

Suburban Observer & Eccentric Automotive Showcase

Published Every Monday

CARReport



Pumped-up Bonneville SE builds on excitement

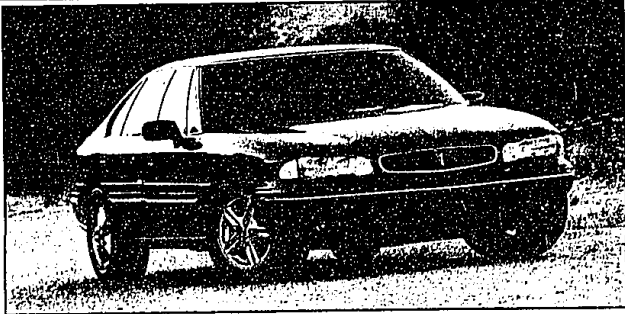
By Anne Fracassa
Avanti NewsFeatures

Here's a full-size sedan that acts more like a high-end sporty two-seater. The kind that flies around corners with the ease, agility and purposefulness of a broken-field runner bolting for a touchdown.

The 1996 Pontiac Bonneville has all that grace and speed and even more muscle than you'd expect. Pontiac Division has always marketed its products as fun-to-drive performance-driven import fighters. That mission hasn't been forgotten in this year's Bonneville SE.

One of my husband's fondest memories as a child is that of his father returning home in his brand new Bonneville, a bright red 1964 model. I'm told he glided into his driveway in this huge convertible at the end of a long day at work wearing not much more than his sunglasses and a smile. He loved his glistening Bonneville so much that his wife was forbidden to drive it.

Although that wouldn't happen today, I can see why a guy would think for a car like that. Especially one as boldly styled and as beautiful as the 1996 Bonneville. From its tough-looking front fascia to the striking rear deck and spoiler, the



ROAD TEST
By
Anne Fracassa

car just oozes power and prowess.

Thanks to the addition of an optional new supercharged 3800 Series II V-6 engine, the power realized is a whopping 240 horsepower — 15 more horses than last year's engine. This car moves when you want it to — at a light, at a stop, during heavy cornering and when you need to get on that freeway fast. It handles the Autobahn speeds of 1-996 in Detroit's northern suburbs quite well, thank you very much.

The standard powerplant of the supercharged 3800 is a normally aspirated version that produces 205 horsepower. With that engine you'll

see fuel economy never before seen on Bonneville: 19 mpg in the city and 30 mpg on the highway. Opt for the supercharged version, I'll give you more bang for your buck.

There's a new exterior on the Bonneville, although it's not so drastic that it looks totally different. Pontiac knows it shouldn't fix something that's not broken, so it just updated the car this year to improve its look.

Enhancements for 1996 include new front and rear fascias, grilles, headlamps, front fenders, body-side moldings, rocker moldings, a new deck lid and deck lid spoiler and new taillamps. Daytime running lights and Twilight Sentinel are standard equipment on all Bonneville.

There are four models in the Bonneville lineup: The SE, SSE, SLE and SSEi. The SE and SSE are the standard models for Bonneville. The SLE and SSEi are special model packages this year.

The Sport Luxury Edition package adds leather bucket seats, leather-wrapped steering wheel, cobra-head shifter, floor console, rear deck lid spoiler, power antenna, 16-inch 5-spoke silver wheels, 16-inch

touring tires, illuminated visor vanity mirrors, a console with rear air-conditioning vents, overhead console with power outlets and a trunk convenience net. Also available on SLE is the supercharged engine.

The SSEi Supercharger package adds driver-select shift controls, SSEi floor mats, uplevel instrument cluster with boost gauge, SSEi badging, 16-inch performance tires and the 240-horsepower engine.

With a base price of just over \$21,500, the Bonneville comes equipped with a ton of standard equipment, including a 4-speed electronically controlled automatic transmission, front wheel drive, power rack-and-pinion steering, an independent front and rear suspension, battery rundown protection, driver and passenger airbags, 4-wheel anti-lock brakes, a PASS-Key theft deterrent system, 15-inch bolt-on wheel covers, fog lamps, dual sport mirrors, a rear-window defogger, air conditioning, power windows with express down, power automatic door locks, AM/FM stereo, cruise control and flash-to-pass and rally gauges with tachometer.

Whew! That's a lot of standard

equipment. The SE sedan tested for 300 miles in suburban Detroit had even more neat features that make it more of a competitor in the luxury segment than in the large sedan segment: A trunk security net, illuminated entry, AM/FM cassette, deck lid release, power mirrors, a six-way power seat, lighted vanity mirrors, air conditioning, remote keyless entry, power antenna and rear deck spoiler.

All told, it pumped up the price to a hair over \$27,500. Not bad at all, considering the Bonneville's competition includes the Mazda Millennia, Eagle Vision, Lexus ES 300 and Mitsubishi Diamante, among others.

The Bonneville SSE also has a newfangled variable effort steering system called MAGNASTEER — code named for Magnetic Assist Steering. Developed by Delphi Saginaw Steering Systems, the system uses magnetism to vary steering effort.

Here's how it works: At low speeds, the steering effort is low to increase maneuverability. As your speed increases, steering effort becomes stiffer for improved road stability. This system, according to Pontiac, has one of the widest steering-effort ranges of any speed-sensitive power-assist power steering system around.

Sounds simple. It is. And it works to give you better control and handling characteristics.

One feature I really liked on the Bonneville is the way you can personalize your car for your individual

tastes and likes. For example, the programmable keyless-entry system can be personalized with programmable door locks, delayed locking and perimeter lighting settings to match your preferences before getting out of the car.

The best part of the feature is that two different drivers can set their own personal settings. That means if a spouse drives the car, he or she can have his or her own settings.

The programmable door-lock system allows you to choose the way your car locks in three ways:

- * It locks all doors when the transmission is shifted out of park, then unlocks all doors when shifted back to park.
- * Or it locks all doors when shifting out of park, but doesn't unlock them when shifting back to park.
- * Or it turns the feature off.

I like the first option best because there's less to fight with.

The 1996 Pontiac Bonneville is a wonderful addition to your own vehicle lineup — be it for just the two of you or the whole family. It offers smart styling, spirited performance ... and good value.

Anne Fracassa is senior editor of Avanti NewsFeatures.

1996 Pontiac Bonneville SE

Vehicle class: Full-size sports sedan.

Engine: 3.8-liter 3800 Series II SFI V-6.

Mileage: 17 city / 26 highway.

Base price: \$21,589.

As tested: \$27,523.

Where built: Orion Township, Mich., and Flint, Mich.

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 AVANTI1054@aol.com

Anne Fracassa is senior editor of Avanti NewsFeatures.

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