



But first let's talk about the candidates. What's a luxury sedan? The Japanese makers have plainly cited BMW and Mercedes as "the competition." The top models of those German brands sell at prices so far above Cadillacs and Lincolns that no one would think of the Detroiters as comparable. Moreover, there is a great philosophical difference between the European and American approaches to expensive-sedan design. The Europeans take driving seriously, and a fine car must therefore be a fine tool for the discerning driver. Detroit generally regards driving as something that the affluent would leave to a chauffeur if they could, so the assignment of a Detroit luxury car is to isolate the driver from his drudgery.

We unhesitatingly side with the European definition, and from that stand-

point the comparison choices become obvious. In size, price, and engine type, the Mercedes-Benz 420SEL and the BMW 735i match the new Japanese challengers more closely than the other offerings from their respective makers. The new Audi V8 Quattro offers traction advantages beyond all conventional sedans, which is surely a luxury from a driver's standpoint. The Jaguar XJ6 brings a unique British perspective to the class. Neither the Lincoln Continental nor the new Town Car are sufficiently driver-oriented to make the cut. Cadillac, however, clearly intends the Seville Touring Sedan for the active driver. Just look at its sixteen-inch blackwall Eagle GT+4 tires if you don't believe us. Finally, we come to Lexus and Infiniti. Both makers claim to have targeted Europe's best, so they asked for this no-holds-barred comparison.

And we gave it to them, the full range of modern motoring—a day of city stop and go, another of Interstate cruising, and a third spent tearing up the twisties (in a secret location); the complete test-track ritual was included, of course. Now our seven-man jury has rendered its decision. The results follow in ascending order of preference. Please, no peeking at the conclusion.

Cadillac STS Seventh Place

This is not your normal Cadillac—not your normal Seville, either. Imagine a Cadillac Z28 and you'll be close, because this is a uniquely American approach to sporting luxury.

The Seville Touring Sedan is shorter in overall length than the other cars in this test, and it is clearly less roomy—the unfortunate result of having a platform conceived in the early eighties for a fuel-short future that never happened. On one hand, we're inclined to forgive the Seville for its tight packaging—hey, back in those days we thought the petro future was bleak, too. On the other hand, 1990 is the fifth year of the Seville's production run. If it were on the typical Japanese four-year cycle, it would be out of production now. If GM isn't going to get competitive, it'll have to take its lumps.

The STS definitely has a special-car sense about it. The big, bold 60-series Goodyears shoulder themselves out of the wheel openings. The exterior decor is restrained; there's no stand-up hood ornament, just one Caddy wreath-and-crest badge. The interior is finished in buckskin-colored leather with first-rate wood-burl accents. A console that cuts through the rear seat enforces the car's

four-seater limit. And the exhausts speak with a rumbling accent. No, this is definitely not your country-club Cadillac.

But it's not quite in the driver's idiom, either. The know-nothing instrument panel has its digital speedo and gas gauge positioned in front of the driver, and all other monitoring functions are combined into a computer display located at knee-height on the console. The driver's seat has lumbar and lateral-restraint adjustments, yet the cushion is so flaccid that basic support is absent. At night, when you dim the instruments for rural driving, the small controls (for the wipers, climate control, etc.) black out completely before the cluster is properly deglared. And the throttle is touchy in a way you never find in cars of breeding.

Cadillac's 4.5-liter V-8 has gained 25 horsepower for 1990—up to 180 hp now—but it still has the lowest output of any engine in this group. Working in concert with an adroitly calibrated four-speed automatic, this engine makes for a quick-reflex machine in the cut and thrust of city driving. Out in the country, though, it's breathless compared with the others.

The Z28 suggestion comes from the way this car moves. There's substantial grip (0.79 g on the skidpad) from the tires, the high roll stiffness tosses your head sideways on lumpy roads, and the shocks really send up a jolt over large bumps. The STS *seems* a handling sort of car in normal driving. But when the country curves come at you, the body floats, the steering becomes insensitive, and managing the grip is quite challenging. The faster you go, the less fun it becomes.

We think the STS is a fine idea. Just don't quit now, Cadillac.

Mercedes-Benz 420SEL Fifth Place (tie)

This biggest of the Benzes is old—introduced in 1981—and its age shows. It feels ponderous, like driving a bank, and the jury ranked it lowest for fun.

A lot of things about this car suggest a bank. The price, for one: at \$62,600, including guzzler tax, the 420SEL is the most expensive car in the test by a clear margin. The vast rear legroom also brings to mind a bank, or perhaps a small cathedral, as does the solid, stolid architecture.

Those staffers who are particularly large of frame and girth find this an exceptionally comfortable car. The welterweights report hard seats that require serious bracing to maintain position during brisk motoring.