

CAR and DRIVER

NOVEMBER 1971/60 CENTS

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MEGA VS. PINTO

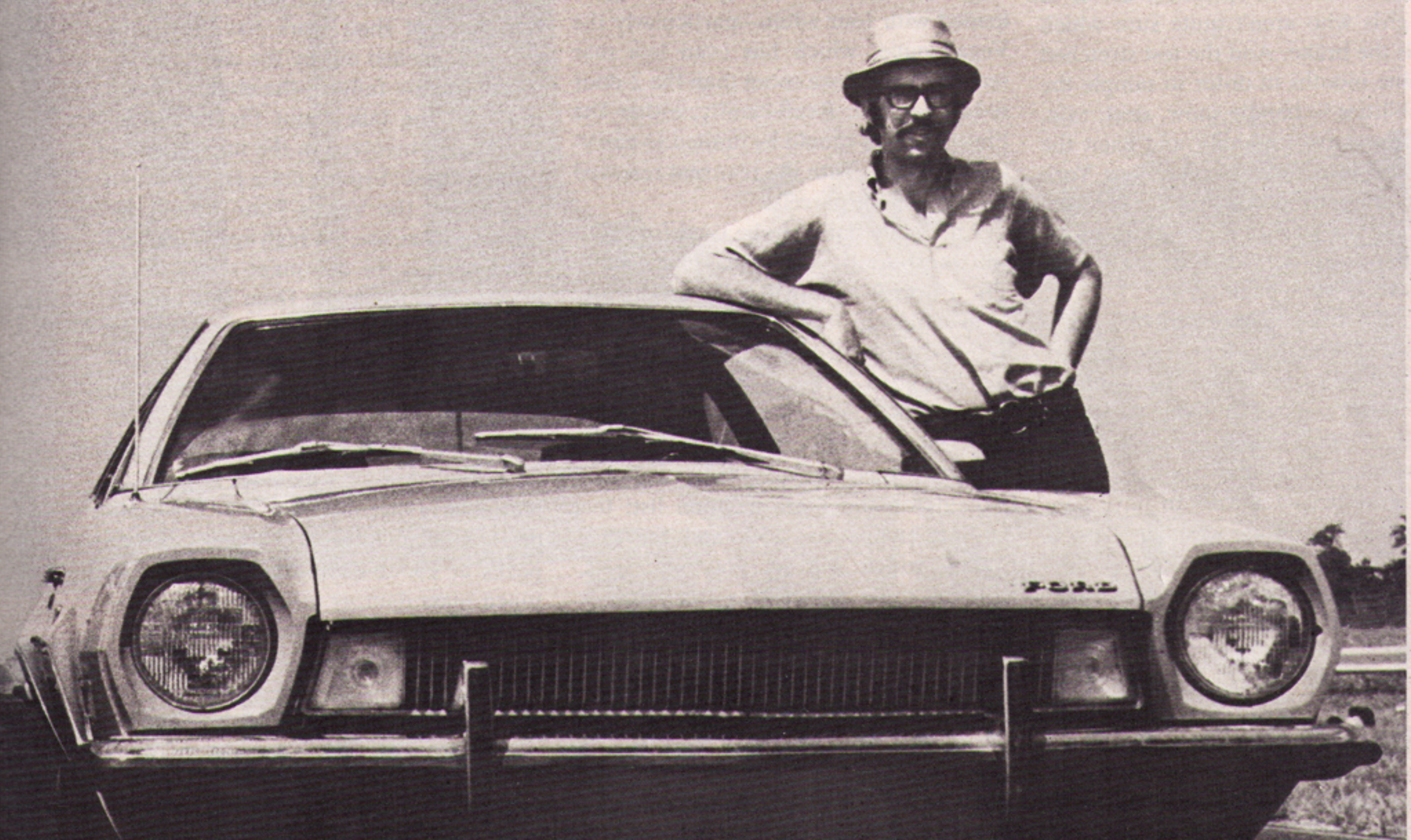
on factory modifications



**15,000 MILE
COMPARISON TEST:
CHEVROLET VEGA
VERSUS
FORD PINTO**



Return with us now to those nine hard months on the road as the



C/D staff recounts the thrill of ownership and the agony of service.

One Vega and one Pinto have survived 15,000 miles at the hands of the Car and Driver staff. And each is still running. It was a tough test too, with many of the miles being clocked on the bombed-out streets of New York City (which has road surfaces so choppy and driving conditions so tortuous that several Detroit auto makers test experimental parts on fleet cars operating here) by the full range of staff drivers—from a left-handed sprint car driver to office girls who aren't quite sure which pedal is the brake. And the test stretched over nine months in order to sample the cars' abilities to handle snow, sleet, rain, heat, oppressive humidity and even the occasional hurricane that the New York weather bureau dials up. Yet the cars survived, and did so with no major mechanical failures—an indication of the soundness of their basic engineering.

Still, far more is expected of a car—even two of America's lowest priced cars—than just a capability of self-propulsion for 15,000 miles. Problems were uncovered. When it comes to convenience, comfort and—particularly—driveability, both the Vega and the Pinto have conspicuous shortcomings. Dealer service, too, is rife with fraud. This test will expose a wide range of strengths and weaknesses that all potential owners should consider.

Neither of the test cars was a budget-priced stripper. Instead, we ordered them with options we felt most enthusiasts—drivers who want a *good* small car, not just a cheap one—would buy. The Vega was a hatchback coupe with crisp, up-town styling that makes it one of the most visually appealing small cars on the market. It was equipped with the optional 110-hp engine, 4-speed transmission, special handling suspension, wide A70-13 tires and all of the comfort and convenience equipment that was available early in the model year (except for air conditioning). Mechanically, it was identical to a Vega GT (introduced after the test had started) with styled wheels and dashboard instrumentation being the only differences between the test car and the version Chevrolet advertises as a sports car. With all of this equipment the price was high — \$2847.25 on the window sticker.

Hatchback Pintos were not in production at the start of the test so we settled for the only other choice, a 2-door sedan. But it, too, had every available performance and convenience option; 2.0-liter engine, 4-speed transmission, disc front brakes, A70-13 tires, all of the conven-

ience groups and a Protection Package (huge bumper guards and vinyl-padded body side moldings to prevent door dents) which turned out to be at least as useful as tires in New York City. At \$2511.00, the price was significantly lower than the Vega.

Considering the prices, both cars perform well enough in urban commuting and cross country situations to serve as satisfactory transportation for one-car families. They are both rated as 4-passenger cars but are uncomfortable when loaded with four adults—particularly the Vega coupe, which has even less rear seat head and knee room than the 2-door sedan version. Realistically, either the Pinto or Vega should be limited to carrying two adults with the rear seat reserved for children or parcels.

And while both can be used for "general transportation," each has its specialty. The Pinto is exceptionally satisfying, even amusing, as a city traffic car. It's highly maneuverable, visibility is extremely good in every direction except toward the rear corners, and it has the sharp-edged, go-stop-turn feel of a sports car. With this in mind, there are two bargains on the Pinto's option list: the 2.0-liter engine for \$50, and the disc brakes, which will set you back \$32. Without those two extras the Pinto is just another low-dollar transit capsule—with them it's a real urban flogger's car. The "big" engine is relatively smooth and quiet and very powerful. It also revs like a dentist's drill. The 4-speed transmission which backs it up is right for the task with short, quick throws and a solid, stubby lever. The disc brakes require somewhat higher pedal pressures than we like but they are extremely controllable and stop the car with no directional instability (unlike the standard drum brakes, the discs can easily be held on the verge of lock-up when the need arises). With this equipment, the only thing more capable than the Pinto in traffic is a motorcycle.

But while the Pinto is definitely more fun than the Vega for hard driving, its charm melts away in point-to-point cruising. The ride quality is much harsher than that of the Vega, high speed directional stability is lacking, and the bucket seats, with their poorly-shaped and too-upright backrests, proved to be agony for most of the staff.

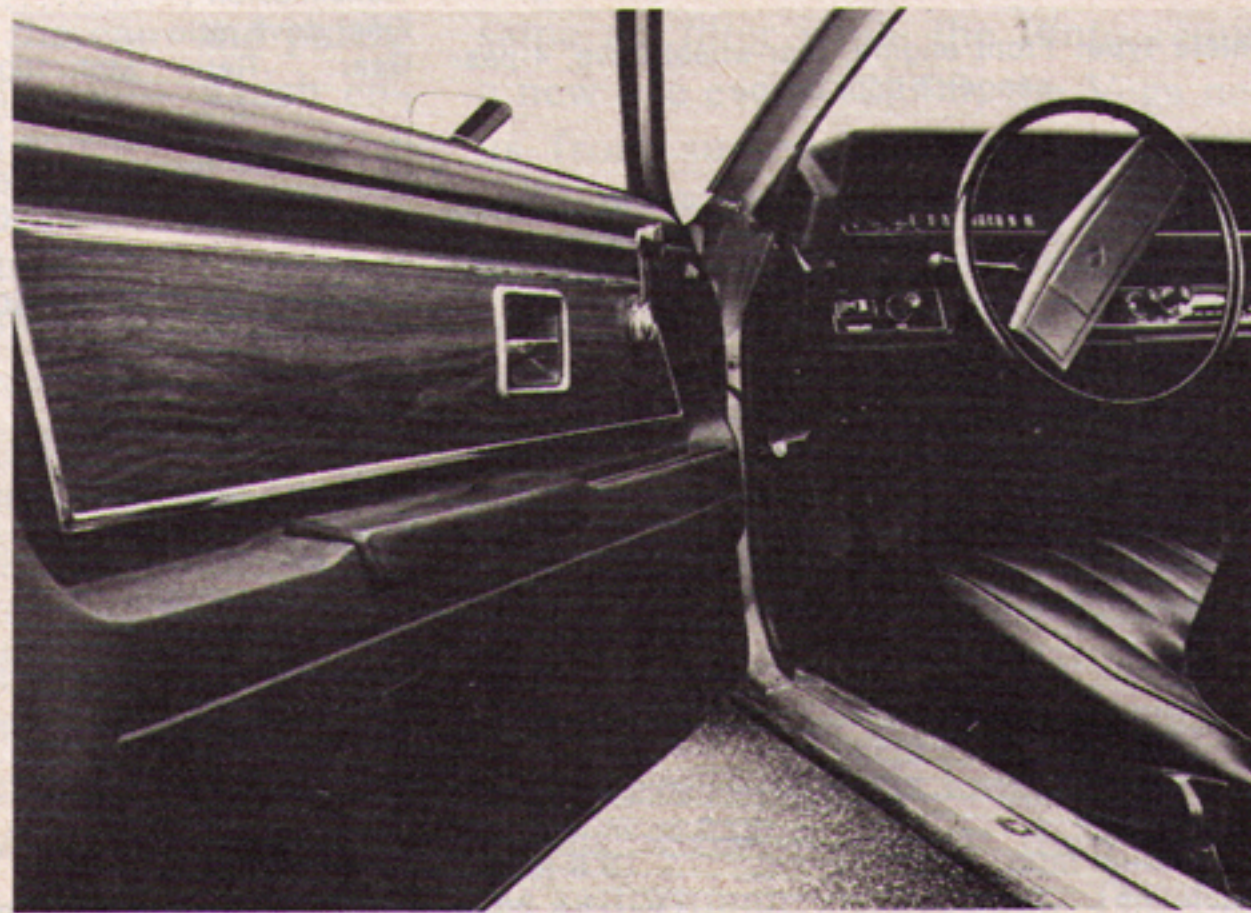
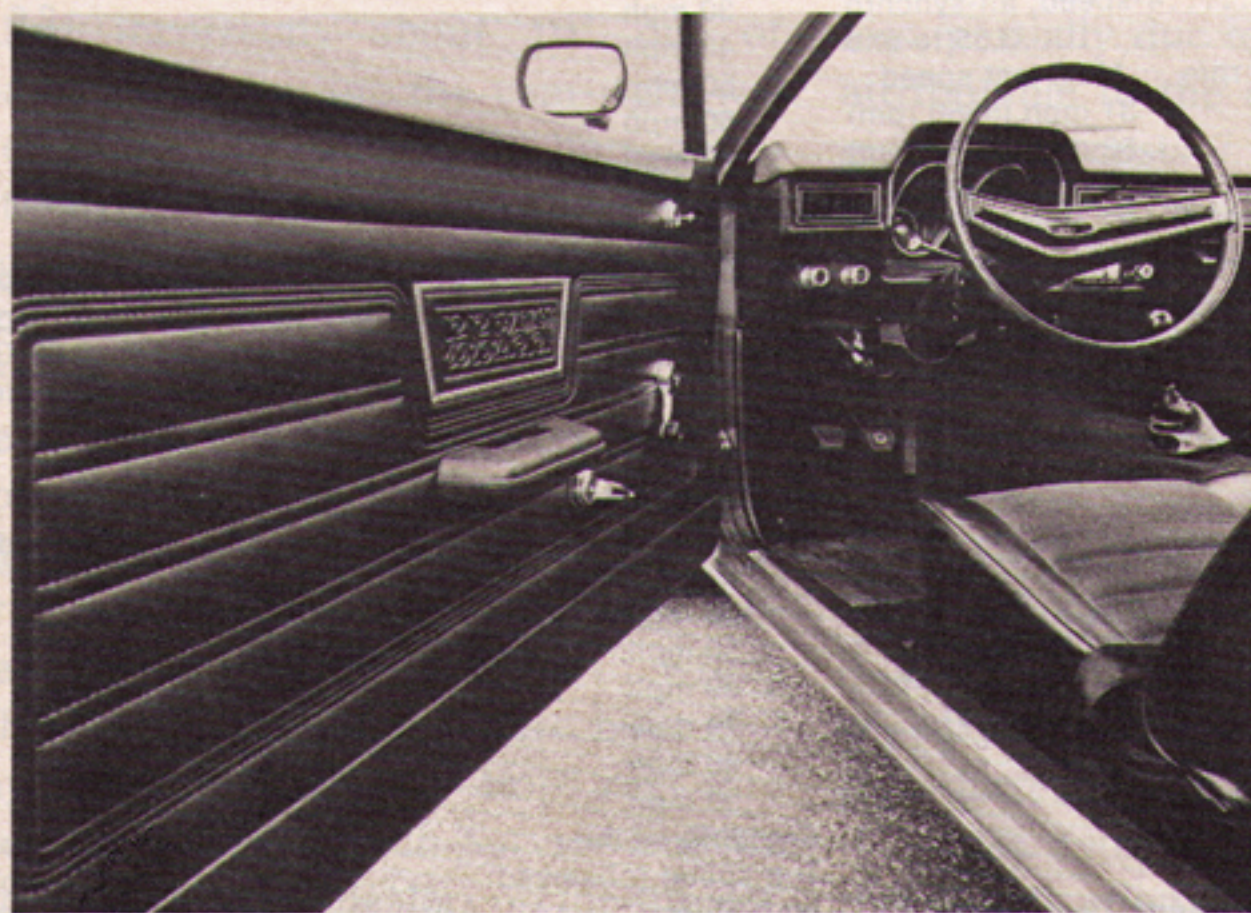
The Vega, on the other hand, hits its stride on the open highway. It has good directional stability and the front bucket seats are comfortable for most drivers. There were complaints of excessive heat radiating from the Vega's driveline tunnel

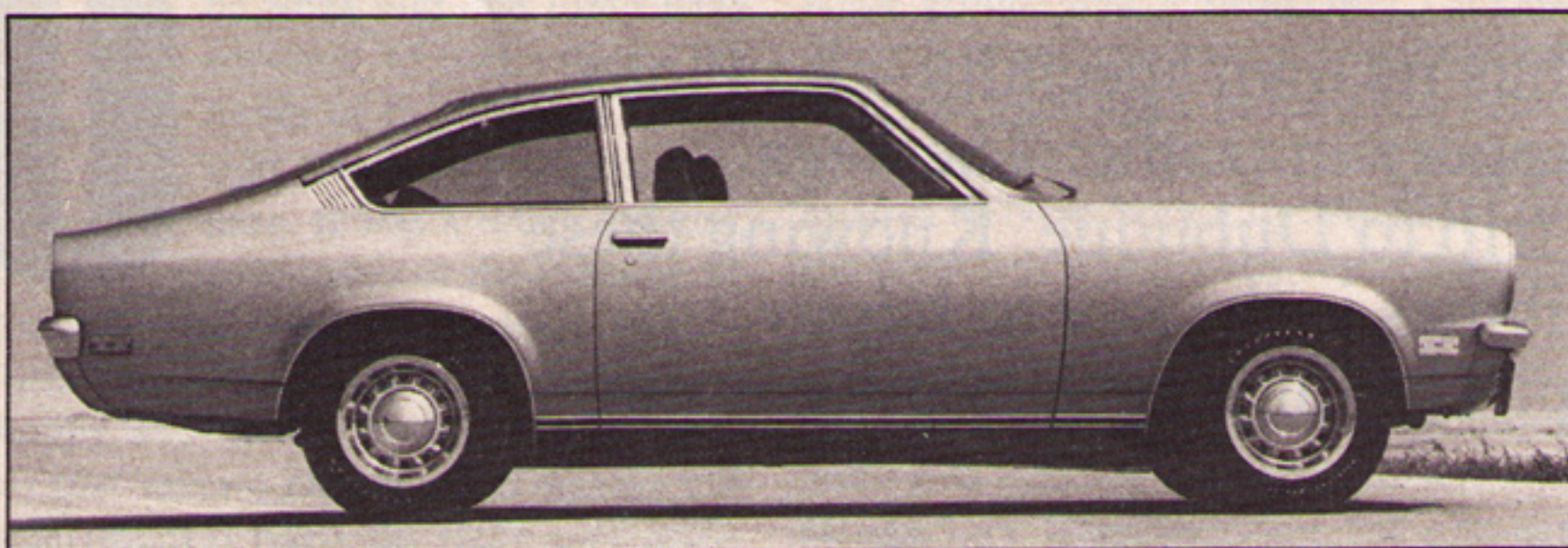
—the effect being exaggerated by the softly-padded bucket seats which envelop you in non-breathing vinyl—but it was agreed that the Vega's far superior flow-through ventilation system was more than enough to offset it. (The Pinto's ventilation is flat inadequate unless you open the windows.) As a point of interest, the Vega's flow-through system is augmented by a blower that operates whenever the ignition is on.

While it is obvious that Chevrolet engineers have made a heavy commitment toward occupant comfort in the Vega, the effect of their work has been very nearly cancelled out by the car's one colossal esthetic failure—the engine. Never mind all the talk about the marvelous technology involved in the liner-less aluminum block: From a noise and vibration standpoint, the Vega's Four is unfit for passenger car use. At high speeds, where wind noise is the dominant sound, there is very little to choose from between the two cars, but in traffic, when accelerating up through the gears, the Vega's clattering engine and fruity sounding exhaust are genuinely unpleasant. In addition, the second order engine shake, characteristic of all in-line 4-cylinder engines, is particularly strenuous in the Vega. It's pretty much confined to two periods with peaks at about 2200 and 4100 rpm. A tuned mass damper attached to the rear of the transmission effectively absorbs the high-speed disturbance but the low-speed one still tingles your toes and buzzes the shift lever as you pass through—when we need a Magic Fingers massage we'll pay our quarter, thanks. This, combined with the noise and the rubbery, balky shifter, takes the fun out of low speed and sporting driving.

The decision to order the optional, higher performance engine in what is basically an economy car is not the contradiction that it might appear. In fact, we have concluded that it is a good idea for all but the most inveterate nickle-noses, particularly if you choose a Pinto in the first place. Of the test cars, the Pinto proved to be quicker, with quarter-mile times of 17.7 seconds at 75.0 mph—0.5 seconds and 1.2 mph quicker than the Vega. Both are substantially more powerful than normal store-bought economy cars which makes for easier passing and better acceleration when heavily loaded. Most important, the big engines don't kill fuel economy. At least, not necessarily. In fact, our tests show that the driver has more to do with gas mileage than does the engine. One guy (the left-handed sprint car driver—it had to come out—Ed.) transported himself through a 1000-mile trip in the Vega and averaged

Each car has its own specialty—the Pinto
is slippery in traffic: The Vega
excels on a trip to Dubuque. Knowing these
attributes is the key to happy
ownership: The difference in price is not.





CHEVROLET VEGA 2300

Manufacturer: Chevrolet Motor Division
General Motors Corporation
Detroit, Michigan 48202

Vehicle type: Front engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger 2-door coupe

Price as tested: \$2830.30

(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges, does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: Base Vega Coupe, \$2197.00; 110-hp engine, \$42.35; 4-speed transmission, \$52.95; Handling package, \$131.25; Wheel trim rings, \$26.50; Custom exterior, \$79.40; Custom interior, \$125.95; Clock, \$14.55; Tinted glass, \$37.05; AM/FM radio, \$123.30.

ENGINE

Type: 4-in-line, water-cooled, aluminum block and cast iron head, 5 main bearings

Bore x stroke3.50 x 3.62 in, 88.8 x 91.8 mm

Displacement140 cu in, 2300 cc

Compression ratio8.0 to one

Carburetion1 x 2-bbl

Valve gearBelt-driven single overhead cam

Power (SAE)110 bhp @ 4800 rpm

Torque (SAE)138 lbs/ft @ 3200 rpm
Specific power output...0.78 bhp/cu in, 47.8 bhp/liter

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission4-speed, all-synchrom

Final drive ratio3.36 to one

Gear	Ratio	Mph/ 1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	3.43	6.2	33 mph (5300 rpm)
II	2.16	9.8	51 mph (5200 rpm)
III	1.37	15.4	76 mph (4950 rpm)
IV	1.00	21.1	105 mph (4950 rpm) (1971) 95 mph (4500 rpm) (1972)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase97.0 in

Track, F/R55.1/54.1 in

Length169.7 in

Width65.4 in

Height51.9 in

Ground clearance4.8 in

Curb weight2440 lbs

Weight distribution, F/R52.7/47.3%

Battery capacity12 volts, 45 amp/hr

Alternator capacity448 watts

Fuel capacity11.0 gal

Oil capacity3.0 qts

Water capacity6.5 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., unequal length control arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar

R: Rigid axle, four trailing arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar

STEERING

TypeRecirculating ball

Turns lock-to-lock4.5

Turning circle curb-to-curb33.0 ft

BRAKES

F:9.6-in disc

R:9.0 x 1.2-in cast iron drum

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size13 x 6.0-in

Wheel typeStamped steel, 4 bolt

Tire make and sizeGoodyear A70-13

Tire typeBelted, tubeless

Test inflation pressures, F/R24/24 psi

Tire load rating1060 lbs per tire @ 32 psi

PERFORMANCE (1971)

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	2.9
40 mph	5.2
50 mph	7.8
60 mph	11.4
70 mph	16.0
80 mph	23.0
90 mph	32.0

Standing ¼-mile18.2 sec @ 73.8 mph

Top speed (observed)105 mph

80-0 mph244 ft (0.88 G)

Fuel mileage22.6 mpg (avg.) on regular fuel

PERFORMANCE (1972)

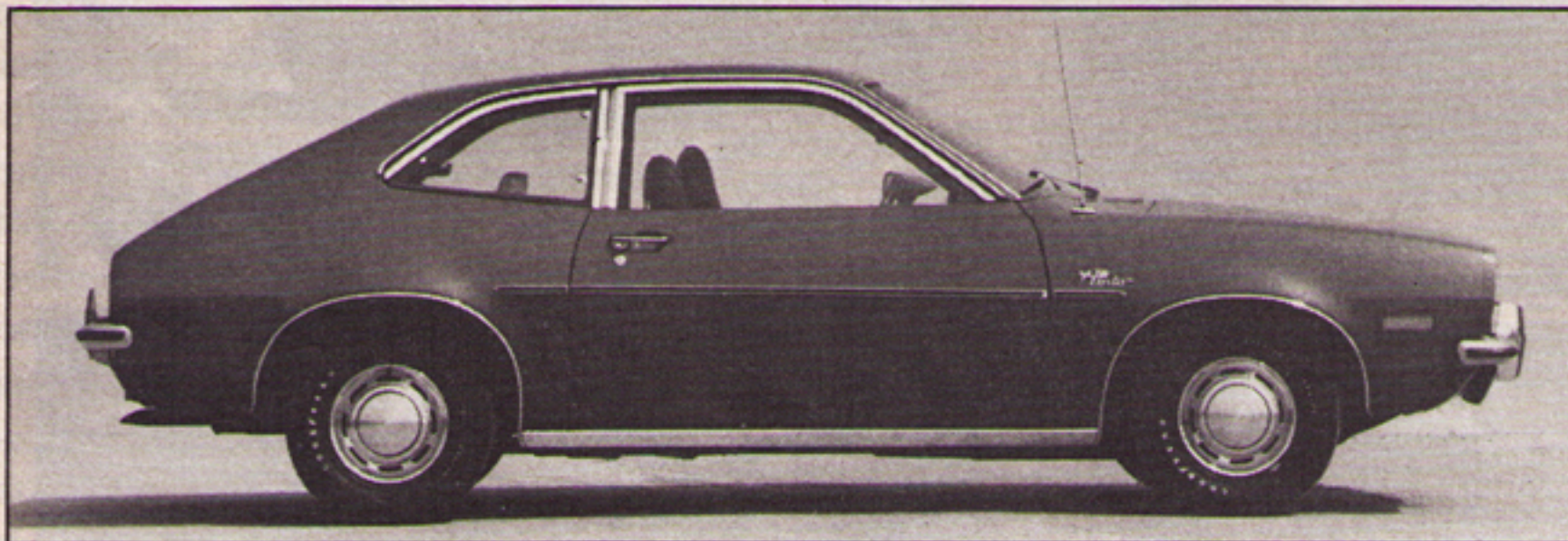
Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	3.0
40 mph	5.3
50 mph	8.0
60 mph	11.6
70 mph	16.6
80 mph	24.5
90 mph	34.5

Standing ¼-mile18.4 sec @ 72.8 mph

Top speed (observed)95 mph

80-0 mph244 ft (0.88 G)

Fuel mileage22.6 mpg (avg.) on regular fuel



FORD PINTO

Manufacturer: Ford Division
Ford Motor Company
Rotunda Drive
Dearborn, Michigan

Vehicle type: Front engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger 2-door coupe

Price as tested: \$2511.00

(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges, does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: Base Pinto 2-door, \$1919.00; 2.0-liter engine, \$50.00; Disc brakes, \$32.00; Rear window defogger, \$28.00; Luxury decor group, \$130.00; Tinted glass, \$37.00; Convenience group, \$34.00; Protection package, \$68.00; AM radio, \$61.00; Fold-out rear windows, \$29.00; Fold-down rear seat, \$36.00; A70-13 tires, \$87.00.

ENGINE

Type: 4-in-line, water-cooled, cast iron block and head, 5 main bearings

Bore x stroke3.58 x 3.03 in, 90.8 x 77.0 mm

Displacement122.0 cu in, 2000 cc

Compression ratio8.6 to one

Carburetion1 x 2-bbl

Valve gearBelt-driven single overhead cam

Power (SAE)100 bhp @ 5600 rpm
Torque (SAE)120 lbs/ft @ 3600 rpm

Specific power output...0.82 bhp/cu in, 50.0 bhp/liter

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission4-speed, all-synchrom

Final drive ratio3.55 to one

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	3.65	5.5	31 mph (5650 rpm)
II	1.97	10.1	56 mph (5650 rpm)
III	1.37	14.6	82 mph (5600 rpm)
IV	1.00	20.0	99 mph (4950 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase94.0 in

Track, F/R55.0/55.0 in

Length163.0 in

Width69.4 in

Height50.1 in

Ground clearance5.1 in

Curb weight2170 lbs

Weight distribution, F/R55.5/44.5%

Battery capacity12 volts, 45 amp/hr

Alternator capacity532 watts

Fuel capacity11.0 gal

Oil capacity3.0 qts

Water capacity7.0 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., unequal length control arms, coil springs

R: Rigid axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs

STEERING

TypeRack and pinion

Turns lock-to-lock4.1

Turning circle curb-to-curb31.7 ft

BRAKES

F:9.3-in disc

R:9.0 x 1.4-in cast iron drum

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size13.0 x 5.0-in

Wheel typeStamped steel, 4 bolt

Tire make and sizeGoodyear, A70-13

Tire typeBelted, tubeless

Test inflation pressures, F/R24/24 psi

Tire load rating1060 lbs per tire @ 32 psi

PERFORMANCE (Early 1971)

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	2.6
40 mph	4.8
50 mph	7.4
60 mph	11.0
70 mph	15.3
80 mph	21.0
90 mph	29.4

Standing ¼-mile17.7 sec @ 75.0 mph

Top speed (observed)99 mph

80-0 mph257 ft (0.83 G)

Fuel mileage22.0 mpg (av) on regular fuel

PERFORMANCE (Late 1971)

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	2.5
40 mph	4.7
50 mph	7.2
60 mph	10.5
70 mph	14.5
80 mph	20.0
90 mph	27.5

Standing ¼-mile17.6 sec @ 76.0 mph

Top speed (observed)99 mph

80-0 mph257 ft (0.83 G)

Fuel mileage24.0 mpg (avg.) on regular fuel

16 miles per gallon. A week later, on a carefully controlled mileage check that included both city traffic and expressway cruising, the same car managed 30 mpg and did so without the benefit of any special driving techniques. It was just driven gently, with early shifts and no wide-open-throttle acceleration. Normally, the Vega averaged between 22 and 23 mpg the way most of the staff members drive.

The Pinto varied too, but over a narrower range. Even old Left Turn had to work to push it below 20 mpg. On the average, the Pinto was usually within one mpg of the Vega. This result is contrary to the ranking of the standard models where the Vega out-economizes the Pinto by about 2.5 mpg (C/D, January). Both of the test cars run on regular gasoline with no discomfort.

However, one area of both cars' operation is very uncomfortable, and that is driveability. Both were delivered in the winter and starting and throttle response under those driving conditions were unacceptable, for different reasons. The Pinto, to Ford's eternal embarrassment, had a serious defect built in at the factory and it didn't take once around the block to know something was wrong. It moved like it was tied to a Fruehauf, engine idle was unsteady, throttle response was no more predictable than a Supreme Court decision and there was a general reluctance to start. One day the reluctance overcame all and the nearest Ford agency was summoned to administer first aid. "The choke is stuck," the mechanic said. "It could happen to anybody." He also allowed that the Pinto's general malaise was due to maladjustment of its carburetor and took it upon himself to fix it all up. His efforts were for naught. In fact, the car went to several dealers and all of their efforts were for naught. Finally, we interested Ford Engineering in the case and it was discovered that the camshaft had been installed incorrectly—about 10° out of phase. *Voila!* Putting the cam right was like bolting on an extra 40 horsepower not to mention a fantastic reduction in engine roughness. Where the best the Pinto had done at the drag strip was 19.0 seconds at 68 mph, now it would clear the eyes 1.3 seconds quicker and 7.0 mph faster. Finally, the optional 2.0-liter engine proved to be worth its price. It turns out that ours wasn't the only 2.0-liter engine to have its cam in wrong either. A series of them were built that way in the Fall of 1970—Ford isn't sure how many—and a Tech Service Bulletin had been issued to dealers on the subject. But you know how dealers don't like to

be bothered with mere trifles like a rotten motor, so none of them had a clue when they were asked to fix our car.

The Vega's driveability problems could be traced more to production variations than to production mistakes. The engine is very sensitive to calibration of its 2-bbl. carburetor. Constant throttle cruising at low speeds turned out to be no problem but the engine was inclined to bog on even the slightest acceleration. In this nature, some Vegas are OK; some are virtually intolerable. Ours was the latter. The problem diminished somewhat as the weather warmed up but it was still grim. Dealers had no solution but they at least were helpful on two occasions when the car would barely run.

The first time, dirt was found in the carburetor (that could happen to anybody, right?), and the second time the carburetor was found to have unbolted itself from the manifold. That little trick was caused by the 4-cylinder vibration from which the Vega is a chronic sufferer. All carburetor bolts get a dose of Loctite at the factory to prevent loosening (the engineers had discovered this quirk even before production started) but in our case it hadn't been enough.

Chevrolet has been well aware of the Vega's driveability shortcomings so, for this reason and because the latest emission regulations are more difficult to meet, the 1972 models have been modified accordingly. The new high-output Vega engine (rated at 90 SAE net horsepower) has a modified carburetor with richer jets and relocated accelerator pump discharge nozzles, an air injection pump and a camshaft biased toward low-speed output (at the expense of maximum horsepower). To evaluate the improvement in driveability, we updated our Vega to the new-model specifications. It's an altogether different car. The old holes in the throttle response have successfully been filled. But there has been a noticeable power loss, partially due to the cam and partly attributable to the air pump, which engineers say costs 7 hp at the peak. The car is slower. Top speed dropped from an indicated 105 mph to 95 mph and 1.0 mph disappeared from the quarter-mile speeds. But the car is so much easier to drive that the power loss is a fair trade.

First-year Vegas had one other annoying habit that has been eliminated in the 1972 models—brake squeak, actually more of a depths-of-hell howl than a squeak. For '72 the front disc rotors and pads have been redesigned to tune out the noise. Our test Vega was treated to this modification and, although a squeak did reappear after 3000 miles of testing,

it was minor—you might even say musical—compared to the original.

The Pinto also received some aid during our test. Once its camshaft had been set right it did not have the driveability problems of the Vega but that did not mean there wasn't room for improvement. Obviously Ford engineers felt the same way because they developed a series of changes that were incorporated into production cars throughout the model year. The areas included improved performance, fuel economy *and* driveability. You can't ask for much more than that. Our test car was updated to the late 1971 specifications by advancing the timing from 6° to 10° before-top-dead-center, and installing a revised carburetor and hotter spark plugs with a wider gap. The results were significant; quarter-mile times improved by 0.1 seconds and 1.0 mph and the average fuel economy increased by almost two miles per gallon, which is an incredible improvement due to the new carburetor being in the most favorable area of the production tolerance range. Our updated Pinto will not be typical of 1972 models however, because further modifications (lowered compression ratio, revised ignition curve and a recalibrated carburetor) were subsequently required for emissions compliance.

As already mentioned, fuel economy of the Vega and Pinto is similar and so, it turns out, is the cost of routine service. Both Ford and Chevrolet recommend visits to the dealer at 6000-mile intervals for oil changes, lubrication of certain systems, filter replacements and strategic adjustments. Naturally, the program for each car is different—both require oil changes every 6000 and engine tune-ups every 12,000 but that is just about the extent of the similarity. The Vega is scheduled for a new oil filter at every other oil change, the Pinto at every change; the Vega will go for 50,000 miles on the same air filter while the Pinto requires a new one every 12,000; the Vega needs its front suspension lubed every 6000 miles while the Pinto will go 36,000; but by far the most significant difference is the recommendation for valve lash adjustment—every 6000 miles for the Pinto, every 24,000 in the Vega. This disparity is responsible for one of the most conspicuous differences in the two cars—engine noise. Chevrolet has developed the Vega to run with loose initial clearances which allow it to absorb the valve seat wear associated with longer service intervals. Excessive valve train noise is the unfortunate by-product. The Pinto,

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CHEVROLET VEGA VS. FORD PINTO

(Continued from page 27)

on the other hand, maintains its silence at the expense of frequent lash adjustments. And the expense can be computed on the basis of about 0.6 hours of labor for each trip back to the dealer. This is offset, however, by certain operations which are required only on the Vega.

As you might suspect, labor is the single most expensive item on the routine service schedule. The manufacturers determine flat rates for each operation. On the Pinto it works out to 1.4 hours for the 6000 mile service, 3.4 for the 12,000, 1.3 for the 18,000 and 4.6 for the 24,000. That totals up to 10.7 hours for a manual transmission car, assuming nothing other than routine service or warranty work is required for the first 24,000 miles. The Vega requires slightly more labor—11.0 hours for the same interval—divided as follows; 1.4 at 6000 miles, 3.4 at 12,000; 1.3 at 18,000, and 5.0 at 24,000. At the commonly used shop rate of \$10 per hour, that works out to \$107 for the Pinto and \$110 for the Vega—hardly a significant difference.

The Pinto's advantage in low labor consumption is more than offset by its higher rate of parts replacement during the same mileage. The Vega does use a more expensive spark plug (because each has an internal resistor for radio noise suppression) but it requires one less quart of oil at every oil change and will go for a longer interval on the same air and oil filters and PCV valve—all items which usually cost at least \$4 to replace.

As an example of what happens, or at least can happen, when you take your car in for service, let's review our experience when the Pinto was taken to "Long Island's oldest Ford dealer" for its 12,000-mile checkup. The bill was \$64.83, broken down as follows: parts including lubricants, \$27.10; labor, \$34.00; and \$3.73 for tax. As you can see, labor is the most costly category. Unfortunately, we didn't get our money's worth. Certain operations specifically called for in the manual were not performed—adjusting valve lash was one of them—yet we were still charged for the full flat-rate time suggested by Ford for the complete 12,000-mile service. Further, with regard to the spark plugs, the manual directs the mechanic to "Inspect, clean, adjust and test. Replace as required." Even though we had replaced the spark plugs 3000 miles earlier, a new set was screwed in (because the house makes a profit of about half of the retail price on each spark plug and because it

is customary for mechanics to get a commission on the parts they replace, the usual service procedures across the country is to put in new plugs whether they are needed or not). Curiously, the ignition points were not replaced—it's a time consuming job and the profit margin on points is less than on plugs—and the timing and dwell were not checked (after the car was returned we found the timing to be 4° BTDC and the dwell angle at 32°—the manual specifies 10° and 48°-52° respectively). There is really very little point in paying money for this kind of non-service if you have some other choice, and with the Vega and Pinto you do. Do it yourself. It's easy on these cars because they are simple—only four cylinders and no power accessories to clutter up the engine compartment. And the manufacturers make it easier still. Do-it-yourself service manuals are available for both the Vega (\$1.25) and the Pinto (\$2.25) and they are excellent. They explain the routine service operations in such detail that almost anyone with a basic intelligence can perform them. To be sure, certain special tools are required—a timing light, dwell meter, etc. (the books list everything you'll need)—but the money you save on labor will easily pay for them in the first year of driving. And you won't be buying spark plugs and PCV valves that you don't need. Best of all, you'll be doing your civic duty by rendering dishonest car mechanics redundant in their chosen field of plunder. So, to finish off this discussion of maintenance costs, we feel that neither the Vega nor the Pinto has an advantage in this category because there is far more money to be saved by doing your own service on whichever car you choose than there is buying the one with the lowest projected labor cost or the one with the lowest replacement parts cost.

In fact, as a conclusion of this test, we feel it would be a mistake to buy either of these automobiles on the basis of cost alone. The initial purchase price and the operating cost of both cars are practically coincident compared to the basic capabilities—the esthetics and the performance—of the cars themselves. If you want a nimble, powerful commuter car, buy a 2-liter Pinto. On the other hand, if, in your travels, you spend more time on the open road and you agree with GM's sense of sheetmetal fashion, the Vega is a better choice. With either, it's important to remember that you're buying a car, not a price tag.