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2005 Suzuki Reno: The United Nations of Hatchbacks

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SINCE it bought the remains of Daewoo in 2002, General Motors has been divvying up the products of that bankrupt Korean automaker. One beneficiary is Chevrolet, whose Aveo subcompact comes from Daewoo, and another is Suzuki Motor, the product-starved Japanese company of which G.M. owns 20 percent.

The midsize Suzuki Verona sedan and the compact Forenza sedan and wagon were to have been Daewoos, but they ended up wearing Suzuki's big S, an appropriate symbol, perhaps, for this mild-mannered Clark Kent of a company.

For the 2005 model year, a third Daewoo entered Suzuki's line: the Reno, a four-door hatchback based on the Forenza.

Suzuki says the Reno has a refined European look, and I found myself agreeing with the spin. This Korean-built car, which is being sold by a Japanese company thanks to its big American brother, has some Italian flair. The Reno was styled by Italdesign in Turin with purposeful but handsome lines, especially in its chunky rear three-quarters.

The Reno LX that I tested had strobe-effect gray racing stripes on its metallic orange flanks, part of the SWT sport-appearance package. (The key word here is appearance, since the package, which stands for Suzuki Works Techno, includes nothing to enhance performance.)

The \$500 package includes those overstated stripes, "carbon fiber" appliqués on the roof pillars, a stainless-steel exhaust tip and, in Suzuki parlance, a "mid-rear spoiler." Thus, my Reno had two rear spoilers.

The SWT cosmetics, like the Reno itself, are aimed at Generation Y tastes. Many manufacturers assume that 20-something consumers care more about their gigabytes of iPod storage than about anything so last-century as high horsepower.

Therefore, the front-drive Reno comes with an impressive list of equipment: air-conditioning, an audio system with MP3 capability and a single-CD player and a tilt steering wheel with stereo controls. There are front and side air bags, though side-curtain bags are not offered.

The Reno S starts at \$14,000; my LX test car, with standard features including a power sunroof, cruise control and keyless locking, had a sticker of \$15,849. There is a three-year basic warranty and a seven-year transferable powertrain warranty.

As a borderline Gen-Yer, I know none of this matters if the thing has the dynamics of a shopping cart

with a busted wheel. Around town, the power from the 4-cylinder engine (2 liters, 126 horsepower) is adequate. Speed-sensitive steering is a nice touch, though the added heft as the speed increased felt a bit artificial. It all became downright messy when, during a little late night joy-riding, the tires proved to have as much grip as a puppy on linoleum. A dab on the nicely progressive brakes signaled a quick end to my attempts at finding latent sports car genes in the Reno's DNA.

There are disc brakes at all four wheels, a nice touch in this class. But antilock brakes, which should be standard, are a \$500 option.

The Reno impresses most on the highway. Despite its modest horsepower, it is a fairly quiet and comfortable cruiser, made all the better by its well-isolated ride. A four-hour New England road trip - accompanied by nothing but my favorite Guster CD and an IV drip of Starbucks coffee - went smoothly, and cruising at a constant speed also meant less shifting of the vague and sloppy five-speed manual transmission. (A four-speed automatic is optional.)

Mileage could be better; my Reno carried an E.P.A. rating of 22 m.p.g. in town, 30 on the highway. I averaged around 28.

While I'm nitpicking, the stereo's satisfying sound was countered by its dreadful appearance. But Suzuki got the rest of the cheery interior right. Cargo space is competitive, with 8.8 cubic feet behind the back seat and 45 cubic feet with that seat folded.

Where does the Reno fit in the budget-car world? Its strong warranty compares well with Korean value leaders like the Hyundai Elantra or Kia Spectra 5. Compared with default choices like the Honda Civic or Toyota Corolla, the Reno is better looking and has more features. In terms of driving refinement, the Reno trumps the Scion xA hatchback and xB wagon.

If you ignore the hollow promise of the SWT badges and look beyond the Reno's confused lineage, you'll find a solid economy car that is just a few horsepower, and a few miles per gallon, away from standing out.