make garbage trucks?) But, of course, you want to know how it handles, don't you? Of all the cars I drove, it elicited the most curiosity and covetousness among my guy friends, all of whom apparently relish getting away fast (from zero to 60 m.p.h. in 3.7 seconds). I had no choice but to invite one of them along to the Chelsea showroom. After driving the car, he chattered for a good long while about steering response, single-speed transmission, regenerative braking, and inertial prowess. "Can you summarize?" I asked him. "Holy fuck!" he said.

The all-electric Nissan Leaf is coming soon, as early as December in some states, but New Yorkers will have to hold their horses a few months longer (646 Eleventh Avenue, at 47th Street; M.S.R.P. \$32,780). This hatchback can be fully energized in twenty-six minutes if you plug it in at a public charging station. Currently, New York City has only one such site, but a hundred more are promised by September of 2011 (Edison Park-Fast, 451 Ninth Avenue, between 35th and 36th Streets; free to garage customers through the end of the year, subsequently \$6-\$8 per full charge). If you would like to juice up your car at home, it could take anywhere from eight to eighteen hours, depending on the voltage used and whether your teen-age daughter is blow-drying her hair. But can you fit your golf clubs into its trunk? This is one of the F.A.Q.s listed on the Nissan Web site, and the answer is yes. If I've learned anything from car shopping, it's that golfers worry a lot about where to keep their stuff, unless "clubs" is code for "mistress."

Hybrid vehicles, the motorized equivalent of free-range chickens, allow you to feel pleased with yourself without having to stop every hundred miles to look for an electric outlet. Most hybrids run on small gasoline engines assisted by battery-powered motors. The Prius (\$22,800) is the most fuel-efficient vehicle on the road (51 m.p.g. in the city, 48 on the highway). It, along with the Ford Fusion (\$28,100) and the Mercury Milan (\$31,915), handles so well that you'll swear that you're still destroying the planet (787 Eleventh Avenue, at 54th Street). By the way, the Fusion Hybrid recently won the 2010

award for North American Car of the Year, so you might want to send congratulatory flowers.

What's the difference between a Rolls-Royce and a Bentley? "You drive a Bentley, but you get driven in a Rolls," said Steven Schneir, the sales manager for Bentleys at Manhattan Motorcars, the exclusive New York outlet for these brands, as well as for Lamborghini, Porsche, and Lotus (270 Eleventh Avenue, at 27th Street). Nevertheless, I swallowed my pride, rolled up my sleeves, and chauffeured myself and a dapper sales representative hither and thither and yon on the West Side Highway in a Rolls-Royce Ghost, junior to the nearly twenty-foot-long Phantom but senior in every other respect. This entry-level (ha-ha) vehicle can be outfitted with seven cameras aboard, including two that provide an aerial view of the car (just like the O.J. chase!); a cruise-control system that adjusts, depending on how fast the driver ahead of you has set his cruise control; a steering wheel that vibrates to rouse you should you drift into another lane without putting on your turn signal; holographic images on the windshield that display key information, such as G.P.S. directions and the car's speed; Teflon-coated umbrellas tucked into the front doorjamb; a lamb's-wool carpet; and a Spirit of Ecstasy hood ornament mounted on a spring-loaded mechanism so that it ascends and descends at the push of a button. And rest assured that you can order the hood ornament in gold (\$8,100 extra).

The Ghost has been well received in the press, but is there still a market for it and its regal ilk? (The Ghost starts at \$246,500, the Phantom EWB at \$450,000; add at least \$75,000 to both numbers for a realistic idea of what a reasonably loaded version would cost.) "When the economy tanked, you heard a lot of 'I still have the money to buy a Bentley, but I just fired fifty guys,'" a salesman told me. "People used to say that, and then they stopped saying it. They are starting to buy expensive cars again." *Phew.*

Petits bourgeois who want to motor as aristocrats should join the Classic Car Club Manhattan, which is like a lending library, but with a Thursday Night Happy Hour, and, instead of taking out "The Great Gatsby," members borrow what might have been in the tycoon's garage

(250 Hudson Street; membership, which includes insurance, maintenance, and E-Z Passes, ranges annually from \$8,000 to \$18,000, depending on the plan; club outings and booze are extra). The club's collection, parked in a space that resembles a downtown loft with an automotive theme, includes a few Ferraris, a Lamborghini, a Lotus Exige S (you don't drive them, you wear them, I was informed), an AC/Shelby Cobra (with a safety roll bar for the driver but not for the passenger), a Jaguar E-Type (like the one displayed at MOMA), an Ariel Atom (a go-cart-y vehicle that lacks a roof, windows, a door, and other things I've come to expect), and dozens of other exotic cars. There are also roomy family sedans, and by family I mean the Royal Family—a Bentley, a 1977 Mini Cooper, and, perhaps for Fergie, the 1965 Shelby Mustang I took for a joyride around the block. The club has more than three hundred members, only about forty-five of whom are women.

Dating tip for women seeking to meet men (caution advised): Take out a classified ad that says you are trying to sell your Ferrari 599 GTB. Now hurry over to Gotham Dream Cars and rent a decoy to show the parade of guys who'll soon be knocking at your door, agog with anticipation (212-957-4400; from \$1,950 a day). If, however, you're not in the market for a wealthy, middle-aged, balding fellow, maybe you should, instead, go to Hertz and rent a Subaru Outback (a fly fisherman who can field-dress a moose while maintaining his Frédéric Fekkai hairdo), a Hyundai Sonata (a Long Islander who shops for cashmere socks at Loehmann's), a Volvo (a goateed Park Slope locavore who works semi-pro on the ultimate-Frisbee circuit), a Jeep Grand Cherokee (an owner of three big malamutes that shed and wear matching bandannas), a Miata (do you need another gay boyfriend?), a Camaro (bring this dude home if you want to get back at your mother), a VW GTI (a goy), a Cadillac (your grandfather in Florida), or a Chevy Aveo (knows what's important in life, and it's not what he drives). By the way, if it comes up, tell Mr. Right that just before he arrived you regrettably sold the car, but, hey, why should that rule out a romantic test-drive? ♦

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Patricia Marx on shopping for cars.