

CAR AND DRIVER ROAD TEST

PONTIAC LE MANS SPRINT

"You guys take a Tempest Le Mans to Europe..."

"Did you say take a car to Europe?"



PHOTOGRAPHY: ALFRED FISHER

You already know what we think of Pontiac's Sprint engine—the overhead cam six-cylinder—right? We thought it stacked up pretty well against Jaguar's twin-cam six, and there's a Pontiac-engined XK-E running around to prove it (C/D, July '66 and January '67). Don't think it didn't occur to us that this engine, at a stock 215 horsepower, would look pretty good in some other European machinery as well—like the Jag sedans and the Mercedes-Benz range of touring and sports cars, and maybe even some of the better four-cylinder sports sedans, like the BMW 1800 and the Rover 2000. Imagine, for instance, the 315-hp, Weber-carbureted Sprint engine from our Jag-Pontiac in a

Mercedes 230 SL. *Holy Bobcats!*

So, while we were psyching ourselves about combinations like that, this guy from Pontiac calls up and has the temerity to suggest that not only is the *engine* European in concept, but that the *whole car* is too. He says that a Pontiac Le Mans Sprint four-door sedan is every bit as good as all those British, German, French and Italian "saloons" (as this guy from Pontiac calls 'em).

"Sure, sure," we say.

"No, really," says the Pontiac guy, "We can *prove* it."

"How?"

"You guys take a Tempest Le Mans to Europe and drive it around and see how it rates against..."

"Did you say take a car to

Europe?"

"Yeah, take it to Europe and..."
"You're kidding. K-I-D-D-I-N-G."

* * *

The General Motors Overseas service representative was waiting at the London airport when our flight arrived. He gave us the keys to a black-and-white 1967 Pontiac Le Mans Sprint (which had been airlifted over ahead of us), a road map from London to Dover, and a schedule for the cross-channel ferry to Calais. So far, so good. Now, if we could just keep from being wiped out driving on the wrong side of the road until we reached Dover, everything would be lovely—a four-day drive through France, Switzerland

The windshield wipers ceased functioning when we reached Calais. "Welcome to France," the tri-lingual sign said. So where's the nearest Pontiac dealer?

and Italy, arriving at Monza in time for the Italian Grand Prix.

One advantage of the Pontiac became obvious as we transferred our luggage to the car; it all fit in the trunk, with space left over. Camera bags, suitcases, tripods, boots, overcoats and rose-colored glasses—the works. Of the European sedans, only Mercedes and Jaguar can approach the Pontiac in this respect. But with its large trunk, the Le Mans Sprint also has larger outside dimensions, making it huge by European standards. This is no disadvantage in America, but in Europe we became a moving traffic jam. We were constantly nervous about encountering narrow streets and the traffic snarl that always ensued.

We debarked from the ferry at Calais under a driving rain that had followed us across the Channel from Dover. The Pontiac's heater produced heat in huge, pointed-at-the-face quantities, leaving us uncomfortable but the windshield clear. It didn't matter, as the windshield wiper motor blew its fuse as soon as we reached shore. "Welcome to

France," the tri-lingual signs said. So where's the nearest Pontiac dealer? After all, Mercedes, Jaguar, BMW, *et al.*, have American parts-and-service facilities for the cars they send to the States, so why not a similar arrangement for American General Motors products in Europe? *Particularly in Calais.*

No deal. The nearest GM service was 30 kilometers away, in Bologne, and they would be closed by the time we could get there. So we stocked up on 30-amp fuses at a Shell station and drove down the cobblestoned streets past the ancient town hall to the Hôtel du Sauvage for our first night in Europe.

The following day, with no rain in sight, we left early for a morning drive to Paris. The French were quite open in their admiration of the Pontiac's style, and people gathered to admire it whenever we stopped. A Pontiac four-door hardtop with a white body, black vinyl roof and Michigan license plates isn't exactly common in rural France, and every time the road narrowed to squeeze between the old brown buildings,

pedestrians began a barrage of questions. Textbook French does not include words for horsepower, weight or number of cylinders, but we evolved a simple ploy of opening the hood, asking directions to the nearest water closet, and wandering off to watch the fun.

In the countryside, dotted with amber fields and small villages, we found the Pontiac comfortable enough, although unnecessarily stiffly sprung. The ride is well controlled, and the front bucket seats give good support, but the stiffness of both suspension springs and rear-seat springs make back-seat passengers feel as though someone is whacking their behinds with a baseball bat through four inches of foam.

Ten kilometers from Peronne, on Route Nationale 37, we ran into rain again. This time the wipers worked effectively, and only the poor wet-weather adhesion of the Goodyear Wide Tread tires slowed us down. Their traction on dry pavement cannot be faulted, but on wet surfaces the aquaplaning is entirely unacceptable. At Peronne we adjusted



It is too easy to forget that road conditions in the States are not the same as in Europe. We really need high-revving, overhead cam sixes like Hiroshima needed the A-bomb.

the pressures to 26 psi front and rear, but found no improvement. Leaving Peronne, the wipers stopped working again, and only by feeding a constant supply of fuses into the proper clip did we reach Paris some three hours later.

Entering the great, gray city of Paris, we felt embarrassed for the Pontiac's sleek, flash-merchant lines. They seemed wholly out of place among the hulking 17th and 18th century buildings, the ancient masonry churches with their flying buttresses, and the tall, poised carillons. The buzzing, corrugated-steel Citroën 2CVs and Renault 4CVs seemed to belong to the city and its way of life in a way no modern American car ever could.

Turning onto Rue de Rivoli, we passed the rows of archways and spires that the Louvre presents to motorists, went twice around the Place de la Concorde, passed the Grand et Petit Palais and their gardens, and suddenly discovered the crush of traffic around the Arc de Triomphe dead ahead. We inched ahead timidly, feeling like the Ugly American and Gulliver in Lilliput all wrapped in one, and finally arrived at the Hôtel de Napoléon on Avenue Friedland. With our luggage safely stowed in the room, we drove the Pontiac to the GM garage, returned to the hotel by taxi, and enjoyed the excellent *choucroute garnie* and Bordeaux wine served by Chez Pescadon. And so, to bed.

The following morning we picked up the car, being told that the service mechanics had tightened a loose wire on the wiper motor, and left Paris on Nationale 7 for the magically gardened and forested town of Fontainebleau. After several hours of sightseeing we again took to the road, down Nationale 5 into Sens. It was a comfortable and uneventful drive, with the road surface being much improved over the route from Calais to Paris. In Auxerre we stopped for gas and oil, noting we were averaging 13 liters of gas per 100 kilometers (21 mpg), not bad,

(Text continued on page 90;
Specifications overleaf)



PONTIAC LE MANS SPRINT

Manufacturer: Pontiac Motor Division
General Motors Corp.
Pontiac, Michigan 48053

Number of dealers in U.S.: 3700

Vehicle type: Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive,
5-passenger sedan, all-steel
body with separate chassis

Price as tested: \$4049.50

(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, plus
Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and
delivery charges; does not include state and
local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: Vinyl top (\$84.26), 4-speed
manual transmission (\$184.31), Sprint en-
gine (\$105.60), power antenna (\$29.12), AM
radio (\$61.09), rear-window defroster
(\$21.06), door edge guards (\$8.16), outside
remote mirror (\$7.37), roof rail and reading
lamp (\$3.59), underhood lamp (\$3.48), cus-
tom seat belts, front and rear (\$10.53), shoulder
belts (\$26.33), special instrumentation
and tachometer (\$84.26), rally wheels
(\$56.97), woodrim steering wheel (\$30.02),
power steering (\$94.79), tilt steering wheel
(\$42.13), front disc brakes (\$104.79), power
windows (\$100.05), ride and handling pack-
age (\$3.74), Super Lift shocks (\$39.50),
capacitor ignition (\$104.26), limited slip
differential (\$63.19).

ENGINE

Type: Water-cooled 6-in-line, cast iron block
and head, 7 main bearings
Bore x stroke: .387 x 3.25 in, 98.4 x 82.5 mm
Displacement: 230 cu in, 3770 cc
Compression ratio: 10.5 to one
Carburetion: 1 x 4-bbl Carter AFB
Valve gear: Belt-driven single overhead
camshaft, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE): 215 bhp @ 5200 rpm
Torque (SAE): 240 lbs/ft @ 3800 rpm
Specific power output: 0.94 bhp/cu in,
57 bhp/liter
Max. recommended engine speed: 6500 rpm

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission: 4-speed manual, all-synchro.
Clutch diameter: 10.4 in
Final drive ratio: 3.55 to one

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	3.11	6.8	37 mph (5500 rpm)
II	2.20	9.6	53 mph (5500 rpm)
III	1.47	14.4	79 mph (5500 rpm)
IV	1.00	21.2	97 mph (4600 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase: 115.0 in
Track: F: 58.0 in, R: 59.0 in
Length: 206.6 in
Width: 74.7 in
Height: 55.0 in
Ground clearance: 5.7 in
Curb weight: 3405 lbs
Test weight: 3715 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R: 55/45%
Lbs/bhp (test weight): 17.3
Battery capacity: 12 volts, 44 amp/hr
Alternator capacity: 444 watts
Fuel capacity: 21.5 gal
Oil capacity: 6.0 qts
Water capacity: 12.1 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., upper and lower wishbones, coil
springs, 0.94-in. anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle, trailing links, diagonal upper
control arms, coil springs

STEERING

Type: Recirculating ball
Turns lock-to-lock: 4.25
Turning circle: 41 ft

BRAKES

F: Delco-Moraine 11.12-in vented discs
R: 9.5 x 2.0-in drums
Swept area: 323.6 sq in

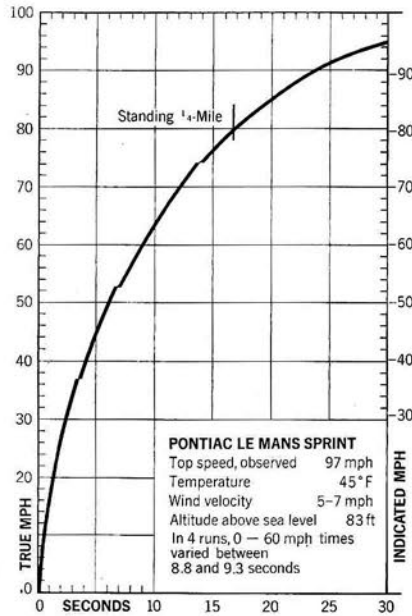
WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size and type: 5J x 14-in, pressed steel
disc, 5-bolt
Tire make, size and type: Goodyear Speedway
Wide Tread F70-14, two-ply nylon tubeless
Test inflation pressures: F: 26 psi, R: 26 psi
Tire load rating: 1280 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	2.5
40 mph	4.2
50 mph	6.0
60 mph	8.8
70 mph	12.0
80 mph	16.7
90 mph	23.8

Standing 1/4-mile: 16.7 sec @ 80 mph
80-0 mph: 252 ft (.85 G)
Fuel mileage: 21-24 mpg on premium fuel
Cruising range: 451-516 mi



CHECK LIST

ENGINE

Starting..... Good
Response..... Very Good
Vibration..... Excellent
Noise..... Fair

DRIVE TRAIN

Shift linkage..... Excellent
Synchro action..... Excellent
Clutch smoothness..... Excellent
Drive train noise..... Fair

STEERING

Effort..... Very Good
Response..... Very Good
Road feel..... Poor
Kickback..... Excellent

SUSPENSION

Ride comfort..... Fair
Roll resistance..... Very Good
Pitch control..... Very Good
Harshness control..... Poor

HANDLING

Directional control..... Very Good
Predictability..... Very Good
Evasive maneuverability..... Very Good
Resistance to sidewinds..... Excellent

BRAKES

Pedal pressure..... Poor
Response..... Very Good
Fade resistance..... Very Good
Directional stability..... Good

CONTROLS

Wheel position..... Poor
Pedal position..... Fair
Gearshift position..... Excellent
Relationship..... Good
Small controls..... Very Good

INTERIOR

Ease of entry/exit..... Very Good
Noise level (cruising)..... Fair
Front seating comfort..... Very Good
Front leg room..... Very Good
Front head room..... Good
Front hip/shoulder room..... Very Good
Rear seating comfort..... Fair
Rear leg room..... Fair
Rear head room..... Fair
Rear hip/shoulder room..... Fair
Instrument comprehensiveness..... Excellent
Instrument legibility..... Excellent

VISION

Forward..... Excellent
Front quarter..... Very Good
Side..... Very Good
Rear quarter..... Fair
Rear..... Good

WEATHER PROTECTION

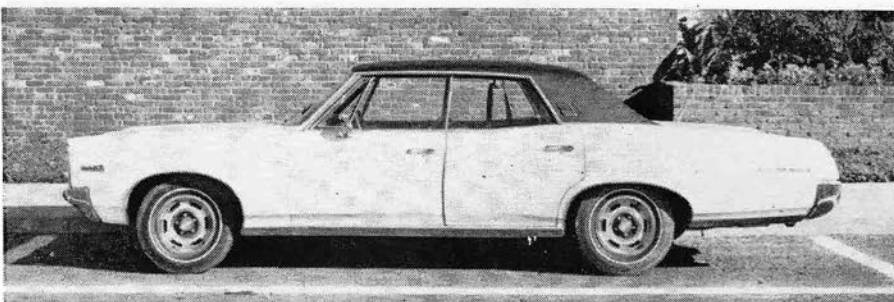
Heater/defroster..... Good
Ventilation..... Very Good
Weather sealing..... Very Good

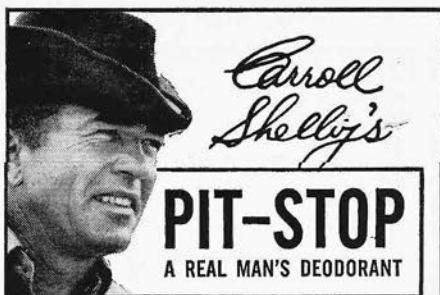
CONSTRUCTION QUALITY

Sheet metal..... Good
Paint..... Very Good
Chrome..... Very Good
Upholstery..... Good
Padding..... Good
Hardware..... Poor

GENERAL

Headlight illumination..... Excellent
Parking and signal lights..... Fair
Wiper effectiveness..... See Text
Service accessibility..... Very Good
Trunk space..... Excellent
Interior storage space..... Fair
Bumper protection..... Very Good





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PONTIAC LE MANS SPRINT

(continued from page 54)

but only 400 kilometers (248 miles) per liter of oil. Hmmm. Then we noticed that three oil pan bolts had fallen out somewhere along the road, so, after respacing the remaining bolts, we continued.

On the drive from Morez to Geneva, we briefly explored the Pontiac's limits of adhesion and found that while it understeers slightly, its power steering and brakes are completely unsuited to the European style of flat-out driving. These power-assisted controls are so overly sensitive that no feeling of the road is transmitted to the driver. European power-assists are deliberately held back, to make sure the driver gets the message. The Mercedes-Benz power-steering, with its artificial feed-back, and the BMW's subtly power-boostered brakes, are excellent examples.

In addition to the humiliation of being passed on braking by a Rover 2000 TC filled with young English mods, the Pontiac's rear axle refused to behave itself on corrugated turns, like those radially-ribbed mountain switchbacks the French are so fond of. With everything smoothly set up for an increasing-radius, understeer-type turn, the rigid axle would begin skipping sideways across the road ripples while the intended radius disappeared in a welter of hasty steering corrections. This is no way for a great, European-style road car to behave!

Our fourth night in Europe was spent at the luxurious Hôtel du Rhône, where Pontiac had arranged a brief tour of Geneva for us. The late evening hours were spent—over cheese fondue and Johannisberger wine—with some Swiss motoring journalists, debating Ferrari's and Brabham's chances in the upcoming Italian Grand Prix.

We passed from France into Italy through the beautiful Col du Mont Cenis, between Lanslebourg and the Italian town of Molovetto. As this is the main Alpine passage from eastern France to northern Italy, the road is very well maintained and there are numerous small *auberges* along the road offering good food and wines at something less than expense-account prices.

In negotiating the myriad switchbacks on the downward passage, we developed a rhythm of shifting and braking, broken only by the necessity of watching for lumbering busses that take up all the road and usually drive smack-dab in the middle. The precise, positive Hurst shifter that

comes on Pontiacs with four-speed or floor-shift three-speed manual transmissions is also very stiff. After a few hundred gearchanges, we decided the GM Turbo Hydra-Matic three-speed automatic would be a better solution. Unfortunately, the only automatic available with the Sprint engine is the older two-speed, so we rammed another shift home and thought about buying a pair of driving gloves at the next stop.

Another irritation that stood out on this stretch was the relationship of the controls. It's practically impossible to heel-and-toe efficiently in the Sprint, due both to the power brakes' sensitivity and to the relative pedal positions. Indeed, the Le Mans seems to be laid out for a short, fat matron wearing spike heels. Suburbia carries a lot of weight in the Motor City.

A final blow at the sporting driver is having the steering wheel four inches too close to the chest. Our test car was equipped with the optional adjusting mechanism that allows for the steering wheel rake to be changed, but does not telescope. On larger GM cars you can have your cake and eat it too, with a wheel that both tilts and telescopes. (And, oddly, a telescoping wheel is offered on the Corvair, but without the tilting feature.) By contrast, the Mercedes, the BMW, the Rover and the Jag—in that order—are well laid out for drivers of our tastes.

We arrived, very tired, in Turin at 2:00 A.M., and took our Le Mans to an all-night Fiat service center to have the timing checked. After leaving Paris, the car had continually overheated under heavy loads, and the spark knock that accompanied it was deafening. The trouble turned out to be over-advanced timing. Setting it back to the specified six degrees seemed to alleviate the problem. Still, the Sprint engine is unhappy when strained, and would not pull smoothly in high gear below 2500 rpm. We also added an additional liter of oil and took on another dozen 30-amp fuses. And so, visions of axles dancing in our heads, we retired for the night at Torino's Grand Hotel Principi di Piemonte.

The best section of the journey was from Turin to Milano on the *autostrada*. There, the Pontiac was at home, and for the first time since landing at Calais we were able to forget the minor irritations and concentrate on the passing countryside. *Autostrada* driving is not as boring as Interstate travel in the U.S., what with Nervi-inspired bridges tracing

delicate webs of concrete into shapes of great structural beauty.

Being conditioned to American freeway driving, we cruised at 105 kph (65 mph) until the sudden realization came that there was no speed limit. Prodded into action by a blue Volvo 122S loaded with blonde, blue-eyed, red-faced Swedes that passed us like we were a Fiat 600, we decided to see what the Pontiac would do wide open.

The highest speed we could coax out of the Sprint was 155 kph (96 mph), and that only briefly. After five minutes in that lofty bracket the engine began to overheat. At 140 kph (87 mph), or roughly 4000 rpm, everything settled down to normal and we loped happily along, watching the Lancias, Alfas, Mercedes and an occasional Maserati pass us by.

We arrived at Monza just in time to catch the last practice session, and were paged over the PA system by the GM representative from Turin. We met him at the car and, out of curiosity, asked him "How much?" meaning in Italy. "Got a letter on that," he said, "think it was over \$4000." "Over \$4000 in Italy?" we queried—for some reason it sounded steep. "No," he said, "in the States." And he was right, as a telex to Detroit confirmed. Still scratching our head, we gave him the keys to the Tempest and mulled over plans for the trip home.

* * *

The \$4000-plus price tag is explained by the incredibly long list of options on our test car (see the specifications page). When the Pontiac guy said it was loaded, what he meant was that it was *loaded*. This also took the edge off the Pontiac's largest single advantage over its European counterparts—a substantially lower price. In fact, the BMW 1800 is cheaper, with a base price of \$3225 and very few options to choose from. By comparison, the Rover's base price is \$3998, the Mercedes-Benz 230 S's is \$4910, and the Jaguar 420's is \$5786. To that, a couple of hundred dollars in options and extras must be added, plus \$50 or so in dealer preparation charges.

In general, you get what you pay for, although in the case of this particular Pontiac, the value isn't readily apparent. Measuring its worth against the European sports sedans we've mentioned, the Pontiac lacks the tangible feeling of quality that these imports are famous for.

As a sports sedan, the Pontiac's roadholding is considerably less refined than its competitors'. Its brakes are hypersensitive, however effective. Its acceleration is superior

in every speed range, although it is incapable of sustaining its top speed (a purely academic point in the U.S.). On a long trip, the Pontiac would be hard-pressed to maintain as high an average speed, and it is less comfortable to drive from point to point. The Sprint's engine and gearbox are the full equal of any six-cylinder and four-speed manual transmission in the world, and the car's overall operating economy is probably better than that of the other cars we've compared it with.

These are individual points, however. Pontiac is building what it bills as a European-style road car. ("Can't afford a European GT machine?" asks a 1966 Pontiac ad, urging, "Fake it.") The Sprint, on paper, follows the European recipe: a high-revving, overhead-cam six-cylinder engine; a four-speed, all-synchro, a stick-shift transmission; front-wheel disc brakes; stiff suspension; bucket seats; tachometer—even a woodrim steering wheel (so what if it's simulated wood?). But it doesn't add up to a European car. The Pontiac is as American as apple pie and Lime Rock, and that's a different *kind* of car, no matter how close it may come on paper.

In the long run, why try to build a car to European specifications in this country, when what Detroit does best is build big, loafing V-8s? Pontiac's high-revving, overhead-cam six-cylinder is one hell of a good powerplant—in any car—but we need it like Hiroshima needed the A-Bomb. It's nice, but do we *need* it? True, the Sprint package has better balance, and it's more agile, but most of our driving is done on straight, level, smooth roads. For those mountain switchbacks, in the Alps or in the Rockies, a BMW, or Mercedes-Benz, or Rover 2000, or a Jaguar sedan is still going to be more to the enthusiast's liking.

What the Tempest Le Mans *needs* is an easy, beefy V-8 (which is available) and a 3-speed automatic transmission (which isn't—so stick with the 4-speed manual), plus all those nice luxury options and power-assists that bring the cost up to that of a comparable European sports sedan. This combination would give better performance than the Sprint, at a slight sacrifice in fuel economy and handling ability. It wouldn't have the Sprint's exotic six-cylinder exhaust note, but it wouldn't get winded at 97 mph either. This is the American way, baby, and when Americans stop worshipping at the altar of European traditions and get with the home-grown product, maybe we'll start building sports sedans as well as they do over there. **C/D**

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