

Shifting Gears

Muscle Cars and Speed Kings

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By Roger Witherspoon

The muscle cars and speed kings are back in force.

Anyone who worried that an automotive era dominated with talk of fuel efficiency and practical cars meant an end to the most expensive, powerful, fast, flashy set of wheels can rest easy. Yeah, there is a lot of talk about these cars being the most fuel efficient *ever* in their class. But that class deals with a lot of horsepower, drinks premium fuel like its Gatorade and measures its performance in fractions of a second.

These are the cars that you do not need to commute to work, and will not get you to a place of worship any faster than the old folks in the minivan in front of you. And they'll get 20 miles per gallon mostly in your dreams.

But that's really irrelevant.

If what you are looking for is a car which looks as if it is flying when it's really parked; which will cause heads to spin and neighbors to drool; which has a powerful growl you can hear down the block without thinking someone has lost a muffler; and, if you floor

the pedal, will rock you back in your seat hard enough for you to recall being a dumb teenager, then the New York Auto Show has a set of wide wheels for you. Some may fit your household budget, and some may just fit into your imagination. They come with old fashioned American swagger, as well as foreign flair.

For starters, let's say you are a family man and want to be somewhat "responsible" and get a car which can take the family to the grocery store and the kids to school when you are not looking for an empty, unpatrolled road to really roll on. Detroit has two family-friendly, fast cars to choose from, and the Germans have added a third.



First, there is the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT-8, a well-heeled SUV from the renovated Chrysler-Fiat group which can get the kids to their soccer game at 150 miles an hour. You will be traveling tire to 20-inch tire with the Porsche Cayenne, which was also designed to help you pick up the school kids in a hurry. Both are luxury SUVs, with wood paneling, an elaborate music and entertainment system, and a price tag that's well south of \$100,000. Porsche used to have a decided edge in interior comfort, but the redesign and attention to quality and detail in the new Chrysler-Fiat company significantly trims the difference down to a simple matter of personal taste.



If the notion of an SUV is not to your liking, Cadillac has a station wagon for you that rolls along on 19-inch aluminum wheels. The CTS-V Sport Wagon – a slightly larger version of the 180-mile-per-hour CTS-V supercar – uses the same 6.2-liter V-8 engine cranking out 556 horsepower. The station wagon will only get you 150 miles an hour – which is no better than the SUVs – but it looks good doing it.



Okay. Skip being responsible.

You want a car like the one you wish you had when you were younger. In that case, Detroit has brought back several muscle cars, and made the engines bigger, the cars faster, the gadgets more numerous and the seats larger to accommodate older and bigger drivers.

At the top of the heap is the 220 mile per hour Corvette ZR-1. Its supercharged V-8 engine cranks out 638 horsepower and lets the car bolt from 0 to 60 miles per hour in about 3 seconds. The 2012 'Vette has 19-inch wheels in front and 20-inch wheels in its bulging back for added stability. That's a step up from the zooming Corvette Z-06, which is clocked at just 198 miles per hour. The EPA says the new Corvette can get around 14 miles per gallon of gas though, at that speed, who is checking for anything except the Highway Patrol?



Slightly slower – somewhere between 190 and 200 miles per hour – is GM's Chevy Camaro ZL-1, with a 6.2-liter, turbo-charged, 550-horsepower, V-8 engine. This Camaro looks a lot like it did in the 60s – only faster. If you drop down below 190 MPH, you can find the iconic, Ford Mustang Shelby GT 500. It is still a head turner a half century after Steve McQueen went airborne chasing the bad guys up and down San Francisco's unreasonably steep hills in one. Under the Mustang's recognizable hood is a 550 horsepower, supercharged V-8 engine which costs only \$50,000 and, according to the EPA, can get 23 miles per gallon of gasoline while racing down the highway. The mileage



may be less if there are frequent stops for police.



Dropping down about 100 horsepower, but keeping up the image and speed is the 2012 Dodge Charger, with a 6.4-liter, Hemi V-8 engine. It looks a lot like the one the Dukes of Hazard drove – but meaner.

Perhaps American muscle cars, whose designs are geared to men, aren't up to your aesthetic standards. A professional woman on the go may opt for one of the more beautifully designed cars on the road, the Jaguar XKR-S. While the Jaguar is easily recognized for its soft, smooth-flowing lines, there is nothing soft about it. Under the gently sloping hood is a 550-horsepower engine which can rocket the car from 0 – 60 miles per hour in 4.2 seconds en route to a top speed of about 185.



Which means the woman who shells out more than \$100,000 for the XKR-S will look very good as she leaves you way behind.



If you dole out about \$175,000, you can get behind the wheel of the 190 mile-per-hour Porsche Panamera, whose 550-horsepower turbo-charged engine lets you race down the highway while getting 23 miles to the gallon of premium gasoline – which is pretty good for this segment. But if you like the looks of the Panamera but want to be more ecologically minded, there is a hybrid version of the Panamera. Its combined V-6 gasoline engine and electric motor deliver just 380 horsepower and the top speed is only 167 miles per hour. But while the hybrid can't run with the really big dogs on the road, its price is only \$95,000 – which means you save enough to add a Corvette to your garage.

And then, for performance and elegance, there is the Bentley Continental GT, the ultimate in refined, expensive, muscle cars. For \$250,000, one can slide behind the wheel of one of the world's fastest production sedans, whose W-12, twin-turbocharged engine cranks out 567 horsepower, jets the car from 0 – 60 miles per hour in 4.4 seconds and 0 – 100 in 10.2 seconds with a top speed of an even 200 miles per hour.

The exterior refinements on the 2012 Continental GT are subtle: the rear was widened an inch and a half and there is a soft ridge which curls around the front wheels and flows through the middle of the door handle towards the humped, 21-inch rear wheels. The big changes are in the interior electronics. The continental now has a touchscreen driving the infotainment system featuring a 30 GB hard drive as well as satellite radio and connections for iPods, flash drives and MP3 players.

Traveling in the Bentley Continental GT means going places in very expensive style. But with the exception of the guy in the little Corvette, no one is going to get to their destination faster.

