

BEST BUYS FOR VEHICLES PRICED \$13,000 OR LESS

By L. Conrad Bell

O.K., here's the deal: You can have any car you want, as long as it costs \$13,000 or less, so what do you buy?

Shopping in this price range used to be as appealing as a root canal. Fortunately, times have changed. Economy doesn't necessarily mean sacrifice anymore. You know that a car's speed through the pylon cones of the slalom is a good measure of its handling. What if I told you that one of our Urban Picks is faster through the slalom than a BMW 318ti?

Got your attention? Good!

Before we get off into it, let's talk about what these cars have in common other than a low price tag, four tires and a steering wheel. After all, Jazz & Hip-Hop are both music, but what sets them apart is the tastes and values of the listener.

The same holds true when shopping for a new car. We all have different priorities. However, whether it's style and performance, or comfort and spaciousness, there is truly something here for nearly everyone.

To be sure, this represents a diverse group of buyers. Some are parents purchasing a vehicle for high school or college students. Some are recent graduates. Others are urban commuters looking to get maximum mileage. And others may be budget-minded buyers. It may be the lone car or one of three sharing space with a SUV and luxury car.

"This sub-compact category is constantly evolving," says Editor-in-Chief Jacqueline Mitchell. "For decades, it has been a category that the Japanese auto companies have dominated. In recent years, the so-called domestic auto companies have tried, many times unsuccessfully, to make strides in this market. But the top five Urban Picks reflect a diverse mix, showing that the entry-level vehicle market has become much more competitive."

Still, don't expect a whole lot in this category. Expect to sacrifice performance for size. With the exception of the three-cylinder Chevrolet Metro, you WILL get a four-cylinder engine: there are no V's in this category. The least expensive vehicle in this group is the Daewoo Lanos S Hatchback at \$8,749. It's a little smaller than the Mazda Protégé, but has the same size engine (1.6-liter) and horsepower (105). The most expensive in the group is the Pontiac Sunfire SE Sedan at \$12,745. It has a 2.2-liter engine cranking 115 horsepower; ABS is standard.

Additionally, all of our Urban Picks come with five-speed transmissions. Automatics are generally offered as an option in the \$600 to \$800 range. ABS is optional or only available on more expensive trim levels for most of the models in this category.



FIRST PLACE: HONDA CIVIC HATCHBACK

The Honda Civic Hatchback practically invented this category. Remember the cute little Honda Civics of the 70s that looked like high top tennis shoes? They are still around and better than ever. Honda is known for infusing even their most basic cars with exceptional technology. For example, the Civic was the first Honda sold in the U.S. to qualify as a Low Emissions Vehicle. The Civic HX with the Continuously Variable Transmission is the only car sold in America equipped with an automatic transmission that is one of the EPA's top fuel misers.

At a base price of \$10,650, all of our writers agreed that the Civic represents an excellent value. Senior Editor Winfred Cross said, "This is truly a fine entry level car. It has all of the goodness of larger Hondas at a reasonable price." So agreed Senior Editor Warren Brown, who said the Civic is an "exceptionally made little commuter...high quality in a small efficient package." According to Senior Editor Paul Eisenstein the Civic is "solid and dependable...when you're plunking down your hard earned cash, you want a vehicle you can count on."

Hey, if I have to drive an inexpensive car, I don't want to be reminded every time I walk up to it. Apparently a lot of people agree. The Honda Civic has been the best selling small car in America for the last two years running. In California, Honda Civics are the car of choice among the young hot rodders, which only demonstrates the versatility of the package. All of these factors have given Civics an immense popularity that, in turn, gives them terrific resale value.