

COMPARO TEST: EIGHT CARS UNDER \$10,000!

# CAR AND DRIVER

DECEMBER 1988 • \$2.75

## AMERICA'S BEST SEDAN!

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Saab 9000CD. Dodge Spirit ES. Geo Tracker.  
Porsche 911 goes flying. Monster trucks.

# Eight for Ten

*Can you find decent transportation for less than \$10,000? We say yes.*

BY WILLIAM JEANES

•“The problem with cars,” someone said over coffee one morning, “is that they cost too damn much.” If you hang around the *C/D* offices long enough, you’ll hear a lot of deep economic theory like that, most of which wafts its way into the ether as the talk turns to more exciting topics—horsepower and torque, to name two. In this instance, however, the discussion continued and resulted in our latest price-based



comparison test: eight cars for an out-the-door price of less than \$10,000.

Because we know that young persons are most often the car buyers with low readings on their cash dipsticks, we added three of our road warriors—André Idzikowski, Matthew Smith, and Adam Agranoff—to our four-editor evaluation team. And to even the sides, the warriors called on summer intern Bill Visnic—who

had such a good time that he stayed on here as a writer.

Each of our big eight nominated a car, and these nominations begin on page 57. The criteria could not have been simpler: four-wheel transportation costing less than \$10,000.

What cars did we pick? An alphabetical listing of our octet follows: Ford Festiva LX, Honda Civic DX, Mazda 323SE, Mer-

cury Tracer, Mitsubishi Mirage, Subaru Justy RS 4WD, and two Volkswagens, the Fox GL and the Golf. The Justy alone among the cars had four-wheel drive. The Fox, the Mazda, and the Mirage had four doors; the rest made do with dual side entrances.

Our evaluation of the eight cars took its usual form. We provided ourselves with the test numbers generated by the techni-



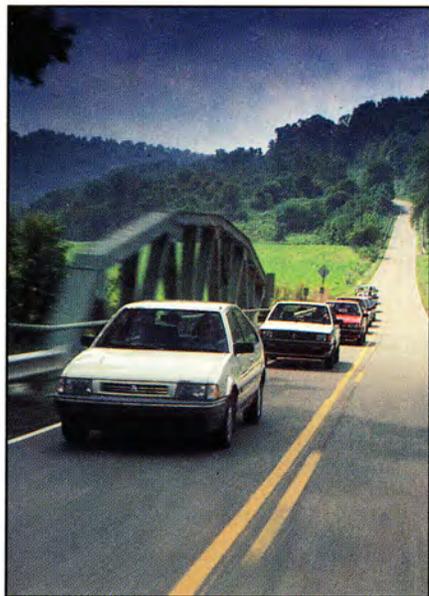
cal staff, and we took the cars to Ohio on a two-day escape and evasion exercise run over the rolling and twisting two-lanes that so distinguish that state's southeastern quadrant. Changing cars at approximately 30-minute intervals gave us ample opportunity to rate individual cars and to compare them with the group.

At the conclusion of our trip, we each filled out a secret ballot that asked us to rate such subjective categories as comfort, utility, value, fun-to-drive, and so on. The results appear in the chart on page 68.

Our rules did not specify any options—only the price cap. But because comfort was a rating category and because a life without music is no life at all, radios and air conditioning appeared on every one of the entries. After all, driving an inexpensive car doesn't require you to sweat in silence.

At \$8382 the Festiva LX was the least expensive testee, but it didn't look it. A tiny car with a tiny engine, our top-of-the-line Festiva LX was nonetheless remarkably well outfitted. Its standard features included tilt steering, power mirrors, a rear wiper-washer, a tachometer, and an AM/FM stereo radio with a clock. The Festiva even sported a set of handsome alloy wheels.

Next up on the dollar scale, at \$9144, came the Subaru Justy RS 4WD. Although



not as well equipped as the Festiva was, the Justy came equipped with a part-time four-wheel-drive system. Obviously, that would have made the tiny Subaru a strong contender in a winter driving test. Ours was a summer drive, however, and the added weight of the Justy's four-wheel-drive hardware promised to be a burden when we made demands on its diminutive three-cylinder engine. The Justy looked



good, though, wearing a neat black-and-gold paint scheme.

The Mercury Tracer—a Mazda 323 in luxu clothing built in Mexico for sale by Lincoln-Mercury dealers—cost \$9631 and delivered an American-class luxury interior and a long list of standard equipment for that money. Mercury has aimed the Tracer at the high end of the economy-sedan market; as a result, the Tracer is available only in premium-level trim. Adam Agranoff spoke for us all when he called the Tracer “definitely the plushiest car of the bunch.”

At \$9695, Bill Visnic's Volkswagen Fox GL represented the top-of-the-line version of VW's least expensive car. The Brazilian-built Fox is based on a six-year-old VW chassis, but extensive development has ensured that it still feels up-to-date. And, thanks to the low manufacturing costs in its country of origin, the Fox's modest price includes a handsome, well-appointed cabin.

In choosing the \$9870 Volkswagen Golf, André Idzikowski tried a different ploy. Instead of selecting the top version of VW's cheapest model, André picked a base edition of the maker's most modern, most technically advanced econobox. By forsaking some of the Fox's amenities, André picked up more room, a better chassis, and more power. And his Golf wasn't a stripper, either: in addition to A/C and a radio, it included a rear wiper-washer and a clock.

Larry Griffin's Mitsubishi Mirage, at \$9929, was the new-for-1989 version of Mitsubishi's smallest sedan. Completely restyled, it immediately won praise as one of the most attractive cars in the group. With four doors and a big cabin, the Mirage looked plenty practical. But its narrow tires and 81-hp engine didn't do much to raise the eyebrows of our performance-minded bunch.

Despite being a cousin of the Tracer, the Mazda 323SE, \$9954, had a personality all its own. A quiet personality. It had no tachometer and no clock, despite having the word “quartz” on its dash, mocking you for deleting the clock. Considerably more spartan than its sibling, the four-door 323 nonetheless offered easier entry than the three-door Tracer, and its trunk provided far better luggage space.

Adam Agranoff's Honda Civic DX, at \$9975, ranked as the most expensive of our cars. This Civic also came without a tachometer, but it had all the good things we've come to expect from Honda—a point made by Matthew Smith, who said, “It's tough not to bias yourself in favor of a car that you're so familiar with.”

There, in brief, you have the competitors. The winners? Just keep reading and turning pages.



### Matthew Smith: Ford Festiva LX

Picture this. You're a college student. You love cars. Tuition was just hiked another ten percent. You no longer have the stamina to perform wintertime parking-lot repairs on your ten-year-old beater. You need a sporty, affordable,

reliable, *new* car.

Slide behind the wheel of a Ford Festiva and you'll find yourself sitting in the perfect car. The Festiva's ergonomic layout and attention to detail give it a competitive edge in the convenience and drivability departments. The pedals are well positioned, and the shifter is as smooth as those found in more expen-

sive Hondas. In LX trim, the Festiva offers a tachometer, power mirrors, and a rear wiper as standard equipment. A roomy trunk rounds out the package and allows you to bring plenty of dirty laundry home to mother.

Powered by a Mazda-built, 1.3-liter four-cylinder, the Festiva is a nimble performer. Rev the engine to its 6000-rpm redline (as it loves to do) and you'll find that you can surprise more than a few cars from a stoplight. The suspension provides a ride that is surprisingly reasonable, considering the Festiva's short wheelbase.

The Festiva is the ideal car for a financially strapped college student—or for someone just starting on the road to financial independence. And it has an American nameplate to satisfy the conservatives in your red-white-and-blue hometown. Its proven Mazda reliability practically guarantees that you'll never face another parking-lot repair. Its Euro-Japanese styling is sure to impress those college coeds. And because it's built in South Korea—where labor is cheap—the Festiva will leave you with more than \$1600 in change from a \$10,000 bill.

That will pay for a *long* spring break.

### Adam Agranoff: Honda Civic DX

Speaking practically—as we college punks so often do—the Honda Civic DX hatchback offers the best combination of performance, versatility, and good looks that can be had for your hard-earned \$10,000.

Okay, I may be biased toward the Civic because my first real girlfriend had one. But, hey, not even our esteemed editors can deny the fact that in an era of stratospherically priced Japanese imports, this car offers more value than just about any car on the market.

The Civic DX weighs in at a modest 2104 pounds, and its little sixteen-valve engine puts out 92 hp at 6000 rpm. It doesn't take a physics major to realize that that power-to-weight ratio translates into enough zip to propel the Civic from 0 to 60 in less than ten seconds.

The Civic DX also offers a level of versatility that is rarely seen in cars at this price level. Thanks to a fourteen-percent increase in interior room, this year's Civic is less claustrophobic than its predecessors. And it's remarkably well outfitted. The DX model comes with such standard amenities as a rear-



window wiper, a tilt steering column, and wide 175/70R-13 rubber. Add air conditioning and a stereo and you can still have your way with one of these knockouts for less than ten grand. Included in the price is Honda's proven record of reliability.

What impresses me most about this car is that it has more presence than the

other entries in this test. The Civic DX doesn't blend into the crowd; its low hoodline and long-roof design give it a pleasing, distinctive appearance.

My selection offers one additional benefit: When you buy a Honda Civic DX hatchback, you don't feel as though you've had to compromise your expectations in order to save a buck.

## William Jeanes: Mazda 323SE

As my entry in the decent-car-for-under-\$10,000 challenge, I chose the Mazda 323SE, thinking—for reasons we'll get to in a moment—that it is an excellent buy. I chose a four-door, believing that practicality somehow offsets the indignity of being seen in an inexpensive car. This led me to add NoDoz to my options list, thinking that it would spice up small-four-door operation. That concern proved to be needless.

If, at this point, you have inferred that I had never driven a four-door Mazda 323, you are correct. I had driven the 323 Turbo two-door and liked it a lot. It was fun to drive and delivered considerable value for the money, offering an independent suspension, a strong engine, and a shifter that was just great.

The Turbo, of course, costs a lot more than \$10,000, but it still stood to reason that the lower-line SE would be likable. Particularly when—and here is where the real reason for choosing it surfaces—Csaba Csere, our esteemed technical director, selected one for his mom and walked around the office for weeks telling everyone what a hell of a



buy it was. Ever a sucker for Old World Hungarian values, I bit.

What I got for my bite is a perfectly practical, good-handling, hard-running sedan that has tweed upholstery, air conditioning, carpeting, a split rear seat, alloy wheels, and a decipherable AM/FM radio with a cassette player. Its worth cannot, to my mind, be seriously

questioned. Nor can its panache—largely because it doesn't have any. The 323SE is the kind of sensible car that a generous shoe salesman buys for a son going off to college and, on presentation day, has the dubious joy of seeing the matriculating offspring's face fall.

The Mazda 323SE is a better car to drive than to turn heads with.



## Csaba Csere: Mercury Tracer

Finding a good all-around car with air conditioning and a radio for less than \$10,000 is about as easy as finding a decent pair of jeans for less than twenty bucks. It's possible, but only if you shop carefully and are discerning enough to

identify quality rather than simply a designer name.

That's why I chose the Mercury Tracer, the bargain hunter's version of the Mazda 323. Designed by Mazda, built in Mexico, and marketed by Lincoln-Mercury dealers in the U.S., the Tracer is a well-kept secret. Twelve 323s are sold for each Tracer, but Mercury offers

more car for the money.

Sharing the same port-fuel-injected, overhead-cam, 1.6-liter engine, the same fully independent suspension, and equally roomy interior layouts, the Tracer and the 323 are without question the best-equipped cars in this test. The Tracer, however, is far more lavishly outfitted than any 323 available for less than ten grand. Among the Tracer's standard features—features available only on much more expensive 323s—are a tachometer, dual power mirrors, remote fuel-filler and trunk releases, adjustable height and lumbar supports for the driver's seat, a clock, a day-night rear-view mirror, rear-seat headrests, three-speed wipers, and better-quality upholstery and interior trim.

None of this equipment will quicken the average enthusiast's heartbeat, but most drivers will appreciate having such niceties on board. Try driving at night without a dimmable rear-view mirror and you'll see what I mean.

The Tracer's beauty is that it offers the amenities many drivers take for granted, a technically sophisticated and roomy package, and a bargain price. This is one generic nameplate that none of the name brands can match.

## Larry Griffin: Mitsubishi Mirage

Live half-dangerously, that's my motto. Never having seen a Mitsubishi Mirage four-door in anything other than glossy eight-by-ten form, I picked it as a candidate for best-sedan-under-ten-grand honors. I wasn't being careless, though. I've driven the four-door's sporty brother, the Mirage Turbo hatchback, and it's a killer—a performance-and-comfort-and-looks-per-buck champ. The Mirage Turbo is the best \$12,800 sporty package I've seen since the current VW GTI came out, grew eight more valves, got tinny and nose-heavy, and ran its price to thirteen grand and beyond.

So at ten Gs, the Mirage four-door seemed a good choice. Several other candidates clamored for attention, but I figured that since the hot Mirage was so good, the cool Mirage might be cooler than its competitors.

I can't say I love its looks. The handsome three-door hatchback is also available as a normally aspirated model, but in a decidedly peculiar marketing move Mitsubishi sells it only with an automatic transmission. Well, I never! Thus, the



sedan with a five-speed stick stands in.

After driving this nifty Mitsu, I'm satisfied that most grown-ups will cozy up to it just fine. Those with a feel for viscous machinery will take the same pleasure in its controls that I took in those of the Turbo. In addition to its smooth feel, the four-door offers laudable roominess; pleasing seats, ergonomics,

and trim; a sizable trunk; and a feeling that it will run without fuss for a notable length of time. Okay, the tiny-tired four-door's handling may be a wee bit squirrely in hard driving over tricky roads. But the base Mirage should make a juicy choice for those who sense how much to ask of a car, and how to avoid probing too deep.



## Rich Ceppos: Subaru Justy RS 4WD

The Ceppos Theory of Thrifty Car Buying is as follows: The ten-grand class is a veritable Milky Way of competent but forgettable little sedans, amid which are hidden a couple of wacky, lovable automobiles. You can buy a so-

called real car and engage in the automotive equivalent of thumb twiddling. Or you can search out the brightest lights and spend your hours behind the wheel amused and entertained.

The Justy RS 4WD proves my theory. It's not a car, it's an alternative transportation mechanism. Real cars, at least those in the ten-grand range, don't face

the snows with a keen part-time four-wheel-drive system. Few are equipped with a growling three-cylinder engine. And fewer still are so efficient.

If all you're looking for in a small car is a low sticker price and enough reliability to get to K mart and back, any number of low-ball four-wheelers will meet your meager needs. But think of what a piece of transportation ought to do for you. It should get you where you're going come rain, slush, or mush. It ought to be cheap to own and miserly with the earth's precious fuelstuffs. It should be versatile enough to handle the people-and-cargo hauling in your life without strain. If it's also a kick to drive, then you have something special.

That's why I'm confident the Justy will win the hearts of my flinty-eyed colleagues. Just punch the button in the shift knob and it's four-wheel-drive unstoppable. At a tad over nine grand it's cheap to buy. Its hatchback design gives it mini-wagon utility. And though it admittedly gives away some raw performance, the RS is so small it can scamper for daylight like a crazed cockroach.

Considering the real-car alternatives, I hereby conclude that this nomination is amply Justy-fied. Ahem.



### Bill Visnic: Volkswagen Fox GL

What *really* makes one car in this test better than another? To answer that question, you've got to analyze a number of factors. Performance is certainly a consideration, but it's not the overriding concern. It can't be, because these

aren't performance cars. When you shop in this price class, you have to leave your driving gloves on the shelf.

I say this because several of my colleagues would have you believe that the performance of these cars is everything. If this were a hot-car shoot-out, I would be the first to agree. But these cars sit near the bottom of the performance

spectrum. Driving some of them is about as much fun as a fiber diet.

My choice, the VW Fox GL, doesn't look very impressive on paper. It doesn't have a sixteen-valve engine or NASA-designed bodywork. It's far from potent; its engine produces a modest 81 hp and 93 pound-feet of torque. And its straight-lined sheetmetal could use a rounded edge or two.

Out in the real world, though, the Fox excels. Despite its engine's humble output, the Fox feels strong in almost every situation—especially open-road cruising. Its suspension is supple and compliant—easily the best in the group. Its steering is a bit heavy around town but, in typical German fashion, is wonderfully precise at speed. The doors shut with a firm *chunk*.

The interior is equally fine. The seating material and the plastics are first-rate. Headroom is abundant, even for over-six-footers. There's plenty of room in back for two full-size adults. The shifter offers a firm and direct action that makes changing gears a joy.

In this class, overall goodness means more than a tenth of a second at the drag strip. Overall, the Volkswagen Fox GL is a damn solid car.

### André Idzikowski: Volkswagen Golf

If you're a college student—as I am—you know how hard it is to find a reliable, affordable, and yet suitably sporty set of wheels. A college student's car must accomplish several missions. First, it's got to look good. Second, it should have enough room to haul the pile of school-related detritus that inevitably accumulates during the year. Third, it's got to be fun to drive. Finally, it's got to be cheap to maintain and operate. The VW Golf, in my humble estimation, meets those tough criteria perfectly.

I've always been partial to German-made cars because they feel so solid—even the inexpensive ones are free from the tinniness common to so many Japanese econoboxes. German cars typically also have very fine road manners. That's important to us enthusiasts. The Golf not only has a finely tuned chassis but also a strong, 100-hp engine, a slick-shifting five-speed, and sporty looks.

Its interior is a bit spartan, but the Golf has most of the goodies needed for comfortable driving—including the all-important stereo system. All of the gauges are clear, and the controls are



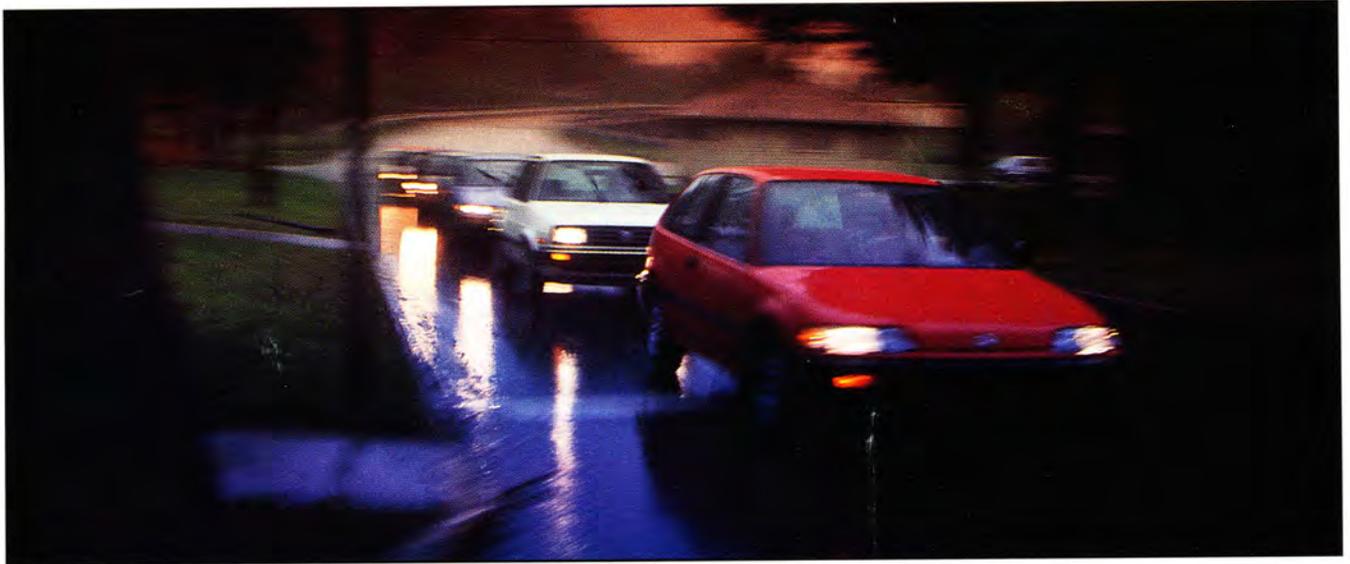
within easy reach. The pedals are perfectly placed for heel-and-toe downshifting, and the seats are supportive and grippy. There is one heinous omission, however: a tach is not included. I can overlook that, though, because the Golf's talents can't be ignored.

The Golf is also a car you can grow with. The aftermarket is full of Golf add-

ons, including air dams, wider wheels and tires, suspension upgrades, and new interior pieces. When you land that first job, your Golf can move right up the socioeconomic ladder with you.

But I'm straying from the point. The Golf is terrific fun. If you're a discriminating enthusiast on a budget, look no further.

BEST ECONOSSEDAN



C/D Test Results		acceleration, sec				top speed, mph	braking, 70-0 mph, ft	roadholding, 1 300-ft skidpad, slal	
		0-60 mph	0-90 mph	1/4-mile	top gear, 30-50 mph				top gear, 50-70 mph
	FORD FESTIVA LX	12.5	50.4	18.5 @ 72 mph	15.9	24.9	91	193	0.67
	HONDA CIVIC DX	9.6	25.3	17.3 @ 79 mph	13.5	15.7	108	206	0.77
	MAZDA 323SE	10.6	29.6	17.7 @ 76 mph	13.2	14.4	101	199	0.74
	MERCURY TRACER	10.8	30.7	17.7 @ 76 mph	14.3	16.9	101	225	0.69
	MITSUBISHI MIRAGE	12.3	34.2	18.4 @ 74 mph	13.3	15.8	98	209	0.71
	SUBARU JUSTY RS 4WD	12.4	58.3	18.7 @ 71 mph	14.3	18.3	90	218	0.65
	VOLKSWAGEN FOX GL	12.3	44.3	18.5 @ 73 mph	15.1	18.6	96	205	0.73
	VOLKSWAGEN GOLF	9.6	25.3	17.1 @ 80 mph	14.4	15.5	108	200	0.74

Vital Statistics		price, base/as tested	engine	SAE net power/torque	dimensions, in			
					wheel-base	length	width	height
	FORD FESTIVA LX	\$6906/\$8382	SOHC 1324cc 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, 1 x 2-bbl carburetor	58 bhp @ 5000 rpm/ 73 lb-ft @ 3500 rpm	90.2	140.5	63.2	55.3
	HONDA CIVIC DX	\$8195/\$9975	SOHC 16-valve 1493cc 4-in-line, aluminum block and head, 1 x 2-bbl throttle-body fuel injection	92 bhp @ 6000 rpm/ 89 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm	98.4	156.1	65.6	52.4
	MAZDA 323SE	\$7999/\$9954	SOHC 1598cc 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection	82 bhp @ 5000 rpm/ 92 lb-ft @ 2500 rpm	94.5	161.8	64.8	54.7
	MERCURY TRACER	\$8216/\$9631	SOHC 1598cc 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection	82 bhp @ 5000 rpm/ 92 lb-ft @ 2500 rpm	94.7	162.0	65.2	53.0
	MITSUBISHI MIRAGE	\$8599/\$9929	SOHC 1468cc 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection	81 bhp @ 5500 rpm/ 91 lb-ft @ 3000 rpm	96.7	170.1	65.7	55.1
	SUBARU JUSTY RS 4WD	\$8066/\$9144	SOHC 9-valve 1190cc 3-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, 1 x 2-bbl carburetor	66 bhp @ 5200 rpm/ 70 lb-ft @ 3600 rpm	90.0	139.2	60.4	54.7
	VOLKSWAGEN FOX GL	\$8115/\$9695	SOHC 1780cc 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection	81 bhp @ 5500 rpm/ 93 lb-ft @ 3250 rpm	92.8	163.4	63.0	53.7
	VOLKSWAGEN GOLF	\$8190/\$9870	SOHC 1780cc 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection	100 bhp @ 5400 rpm/ 107 lb-ft @ 3400 rpm	97.3	158.0	65.5	55.7

**And the winner is . . .**

Our contestants surprised us with their diversity. We learned that neither comfort nor performance need disappear just because a car lacked the ability to induce sticker shock. We learned that life without a tachometer could indeed be sustained—as long as one's aural faculties remained in order.

There's always a tendency, in any multi-car romp, to gang up and pick on one of the cars. Once we reached the twisty roads, the Subaru Justy became the class goat, despite being the sole four-wheel-drive entry. We all liked its looks well enough, but the Justy generated comments such as these: "They should call this the Subaru Drone . . ." and "It understeers, understeers, and then understeers some more. Scary on roads like these."

The Justy's unacceptable engine vibra-

tion—below 2000 rpm, the vibration of the little three-cylinder was so bad that it rendered the rear-view mirror useless—also came in for a lashing. Because it is inexpensive for a four-wheel-drive car, however, the Justy will attract snow-belters in search of cheap transportation.

The Mitsubishi Mirage, a car that rides like a softly sprung big sedan, had a loose feeling when pressed to the limit on curving hillside roads. Its four-season tires contributed to this effect, reminding us that—despite our instincts—we were examining reasonably priced transportation and not sports sedans.

Of the Mirage, Griffin said, "A squirrel of the first order on twisty, whoop-de-do roads. Too bad, because all the surface stuff you scratch so lightly in everyday driving is so fluid, graceful, and pleasant." For a car buyer who intends to motor plac-

idly through life, the Mirage rates a look.

The Ford Festiva's 58-hp engine performed surprisingly well for its size, but we generally agreed that this car's rightful métier lay inside the city-limit signs. With its low, low price and high level of interior trim, though, the Festiva LX will attract urban hedonists on a budget.

The Mazda 323SE lost some ground because, as noted earlier, it fell below its Tracer kinsman in both interior appointments and seat-of-the-trousers luxury feel. It handled better, marginally, but ranked well beneath the Fox, the Golf, and the Civic in this category. Ceppos, waxing excitedly, had this to say: "No tach! No tach! No cloth on the door panels! No clock! Drives reasonably well. The engine gets coarse at high revs. Overall, competent but undistinguished."

Our Mexican-built Mercury Tracer

1000-ft slalom, mph	interior sound level, dBA				fuel economy, mpg		
	idle	full throttle	70-mph cruising	70-mph coasting	EPA city	EPA highway	C/D 700-mile trip
59.4	43	89	74	73	39	43	33
61.1	43	88	73	72	33	37	30
57.8	45	84	74	73	28	35	31
57.7	43	87	74	73	28	35	29
58.3	46	83	74	73	32	37	33
58.1	49	79	75	74	30	35	29
59.5	46	80	73	73	24	29	27
60.1	51	79	74	73	25	33	30



curb weight, lb	weight distribution, % F/R	interior volume, cu ft			suspension		brakes, F/R	tires
		front	rear	trunk	front	rear		
1802	63.2/36.8	47	40	12	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, trailing arm, coil springs	disc/drum	Yokohama Radial 361, 165/70SR-12
2104	62.7/37.3	51	34	12	ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, multilink, coil springs	vented disc/drum	Dunlop SP23J, 175/70R-13
2236	60.6/39.4	49	39	11	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/drum	Yokohama GT Special 351, 175/70SR-13
2224	61.8/38.2	48	37	15	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/drum	Goodyear Corsa GT M+S P175/70R-13
2322	61.4/38.6	51	40	10	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	rigid axle, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/drum	Michelin XA4 M+S, P155/80R-13
1842	61.8/38.2	46	32	9	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, strut, coil springs	vented disc/drum	Bridgestone SF-405 M+S, 145SR-12
2285	61.0/39.0	45	32	10	ind, strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, trailing arm, coil springs	disc/drum	Pirelli P44 M+S, 175/70SR-13
2242	62.3/37.7	46	41	18	ind, strut, coil springs	ind, trailing arm, coil springs	disc/drum	Michelin MXL, 175/70TR-13

## BEST ECONOSSEDAN

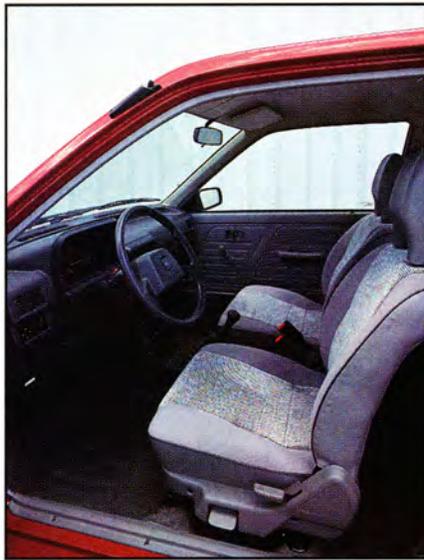
proved to one and all that an inexpensive car need not lack luxurious accommodations. "To coin a phrase," said Csere, "the Tracer is the Cadillac of the \$10,000 cars. With its plush upholstery, lavish interior finish, and full basket of comfort and convenience features, it makes every other entry seem primitive."

On the down side, the car felt—as Griffin put it—"a bit wormy" on the twisties compared to its Mazda cousin. Overall, however, the Tracer rated decently enough in the handling category and highest of all in the ride column. No shopper with \$10,000 to spend should leave this car off the shopping list.

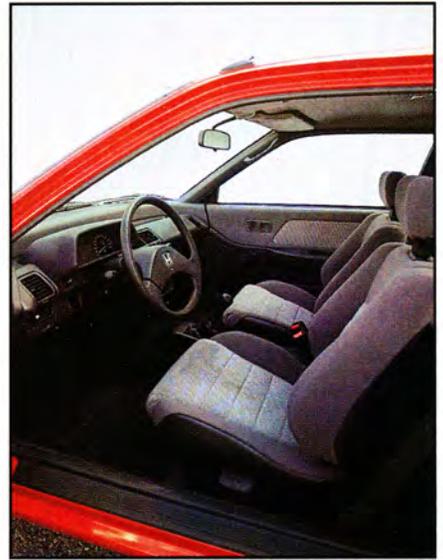
The Volkswagen Fox GL, with its four doors and nicely done Germanic interior, came close to looking and feeling like a sports sedan, yet it rated next-to-lowest in styling. Its engine rating hovered in the mediocre range, but in virtually every other category the Fox rated quite high. "Very nice transitions and balance," said Griffin. "Good German seats and good German ergos," said this writer. "Class accommodations," said Ceppos, adding, "It doesn't seem at all like a cheapie." The Fox finished a solid third in our balloting and belongs on your \$10,000 short list.

The Honda Civic, probably to your surprise as well as ours, actually failed to win this *C/D* comparo. If you read our November road test of the four-door Civic LX, you know what a favorite of ours the Civic has been. "As usual," one of us wrote, "here's a Honda that seems to be the best-integrated car of the bunch."

The Civic's driveline came in for universal praise, as did its handling and overall high-level fit and finish. It lost ground only in two areas: ride and comfort. "A very entertaining, aggressive sedan with good power, great looks, and the best engine note in the group," wrote Rich



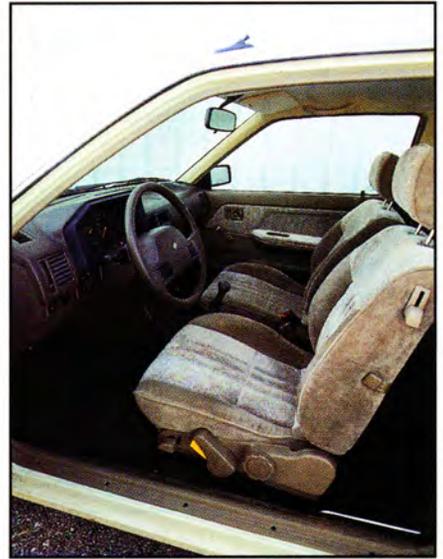
FORD FESTIVA LX



HONDA CIVIC DX



MAZDA 323SE



MERCURY TRACER



Ceppos. All told, and this is a refrain you've heard from us a few times before, the Civic is a hard car to beat for the money it costs. Or even for more money.

The winner then, as those of you with a memory for names have surmised, is the Volkswagen Golf. Surprised us, too, except for André Idzikowski, the man who nominated it. Its 100-hp engine exceeded the output of the Civic's engine by 8 hp, and it was twenty percent or more ahead of the rest of the contenders. This added punch felt good to us—as it invariably does—and took the Golf a long way down the road to victory.

The Golf's shifter drew mild complaints about being a bit notchy, but the steering and handling were well liked. The Golf led the balloting in brakes, handling, ergonomics, utility, value (where it tied with the Festiva), and fun. It finished second in ride and comfort (to the Tracer), tied for fourth in transmission quality, and finished third in styling. Its engine, despite its 100-horsepower heft, ranked second to the Civic's smoother powerplant.

The Golf needs to be looked at by more enthusiasts, particularly those on a budget. Many of the qualities that make the more expensive GT so likable can be found in the plain-Jane Golf, and, best of all, it's a car that is inordinately pleasant to live with.

As ever, we're proud to announce our winner, but we're also moved to express a note of surprise. Had we not done this \$10,000-limit comparison test, we would not have believed that so much automotive fun could come from so little money.

Keep that in mind when you take your \$10,000 nest egg down to the dealer. Do your homework and you'll be amazed at the number of cars you'll find to choose from. And you'll be even more amazed at how many you'll find that you like. ●



MITSUBISHI MIRAGE



SUBARU JUSTY RS 4WD



VOLKSWAGEN FOX GL



VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

Staffers' Ratings		engine	transmission	brakes	handling	ergonomics	comfort	ride	utility	styling	value	fun to drive	OVERALL RATING
	FORD FESTIVA LX	22	28	27	22	29	27	22	27	25	35	23	25
	HONDA CIVIC DX	38	38	30	37	33	26	28	33	37	32	35	35
	MAZDA 323SE	28	26	22	26	30	28	30	29	23	26	24	26
	MERCURY TRACER	27	29	25	25	32	36	35	33	28	33	25	28
	MITSUBISHI MIRAGE	27	33	25	20	30	27	29	31	29	23	23	22
	SUBARU JUSTY RS 4WD	13	21	21	17	23	18	16	26	18	21	11	13
	VOLKSWAGEN FOX GL	26	33	29	34	31	31	31	31	21	28	29	31
	VOLKSWAGEN GOLF	35	29	32	38	37	34	32	37	26	35	36	38

Eight staffers rated the cars in each of twelve categories on a 1-to-5 scale (5 being best). The numbers above are the simple additions of their ratings. (For example, if all eight staffers gave ratings of 5 to a car's brakes, it would earn a total of 40 points—the maximum possible.) The points in the Overall Rating column were assigned in the same fashion; they are not averages or summations of the other scores.