

Modern times

Minivan quickly becomes a family favorite

By Don Chalkin
special writer

THE MINIVAN has forever transformed that great American institution, the family station wagon. With its ability to carry whole families and all their necessities comfortably — strollers, boxes of disposable diapers, playpens — while still being easy to drive and park, the minivan is racing into the spotlight as one of the most popular family cars.

At least one version of the minivan is available from each of the domestic carmakers, and many foreign makers have jumped on the van-wagon, too.

Although the models all adhere to the basic formula of a high-sided, wide-doored, flat-floored box on wheels that can fit in the garage, each manufacturer has created its own interpretation of the formula.

Some are front-wheel drive, some rear-wheel and some four-wheel. Most have rear hatches and sliding center-side doors, but you can also find minivans with hinged rear doors or hinged center-side doors. At one end of the spectrum are vans that are car-like in ride and behavior; at the other, those with ride handling more characteristic of a small truck. The truck-like vans compensate for their harsher ride with greater towing capacity and a high, commanding-view-of-the-road driving position.

REGARDLESS of which dealerships you visit, however, you'll find that the level of luxury appointment can rise as high as your budget allows, including leather seats.

All the minivans can be fitted with the same accoutrements that their more traditional car cousins have: air conditioning, power seats and windows, cruise control, elaborate stereo systems and more.

But minivans also offer special options such as seating configurations for five, seven or even eight people and additional rear seat heaters and air-conditioning outlets.

All minivans have at least one thing in common besides their shape and size: they are not considered passenger cars by the federal government. This means that these vehicles need not meet the same safety criteria as passenger cars.

However, thanks to the swelling popularity of the minivan and other so-called multi-purpose vehicles, government-mandated safety standards will be changing in the next few years.

Meanwhile, there's no need for alarm. Manufacturers have been incorporating many safety features into the vans since their inception; minivans as a whole have a safety record comparable to those of most passenger cars.

THESE ARE some of the best choices in minivans:

The Dodge Caravan, along with its twin, the Plymouth Voyager, started it all. Despite all the new competition, these vans still set the standard with front-wheel drive, pleasing looks, clever interior touches such as a clever arrangement for a slide-out center cup holder, storage drawer under the right passenger seat and pop-out side and rear windows, and choice of standard or extended length.

In 1990, the Caravan and Voyager got new, more powerful, Chrysler-designed and built optional V6 engines and a four-speed automatic transmission.

The 1991 models will include an optional all-wheel drive system and four-wheel anti-lock brakes. There's also a luxury version, the Town & Country, which features leather seats and brings back the "woody" look, '90s style. Prices start at about \$12,500.

The Ford Aerostar's stylish looks cover a sturdy, rear-wheel drive, truck-derived chassis that offers a nice compromise between car-like and truck-like rides.

In addition to typical Ford amenities, such as a useful cargo-area net and headlamp jacks so that the stereo can entertain the kids in back without deafening you, the 1990 model had some important improvements, including a new V6 engine, an improved four-speed automatic transmission and rear anti-lock brakes.

You might also opt for the full-time, electronic, four-wheel drive in either the standard or the extended-length model. Prices start at about \$12,500.

THE CHEVROLET Astro has to be the toughest-looking of the bunch. It has a squat, muscular body that does aesthetic justice to its truck-derived, rear-wheel-drive chassis.

The Astro offers the most convenient rear loading by virtue of its hinged rear cargo doors; you can open one side only, if that's all that's needed. The 1990 Astro can be equipped with a V6 engine, a four-speed automatic transmission and four-wheel anti-lock brakes.

Last spring, the options expanded to include a full-time, four-wheel-drive system and a "stretched" version for added space. Prices for the Chevy Astro start at about \$14,000.

The Mazda MPV is the only imported minivan that was designed for the American family. The others are adaptations of vans designed to meet the particular needs of the Japanese.

The MPV, Multi-Purpose Vehicle, features stylish looks (such as a blunt nose, bulging fenders and a squat-to-the-ground stance, which

gives it a low and brawny look), and passenger-car ride and handling.

This rear-wheel-drive minivan (four-wheel-drive is also available) is unique in offering a wide-opening, hinged, center-side door. More usual are the optional V6 engine, a four-speed automatic transmission and rear anti-lock brakes. Prices start at about \$13,700.

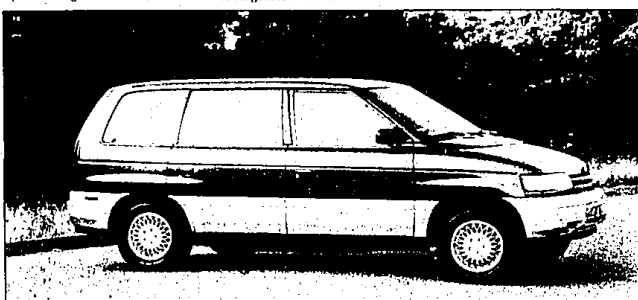
THE PONTIAC Trans Sport and its siblings, the Chevrolet Lumina APV and Oldsmobile Silhouette, keep the latest in minivans all in the family. They're startling to look at, thanks to large laid-back windshields in

front and vertical tail lights running up to the roof in back.

GM's new generation of front-wheel-drive minivans offers not only innovative technology, their bodies are made of huge plastic panels instead of steel, but also innovative design, with center bucket seats that can be folded to form tables or beds.

The lightweight individual seats are lighter and easier to remove than the awkward heavy center bench seats of other vans.

Trans Sport prices start at about \$15,000, Lumina APV at about \$14,000, Silhouette at about \$17,000.



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Show time

• **What:** The third annual North American International Auto Show, sponsored by the Detroit Auto Dealers Association.

• **When:** Through Sunday, Jan. 20. Saturday, Jan. 19, 10 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Sunday, Jan. 20, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Monday through Friday, 2-10:30 p.m.

• **Where:** Cobo Conference & Exhibition Center, at the foot of Woodward, downtown Detroit.

• **Who:** More than 40 of the world's auto manufacturers will display 750 cars and trucks at the show, covering America's Big Three and international manufacturers ranging from BMW to Toyota.

• **Domestic Car Exhibits:** Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Plymouth, Dodge, Ford, Jeep, Eagle, Lincoln-Mercury, Oldsmobile, Pontiac, Saturn.

• **Domestic Truck Exhibits:** Chevrolet, Dodge, Ford, GMC.

• **Import and Specialty Car and Truck Exhibits:** Hyundai, Industrial Design Research, Isuzu, Jaguar, Lamborghini, Lotus, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Nissan Infiniti, Pininfarina, Peugeot, Porsche, Range Rover, Rolls Royce, Saab, Scania of America, Sterling, Subaru, Suzuki, Toyota/Lexus, Volkswagen, Volvo, Yugo.

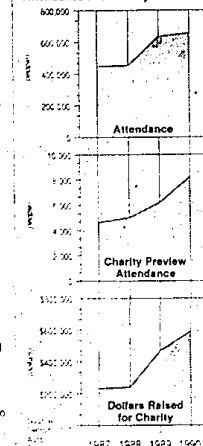
• **Tickets:** Adults, \$5. Seniors, free (65 and older). Children 12 and younger, \$1 or free with parent.

• **Parking:** Cobo Garage, Cobo Roof and Arena Garage, Joe Louis Arena Garage, Ford Auditorium Garage, Riverfront Parking next to Joe Louis Arena and other nearby local facilities. People Mover monorail system provides easy

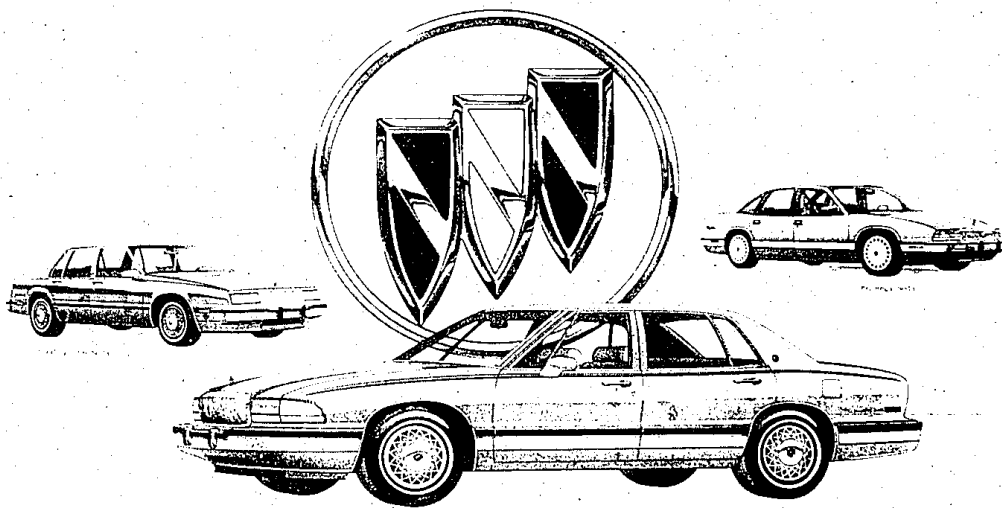
access to parking facilities.

• **Extras:** worldwide, North American and concept car introductions; a look into the automotive future, featuring manufacturers, international design houses and coach builders; a major van conversion show in the lower level of Cobo; 25 radio stations broadcasting live from the show.

Attendance and Charity Donations



IF YOU SEE ONLY ONE CARLINE AT THE SHOW, MAKE IT AMERICA'S MOST TROUBLE-FREE: BUICK.



There's a lot to see at this year's auto show. But for a showing of superior quality, visit the Buick display.

The 1991 Buicks are impressive. Especially since Buick

ranked as America's most trouble-free carline, according

to J.D. Power and Associates' 1990 Initial Quality

Survey. It's also the only American carline to

rank among the world's 10 most trouble-free. These findings are based upon owner-reported problems during the

first 90 days of ownership.

After the show, see your Buick dealer for another display of

automotive excellence. And find out why Buick is the

new symbol for quality in America... and beyond.



BUICK

The New Symbol For Quality
in America.