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TEN BEST

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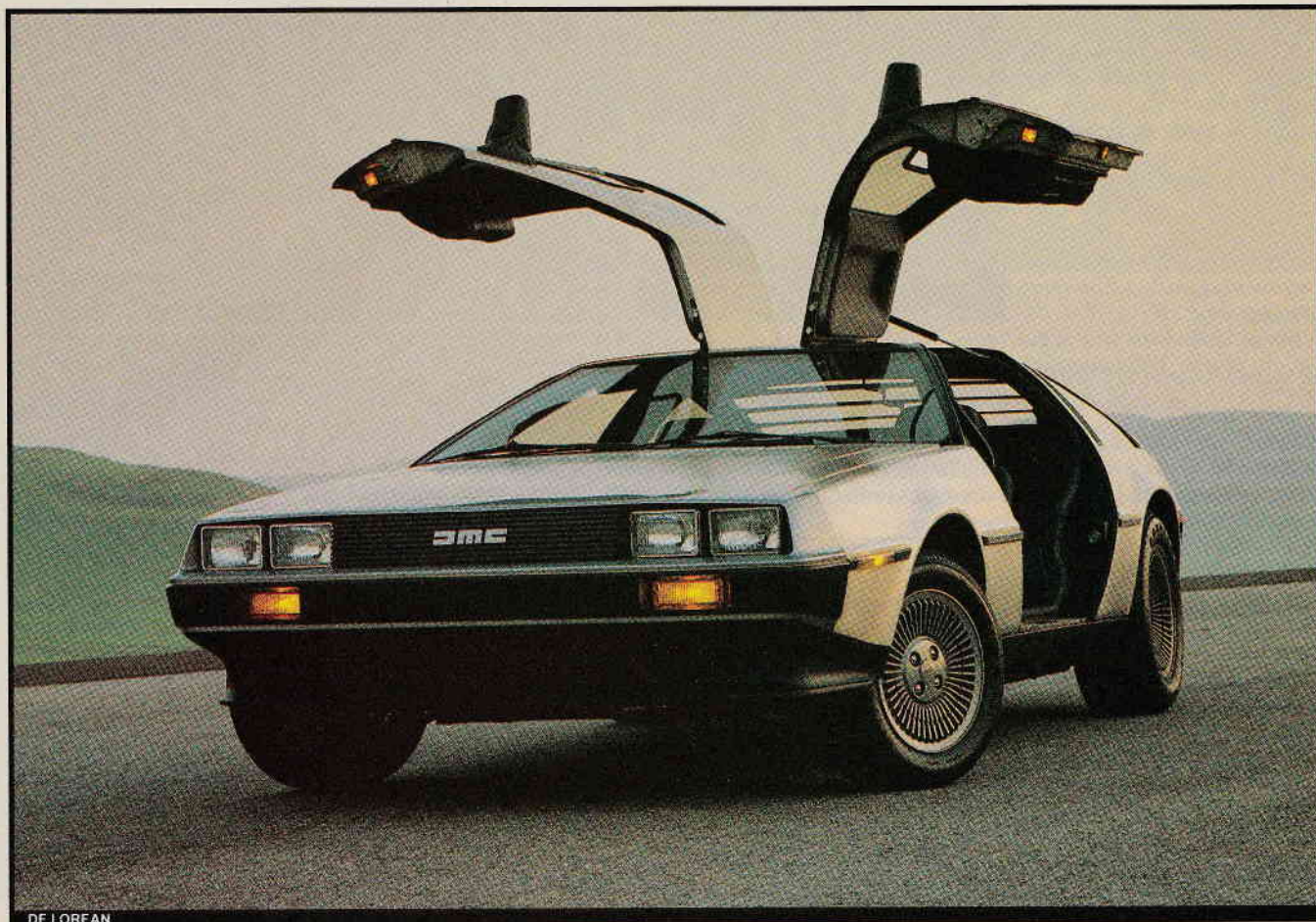
Porsche 911 Turbo, Pontiac Grand Am SE,
Mitsubishi Starion ESI-R, Suzuki Samurai



TEN BEST COLLECTIBLES

A short course in automotive appreciation.

BY PETE LYONS



DE LOREAN

• Each of us in this investment-conscious culture has had the bitter experience of missing the skyrocket—of selling an automobile, or deciding not to buy one, just before its value went into orbit. But there are some people who know how to play this market. They choose their investments so craftily that, if they don't actually make money, they can at least claim to "drive for free" as their vehicles appreciate in value.

So how do we learn the trick? How can we determine which of the cars now available at reasonable prices will one day be worth much more?

If preserved well enough long enough, any old auto at all will become valuable. Seal a

new Yugo in a balloon full of nitrogen and in the year 2086 somebody will want to pay real money for it. Of course, the car is useless in the meantime, none of us will be around to cash in at the end of the term, and we can't be sure that our heirs and assigns will keep paying the rent on the storage vault. No, we've got to have shorter sight.

Our assignment here, should you choose to accept its premise, is to select the ten most collectible cars. We have assigned ourselves narrow criteria: we'll be looking only at cars manufactured in the past ten years; only at street-legal cars; only at those regularly available in the U.S. (sorry, no gray-market ma-

chinery); and only at less obvious choices (there's not much point in listing the Ferraris, Porsches, and similar cars that everybody already recognizes, because their prices are already well along in their second-stage burn).

Selection under these constraints is no simple task. In terms of exciting cars, this has been a rather dead decade compared with, say, the heady periods pre-pollution controls and pre-petroleum embargo. In the past ten years, the U.S. has been pretty well preoccupied with emissions and economics, with downsizing and DOT regulations. Of the nearly 100 million new automobiles that rolled onto the streets of

this country during the last ten years, few lit lasting fires.

Many recent offerings are rendered even more tepid by the fact that things are now hotting up. The immediate future holds much promise in the fields of engines, chassis, and aerodynamics, so most good cars built in the early eighties are simply going to be overshadowed by their successors. Similarly, many cars of the late seventies were but pale reflections of earlier examples of the same models.

Still, we can distinguish a handful of likely candidates for appreciation.

Rarity, of course, is a prime point in collecting. It adds value, whether we're talking an-

tiques, art, or autos. The fact that Bugatti made only six Royales would make them attractive even if they weren't splendid in and of themselves. Conversely, if Ferrari were to churn out two million Testarossas, everyone might want one, but we wouldn't expect to pay much for them.

Also, if the collector can point to the piece and truthfully say, "You know, the world's never going to see anything like it again," the onlooker will certainly be moved.

Another thing to look at is a car's historical stature. An organization called the Milestone Car Society recognizes five criteria: styling, engineering, performance, innovation, and construction quality (the mnemonic is "SEPIC"). If a car stands out in at least two of the five, it might be something special.

Then there's pure pizzazz. "Sedans are historically not big-demand items," says Chris Poole, editor of the bimonthly magazine *Collectible Automobile* (3841 West Oakton Street, Skokie, Ill. 60076; 312-676-1544). "Hardtop coupes, two-seaters, and almost anything with the name Porsche, Ferrari, Corvette, or Mercedes-Benz on it is going to be sought after. The factors that apply to make a car valuable when it's new will also apply in the future."

A cautionary note, though, is sounded by professional restorer Jack Bianchi (Bianchi Motors, 435 East Haley Street, Santa Barbara, Calif. 93101; 805-965-5261). "I know two people who paid over \$50,000 apiece for brand-new Porsche 930 Turbos and took them directly from the showroom floor into storage garages. But the value has just not gone up, and they both recently got rid of them for under \$30,000." So sometimes an apparent "sure thing" doesn't pan out, whether it's because of the low intrinsic worth of the car, public resistance to a suspected scam, or just impatience on the part of the collector.

Poole and Bianchi have helped us with our list of ten, but the selection was by no means unanimous. Neither they nor we offer any guaran-

tees. You are free to disagree with our choices (just exercise your usual decorum in the wording of your letters, please) and go about your own collecting business. Nobody will know the final verdict for another 50 years, anyway.

1981-82 De Lorean

The notoriety factor is what we're thinking of here. Poole calls the De Lorean "a mediocre car with an interesting history." No, it's not a great car in its own right, and no, it's not a hot used item at the moment. Yes, it took years and deep discounts to get rid of the whole 8000-some production run. But in decades to come, it seems to us, owners are going to stand around their gull-wing coupes on manicured country-club lawns and say, "Did you ever hear the whole background story on this car?"

We can be reasonably sure that the item itself will last, as plastic and stainless steel are two of the most durable materials in the world. And Bianchi, after crawling through a De Lorean with wrench in hand, speaks highly of the car's construction. "It's honest and straightforward, a genuine hand-built car. It's a car that an owner can work on himself." There already exists an energetic enthusiasts' club, dispensing know-how to the faithful.

Quite a few De Loreans have been covered with paint by now, but it's likely that the origi-

nal bare metal finish will prove to have more historical value, fingerprints and all.

1976-78 Jaguar XJ12C

This car, we suggest, will one day be coveted under the "they don't make 'em like that anymore" clause of perceived value. The industry is marching away from opulent, florid cars with big, elaborate engines. And Jaguar's name in history is not only safe but highly respected.

Further, now that a modern, four-valve Jaguar six is coming along, the company's hoary V-12 may eventually be seen as a monument. "It's such a smooth engine, the car just glides," raves Bianchi. The fact that it only delivers around one mile

per gallon per cylinder is ultimately irrelevant to a collector.

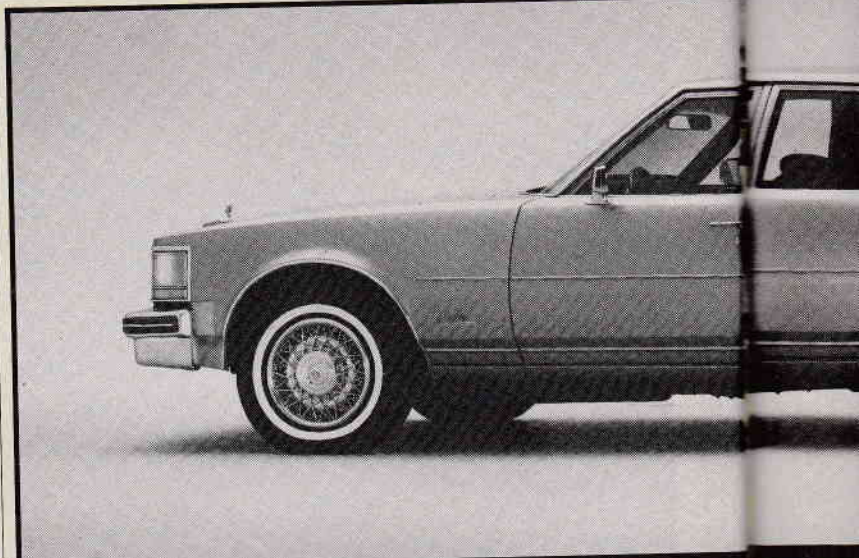
E-types, the "obvious" chassis for this engine, are too old for our ten-year window of eligibility. Twelves were also available in the XJ four-door sedan, of course, and still are in the XJ-S. But we agree with both our contributing advisers that the graceful, low-production C-model (fewer than 700 units were sold in the U.S., according to Poole) is the one to squirrel away. We understand prices are in the \$10,000 area.

1976-79 Cadillac Seville

Cadillac is another name that will be famous many years into the future, and one with a number of models that should hold their "oh, wow!" value. We've



JAGUAR XJ12C



CADILLAC SEVILLE



CHEVROLET COSWORTH VEGA



VW BEETLE CONVERTIBLE

chosen a representative that might seem a little out of the ordinary, though.

The late-seventies Seville was the first of the reasonably sized Caddys. Poole thinks of it as "sort of a latter-day La Salle, sort of a trial balloon for the division. A lot of people called it just a tricked-up Nova when it came out, and it had basically an Oldsmobile engine. But it turned out to be a likable car for itself." The Seville was indeed likable; in fact, it was the only Cadillac in decades that appealed to actual driving enthusiasts. *Car and Driver* went so far as to treat one to a thorough grand-touring upgrade.

"It's still a practical car to drive," says Poole, "and the values are still reasonable, around

\$6000 to \$7000. It's still more of a used car than a collectible. I like it. It's a ringer. But stay away from the diesels."

1976-79 Volkswagen Beetle Convertible

The VW Beetle, Adolf Hitler's move to bring transport to *das Volk*, eventually enjoyed the largest production run—more than twenty million—in automotive history. It therefore is hard to imagine that one day the outdated, slow, noisy, ill-handling, ugly little Bug will be rare and sought after. But in its day there were even movies about the contraption, and today it is already a genuine cult car. Several clubs, companies, meets, and magazines are devoted to it.

The evident queen of the fleet, the ugliest and least practical of the lot, is the convertible model, sold in the U.S. until 1979. Owners already revere their ragtop Bugs, treat them to heated garages and custom-fitted covers, exchange their manuals, and enter them into shows, as others do with MG TDs and Edsels.

Maybe the Bug was such a part of so many lives that nostalgia is what makes it collectible. Maybe, for some people, the Bug offers many of the same elements that make modern rock music popular. Who can explain any of this? Who

needs to? Jump on the bandwagon. One thing is for sure: girls are always, *always* going to want a ride in a convertible.

1976 Chevrolet Cosworth Vega

One of those noble efforts that giant automakers mount from time to time to break themselves out of the stultifying technological mainstream, this factory-made hot rod—like most—was a neat idea that didn't work out. It was handicapped from the start by being a Vega, one of the least loved American cars of all time. Rightly or wrongly, the Vega's

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TRIUMPH TR8

engine set the public perception of linerless aluminum cylinder blocks back decades. And the Cosworth version was harder to drive than the standard model, being annoyingly gutless at low rpm.

What the Vega did have was good basic handling, and what the British-designed aluminum cylinder head offered was a crossflow design, twin overhead cams, and four valves per cylinder. You can get all that stuff in Toyotas now, but until the Cosworth Vega was launched in the spring of 1975, you pretty much had to buy a Ford for Indy or F1 to call it your own. We're talking built-in historical significance here.

The Cosworth Vega was a keen car to drive when it came out, and not many came out, so its original owners recognized what they had. At least one owner of our acquaintance took care to buy a second set of body decals when they were still available from Chevrolet, just to simplify the restoration he knew he would one day carry out. (No, he hasn't begun the project yet. In fact, the car is off the road right now, lying a little neglected. No, we aren't telling you where.)

1984-86 Ford Mustang SVO

Here is FoMoCo's expression, a decade later, of GM's Cosworth Vega idea. The five-liter pushrod V-8 makes a better everyday mover, and something like 90 percent of Mustang buyers recognize that, but the 2.3-liter turbocharged and intercooled four gives the SVO a certain tingle that we suspect

will be more widely recognized a few years down the highway.

A similar engine is available in the larger Thunderbird, which may well be honored by historians as a landmark design because of its daring (to today's eyes) aerodynamic styling. But cars are going to be even more aerodynamic in the future. For our tastes the Mustang, though not yet a particularly great car, presents a more interesting blend of performance, styling, handling, and sheer engineering audacity. The SVO really showcases Ford's renewed commitment to performance. We can easily imagine people talking about it in years to come. And it is readily buyable today. It is, however, a bit early to buy one at a bargain price.

1977-79 Mercedes-Benz 450SEL 6.9

Our first notion was to include the grand old 600 "grossier" Mercedes, but it was not sold here during our stipulated

period. So we suggest the same basic V-8 engine installed in the W116 sedan from 1977 to 1979. (Several 1979 models were also sold during the 1980 model year.)

Although, as we've heard, sedans aren't usually top collectibles, this one's rarity argues in its favor: fewer than 2000 were imported. Also, sedans that think they are sports cars often attract followings, and Stuttgart's hothrod is in some respects the most outrageous thing that ever burned up an autobahn.

On the other hand, car people with memories long enough to make them knowledgeable about this whole appreciating-car question will recall a time when Europeans sniffed disparagingly at the American lust for brute power. With their superior taste and refinement, don't you know, Olde Worlde drivers much preferred quality of handling.

Well, whenever somebody

actually made big horsepower available to them, they lapped it up like beer—and what a lovely brute of a V-8 engine ol' Benz brewed up here. *Wunderbar!*

1976-86 Morgan Plus 8

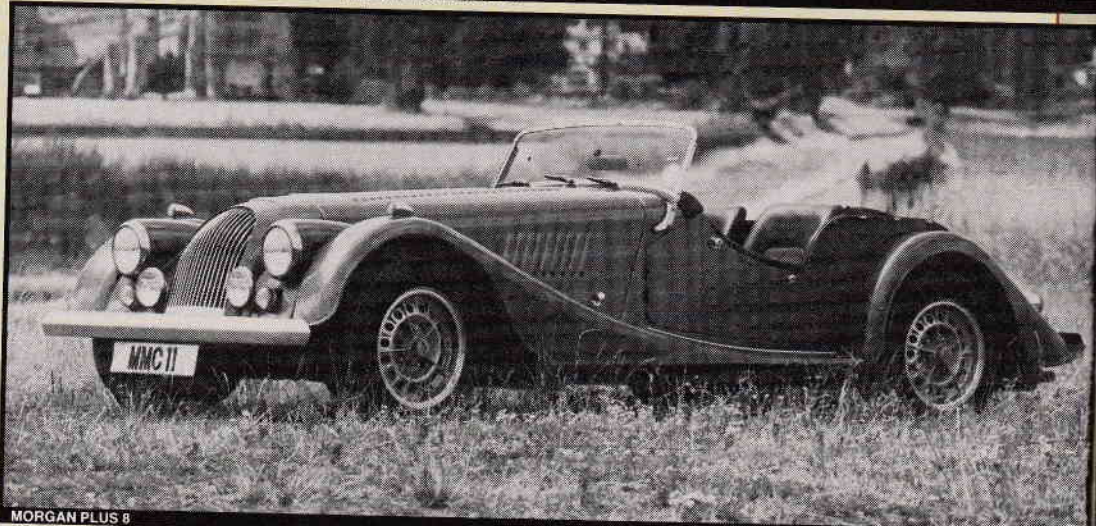
Not because it has a V-8, and nothing to do with running it on propane, but because it's cute. A Morgan is living nostalgia the day it trundles off the assembly line.

To some eyes, a Morgan is too old-fashioned to be taken seriously. They see only its curious, not to say crotchety, concatenation of outmoded design with a few modern elements, all making do in a sports car that would not have surprised spectators at old Brooklands. Because Morgans roll down the same streets as, say, Toyota MR2s, it's all too easy to see what they lack in terms of technology. But time may blur this disparity.

The Plus 8 has a vintage charm that appeals right now



FORD MUSTANG SVO



MORGAN PLUS 8

CADILLAC

and the even more don't to our

Eldorado

This Cadillac was never predicted mark of finest car and we

Contrary to public opinion out to be a Cadillac—identical to be one a yacht it rides on base and of elbow converti



MERCEDES-BENZ 450SEL 6.9



CADILLAC ELDORADO CONVERTIBLE

and that is certain to appeal even more in the future. If you don't want yours, bring it over to our house.

1976 Cadillac Eldorado Convertible

This magazine tested Cadillac's mammoth ragtop when it was new (August 1976). We predicted it would "leave its mark on history as one of the finest convertibles ever built," and we still feel that way.

Contrary to contemporary publicity, this Eldo didn't turn out to be the last-ever open-top Caddy—but we do feel confident that there will never again be one as big. And what a land yacht it is: this 18.6-foot boat rides on a 126.3-inch wheelbase and carries six with plenty of elbowroom for all. The Eldo convertible's 5200-pound curb

weight is hauled around by an engine with 500 cubic inches of piston displacement. This is precisely the sort of sweeping substance that people are going to ooh and ah over for generations to come.

But it isn't the Eldo's style alone that makes it a collector's item; it's also a landmark example of mid-century Detroit techno-fervor. There are servos for everything, including the radio. In 1976 we called this car "the most automatic convertible ever created by man," and noted that "it is worth money to witness the incredibly elaborate top in action." Ten years later, we can stand by both of those statements.

We're not dealing with a driver's car here, but as a focus of future awe, this Caddy is a keeper.

1980-81 Triumph TR8 Convertible

From one point of view, virtually all British-built sports cars should be valuable far down the road—providing they survive the trip—if only because they represent a vanished era. An appealing example that lasted into our eligibility window is the Triumph TR8. To our way of thinking, the comparatively rare, comparatively excellent V-8-powered TR will one day have the large following it failed to attract when new.

In our road test of August 1980, we found that the TR8 had reasonably stirring performance (0 to 60 in 8.1 seconds, 117-mph top speed), well-balanced handling, plenty of boot-the-tail-out torque, decent ride quality, and good cockpit com-

fort. We thought the open-top edition of the final Triumph looked pretty nice, too.

Perhaps most of all we liked the TR8's 148-bhp, fuel-injected, aluminum-block, 3.5-liter motivator. Talk about history to talk about. Here is an original GM (Buick-Olds-Pontiac) design that went unappreciated at home until it was sold to England, after which its creators tried (unsuccessfully) to buy it back. Here is a stock block that not only powered numerous race cars (think Penske, McLaren, Scarab) but actually turned into a Formula 1 engine—a successful, World Championship-winning Formula 1 engine (Jack Brabham, 1966; Denny Hulme, 1967). Now, if you can't draw a crowd with a tale like that at Pebble Beach in the year 2026 . . . ●