

Stare Quality

If you like your ride ultra-cushy and your profile twelve o'clock high, have we got a car for you

By Phil Berg

Terrible things will happen if you get close to this car in a blue suit. Don't even look at this plush, hydraulic-everything US-legal Citroen CX if you've ever as much as paused in front of a Brooks Brothers store.

We've seen innocents take the risk: Respectable and upstanding Americans crane their necks indiscreetly, triple-taking everytime this CX Automotive import slithers by. Should their peers notice they like this insurgent car, they'd be jeopardizing their paths to the junior vp suites at Consolidated Associates Inc.

As oddball cars go here, this CX Prestige carries the impact of Grace Jones riding a hovercraft down Maple Street.

Which means the firmly and fully conforming out there may consider this Citroen as anti-social as Jean Paul Sarte. More open-minded car nuts will just think of it as French, and put up with parts prices that would make a Mercedes counter man green.

This 150bhp 3330lb sedan is the weirdest car you can buy in the US—stranger at \$38,400 than a \$120,000 Countach. It has no springs or shocks, and everything except the steering wheel, shifter and pedals is not where you'd expect—if you try to expect anything at all. It has an 1100psi hydraulic pump bolted to its motor that could likely power the steering assists of 50 Audis. It looks at once angular and smooth, and you'd never think a machine like this would have a mere 2.5liter 4cyl engine, much less only four wheels.

Since the CX was introduced by Automobiles Citroen in France in 1974, it has been moderately successful—somewhere under 40,000 are sold each year in Europe. It was designed as the French like their cars to be: lots of body roll for ride comfort, but plenty of wheel travel, grip and good handling.

It was not, however, even considered as something Americans would like.

But that was 1974, when the rest of the world thought we actually *liked* Mustang IIs. Malcolm Langman, president of CX Automotive, the car's importer and semi-manufacturer, believes things have changed. In 1987, Langman expects his small company (now about 25 people) to sell about 2000 CXs, ranging from a short 5speed GTI

sedan version at \$29,800 to a \$32,000 Estate wagon up to the long Prestige sedan (a turbo 2.5liter with 185bhp is optional on both sedans). Length in these terms is relative: The Prestige is about seven inches *shorter* than a Monte Carlo, but its wheelbase is a foot *longer* than a Cadillac Fleetwood. It's not as you'd expect.

In fact, this car is not really a Citroen. Some history: Automobiles Citroen, the French company, is still hashing over whether or not to reenter the US market, which it left in 1974. In its absence, you could buy only gray market versions of the CX here, some of which have had less-than-reputable backing, according to several experts in the industry. But CX Automotive, based in Lebanon, NJ, plans to bring in 2000 cars to start (Citroen's own best US year was 1971, when it sold not quite 1400 cars), a much larger scale than a typical gray market effort. To sell that many cars, Langman expects the company will need about 40-45 dealers. About six weeks ago it had five. Last week Langman reported 25 had signed up so far.

In addition, CX Automotive thinks it's a good idea to remove all the Citroen badges from its cars, partly to reassure Automobiles Citroen that CX Automotive is the liable

manufacturer of the cars, and partly to identify that the cars have had massive changes to meet US specs. So the proper name for this car is the CX Automotive Prestige.

Langman says CX Automotive doesn't want to step on Citroen's toes; eventually he expects a market in the US greater than 4000 cars, and will need factory support to bring in that many. "There's got to be a market for the CX—not like the old DSs and SMs. High tech is in," he says.

Getting the cars ready for sale in the US has been quite a project, according to Langman. The cars are bought in Europe, some from the factory, the rest from various distributors. Then they're sent to a shop in Amsterdam for conversion to US specs. The cars' interiors are gutted and major body and sub-frame braces are added, according to Langman, and at the same time the engine receives pollution control pieces.

Langman, a Citroen aficionado, has been in the import business (not cars, but pharmaceuticals) and has had dealings with French businesses ("ineptitude" and "tremendous internal politics" are two descriptions he uses). He thought he understood the French, but since beginning the CX project in 1981 he's learned quite a bit. "I didn't realize how difficult it would be. It did start



Phil Berg photos

out as a game", he says. "If I'd known (the problems) I'd never have started it."

Langman says CX Automotive has crash-tested a few CXs to find where frame supports and door beams are required. (For the interior dummy damage test, Langman says, the company used his wife's car. *Shhh*. Don't tell her; he's having it fixed.) It turned out the whole rear clip is vulnerable to folding up, so new back-to-front frame struts are added in the Amsterdam shop. The Dutch facility has 12 workers and presently can turn out cars at a rate of 1000/yr. The front end, Langman says, is plenty strong and only gets a bigger bumper.

The 2.5-liter sohc Citroen four is cleaned up with a lambda oxygen sensor and an additional computer for the standard Bosch L-Jetronic injection on the car. A catalyst is also added and the result, according to CX Automotive chief engineer Paul Heuston, is good enough to meet 49-state and California pollution standards. Heuston says it took him a year to get the engine to a point where it would achieve EPA and CARB emission numbers, and another year to get drivability and performance up to non-US CX levels (the big Prestige gets to 60mph in well over 10sec, the turbo GTI in under 8sec).

The CX has been on the road for more than a decade, but here it makes a Taurus look dated. It has a fully independent, adjustable hydraulic suspension, with a half-hydraulic, half-inert gas cylinder at each wheel. Another cylinder, more like a globe, assists the steering and 4-wheel disc brakes and yet another is a reservoir for the whole

interconnected system. Standard on CX Automotive's turbo models is abs, which is optional on the rest of the line.

Inside, the ignition key is on the left, like a 911, and light and wiper controls jut out from dash pods for easy fingertip use. It sounds simple, like the dash of an Isuzu, but the controls are all switched about enough that they're unfamiliar.

The horn button is where you'd expect the wiper switches to be and the turn signal switch (still not self-cancelling) is where you've been taught a headlight switch should be. The inside door latches work like the trigger on a gun, and they're invisible so remember to open the door for a parking valet, or he'll be stuck inside all night.

At speed there is ride smoothness that nothing else on the road approaches. It is a hovercraft, you think, except you can hear tire and driveline noise. Our test Prestige had an electronically-controlled 4-speed automatic, and apart from a very sudden 1-2 shift, it had no vices.

Like other French cars (particularly Peugeots), the CX's ability to handle bumps and rough roads is a worldwide benchmark. When you drive over dips and rises in traffic, you're suddenly aware that every car around you is bouncing and bobbing as if shock absorbers hadn't been invented. The CX is so controlled it makes almost everything else look that primitive.

Steering is hydraulically assisted, and the wheel returns to center if you let go—no matter if the car is moving or not. But it is not numb, which you might expect with

the car's extraordinary amount of assist.

Just as perplexing are the brakes. The pedal has practically no travel at all—foot pressure is everything—but once you get used to it you won't make the abs work nearly as much as we did.

Only Jaguar, Mercedes and BMW compete at the price levels CX Automotive has set for its cars (which cost about \$9000 more than comparable European models). That's a tough league, and in some ways the CX falls short. The dash, as oddly functional and complete as it is, is cheap plastic. Road noise is higher than both Jaguar's and Mercedes', and cornering power falls below all three other marques.

But in its own way the CX is a remarkable engineering achievement. Its ride is mind-altering and interior room—especially in the rear seat area—is beyond limousine. It is hands down the most comfy car we've driven on the highway.

According to our government, this CX came from Holland. But we know its true origin. Staid types like federal bureaucrats don't understand the French either. Hint: The French don't wear blue suits. **AW**

Specifications

Base Price:	\$38,400
Wheelbase, (in):	121.8
Length/Width (in):	193.5/69.7
Curb weight (lb):	3330
Powertrain: Front transverse 153cu in/ 2.5-liter sohc inline four, iron block and alloy head, 150bhp @ 5000rpm, 156lb ft @ 4000rpm, front-drive four- speed automatic	
0-60 (sec):	11.0
Top speed:	137mph
Mph at 1000rpm in top:	22.3
Suspension: Ind front and rear, manual and self-adjusting hydraulic cylinders	
Brakes: Vented discs front, solid discs rear	
Tires:	195/70R14
Mpg/range:	21mpg × 20.0gal = 420miles



CX hydraulic suspension is cockpit adjustable from Baja mode...

...all the way down to full-lizard