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ROAD & TRACK



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FORD'S NEW Thunderbird



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Elise

■ MG's entry for Le Mans.

treme" MGs designed for demonstration and promotional purposes.

The MGF Extreme will have modified, aerodynamic bodywork to match the almost triple power. There will be bigger air intakes and outlets to feed and cool the engine, and suspension modifications that, together with bigger wheels, will make the car a roadworthy proposition.

Under BMW, there were plans to bring MG back into the U.S. market, but they disappeared when the company went back into British hands. Nevertheless, if the new owners can make a go of it, U.S. sales have to be considered. There could be some interesting cars to revive MG's reputation as "The Sports Car America Loved First."—IN

GOING TO EXTREMES

ONE OF THE MAIN PLANKS on which now-independent Rover is being built is reflected in the company's change of name to MG Rover. The MG brand, which BMW revived after British Leyland cast it aside, is being exploited even more strongly by the new management. A new line of MG versions of Rover sedans will be in-

troduced this year, and there's a strong racing program in the cards.

Heading that program is an entry at Le Mans with an open-topped prototype designed by race-car specialist Lola and powered by a brand-new 2.0-liter 4-cylinder racing engine. It's all part of what MG Rover racing boss, Rob Oldaker, refers to as a mission for

the MG brand to provide "outrageous fun."

The first evidence of that fun really is outrageous. MG is to slot the new race engine into its compact MGF sports car, giving it 450 bhp in place of the 180 bhp of the most powerful current version. The car will be road-legal, and will be part of a family of "Ex-

Is This Your Truck?

There was a simpler time when a pickup was easily identifiable. It had a cab, a box, a bench seat and little else in the way of creature comforts. Now, it seems, trucks want to be everything from a sports car to a luxu-cruiser.

The **Ford SVT Lightning** defined the pickup as sports car, and this year received a significant infusion of power—the 2001 model now boasts 380 bhp (20 more) and 450 lb.-ft. of torque (up 10). Ride and handling have been improved with the use of new Bilstein shocks and revised springs (front coils/rear leaves), which also lower the vehicle by 0.5 in. at the front and 2.0 in. at the rear. Along with improved power, ride and handling, the Lightning has a bolder look with a horizontal billet bar grille design and new 5-spoke alloy wheels. Touting the all-new **Chevy Avalanche**

as "the Ultimate Utility Vehicle," the bow-tie brigade figures to cash in on the 30 million or so homes in the U.S. that have both a pickup and a sport-utility vehicle. The main attraction of the Avalanche is its Convert-a-Cab System, made possible by the ingenious Midgate, which allows the Avalanche to switch from a 6-passenger SUV with a 5-ft. bed to a 3-passenger pickup with an 8-ft. bed.

Simply fold down the rear seat, remove the rear window (which stores handily on the Midgate) and lower the Midgate onto the rear seat—presto!—instant full-size cargo box. The Avalanche (built in Silao, Mexico) also features a three-section cargo cover, which, along with the locking tailgate, provides theft-proof weather protection for all your gear.

While the concept of the Avalanche is all-new, the parts aren't. It shares 85 percent of its components with the Suburban, which is good because it means the interior is one comfortable place to be. And the truck drives fairly well, especially when equipped with the Z66 On-Road Package. There is a

271 Off-Road option, but you feel more of the 285 bhp and 325 lb.-ft. of torque from the 5.3-liter V-8 with the lighter (about 5400 lb.) 2wd setup. Prices for the 4x2 Avalanche start at \$30,965.

Lincoln hopes to redefine American luxury with the **2002 Blackwood**, something that looks like a crew-cab pickup but functions more like a Town Car. The 4-passenger Blackwood has a cabin that resembles the front two-thirds of a Navigator because of the rear captain's chairs. The 2wd Blackwood delivers 300 bhp from its 5.4-liter V-8 and can tow up to 8700 lb. Even though it has a lower ride height and 18-in. wheels, the ride is still trucklike.

The pickup box, clad in a composite surface that re-creates the grain of the African Wenge wood shown on the concept, functions more as a trunk. There's a power tonneau cover, side-hinged Dutch doors and a pair of neat storage bins with brushed aluminum covers.

Only 10,000 of the \$53,000 Blackwoods will be built per year.

—Mike Monticello and Matt DeLorenzo

■ Ford SVT Lightning.



■ Chevrolet Avalanche.



■ Lincoln Blackwood.



Inside LINE



By Sam Mitani,
INTERNATIONAL EDITOR

HAZY SHADES OF GRAY

We all get a kick out of buying a bootleg CD or fancy Cartier wristwatch overseas, and then showing it off to our friends, smugly telling them, "You can't buy one of these here." But for car enthusiasts, the law seems black and white about what can be driven in the U.S. Or is it?

Recently, I drove a Lotus Elise powered by Honda's 1.8-liter VTEC inline-4. The Elise is not federalized for U.S. roads; therefore, driving one here is illegal. But there I was, in the middle of Torrance, California, driving around in this car. How was this possible?

According to Tom Cahalane, the president of Sun International Racing, the company installs the EPA-certified Honda engines, which allows them to supply the car "as a manufacturer, not an importer, where we build the car for a customer."

Others go to greater lengths to satisfy the letter, if not the spirit, of the law. MotoRex, a company that imports the Nissan Skyline, spent the money to crash-test four cars (which cost the company about \$380,000) and obtained all the necessary permits from the DOT. All Skylines sold by MotoRex are 50-state legal.

But beware of the few who are in it to make a quick buck.

If you ever find yourself mired in this "gray" automobile market, heed the Latin phrase, caveat emptor. Be sure to research the company and existing regulations before putting down your cash. A quick call to the DOT, not to mention the EPA, is also a good idea. It's not as much fun showing off your prize purchase behind a "Government Property" sign.