

Automobiles

The New York Times

Topping Off the Tank of 2007

Cars Rock, But Stickers May Shock

By JERRY GARRETT

MY list of favorite automobiles this year is, I think, a reflection of America: there's a growing class of millionaires at the top, a widening blue-collar class at the low end, and a middle class that is rapidly disappearing.

Though few of us have owned a six-figure car, I can't exclude them from consideration among my favorites — or my duds.

Certainly not all test cars are created equal. Even the most expensive cars may have squeaks and rattles that others of the same model might not have, and vice versa. For instance, I'm still concerned about owner complaints of reliability problems on the Volkswagen Eos, which made

ONLINE: THE YEAR IN CARS

Models gone missing, racing highlights and auto updates: nytimes.com/autos

my list last year. I liked it when I drove it, and nothing fell off. And I did urge caution about VW's reliability bugaboo.

Manufacturers usually make sure test cars are in showroom condition — and beyond. I know of cases where test cars have been tweaked beyond stock — especially to impress us. (I'm still wondering where that bright red Honda Civic Hybrid that I tested last year came from; it is not a color you can buy.) I try to keep a jaundiced eye out for the ringers.

What I can say for sure is that after testing the cars listed here, I came away with strong opinions — good and bad. But as always, caveat emptor; your smileage may vary. Here are my picks:

1. FERRARI 599 GTB FIORANO (\$320,000) It is the finest automobile on the road — too bad they are already sold out and so expensive few of us will ever drive one. The 599 is indeed costly, but it has features found only on million-dollar cars — like its Enzo-sourced 612-horsepower V-12 engine. Despite its 3.7-second 0-60 capability and 205 m.p.h. top speed, this is a car that is also tuned so that it can be a docile everyday driver. The sophistication and beauty of this latest Ferrari elevates it from a sublime piece of machinery to fine art.

2. ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM DROP-HEAD COUPÉ (\$407,000) The world's most expensive four-seat convertible, this opulently appointed land yacht is worthy of note because BMW, which began producing Rolls-Royces only in 2003, has done an admirable job of capturing the essence of British luxury — better than the British are doing these days, in fact.

3. AUDI R8 (\$109,000-\$118,000) The arrival of the R8 poses a question: Why spend \$80,000 to \$100,000 more for a Lamborghini Gallardo, the R8's evil twin? Whereas the Gallardo is crude, rude, uncouth and socially borderline, the R8 offers everyday drivability, superior occupant comfort, cutting-edge performance and no blind spots. Since Audi also owns Lamborghini, the R8 represents a triumph over itself.

4. PORSCHE CAYENNE (\$43,400-\$93,700) This polarizing Porsche is the best S.U.V. you can buy. If you can get over the fact that the venerable German sports car maker has stooped to making S.U.V.'s, the Cayenne has a lot going for it: high-quality materials, unparalleled driving dynamics and a hip factor missing in other S.U.V.'s. And where else can you find a Porsche V-8?

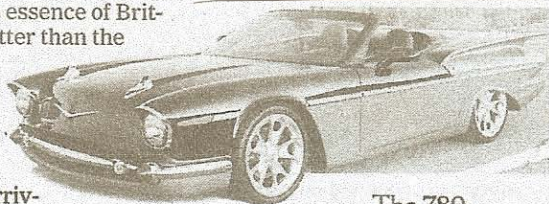
5. FORD HARLEY-DAVIDSON F-150 (\$37,210) This classy fashion accessory is one of the few vehicles that still gets makeovers just about every year. The 2008 model features improved appearance, content and performance — including an optional 450-horsepower supercharged engine (add \$6,500). Expensive, at just under \$45,000 loaded, but what price panache? But it is still less than several flavors of Toyota's humdrum, painfully expensive Tundra.

6. VOLVO S80 3.2 (\$39,400) Buckle up and the first thought you're likely to have is, "Let's go somewhere." My apologies to Volvo for the number of miles I put on

this car while testing it. I couldn't stop myself. The V-8 version, however, seemed like overkill.

7. NISSAN ALTIMA COUPE (\$21,195-\$26,095) Some call it a junior G37, but this sleek two-door actually upstages its Infiniti cousin, especially when equipped with a 270-horsepower V-6. The G37 weighs a ponderous 400 pounds more and costs an extra 10 grand. Who needs it, when this charmer can outperform it?

8. HONDA ACCORD (\$21,995-\$31,105) The first time I got into this elegant new sedan and drove off, I had to ask myself, "Have I accidentally stolen a BMW?" This latest Accord, all new for 2008, positively oozes style, sophistication and mechanical savvy. Always very good, the new Accord has graduated to great.



The 789.

9. VOLVO C30 (\$23,395-\$26,395) My editors asked how it was possible that my list included two

Volvos and no BMWs. Weird, isn't it? Bumped that the new European Ford Focus is not available in the United States? The C30 has the sweet-handling Ford C1 platform, which you've been missing, under it. The C30 represents what the industry needs a lot more of: funky, affordable fun.

10. THE 789 (\$135,000) This eye-catching amalgam of styling from Chevrolet's 1957, 1958 and 1959 models was displayed at the New York auto show. Built on a Corvette C6 platform and powered by a 400-horsepower Chevy V-8, the 789 is hung with carbon fiber body panels that can be ordered in 10,000 color combinations. Made by the custom automaker n2a Motors, the 789 is merely the coolest car on the planet.