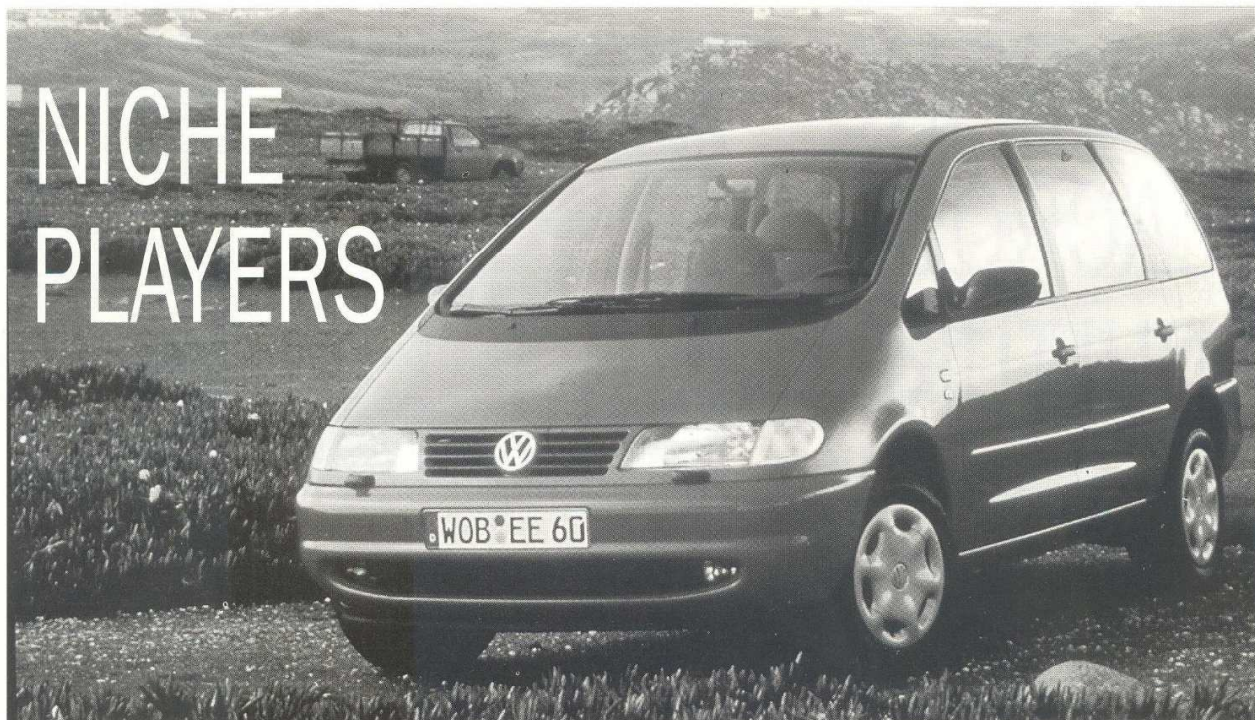


NICHE PLAYERS



VW Sharan is a dazzler in the highly competitive people carrier niche

The past twenty years have seen a revolution in car choice, not so much in the number of makes on offer, more in the types of vehicle available. Open sports cars are back, after Ralph Nader's anti-car influence in the USA waned to zero, hot-hatches continue to attract enthusiasts, sexy GT models are offered by an array of manufacturers but two niches which have become especially developed - and filled - these last five years have been those for people carriers (multi purpose vehicles) and off-roaders.

A summer break in the South of France was the perfect occasion to put the VW Sharan MPV to the test. Firstly, there were going to be five adults travelling south, four on the return trip. Then, the 'break' was of only five days, including travelling time, so the vehicle needed to be swift if a combination of touring and socialising were to be achieved. As the passengers had enough luggage for weeks, space was at a premium. The car had a turbo boosted 1.8 litre petrol engine which, although not as frugal as a turbo diesel, proved not to have an

excessive thirst, even when driven fast for much of the vacation. A useful tip from D'Ieteren's PR Manager, Philippe Casse, was to accelerate as though there was "an egg between the right foot and the gas pedal." Good advice it was, too. However, even when impatience or conditions dictated 'flooring' the throttle to reach the desired speed more quickly, fuel consumption was still reasonable.

A significant bonus is that this car drives like a sports saloon, even with five and, on one occasion, six up, for

its roadholding and general derivability are of a very high order. The brakes are powerful, the gearbox precise and it's a comfortable place to be in, even for 11 hours as on the return journey. It was one of those days in August when half of Europe's motorists, it seemed, were using the same section of the autoroute du soleil. A little like city driving when the traffic lights system is on the blink. Throughout the trip, the rear-seat passengers commented about the viewing capabilities from their seats, as those in the front are adjustable for height. It was purely a



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matter of lowering those in front, which made for a better driving position, anyway, but it underlines VW's attention to detail.

The Sharan was the third people carrier I've lived with during the last year and, on balance, the best. This Portuguese built car - a joint-venture between the VW Group and Ford - is, arguably that by which others are now judged. Or, to put it differently, if other manufacturers are going to create ones better than this, we motorists can only gain from the competition. Price of this model is BEF 997,000, plus BEF 26,620 for climate control, which is a worthwhile extra, especially for summer travel.

PURPOSEFUL 4 X 4S

The first Land Rover was launched at the Amsterdam Motor Show in April 1948, starting life as a rugged, utilitarian, all-purpose four-wheel-drive vehicle conceived for farmers and small businesses. Over the years, Land Rovers and, later, Range Rovers became more sophisticated broadening their appeal to a much wider public. As Philippe Mertens, Rover Belgium's Managing Director, points out, the majority of Range Rovers and Land Rovers are bought by people who rarely take their purchases off-road and many are city dwellers. It's probably equally true of Jeeps in various guises and the many other 4 x 4s that comprise this important segment. But every 4 x 4 must be capable of performing with most of the tractability of more traditional agricultural work-horses.

Earlier this year, Rover Design & Concept Director Geoff Upex was awarded the 'European Award of Automotive Design' in the 4 x 4 leisure vehicle category for the Land Rover Freelander. The award was well merited for this is a vehicle which has levels of performance and comfort we expect to find in more mainstream saloons, yet it is an accomplished off-roader. If you want it principally for city driving, you'll like its easy parka-



The Freelander is a successful mix of the traditional, all-purpose Land Rover and a mainstream touring car.

bility as you sit fairly high, so manoeuvring it in tight spaces is not difficult.

After time spent on a mixture of motorways, B-roads, cobble-stone surfaced lanes, and muddy pathways it was time to go completely off-road and check out its ability to emulate more traditional tractors. A slushy, wet day and a nearby field with a few really steep slopes seemed like the perfect testing opportunity and so it proved.

No problem climbing the gradients or descending, especially as there is a special hill descent system fitted. You

simply depress a yellow 'collar' around the gear lever, and the vehicle cannot run away, even on super-steep terrain.

The Freelander is available in 3- and 5-door configurations. That tested was a 5-door, 1.8 litre petrol engined version. It seats five adults in comfort and has a reasonably large, though not cavernous boot. It's well made, pleasing and fun to drive, both off-road or in a multitude of other motoring environments. Prices for the 5-door Freelanders start at BEF 908,000.

Dick Suter