



From sport to transport

Whether you need a ride for two or a family of eight, these three models are sure to please.

BY WILLIAM ROEBUCK

2000 FORD TAURUS

It was way back in 1983 when I first read about the forthcoming, all-new Ford Taurus, which was to be launched in the fall of 1985 as a 1986 model. Production and quality glitches delayed its introduction until after the new year, but I ordered the 1986 station wagon as soon as I could, figuring Ford must have gotten all the problems solved by then. I remember I liked the handling – stiffer and more



2000 Ford Taurus

European than other North American cars available at the time – and the fold-away third-row seats.

That first model year proved to be a bad one – this Taurus was one of the most troublesome cars I'd ever driven, sur-

passed only by a 1963 MGB I'd owned earlier. But I still liked the design and replaced it with a 1991 – another wagon – which proved to be pretty reliable. Same again with a 1994 model. I skipped the next generation, Ford's 1996 ovoid redesign. Turns out I wasn't alone – the look of that version made the one-time best-seller almost disappear off the monthly sales reports issued by the company.

With another revamping for the 2000 model year, Taurus designers have backtracked and come up with a fine-looking vehicle. The oval windows and shapes are gone from the sedan, the front hood now scoops low – looking Neon-like – and the rear is nicely sculpted with large, Crown Victoria-type tail lamps. However, the 2000 wagon is identical to its predecessor from the A-pillar back. Passenger capacity in the wagon can be as many as eight with its rear-facing third seat option and unique split-bench front seat. (The centre seat back can be flipped over to reveal a console with handy cupholders.)

Ford found a lot of other areas to improve in the 2000 Taurus. Two things stood out after recent test drives with the SE sedan and SE Comfort wagon. First, it's quieter, mainly because of smoother engines and improved sound deadening in front of the firewall. (The company says there is a 30% reduction in interior noise.)

FAMILY WHEELS

Second, safety seems paramount.

Ford's Personal Safety System encompasses a dozen components that allow the car, as the company puts it, to "think" about a crash, "understand" its severity, "examine" the driver seat position and whether a safety belt is being worn, and "decide" how to deploy the safety systems. That means the dual-stage air bags will inflate at two different rates depending on the severity of a crash. The safety belts have pre-tensioners and force-limiting retractors to help reduce injuries. Head and chest combination side air bags are available. The sedan comes with an emergency release latch that opens the trunk from the inside. And the Taurus has a five-star frontal crash protection rating from the U.S. government.

This also is the first car to offer a power adjustable brake and accelerator pedal cluster. It enables drivers, especially those of small stature, to find the optimal seating position, without getting too close to the steering wheel. (There should be 25 cm between you and a steering wheel-mounted air bag.)

Other features are an increase of almost two inches in the headroom of the rear seat position in the sedan (the wagon was already much roomier), more cargo space

in the sedan's trunk, and, in both models, improved engine power and steering and alignment refinements. However, I found the steering to feel quite heavy at low speeds.

Two engines are available, a 153-hp Vulcan and a 200-hp Duratec, both 3-litre V6s. The Duratec version I tested is quiet, smooth and very powerful.

The base Taurus LX is \$24,495, the SE, which includes ABS and the adjustable pedals, is \$1,100 more, and the loaded SE Comfort is \$26,495 (\$27,695 for the wagon).

2000 HONDA S2000

When the Honda Civic was introduced decades ago, it was the beginning of a long era of success for the company. One of the criticisms of it was its high-revving engine. North Americans were used to powerful but lower-rpm machines at the time. But the fact was – and remains – that Honda could wring more rpm and more horsepower out of engines than its competitors could.

That characteristic is clear when you look at the specs for the S2000 engine – an incredible 240 hp is generated by this little two-litre, four-cylinder powerhouse, and it doesn't redline till 9,000 rpm. That's screaming. It has more power per litre than any other normally aspirated engine on the market. Interestingly, the S2000 behaves rather normally in average driving. Then, when you accelerate onto the highway and hit 6,000 rpm, it seems like-rocket boosters kick in and you really start to fly. It will go from zero to 100 km/h in around six seconds.



2000 Honda S2000

The week that I tested the rear-wheel drive S2000 was frustrating – it was cold and rainy and even snowed one day. You can't really enjoy this car in the winter – it was a handful in the light snow, and the plastic rear window fogged up readily. But when a single, mild, sunny day turned up, it was perfect for a top-down jaunt to a business meeting near Kitchener. This Honda sounds and drives like a great sports car and it performs flawlessly. I found it more fun, and easier to drive, than the more costly Porsche Boxster.

The six-speed manual transmission shifted easily, being one of the smoothest I've ever used, and its suspension ate up all the defects in the road. Despite being a convertible, the S2000 is as solid as a rock. However, it is a \$48,000 rock.

Most people who stopped to chat about the car – it has a look that attracts a lot of attention – were quite surprised to learn the S2000's maker was Honda. I had to tell them that this is one sports car that can match the unsurpassed fun-to-drive quotient of the old '63 MGB I used to own.

2000 DODGE DURANGO

The Dodge Durango sport-utility vehicle tries to give you everything: tough, off-road abilities, lap-of-luxury comfort and conveniences, workhorse torque and towing capacity, smooth performance and handling, and plenty of room for the whole family with seating for up to eight.

New for the 2000 model year is a 4.7-litre Magnum V8 that provides improved smoothness and fuel efficiency over its predecessor. It delivers 235 hp and 295 lb-ft of torque. The engine is coupled to a new



2000 Dodge Durango

electronically controlled automatic transmission that features a dual-ratio second gear. The tranny uses a higher ratio second gear for better start-up acceleration, and a lower ratio for kickdown mode in highway acceleration for smoother performance.

Four-wheel drive (either part- or full-time) is standard on all Durango models, including the Sport, SLT, SLT Plus, and the just-released R/T Sport. The R/T features a growling, 250-hp, 5.9-litre Magnum V8 and massive 17-in. cast aluminum wheels. It's the one Tim "The Toolman" Taylor would order, I expect.

Compared to other vehicles in this size range (believe it or not, it's classed as a compact SUV), the Durango has the largest overall interior roominess and largest towing capacity – 7,350 lb. The Durango is a truck at its heart. Ladder frame construction provides the chassis with strength and durability for a solid, stable ride. Ground clearance is substantial at 8 in.

One surprise in the Durango is its tight turning circle at 38.4 ft. Another was the quiet, smooth ride – not truck-like at all. The Durango's price range starts at \$37,750. The R/T as tested was \$46,355. 🌟

■ *William Roebuck is a member of the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada. You can reach him by e-mail at homedigest@Canada.com.*