

THE 10 WORST CARS – PLUS SOME

Just the other day, Matt sent me an internet thing called “10 worst cars” with the tempting admonishment of “They have most of your favorites”. My mouse jumped to qis.net/~jimjr/misc160.htm and up came a pictorial list of some of the most evil, contemptible and downright lethal rolling stock ever thrust upon a naïve driving public. The perpetrators of this list, *Click & Clack*, the Car Guys, got ‘em pretty much right but it occurred to me that a lot of folks who grew up after the ‘60s and ‘70s probably wouldn’t recognize some of the junk described. What’s strange about that era is that most of the great Muscle Cars we virtually worship today shared that automotive landscape but it vividly illustrated the gulf between “havin’” and “not havin’”.

I actually owned one of these things! Back when I was going to school in Denton, I bought, for \$100.00 cash American, a faded ‘tomato soup’ red Renault Dauphine, a black & white TV, 6 Renault wheels and tires and a tow bar. These cars had a small four cylinder engine behind the rear seat but ahead of the rear swing axle, a three speed tranny, and an engine temp control that was controlled by pulling (I’m not making this up!) a windowshade up in front of the radiator, which was also just behind the rear seat. A string came out of the dash and you could pull on it to raise the shade. Or lower it. All the bolts were metric. When the fiber timing gear went, I fixed it with Channel Locks and Vise Grip pliers. Rounded off every rusty hex nut. The towbar was the most useful accessory. The water pump also leaked, replacements were the price of the car so I carried a couple of antifreeze jugs of water and a jar of Bars-Leak. A fillup would get me through the day so it was OK. The spare was carried in a tray under the front end. There was a sheet metal “jowl” that was supposed to cover it but the latch would come loose and it would hang open like a slack-jawed hillbilly. I painted teeth on it for fun. The rubber bushings holding the rear axle were rotting away and the car would wander down the road in drunken sways. You’d correct a left drift and then it would heel over and start the other way. Constant correction kept you going in a general direction. Highway driving was a death wish. In my poverty, I tolerated the thing for a year, it would get 30 miles a gallon on 25 cent gas. I actually got a ticket from a Denton cop for “Reckless Driving” because I found that I could come up to a street corner, crank the wheel, lift off the gas, and the rear swing axle would tuck under like an early Corvair, break loose and slide sideways until you stood on the gas again. You could do 90 degree turns at street speeds and it was the only automotive fun I could have with the thing. A cop saw me do this one day and totally came unglued about the car “swerving out of control”. He broke two pencils writing and it cost me a quarter of the value of the car. That hurt.

The end was predicted by the TV starting to arc inside the picture tube. We enjoyed watching the lighting bolt flashes and bursts on the screen for awhile but there was no story plot so my roommate and I took the thing out to the dump and fired the .45 at it. Have you ever seen a picture tube blow up? Glass for 50 feet in every direction. Wow! At about the same time I used the Renault to push start a guy with a ’61 Powerglide Bel Air. In those days, the old iron glide had a rear pump and you could get up to about 30 and actually spin the motor. The Renault just wasn’t up to the task and it cost me low gear.

Starting up hill was a clutch torturing exercise. I didn't mention that the floor shifter had so much slack that I had to stir it like beating a bowl full of batter just to find the remaining gears. What a slagheap! Finally, the motor started filling one cylinder with water so I learned to pull #3 plug before spinning it over after an overnight stop. Two speeds and three cylinders wouldn't even pull a Renault at a decent speed but the radio, a Motorola, still worked so I set it on a local rock station, put up ads around school and downtown and actually got some bites. An older guy who already owned a couple of Renaults and wanted "spare parts" bought it for \$40 cash, one \$20 and 2 greasy \$10s. I just smiled and wished him the best as the thing smoked and shuddered its way out of my life.

That was my only experience with: (1) Foreign cars. (2) French stuff. A lesson I have not repeated.

Don't get me started on the Gremlin. I had two dates with a girl who owned one.

I sent this tale to some friends and several responses surged back. It must have struck a nerve so let's continue the story.

From Kurt:

Well, I can smugly say that I never owned any of these ten cars. I will say that my father-in-law owned a mid-70s Pinto that he drove to work at Fluor in southwest Houston from his home in Spring Woods off of Gessner. Luckily for him, it was parked at the curb one night and an errant motorist totaled it saving him from a potential fiery death on the Katy Freeway.

My actual closest brush with underengineered French cars was a 1959 Simca. The gentleman who owned it, Alan Herzik, got to drive this car quite often because it belonged to his family. Alan commented that yes, "the Simca was a one of a kind! It made a very distinctive noise that was audible for 6-8 blocks in every direction. No sneaking up on anyone, no coming home unannounced especially after hours or some other compromising condition. But, NOBODY had another one within a 20,000mile radius – or parts to fix it, but it was fun when it was running. The French must have filled old wine barrels with parts and chunked them into the Atlantic when you had to order something. We probably put it out for the garbage man to pick up but I can't remember what happened to it other than that."

Back then a Driver's License could be had at the impressionable age of 14, so I was quite turned on by the Simca because IT WAS A CAR! And we were cool and free when we were crusin'. However, by then I had owned a go-kart and built my own minibike and was sorta tuned into whether or not something seemed substantially built.

Two of the things that stick in my mind about the Simca was a 4-speed on the column (really) and the wheels that were held on by only three lug nuts. As I remember, the car wouldn't go any faster than 50, even downhill.

One of the best things that we did in that car was to go “cat hunting” which involved getting our BB guns and creeping up to a streetlight on a summer night. Bugs were swarming and the cats were grabbing and eating the yummy fresh crickets. We’d shoot the cats and watch them jump about three feet in the air and then haul ass. It was even better when there was loose gravel because sometimes the cat would “peel out” during the hauling ass process.

Looking back, it was almost the ideal “kid first car” because it wouldn’t go too fast. In fact, dumping the clutch in first gear would usually kill the engine. I guess that I would not buy it for a kid today because everyone drives fast; even in their own driveway. It could never keep up. It was that indistinguishable color that many 49-51 Fords were painted: Blue/Black. Is it blue? Is it black? I dunno, but either way it IS oxidized to a flat finish. I think it may have had red wheels and some white trim. Ah yes, those French. Always showing “Ze Flair”. Not so?

And next, from Bruce in Wisconsin:

I didn’t have the pleasure of owning a Renault, but helped my friend fix up a 1960 Renault Dauphine. I remember it was so small no one would give him any respect, so we went to the JC Whitney catalog to change that. We put a set of air horns under the hood. What great fun! It would scare the squat out of people walking across the street.

I had my own “French Experience”. A Citroen 2-CV. It looked like a hardtop that had the top but not the sides of the roof cut off. The top was replaced by a piece of canvas that slid in a track and was clamped at the top of the windshield frame. This thing leaked so bad that it might have been better just to leave the top down. As for the tranny, it was a 3 on the DASH. It looked like an emergency brake handle. Pull back and a twist to the left was first. Various other positions gave you the other gears. It had a 2 cyl air cooled 29hp engine and you gave it gas till the valves floated and then shifted. That got you across the intersection. Any real speed was a distant dream.

All I’ve told you so far were the good qualities of the car. Fortunately, I didn’t own this thing, but drove it on a daily basis for the business I worked for after getting out of high school.

Becky, my wife, didn’t have a French experience but can regale you with stories about her Volks. The scariest one was about the heater going out. They strapped a propane heater in with the passenger seatbelt and would light it for heat while driving. It’s a wonder she lived to meet up with me. Given that, I’ll say it was good for her in the respect that she learned how to maintain a car. Changed her own oil and did minor repairs. She also came from the school of “No Money” and all of us who came up that way learned to be inventive and creative in fixing and driving our ancient vehicles. I think it was good for us and in some ways wish that my son would have had that experience.

Also, since I live in the land that created the Gremlin (AMC), I know what you speak of. Some day I’ll tell you about the Rambler Wagon. It was a 2 door on the driver’s side and a 4 door on the passenger side.



CITROËN 2CV

And finally from Dorothy:

“Living in Ohio for (too many years), we would buy \$100 junkers to drive during the winter because of the salt slop all over the roads. Fortunately, most of these clunkers would run OK, just the bodies rusted off the frame. Or, in the case of my '59 Rambler (AMC), rusted at the firewall—push on the brake pedal and the windshield would tilt in. But a sweet runner -- the heater worked, the car ran and we drove it to the junkyard!

Darrell, my husband, worked at the GM Assembly plant when they were building Vegas. Parts started rusting on the line. Absolute garbage and he pitied anyone actually buying one.”

So there we have it so far. The Japanese don't get off free. Ever hear of the Subaru 360? I had a “kinda hippy” acquaintance who became enamored with one because he was walking and it was cheap, really cheap. You had to mix oil with the gas at every fillup because the thing had a 16 hp two cylinder, 2 cycle air cooled motor in the back, a tiny shifter stalk haphazardly sticking out of the floor and would go about 40 absolutely flat out. I actually rode in it down I-35 one day. At noon. Looking out the passenger window, I was half as high as an 18 wheeler tire. It made the Renault memories seem pleasant. After a few months, the engine seized and he moved up to a bicycle. As I remember, the guy who built the Bricklin started his career by importing and peddling these things. Don't ever underestimate the stupidity of the buying public.



SUBARU 360