



Lusty performance disguised in a phone-company fleet car.

BY AARON ROBINSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

It doesn't look like the old goat. That's the harshest indictment we can make against this new Pontiac GTO. Yes, there are other, eminently fixable flaws with the Australian-built GTO, and we'll get to those shortly. But we're really struggling to invent reasons not to put both hands together for this supremely comfortable, rear-drive, all independently sprung, Corvette-powered, husky-sounding, highway-inhaling coupe.

Okay, the new GTO's styling is a snooze. But let's put the body lines into context. The car on which this new GTO is based, GM's Holden Monaro built near Adelaide, Australia, was a styling concept for the 1998 Sydney motor show. Holden staffers penciled it in their off-hours without any approval by the management for production, much less any inkling that it would ever be sold in America.

Wish all you want, but GM won't spend hundreds of millions right now to bring us an all-new replacement for the Firebird. We've seen GTO concepts, some based on the front-drive Pontiac Grand Am and most recently a vile orange nonrunning concept car at the 1999 Detroit show that was too ugly even for Hot Wheels to build. We respectfully yawned in GM's face. So instead, we get a decade-old platform derived from the European Opel Omega and Cadillac Catera sedans.

But wait. The Monaro fits the template of what a GTO should be better than any other vehicle in GM's current global lineup. It's rear-drive, it's relatively inexpensive, and it's already designed to accept a 350-hp Chevy small-block LS1 V-8. Plus, it's a perfect blank canvas for the aftermarket, which will scramble to develop bigger wheels and tires, body tack-ons, exhaust

kits, and the inevitable 405-hp LS6 conversion. GTO Judge, anyone?

Because the Monaro-to-GTO transformation was hasty—about 17 months, says GM—there wasn't much time or budget to thoroughly alter the car. The biggest change involved moving the fuel tank from below the trunk floor to inside the trunk—to help keep the GTO from becoming a fireball in rear-end collisions. The 18.5-gallon plastic-encased tank offers a range of about 350 miles while chopping the trunk almost in half, cutting cargo space down to about two golf bags' worth.

The other downside to the truncated development schedule: The options list contains just one item, a \$695 six-speed Tremec manual transmission that replaces the standard Hydra-Matic 4L60-E four-speed automatic. There's no sunroof, no seat heaters, and no OnStar offered. Nav-

igation is by the old-fashioned paper map and driver-supplied compass.

As sparse as it is of optional luxuries, the GTO's cockpit welcomes patrons with leather seating for four adults, detailed with elegant French seams and embroidered GTO logos. "The best seats in any GM product ever" were compliments regularly heard about the deeply bolstered, lumbar adjustable power front buckets. Put to the endurance test during a nonstop, 29-hour beeline to Las Vegas (see "Fear and Losing Near Las Vegas," page 60), the GTO's seats left backs feeling free of fatigue, tailbones coddled, and spinal nerves unruffled.

Other GM cars that fit that description? Um, we're thinking . . .

The individual rear seats are ergonomically sculpted and scalloped like the fronts. Heads and elbows in the rear get plenty of stretch space. The front seats

sprout a manual-release handle that flips the seatback forward, but only just past vertical. Then a separate button must be held while the front seat motors forward and back with the alacrity of a garden slug. More than a few passengers preferred to wriggle into and out of the rear like escape artists rather than wait for the seats to release them.

That the GTO is a foreigner to GM's North American lineup is evident from the driver's seat. The center-console window switches, the thick rubber knobs of the manual climate control, and the European Blaupunkt CD-changing stereo will seem alien to GM regulars. So will the manual tilting and telescoping steering wheel. Every two hours the cluster's LCD flashes a "rest reminder" with a pixilated image of a tree (perhaps Australian eucalyptus?) and a picnic table. How exotic.

The elegant detailing—including the red-face GTO dials with silver bezels and chrome pointer hubs, the red stitching on the leather-wrapped wheel and shifter boot, the polished metal door handles, and the aluminum-colored ring around the center dashboard stack—is also a welcome departure from GM's typical Tupperware interiors. We only wish Holden would find some space for a dead pedal left of the clutch.

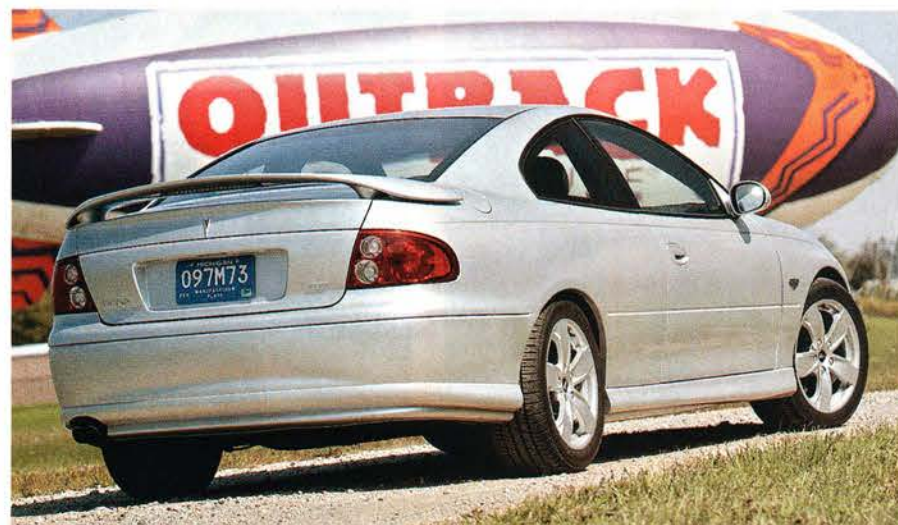
The corn-stalk shifter provides the leverage to easily shove the heavy forks around the Tremec T-56 six-speed. The detents are mushy and the gates somewhat sloppy, and the Corvette's hated one-to-four skip shift is there for fuel economy, but the stick knows its way and rarely hangs up. For a muscle car, the GTO's clutch is soft, slipping enough during shifts to cushion and flatten out small rpm differentials.

THE VERDICT

Highs: Corvette sound and power, Euro ride and handling, acceptable price.

Lows: Iffy build quality, tiny trunk, styling that makes you say, "So what?"

The Verdict: The Aussie GTO isn't perfect, but don't look a gift goat in the mouth.



If you want necks snapped, row hard and keep the gas pedal flat. The all-season 245/45 BFGoodrich g-Force T/As are mere shrimps on the barbie of the LS1 V-8. The GTO charges headlights ablaze out of a toxic cloud of tire smoke to turn 5.3 seconds at 60 mph and 14 flat in the quarter-mile at 102 mph, clobbering with big-bore snort new import coupes such as the Infiniti G35 and Mazda RX-8.

Best of all, the GTO vents USDA Prime V-8 grumble out of a genuine dual exhaust (the Monaro's interconnecting H-pipe is there, but blocked off for meatier noise). The pops and thuds of backfires on the overrun sound positively illegal, like you'd pulled the cans and were heading for Paradise Road.

Unchanged from Australia are the PBR calipers with Akebono front pads and Bendix Mintex rears. They scrub off 70 mph in a longish 185 feet, some 20 feet more than the lighter-weight Asians. The brake pedal also feels squishy at bottom, as if it were swinging against seat foam.

With a little more rubber on the spindles (base Corvettes get 275/40 rear run-flats to handle the same horsepower abuse) the GTO would likely be even faster down the drag strip and shorter in the stops.

Aftermarket tire retailers are standing by.

The GTO glides above the pavement on struts in the front and semi-trailing arms in the rear with an adjustable toe-in link. Australia is a land of rough roads, so the control arms are stout welded steel and forged iron, and the crossmembers to which they attach are beefy stampings and tubes. It all contributes to the GTO's 3821-pound curb weight, a 550-plus-pound hike above a base Corvette coupe. Elevating the fuel tank into the trunk pushed the GTO's center of gravity in the wrong direction, too.

Subsequently, don't expect the GTO to two-step like a Corvette. There's more sponge in the steering, more roll in the tires, more lean and bob in the body. Yet the GTO pulled 0.88 g on the skidpad, a testament to its fundamental balance and stability. The GTO's handling is really more Deutschland than Detroit. In corners the front end bites hard and the rear tracks dutifully, the understeer staying mostly in the shadows. Hanging the tail out is a challenge, even with all the power on tap; the Pontiac prefers to scrub its excess speed through the front tires. This is a car for getting where you're going, not putting on a stunt show.



COUNTERPOINT

BARRY WINFIELD

Having visited Holden's operations in Australia, where I drove the Holden Monaro on which this Pontiac is based, I was looking forward with great anticipation to driving a GTO in the States. A sporty rear-drive coupe with a Corvette motor, a manual six-speed, and a sport-tuned suspension sounds like our kind of car. But among the hordes of 10Best vehicles at our disposal that week, the GTO seemed anonymous-looking, with a somewhat sober interior despite the best GM seats anywhere. There's power aplenty, and the exhaust note is great, but real GTO heritage doesn't really extend beyond the V-8's warble.

BROCK YATES

The Pontiac styling department—presuming such an entity exists—has yo-yoed from the sublime to the ridiculous. After decades of festooning their vehicles with grotesque fiberglass stick-ons, they have created a GTO cunningly disguised as a phone-company fleet car. When I first spotted our dishwater-dull, battleship-gray GTO, I thought perhaps a Navy recruiter had stopped by in an attempt to snare a couple of our office interns. Did the dolts at Pontiac even take a peek at the 1964-65 Goats, the first truly vivid and now classic muscle cars? The GTO is a solid-performing Cinderella who lost her shoe before leaving for the party.

CSABA CSERE

Full marks to GM for conjuring up a thoroughly modern Pontiac GTO. A sophisticated chassis with disc brakes, an independent suspension at both ends, and rear-wheel drive is exactly what the 21st century demands. And the LS1 V-8 provides gutsy thrust in the GTO tradition. With the exception of a heavy shifter, all this hardware works well, and the car's \$33,000 base price is right. However, the new goat's lines are simple and clean to the point of boredom. Other than beefy wheels and tires, the visuals do nothing to suggest performance and speed. A proper GTO should look butch. This one doesn't.

Along the way, expect a supple ride over expansion joints and cold-patch cracks, until the tires hit something big. The bump stops are rigid, a compromise to permit the tires and 17-inch alloy wheels to fit into the small wheelhouses without constant rubbing. At least the GTO's stiff, rattle-free body soaks up shakes that would've had the old Camaro and Firebird shedding parts.

Speaking of which, the GTO did shed one or two of its own, including its battery tie-down and the wing-mounted center stop lamp, which fell off when one of its plastic screws sheared. Additionally, the A/C repeatedly switched itself on and off, the button controlling the passenger-seat motor broke, and the suspension alignment was off enough to occupy a Las Vegas frame shop for two hours.

GM will say that our GTO was an early pilot car. True enough, but the Monaro has been in production for two years, and these are Monaro parts. For the GTO to prosper, GM is going to have to ride its Australian subsidiary hard to keep the quality up.

The GTO is God-bless-America performance wrapped in a sleek and refined package at a price the rest of us can afford. And if you *still* don't like the GTO, it'll be gone soon. Chief engineer Bob Reuter says the company plans to sell the \$33,000 GTO for just three model years at the rate of 18,000 per year. After that, who knows?

Likely, as the song goes, you won't know what you've got till it's gone. ■

Companion piece follows

C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.0
40 mph	2.8
50 mph	4.2
60 mph	5.3
70 mph	7.1
80 mph	8.8
90 mph	10.8
100 mph	13.4
110 mph	16.0
120 mph	19.1
130 mph	23.4
140 mph	28.9
Street start, 5-60 mph	5.8
Top-gear acceleration, 30-50 mph	10.2
50-70 mph	10.4
Standing 1/4-mile	14.0 sec @ 102 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	158 mph

BRAKING	70-0 mph @ impending lockup
	185 ft

HANDLING	Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	Understeer
	0.88 g	minimal moderate excessive

ESTIMATED FUEL ECONOMY	mpg
EPA city driving	16
EPA highway driving	28
C/D-observed	22

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL	dB(A)
Idle	54
Full-throttle acceleration	79
70-mph cruising	71



CURRENT BASE PRICE* dollars x 1000

Mazda RX-8	24
Infiniti G35 coupe	32
Pontiac GTO (estimated)	33
Ford SVT Mustang Cobra	38

*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and applicable gas-guzzler taxes.

ACCELERATION seconds ■ 0-60 mph ■ 1/4-mile

Ford SVT Mustang Cobra	5.3
Pontiac GTO	5.3
Infiniti G35 coupe	7.1
Mazda RX-8	7.1

BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet

Mazda RX-8	185
Infiniti G35 coupe	185
Ford SVT Mustang Cobra	185
Pontiac GTO	185

ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g

Mazda RX-8	0.88
Pontiac GTO	0.88
Infiniti G35 coupe	0.88
Ford SVT Mustang Cobra	0.88

EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg

Infiniti G35 coupe	16
Mazda RX-8	16
Ford SVT Mustang Cobra	16
Pontiac GTO	16

PONTIAC GTO

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door coupe

Estimated price as tested: \$33,695

Options on test car: 6-speed manual transmission

Major standard accessories: power windows, seats, and locks; remote locking; A/C; cruise control; tilting and telescoping steering wheel; rear defroster

Sound system: Blaupunkt AM/FM radio/CD changer, 6 speakers

ENGINE

Type	V-8, aluminum block and heads
Bore x stroke	3.90 x 3.62 in, 99.0 x 92.0mm
Displacement	346 cu in, 5665cc
Compression ratio	10.0:1
Fuel-delivery system	port injection
Valve gear	pushrods, 2 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net)	350 bhp @ 5200 rpm
Torque (SAE net)	365 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
Redline	6000 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission	6-speed manual		
Final-drive ratio	3.46:1, limited slip		
Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	2.97	7.2	43 mph (6000 rpm)
II	2.07	10.3	62 mph (6000 rpm)
III	1.43	15.0	90 mph (6000 rpm)
IV	1.00	21.4	128 mph (6000 rpm)
V	0.84	25.5	153 mph (6000 rpm)
VI	0.57	37.6	158 mph (4200 rpm)

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	109.8 in
Track, front/rear	61.4/62.1 in
Length/width/height	189.8/72.5/54.9 in
Ground clearance	7.8 in
Drag area, Cd (0.31) x frontal area (23.3 sq ft, est)	7.22 sq ft
Curb weight	3821 lb
Weight distribution, F/R	56.0/44.0%
Curb weight per horsepower	10.9 lb
Fuel capacity	18.5 gal

CHASSIS/BODY

Type	unit construction
Body material	welded steel stampings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat	54 cu ft
rear seat	41 cu ft
luggage	7 cu ft
Front-seat adjustments	fore and aft, seatback angle, front height, rear height, lumbar support
Restraint systems, front	manual 3-point belts, driver and passenger front airbags
rear	manual 3-point belts

SUSPENSION

Front	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rear	ind, semi-trailing arms with a toe-control link, coil springs, anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type	rack-and-pinion with hydraulic power assist
Steering ratio	11.8:1-17.2:1
Turns lock-to-lock	3.1
Turning circle curb-to-curb	36.1 ft

BRAKES

Type	hydraulic with vacuum power assist and anti-lock control
Front	11.7 x 1.1-in vented disc
Rear	11.3 x 0.6-in disc

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size/type	8.0 x 17 in/cast aluminum
Tires	BFGoodrich g-Force T/A KDWS, 245/45Z-17 95W
Test inflation pressures, F/R	33/39 psi
Spare	high-pressure compact on aluminum wheel