

URBAN PICKS

By Jacqueline Mitchell

MINIVANS

Packed With Power, Personality and Versatility.

Back in the day, this was a no-brainer. What's the best minivan to purchase? Chrysler, of course, was the immediate reply. In the 1980s, no one else made them. Sure, GM, Ford and Toyota rolled out competing versions, but those minivans were no-match for the market leader. Families replacing space-confining station wagons with roomier, more versatile vehicles turned to the functional and practical Chrysler minivan. Surely, Chrysler had nothing to fear.

Until now.

As the decade winds to a close, automakers are taking another shot at the minivan market, and this time several have landed closer to the mark. The new generation minivans are packaged in sleek bodies loaded with power, personality and versatility. The ride is smooth, comfortable and more car-like. Safety features abound, taking into account that children are the likely cargo in these vehicles. And the minivans are easy to park and nimbly maneuver around slower drivers.

Chrysler minivans, certainly, are of all of this and more. But so are GM's all-new family of minivans: The Pontiac Trans Sport, Chevrolet Venture, Oldsmobile Silhouette. *AAOW* editors selected GM's redesigned trio of minivans as our Top Urban Pick because they pose the first real challenge to Chrysler's dynamic duo, the Dodge Caravan and the Plymouth Voyager and upscale cousin, Chrysler Town and Country.

Both GM and Chrysler offer the optional sliding door on the driver's side, a very useful feature that earned high marks from *AAOW* editors. No other minivan offers that feature, including Ford's Windstar, another favorite. The GM minivan's are a tad longer than Chrysler's, and a little narrower.

Meanwhile, the import makers continue to take stabs at the minivan market. The Honda Odyssey is worth a look. It functions like a minivan, looks like a sport-utility and feels like a car. As for Toyota, it will roll out its Sienna minivan, a replacement for the Previa, in the 1998 model year.




Top Urban Pick: Pontiac Trans Sport, Chevrolet Venture, Oldsmobile Silhouette

GM missed the mark in its first attempt to challenge Chrysler in the minivan segment. The wide-body, long-nosed minivans were comfortable and functional, but awkward. The new GM family of minivans include the Pontiac Trans Sport, the Chevy Venture, and the Oldsmobile Silhouette. For urban performance, we found them to be sleek, nimble and stylish. They are equipped with a powerful 3.4-liter V6 engine, boasting 180 horsepower. Editor Warren Brown says it "handles like a big sedan" on the highway, "but seems to do even better in the city." Seating is comfortable, and the seats are easy to remove when more cargo space is needed. The Trans Sport Montana version has a lot of personality. Radio controls are conveniently placed on the steering wheel, and there's a net between the driver and passenger seat to keep purses and diaper bags from rolling around on the floor. These features were made with parents of small children in mind. With a base price of just over \$19,000, these vehicles offer a lot of personality at a reasonable price.

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