

How to Take a Test Drive

Before you even consider test driving a car, look through *Car and Driver*, *Road and Track*, *Motor Trend* or *Automobile* magazines to get a good sense of what appeals to you. Then for a more sober perspective, check the annual automobile issue of *Consumer Reports* or *Consumer Guide* for reliability, frequency of repairs and safety data on your favorites. Remember, too, that there's plenty of automotive information available on the World Wide Web. Only then, when you have balanced panache against practicality, is it time to test drive the possibilities.

That, according to professional auto journalist Robert Hellman, is step one. Step two, he stresses is approaching the test drive with a clear head, and "the attitude that this is just one of several I might like." Settling on only one make or model in advance, he says, is not only a poor way to negotiate the purchase, but a poor way to judge the vehicle.

What, then, should you look for during a test drive? First, does the car have what you need in these categories: power; room; safety (crash-worthiness, airbags, etc.); ease of entry and

exit; local parts and service; and a solid warranty.

Then look and listen to avoid: excessive wind or engine noise; heavy or imprecise steering; poor gas mileage; sloppy fit (trim, molding, etc.); unreadable instruments; clumsy controls or levers; and poor resale value.

These are fairly objective qualities. But when you test drive a car, you also want to be attuned to "personal" issues that no magazine can settle for you. Our expert emphasizes that, "like a pair of shoes, a car has to fit — not only your body and your budget, but your life." Will your family's luggage fit in the trunk? Will your family fit in the seats? Finally, will the future driver of this car be happy with his or her seat and driving position? Hellman suggests you pay special attention to the latter, since so many models sacrifice shoulder room for aerodynamic roundness.

Our expert even suggests asking the salesperson to be silent during much of the test ride so that you get the proper feedback from the vehicle. Then after the test drive, just sit in the car for a few minutes. Your body will tell you all you need to know.