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By **MALCOLM GUNN**
WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

Some people look at the year-old Aztek and immediately 'get it'. Others not only ask 'What is it?', but 'Why is it?' These are the ones who clearly don't get it.

What people do or don't 'get' is the most unusual Pontiac ever made, and one of the most description-defying mass-produced automobiles to ever roll down an assembly line.

In the customer-pleasing car business that tends to avoid controversy as if it were The Plague, the Aztek not only welcomes it, but goes out of its way to flaunt it. You might not notice most brands that cross your path during a typical day behind the wheel, but it's virtually guaranteed you will notice the Aztek.

Let's face it, some automobile shapes take more getting used to than others. Place 10 people at random in front of 10 different cars and you'll gather 100 different opinions as to what constitutes attractive, innovative styling. It's simply a matter of individual taste. Pontiac's designers knew they were taking a gamble when they first shipped their Aztek prototype to the 1999 Detroit Auto Show. But it took some real guts by someone in Pontiac's Higher-Up department to sign off on this one.

Constructed using GM's U-series platform, the same one employed on the Chevy Venture, Pontiac Montana and Olds Silhouette, the Aztek blends minivan utility with the ruggedness of a sport utility vehicle and the practicality of a combination hatchback/tailgate-equipped four-door sedan. The result is a multi-purpose vehicle that invites its owners to do whatever they want with it.

The Aztek is basically all about choices. Your first choice is to decide between front- or all-wheel drive. The latter adds GM's Versatrak that's optional on its minivans. This on-demand system transfers partial power from the front wheels to either or both rear wheels when slippage is detected. The beauty of Versatrak is that it tacks on only a slight fuel-consumption penalty over the standard front-wheel-drive Aztek.

Your next choice is to select seating accommodations. Buyers can stick with a 50/50 split-folding rear seat, or opt for an extra set of captain's chairs. Either way, the back seats can be folded out of the way, flipped forward or removed completely to maximize cargo space.

Speaking of cargo, you can choose from two different optional storage systems. There's a sub-dividable 180-kilogram capacity tray that can be rolled out over the tailgate for easy loading and unloading. Or, there's a system of cargo nets, two attached to each side and two more that cross the width of storage area that can be configured to keep almost any size, shape and weight snug and secure.

Once that has been decided, there are three lifestyle packages to consider for your Aztek that further extend its usefulness. The available camping package includes a tent that fits over the open rear hatch and tailgate to provide high-and-dry snoozing, especially when using the fitted inflatable air mattresses. The biking package gives you either a roof-mounted or interior bike rack (again, your choice), while the hiking package adds a large, detachable backpack that mounts behind the front seats. All optional packages include rubber floor mats and water-repellent seat covers.

The one area where you won't exhaust yourself in the decision-making department is the standard Aztek powertrain, a 185-horsepower 3.4-litre OHV V6 engine that works in tandem with a four-speed automatic transmission.

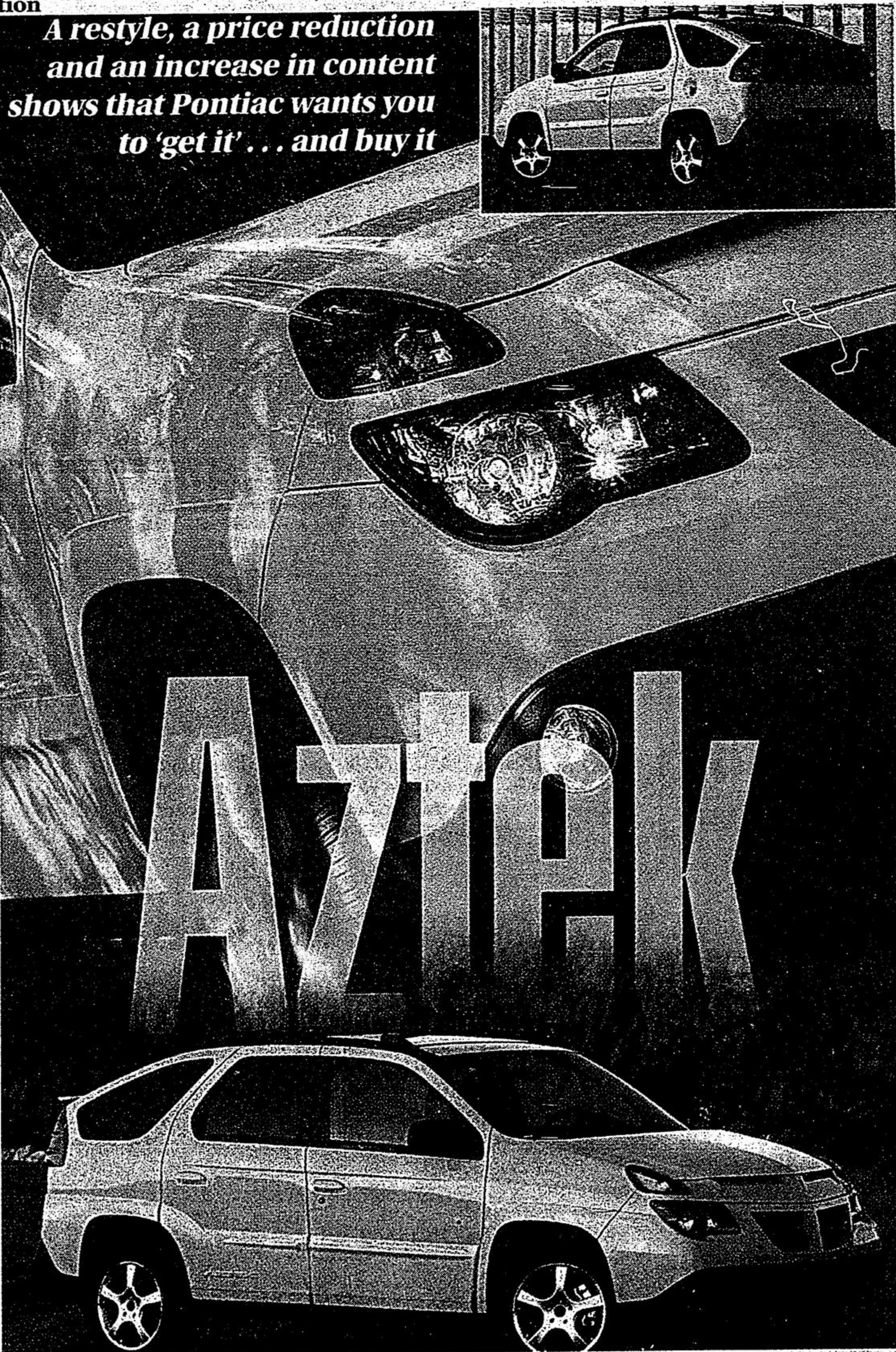
If the Aztek's utility-belt approach still doesn't tempt you, Pontiac's handler's have enhanced the exterior for 2002 by toning down the side cladding (painting it the same colour as the rest of the body). They've also extended the standard equipment list to include the previously optional CD player, 16-inch alloy wheels and a 12-can capacity beverage cooler, that fits between the front seats.

Finally, the base price of the Aztek has been shaved by some \$2,000 in a further effort to tempt fence-sitting buyers.

For anyone looking for an outside-the-box vehicle that shuns that off-the-rack look, the custom-fitted Aztek makes an ideal vehicle, whatever you decide to call it.

The choice is yours.

A restyle, a price reduction and an increase in content shows that Pontiac wants you to 'get it' ... and buy it



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