

Suburban Observer & Eccentric Automotive Showcase

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CARReport

95 Lincoln Continental gives Lexus a run for its money

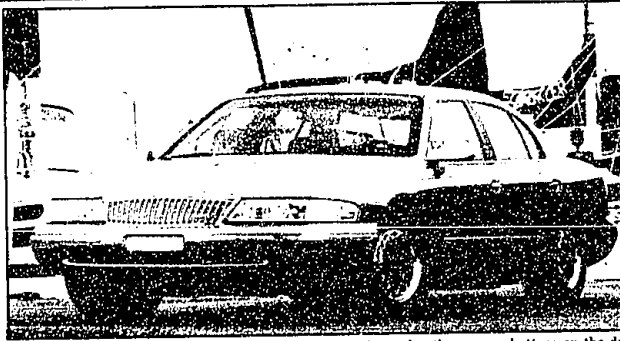
By Anne Fracassa
Avanti NewsFeatures

CARMEL, Calif. — When Lexus came on the market five years ago, American luxury car-makers didn't really take the threat to heart. It was a mistake they later regretted.

Today, the battle to sell a state-of-the-art luxury car to demanding American car buyers isn't so clear-cut. The redesigned Lincoln Continental complicates everything. This car should prove to be one of Ford Motor Co.'s better ideas of all time.

But let's back up for a sec to get some perspective on the luxury-car segment. When Lincoln-Mercury introduced the Mark VIII about 18 months ago, many thought the light bulb had burned out at Ford. The VIII didn't look, feel or act like a luxury car. It just didn't compete with Lexus and Infiniti. And the previous-generation Continental didn't rate, either.

But the lightbulb is back on



ROAD TEST
By
Anne Fracassa

in the heads of engineers at Ford's Lincoln-Mercury Division with this 1995 Continental, which should make its prior import competitors shudder.

The Continental is the newest and most innovative technology offered by Ford in years.

Just slip in behind the wheel. You're staring into a Lexus LS 400 instrument panel, complete with 3D graphics. No more plastic on the dash. Fine-touching, leather-like material surrounds

you. Colors aren't stark; instead, they're really pleasing. The wood trim is understated and actually looks real — it's not cheap plastic imitation.

This is a Lexus LS 400 with a Lincoln nameplate on it. The Continental's MSRP is \$41,375, up from the previous model's base price of \$34,375. Ford expects to sell at least 30,000 Continentals in 1995.

Keith McGee, vice president and general manager of the Lincoln-Mercury Division, said the Continental was not built from the ground up.

"The Continental was built from the customer out," he said. "Our mission was to build the best front-wheel-drive luxury car in the world. Every aspect of the Continental is personalized for the individual driver."

Herein lies the rub. Personalization for at least two drivers has never been done — by a domestic or foreign automaker.

Oh, sure, we've seen those lit-

tle memory buttons on the driver's door that can recall seating and steering-wheel placement for two different drivers. But this sets everything. Or everything that you change when you get into a car to drive.

Lincoln calls it the Memory Profile System, and it's comprehensive. Each driver can set his or her own preferences for auto-lamp delay settings, inside and outside mirror positions, seat positions, instrument lighting intensity, easy entry and exit seating positions, ride firmness (plush, normal and firm), variable assist steering effort (low, medium and high) and even radio station presets.

The driver can also set on and off positions for the door lock confirmation chirp, automatic express-down driver's window, automatic door locks at 3 miles per hour and automatic tilt-down outside rearview mirrors that help drivers see better when they're backing out of a space.

All this can be programmed in the driver's seat by scrolling through a message center in the instrument panel. Once all the selections are made, the driver can set the program by using the key fob or by choosing the "driver 1" or "driver 2" buttons on the driver's door panel.

And if you just don't want to fool with it — as some mature drivers who aren't computer-oriented — it can all be set at the dealership at delivery, as many times as the owner wishes, said Fred Simon, project manager for the Continental.

"What we're doing is tailoring the car for each individual customer, and (that) lets us build a car around the customer," he said. "Such personalization of a car is the first of its kind in the industry."

The Continental is powered by an all-new InTech V-8 engine. It's Ford's first transverse-mounted front-wheel-drive engine and the first time the Continental has ever had a V-8.

The car's got a 4.6-liter dual overhead cam four-valve 8-cylinder that produces a more-than-adequate 260 horsepower. It has 62 percent more power than the 3.6-liter V6 it replaces, and has a zero-60 time of 7.6 seconds.

Due to its platinum spark plugs, the InTech engine can go 100,000 miles without a tune-up and is coupled to a beefy 4-speed automatic transmission, a computer-managed air suspension, load-leveling suspension and four-wheel independent suspension system.

Other changes on the Continental:

* The radio antenna is now within the rear window glass to cut wind noise.

* There's a 5-disc CD changer in

the center console (rather than in the trunk).

* A hands-free, voice-activated cellular phone is new. The phone is so sensitive that it can even detect your individual voice even if you have a cold. And, more importantly, it won't voice-activate a call during normal conversation. It only calls if you direct a command to make the call. This is an important feature because previous voice systems would dial "the jerk" if that was a keyword, causing embarrassment since the driver didn't really mean to call "the jerk" right now.

Anti-lock brakes, dual airbags, side-impact standards that meet the 1998 federal standards and 6 mph bumpers round out the safety package.

"The interior and exterior design enhancements make the 1995 Continental a more than worthy opponent for its import and domestic competition," said L.M. McGee.

For once, he's right. The lightbulb shines bright on this one.

Anne Fracassa is senior editor of Avanti NewsFeatures.

1995 Lincoln Continental Class.....Luxury sedan
dual overhead cam 8 cylinder
EPA mile.....N/A
Where built.....Wixom, Mich.
Base price.....\$41,375

If you'd like to see a particular model tested or if you have a car question, send Anne Fracassa a message at AVANTI 1054, Avanti's America Online mailbox. Or comment through the Internet at AVANTIC4@aol.com

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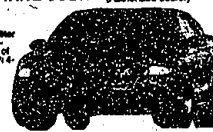
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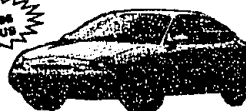
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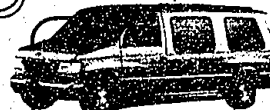
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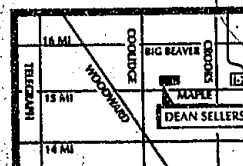
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