

Road-Testing the Asian Car

A respected car critic takes three models for a spin around Bangkok

By Michele Zack Bangkok

WHEN THANES SENIWONGS NA Authya, a well known Thai automotive journalist, test drives cars, he doesn't critique the sound system. After 20 years in the field, he prefers to listen to "the music of the engine. I love it; to me it's life."

Cars have that kind of hold on many people, whether they are automobile owners or wishful ones. That's why Asiaweek asked Thanes to evaluate the new Asian-car models from Honda, Hyundai and Toyota. These vehicles are aimed at the first-time car buyer, so don't look for sports cars or luxury GTs in the group. The benchmarks are iron durability and no-frills economy -- each of the cars tested costs less than \$15,000 and gets more than 6 kilometers per liter of fuel in city driving. Thanes, 53, a one-time airline mechanic turned veteran rally driver, sought to uncover their weaknesses by piloting the cars through some of the worst traffic on the planet, in his hometown of Bangkok. After surveying the field, Thanes has an important piece of advice for Asian auto buyers: Do your own test drive before you decide to buy. Here is his report:

HONDA CITY

Engine: four-cylinder

95 horsepower

Fuel economy: 9 km per liter, city; 12 km highway

Price: \$14,700, as tested

Honda's marketing department must be delighted with its new entry. After its launch late last year, the City quickly became a favorite of Asia's young urban professionals who have approvingly dubbed the model a "baby Accord." Thanes didn't quibble. He liked the four-door City's road manners, and also found it reminiscent of Honda's top-of-the-line sedan. Like all Hondas, though, the City can be serviced only by authorized dealers -- so maintenance costs are slightly higher and appointments more difficult to get than with other cars.

Thanes pronounced the City's relatively roomy passenger compartment "just right" for his own pretty average proportions. He found the visibility excellent and the instrumentation "the most elegant and readable," of the three cars he tested. Under way, interior noise was subdued, vibration was minimal, stopping power was first-rate, and the four-speed automatic transmission performed without a hitch.

But make no mistake, sacrifices were made in the name of frugality. Absent is the double-wishbone suspension found on Honda's more expensive models. The City has ordinary struts, and hence the ride over rough roads does not measure up to pricier sedans. While the company cut corners on the undercarriage, Honda claims it spent considerable engineering effort on the 1.3-liter engine, which despite its diminutive size still pumps out a respectable 95 horsepower. The City is also offered in a fuel-injected version to substitute for

the standard carburetor on the base model. An optional 1.5-liter engine is expected to be available soon, as are anti-lock brakes and an airbag.

In fact, Honda offers so many of the additional features normally found in more sophisticated cars that the price of the City can quickly escalate beyond the reach of its intended audience. At about \$14,700, even a stripped-down City fetches 6% more than the Soluna. Add in power steering, power windows, power door locks and other gadgets and the price can exceed \$17,000. Evidently Honda is hoping that buyers of the City will be climbing the corporate ladder so fast that they'll soon be trading in their baby Accords for the adult model.

HYUNDAI SPRINT

Engine: four-cylinder

91 horsepower

Fuel economy: 6 km per liter, city; 11 highway

Price: \$13,100, as tested

Take an Asian econobox, add a dash of attitude, and you've got the Hyundai Sprint, at \$13,100 the least expensive of the trio tested. Unlike the others, it was not developed as an Asian car -- the company will introduce one of those in 1999. Still, the styling of this two-door Korean-built hatchback is eye-catching, and the car's light weight and 91-horsepower engine make for sprightly performance. But what the Sprint possesses in pep, it lacks in polish. The gear-stick juts up through a crude gash in the carpeting and the small rear seat is uncomfortable. Thanes also found his vision obstructed when looking over his left shoulder.

On the road, the Sprint lived up to its name, dodging in and out of traffic with no problems in braking or steering. Thanes felt that the somewhat stiff suspension gave the driver a good feel for the road, but there was a tradeoff: "The ride is noisy and bumpy." The benefit of Sprint's willing engine was also offset by the five-speed manual transmission. "There's a long throw between the gears that hurts acceleration, even though the power seems to be there," Thanes said. "After shifting into third gear, you have to wait for the power until about 90 kph," indicating Hyundai engineers made an unsatisfactory compromise in the gear-ratio spacing. Another of Thanes's concerns: Hyundai has entered the Thai market late, and will have to fight hard to make inroads into Japan's 90%-plus market share.

Thanes found other things to like. Engine access was easy. And the Sprint had an adjustable steering column and reinforced bumpers, features not found on the other test vehicles.

TOYOTA SOLUNA

Engine: four-cylinder

95 horsepower

Fuel economy: 6 km per liter, city; 14 highway

Price: \$13,400, as tested

The ubiquitous Toyota is the car most likely to ferry you from meeting to meeting in Bangkok. Long known for rigorous reliability, the Toyota Corolla in particular is the favorite of taxi-fleet owners, who have expressed their appreciation for its workhorse nature by pressing thousands into rough service.

The Asian car entry to the Toyota line is the Soluna, which according to Thanes inspires the same confidence as its bigger brother but at a lower price. The Soluna he tested was fitted with a five-speed automatic transmission and the standard sub-1.5-liter, four-cylinder powerplant. Although Thanes pronounced the 95-horsepower engine merely adequate in the acceleration department, he

nevertheless found the Soluna agreeable in traffic. Vibration and noise were unobtrusive, handling easy albeit slightly spongy, and jolts from the occasional pothole (this was Bangkok after all) were dampened handily. Thanes was impressed by the Soluna's grip on the road. Thrown into a notorious curve at 120 kph, the car required little corrective steering. The brakes, however, were not wholly up to the task. Thanes noticed that hauling the car down from speeds over 100 kph produced brake fade and squeal -- annoyances that could be easily remedied with substitute brake pads. At speeds between 60 kph and 80 kph, stopping power was excellent.

Four doors and a large trunk make the Soluna a reasonably comfortable choice for trips with the family. Maintenance should prove no problem, as engine access is good and parts are widely available. On the downside, Thanes complained about a slight shudder when the transmission is manually shifted from neutral, and bumpers that are likely to wilt on moderate impact. Those factors have hardly held customers back: a two-to-three-month wait for delivery is normal in Bangkok, while upcountry customers face a five-month delay. These orders are not for taxis: Because Toyota designed the engine without a catalytic converter and to be slightly under 1.5 liters (the size necessary for a public taxi), you won't find yourself in a Soluna on your way to or from the Bangkok airport.

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