



New styling for General Motors minivans

General Motors next generation minivans, the Chevrolet Venture and the Pontiac Trans Sport were unveiled recently at the New York Auto Show.

This van will have several personnas being produced as a Vauxhall in England, a Opel in Germany, while the United States gets a third version called

the Oldsmobile Silhouette.

These replace the current Chevrolet APV and Pontiac Trans Sport whose radical looks and plastic body never excited interest the way the Ford Windstar, and of course the Chrysler Magicwagon family, have with Canadian consumers.

The new vans will be offered in short

wheelbase (in showrooms by September, 1996) and long wheelbase (in showrooms by October, 1996).

Visually they move closer to the mainstream of minivan styling. The rear half of each could belong to a Windstar or a Magicwagon; but after all, there is just so much you can do with a cube. The nose

of the Chevy Venture has a very prominent, eggcrate styled grille which looks even bigger on vans with dark paint. Pontiac goes for its twin nostrils.

There will be one engine, a 3.4-litre V6 which produces 180 hp and 205 ft/lb of torque and one transmission, an automatic four-speed electronic transaxle as these minivans are frontdrive. What happened to the fabled 3800 V6 which GM touted so highly in its minivans last year you might ask? I did and was told by a GM of Canada type the 3800 has "gone away but let me tell you that once you've driven the 3.4 you'll see it's more than a replacement." I'll wait and see on this one.

Estimated (US figures only) fuel economy is 18 mpg city, 25 highway. The 3.4 goes come with a limp home mode if all coolant is lost and it boasts 160,000 km spark plugs.

Of course the reason for buying any minivan in the first place is for room and seating accommodation. In the Venture and Trans Sport, GM feels its leading in terms of seating technology. There is a choice of 2-2-3, and 2-3-2 for seven passengers or 2-3-3 seating for eight people. There is a wide choice between folding individual seats and benches. On top of all that, the minivans have some 26 storage bins and pockets and up to 17 cupholders.

The biggest news is a choice of one or two sliding panels for access to the rear two rows of seats.

The short (GM calls it "regular") wheelbase is 112 inches and is 187.3 inches long overall with a width of 72.7 inches. The extended model has a 120-inch wheelbase and is 201 inches long and identical in width. Maximum cargo volume with the short is 126.6 cubic feet, the long is 155.9 cubic feet.

Prices have not been set but the entry level version should come in at under \$20,000 with mid-level trim versions in at around \$25-\$26,000. A GM person told me pricing is going to be highly competitive with Chrysler.

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