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Auto Hypnosis

If You're in the Market for the Planet's Priciest Production Cars, Look No Further

by Joshua Shapiro

Of all the deceased presidents, the picture of the 28th, Woodrow Wilson, on the United States \$100,000 bill commands by far the most respect. Issued in 1934 and backed with gold, Wilsons gave the Federal Reserve bankers a means of account settlement long before the advent of electronic wire transfers. Today, dropping a Wilson--or more--is the hallmark of an ultraluxury-carbuyer. * No one needs a "Wilsonmobile." Of course, no one really needs a \$40,000 designer gown or a \$2,000,000 string of black pearls, either. At this rarefied level, cars are a pure extension of self, as personal in fit and finish as a fine Savile Row suit. Since a vehicle of this sort is rarely an investment or a mere means of transportation, it stands to reason that acquiring one is an irrational lifestyle decision that expresses the ego and achievement of the owner. For example, the in-your-face Lamborghini has considerable cachet with in-your-face athletic megastars. The baddest--Dennis Rodman, Mike Tyson and Deion Sanders, not a shrinking violet in the bunch--all picked up Diablo VTs last year. * What does a such a car bring its owner? Besides proclaiming an immunity to Richter-scale sticker shock, superluxury

automobiles offer exceptional styling, performance and exclusivity. They are undoubtedly the most beautiful, powerful, and rarest cars, to be kept hidden in estate garages or furtively glimpsed on the road. Most are individually built and come only in runs of about 300 a year, the number of vehicles Toyota makes in 15 minutes. Buying one means showing up at the club with the assurance that the rest of your foursome didn't drive up in the same car. And suddenly, every parking valet and service-station attendant is your best friend.

You do not save up for these cars by putting pennies into a cookie jar; nor are they financed by taking out a home-equity loan. The base price is just that. Options, when available, aren't cheap: a rear spoiler for a Lamborghini makes a \$5,000 tailwind, while a cell phone to call from your Porsche Turbo will ring up charges of an additional \$3,134. Luxury, gas-guzzler and local sales taxes typically add 16 percent to the manufacturer's suggested retail price. Then there are annual expenses for registration, insurance, gas,

service and perhaps state tax and parking that can add another 10 percent. Replacement tires alone for these exotic creatures can run to more than \$2,000 a set.

But the expenses directly associated with the car are only the beginning. A purely aspirational buyer will feel compelled to play the part. This creates an urge to upgrade wardrobe, restaurants and clubs, and even friends or spouses to accommodate the image of the new vehicle. It's difficult to go on a job interview or shop at the A&P while driving a Bentley. And if you have mortgaged your house to buy one, every dent and ding becomes a source of recurring anxiety.

The profile of dream-car owners: male entrepreneurs with successful, private businesses that throw off significant cash. One Mercedes S 600 owner runs a business that nets \$40 million in profits a year. While perhaps 15 percent of superluxury automobiles are leased, most are purchased for cash, apparently as something of an afterthought. One Mercedes dealer recounts the story of an unassuming couple who came in to shop for an S-class sedan. The husband couldn't decide between the S 500 and the S 600. Finally, he asked the salesman, *"Which one would my chauffeur prefer?"* After hearing that the S 600 would certainly be more appreciated, he bought two, for cash.

The garage manager at the Beverly Hills Hotel tells a similar story of a visiting guest calling the local Ferrari dealership, which dispatched six cars to the hotel for review. The guest bought two for cash and left them covered in long-term parking at the hotel.

A Bentley buyer is likely to have six other cars already. A hundred thousand or more for an entire two-ton package of machinery doesn't seem expensive from the perspective of someone who spent a Wilson or more for two ounces of exclusive tourbillon wristwatch.

Which cars break the Wilson barrier? No Japanese or American brands come close. The priciest Japanese offering, the race-bred Acura NSX-T, peaks at \$88,000, while the American macho military Hummer and the 8.0-liter V10 Dodge Viper GTS both top off at only \$66,000. Surprisingly, even the most expensive, obviously status-oriented Eurocars from BMW (850Ci at \$95,000); its subsidiary, Land Rover (Range Rover 4.6 HSE with Kensington interior at \$66,000); Ford's luxury marque, Jaguar (XK-8 at \$72,500), or GM's former subsidiary, Lotus (Esprit V8 at \$85,000), all fail to reach the stratosphere of truly costly cars.

Most of the world's limited supply of \$100,000-plus motor chariots come from but three European countries and only six companies. In Germany, only the cream of the crop from Porsche--its two Turbo models--and Mercedes-Benz--its three V12 models--make the grade. In the United Kingdom and Italy, all the models from Rolls-Royce, Aston Martin, Ferrari and Lamborghini weigh in over a 100K. All are rear- or all-wheel-driven and leather upholstered. All are powered by magnificent engines that have an unslakable thirst for gasoline--big V12s or blown sixes or eight-cylinder engines. None have cottoned to the American mania for cup holders. And regrettably, none have cigar lighters adequate for lighting a decent-sized torpedo.

Here are my top six choices of the nearly two dozen models of Wilsonmobiles now available in America.

THE PORSCHE TURBO

The Porsche Turbo, despite any rumors to the contrary, is truly the "ultimate driving machine." Other cars might be more expensive, more glamorous or showy, more plush and luxurious, and better prepared to carry a family around in style, but this is not the Turbo's game. The Turbo exists for one purpose only--to be driven. Porsche buyers are driven introverts, and this is their car. Ferry Porsche started building sports cars in 1948. The flagship 911 series, the \$6,500 car with every one of its 2,381 pounds packing 130 horsepower and 120 foot-pounds of torque, debuted in 1964. The first Turbo appeared 10 years later. So depending on how you count, Porsche has had between 23 and 33 years to perfect this car. The breeding and experience are evident in the car's stellar performance and the absence of any annoying design flaws.

The Turbo feels roomier than the stock 911. Be warned, however, that the class designation "2+2" refers to the car's carrying two adults and two tiny, well-behaved pets. This is rarely an issue, since driving a Turbo is typically an individual meditation. No wood trim adorns the cockpit, unless you opt for Porsche factory customization. With the exception of the ignition key, which is located on the left of the steering wheel, the controls are neatly laid out. This affectation dates back to races that used the running Le Mans start. Being able to start the car and shift simultaneously really provides an edge for a dead-start event. The standard Becker stereo with 10 speakers is one of the few great-sounding, high-tech sound systems that you don't need a Ph.D. to figure out. The deeply bolstered electrically adjustable leather seat comfortably secures the driver while carving turns. The Xenon headlamps cast an eerie bluish nighttime glow down the road. Twice as bright as standard halogens, these "Litronic" lights give the driver a deeper view into the distance--a safety feature that proves its worth when you're driving fast.

The Turbo extracts 400 hp and 400 foot-pounds of torque out of its smallish, 3.6-liter, flat six "boxer" engine by adding exhaust gas-driven turbochargers to each bank of cylinders. This is enough to power the car from 0 to 60 in a mere 4.4 seconds and reach a top speed of 180 mph. More impressive than the numbers is its effortless manner. Turbo lag is surprisingly absent. And Porsche makes all-wheel drive (AWD) standard on the Turbo with good reason. Without AWD all that raw power is tricky to control. With AWD, the power is divided among all four wheels, eliminating any chance of burning rubber. AWD also makes the Turbo's handling pleasantly neutral without any oversteer fussiness in turns.

A car is only as fast as it can stop with full control. Confident, power-assisted antilock 12.7-inch four-piston ventilated disc brakes match the engine's performance. On dry pavement these brakes can halt a Turbo moving at 100 mph in four seconds and inside 120 yards. Overall, the complete package behaves effortlessly. The car always seems to be asking its driver, "Is that all you want me to do?"

This year, Porsche has tweaked the engine to deliver another 24 hp (but no additional torque). With some carbon fiber trim and new styling cues, this limited-availability Turbo S model sells for \$50,000 more. Either is a serious investment of money and emotions. Losing one creates a depression clinically known as Turbo Remorse, for which nothing else, not even a lesser Porsche, will compensate. After driving the Turbo for one week, I got an elegant, new, glass-roofed Porsche 911 Targa with a Tiptronic automatic transmission as a replacement test car. My attitude was a blasé "Give me back that crisp-shifting six-speed and get this sluggish piece of junk away from me."

THE MERCEDES-BENZ S 600 SEDAN

Of all the Wilson mobiles, the Mercedes V12s come closest to being practical rather than pure extravagance. With a worldwide production run of 4,600 units last year, they benefit from being able to spread the costly engineering effort over a reasonable number of units. Mercedes are safe, reliable, spacious and supported by a large dealer service network. No special marketing is done to promote the V12s, and their styling is so conservative that only the cognoscenti can distinguish the S 600 from the other S-class sedans. Only the S 600 sedan has six horizontal chrome cross bars on its grille; the non-V12s have only three.

The S 600 embodies the philosophy that "more is better." It has more features and subtleties than the average owner could notice in a year. The S 600 also has sensors that vary the speed of the windshield wipers according to the amount of rain, adjust the speed of the air conditioning fan according to the amount of sunlight, automatically switch to cabin air recirculation if smog levels surpass a given threshold, dim headlight glare in the rearview mirror, and secure the doors and trunk should they be left slightly ajar. The key fob will close the windows and the sunroof when the car is locked. The excellent Bose Beta sound system shifts the volume to accommodate changes in the speed of the car. Like the Porsche Turbos, the 600s come with nifty Xenon headlamps.

The cabin is luxurious. The dashboard, steering wheel, center console and doors are lavished with a forest of burl walnut. The seats are two-toned Nappa leather. The dashboard shift knob, steering wheel, sun visors, rear shelf and upper door panels are all trimmed in leather. Even the headliner is genuine suede. The heated front seats are adjustable 12 ways, have three levels of variable back support, inflatable side bolsters, three separate memory settings, and front- and side-impact air bags. But then again, the back seats are also heated and adjustable and have individual lit vanity mirrors and powered rear-window sunscreen, all of which makes the sedan eminently suitable for chauffeured driving.

Driving the S 600 is like driving a vault. Volvos seem flimsy by comparison. The combination of double-thick window glass and heavy engine-compartment insulation makes the car exceedingly quiet. Like other Mercedes, the 600s have great suspensions and brakes. The S 600 coupe is so buttoned-down that only when the speed exceeds 120 mph does it begin to manifest personality. The S 600 sedan is more accessibly practical, being one of the few exotic cars in which four adults can ride in sustained comfort. This

staid car will hustle from 0 to 100 mph in 12.3 seconds, only a second slower than a Corvette. For those with more than a million dollars and a craving for something more exotic, Mercedes is considering building 20 to 30 "street" versions of its racing mid-mounted, 6.9-liter V12 engine-powered CLK-GTR.

THE ASTON MARTIN DB7 VOLANTE

My favorite experience regarding the Aston Martin DB7 Volante was listening to a couple's conversation, which went like this:

Woman: "Isn't that the new Celica?"

Man: "No, that's a new Aston Martin."

Woman: "All cars look alike."

Man: "That Volante is just another car, like Claudia Schiffer is just another woman."

That the DB7 is such a lush motoring machine with archetypal sports car lines is completely due to Ian Callum, its Scottish, ex-Ghia of Turin designer. The Aston Martin DB7 is the true James Bond fantasy car. Upon getting into one, the immediate sensation of heading for a casino, wearing a tuxedo and sitting next to Honey Ryder (or Claudia) overcomes you.

The British know how to convey sophisticated luxury in their motorcars. Nobody does the wood, leather and carpeting number better. The cabin of the DB7 is simple and elegant. All the controls, warning lights (neatly color-coded for severity) and gauges (analogue white-on-black) are laid out so as to be accessible and unobtrusive. The Connolly leather seating, with contrasting piping, is heated and has inflatable lumbar support. Sitting in the car is like wearing a fine, fitted cashmere blazer--soft, warm and soothing.

The convertible DB7 Volante, with its winged Aston Martin logos on the C-pillar shining like blazer buttons, has a powered roof and a heated glass rear window. Although it is a tad less stiff than the coupe, the open-air joy of taking the top down while venturing through sunny countryside more than compensates for the occasional squeak. Both come with a four-piece set of matching luggage.

Driving it isn't bad, either. The perfectly balanced, dual overhead cam, 24-valve, in-line six-cylinder 3.2-liter engine, assisted by a belt-driven Eaton supercharger, delivers 335 hp and 361 foot-pounds of torque. Its four-speed automatic transmission can deliver the goods. Handling is crisp, although it is subject to noticeable oversteer during braking. Off the track, the DB7 can run comfortably with the Ferrari.

The Aston Martin Lagonda is an old marque, a bit like threadbare royalty. Established in 1913 by Lionel Martin to build race cars, the AML has struggled financially through

many owners for most of its existence. In more than 80 years, it has produced only about 13,000 hand-built cars. In 1994, it was bought by Ford, which has kept it an exclusive and independent manufacturer. In this age of robotics, each DB7 takes 180 hours of handwork to build. Buyers are encouraged to customize everything.

As beautiful as it is, the DB-7 is really the baby of the Aston Martin litter. All the more expensive brethren, such as the \$400,000 AM Shooting Brake (station wagon), are V8-powered, and none are exported to America. Designed and built by AML at the Newport Pagnell factory, the DB7s borrow a modified Jaguar XJS floor pan matched with an exclusive Aston Martin engine and a GM transmission. Wags in Britain call the DB7 a "Jag in drag." This derision is unfair except for the practical issue of price. A Jaguar XJR sells for \$67,400, or about half the price of the DB7. But why not be a fool for a pretty face?

THE BENTLEY AZURE

The experience of driving my first Bentley in silver pearl lacked the spirit of ecstasy as much as its grille lacked the famous Rolls-Royce hood ornament. Here was a car that went for more than \$300,000, more than just about any other car on the planet. Was it that great? Was it worth all that? Throughout my childhood, advertisements had conditioned me to expect a car so reliable that it was guaranteed for life and so quiet that, at 60 mph, the loudest cabin noise was the sound of the analogue clock.

Well, the analogue clock was there, as well as an analogue thermometer. Sure, the Azure had Connolly hides with contrasting piping, burr walnut veneer that didn't look like photo-grain, toe-wriggling deep lamb's wool rugs, heavy chromed air vents and dash switches, but so what? Couldn't you get cruise control, anti-lock brakes, traction assistance, suspension management and a tilt wheel on a Lexus?

Were we having fun yet?

Ettore Bugatti once remarked that Bentleys were the fastest trucks around. The Azure is no exception. It's heavy and huge--long and broad enough and nearly tall enough to match a Chevy Suburban. Next to an Azure, a Jaguar XK-8 convertible looks as tiny as a Mazda Miata. The Azure runs on a 1950s-vintage low-revving, 6.75-liter, 16-valve, pushrod V8 engine, with a Garrett turbocharger, pushing a GM truck transmission. But to its credit, it develops 385 hp and very high torque (553 foot pounds) without much fuss. Bentley claims it will do 0 to 60 in 6.3 seconds on its cushy 255/55 WR17 Avon tires and max out at 150 mph.

The name Azure conjures up the blue skies and sea along the Grand Corniche. But the Riviera is closer than just a spiritual home for the car. The chassis are individually built in Crewe, United Kingdom. Then they are flown to Pininfarina, in Italy, where the folding roof, the one without the "starved cow" look, is installed. Finally, they return by air to England to be fitted with interiors and completed, making this the most sophisticated and well-traveled of convertibles. The process takes six months.

My second Bentley turned me around. Lacquered in peacock blue, a deeply satisfying ultramarine, it resonated with the Azure name. The car was finally properly dressed for its classic styling. The Azure is a bit like a fine Bordeaux. It clearly needs to be opened up to properly breathe and be appreciated. No wonder these cars are happiest tooling around warm, wealthy enclaves like Cap Ferrat in the Riviera, Hong Kong, Palm Beach and Palm Springs. A Partagas, a beautiful companion, the Azure with the top down, a sunny day and a quiet road. Things could definitely be worse.

FERRARI 550 MARANELLO

Like Porsche, Ferrari is a postwar marque, having been founded in 1947 by the director of Alfa Romeo's racing division, Enzo Ferrari. Since then, Ferrari has turned out a series of 43 models of competitive racing cars and has still managed to make grand-touring road cars that have earned the brand worldwide recognition. Although almost 90 percent of Ferraris are exported, to my mind they look their best in their native habitat. Last autumn I was driving the Autostrada One from Rome to Florence, doing a comfortable 210 kilometers an hour, when I saw a red Ferrari 308 approaching in the distance. I changed lanes to let him pass. The driver pulled up momentarily, smiled and waved, and then blew by at 260. It was a memorable Ferrari moment.

The 550 Maranello is the latest offering to carry the black prancing horse on the yellow ground, and it celebrates 50 years of Ferrari automotive finesse. Refinement is the leitmotiv of the Maranello. The classically graceful low and wide body with the long bonnet and cutoff tail is fabricated of aluminum alloy on a tubular steel frame. As with the aluminum Acura NSX and the Audi A8, the Ferrari 550 has a certain lightness and silken quality that match the subtlety of its styling and the suppleness and sensitivity of handling. The center cowl feeds dual air intakes to the fuel feed. Dual engine bay exhaust gills accent the front fender between the wheel arch and the door. Even the undercarriage is totally faired for aerodynamic stability.

The Ferrari 550 has a thoroughly modern design, with the usual air bags, antilock brakes and antiskid features that one expects. The windows automatically lower a fraction of an inch when you exit the car to effect a better seal. The black-leather dash with aluminum air vents holds a neatly laid out set of basic gauges. The drilled alloy pedals contrast with the tan saddle-leather seats and carpeting. The only noise in the cockpit comes from the ball-shaped solid aluminum gear lever hitting against the heavy aluminum shift gate with a satisfying "kerchunk."

Mechanically, the two-seat, Berlinetta-styled 550 is similar to the earlier Ferrari 456 GT coupe. Both have a 5.5-liter V12 up front coupled to a rear-positioned six-speed transaxle, and both share roughly the same dimensions, capacities and weights. The Maranello packs 485 hp, which can be used to accelerate from 0 to 60 in 4.3 seconds and reach a maximum speed of 199 mph. The 13-inch drilled disc brakes, the adaptive suspension system and the traction-control system keep a comfortable rein on the car, which performs any assigned chores without breaking a sweat. One wishes for a control to dial engine noise into the cabin.

When viewed as a replacement for the Testarossa, the rowdy, assertively angular mid-engine star of "Miami Vice," the new Maranello seems tame, almost docile. This is an accessible car without excesses whose quiet, unassuming beauty and discipline appeals to aesthetes, not cowboys.

THE LAMBORGHINI DIABLO VT

Lamborghini is the newest marque among the over-\$100,000 club. When it was introduced in 1963 by Ferruccio Lamborghini, the story goes, the manufacturer of farm machinery was so miffed by the treatment that he received from Enzo Ferrari that he decided to beat him at his own game. Lamborghini was a proud Taurean who loved bullfighting. Hence, the logo of his company is a raging bull, and all the models (except the Countach) have been named for breeds of bulls. The current model Lamborghini Diablo VT's radical styling and aggressive performance truly befit the logo.

The driver who delivered mine told me that when other truckers inquire what he is hauling, he radios back on his CB: "I am hauling this thing to Washington from Area 51 in the Nevada desert, where the government has been hiding it the last 40 years." You can believe it. The chassis resembles a DeLorean, with scissoring doors and Nike swooshlike lines. Whatever its specs say, it is the fastest, wildest machine I have ever driven. As you change into second gear in under four seconds, a glance at the speedometer tells you that you're topping 60 mph; but then, this car can do 65 mph in reverse.

While its makers encourage buyers to drive it every day in ordinary situations, I would pass. The car is as wide as a Hummer, but unlike the commanding view of the road ahead offered by a sport-utility vehicle, the Diablo VT sits so low to the ground (five inches) that while driving you can actually look up to a guard rail. This is not a car to drive when learning to parallel park. It has too many blind spots, and a rear window that's only a tad larger than a mail slot. The optimum situation would be to have diplomatic immunity or a decent race track on your own estate. Otherwise, you might consider relocating to Montana, where highway speed limits have been abolished. City traffic and potholes are death to a car this low and wide.

The VT experience comes across as elemental and raw. It manifests the untamed exuberance of riding a rocket while holding the engine in your right arm. You get a steering wheel (adjustable), a stick shift (gated five-speed) and the largest tires (Pirelli Pzero 335/35 ZR17) found on any production car. No frills like traction control, ABS or even air bags clutter the 1997 model. Everything but the ethereal cabin sound is extraneous.

The sounds (not of the Alpine radio) are what you live for in this car. The revving engine shrieks like Valkyries. The wind howls in tandem with the blur past the windshield. Even the manifolds sucking in air scream with differentials in the throttle. This is the most excitement you can have as a civilian.

While the car comes with standard all-wheel drive, the mid-engine 492 hp double overhead cam V12 overpowers the 12.8-inch Brembo brakes. Accelerating up through the 7,000-rpm red line is akin to dumping jet fuel into an afterburner: "Warp drive, Mr. Sulu." In sum, consider the Diablo a beautiful ivory-handled, engraved and gold-inlaid straight razor--beautiful to look at and an incomparable performer when used knowledgeably. Otherwise, it can do serious and lasting damage.

Three things are worth remembering when you're buying a Wilsonmobile: 1) Specifications such as top speed and acceleration might be inaccurate and don't reveal what a car feels like to drive. The ownership and road experience for each of these cars is significantly different. Some, like the Diablo, require major driving time before you can begin to understand and appreciate them. 2) Despite appearances to the contrary, each car requires professional-level driving skills. Ferrari, Lamborghini and Rolls-Royce provide their customers with factory driving schools. The other option is to go to a domestic performance-driving school, such as the programs run by Skip Barber, Bob Bondurant or Jim Russell. Learn your car's parameters. Experience its performance envelope in a safe track environment. Develop the reflexes for throttle steering and heel/toe power shifting. 3) Buy several. How else can you choose between getting that Ferrari in red or black, manual or automatic, coupe or convertible?

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Wilsonmobiles

- **Porsche** / Turbo Coupe* / \$112,000 / www.porsche.com / Turbo S Coupe / \$160,000
- **Mercedes-Benz** / S 600 Sedan* / \$130,300 / www.mercedes.com S 600 Coupe* / \$133,300 / SL 600 / / \$123,200 /
- **Lamborghini** / Diablo VT Coupe* / \$249,000 / www.lamborghini.com / Diablo VT Roadster / \$275,100 /
- **Ferrari** / 550 Maranello* / \$204,000 / www.ferrari.it / 456 GT / \$224,800 / 456 GTA* / \$229,900 / F 355 Berlinetta / \$127,000 / F 355 GTS / \$133,000 / F 355 Spider / \$137,000 /
- **Aston Martin** / DB7 Coupe* / \$125,000 / DB7 Volante* / \$135,000
- **Rolls-Royce Motor Cars** / RR Silver Dawn / \$159,000 / [ww.rolls-royce.com](http://www.rolls-royce.com) / RR Silver Spur / \$186,000 / RR Park Ward / \$299,900
- **Bentley** / Brooklands / \$149,000 / Bentley Turbo R / \$203,500 / Bentley Continental R / \$307,100 / Bentley Continental T / \$324,500 / Bentley Azure* / \$329,400 /

* reviewed
