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Spring is the time when a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of ... buying a car. Motoring journalist URS SCHEITLIN originally wrote the following article for a Swiss publication, but the timely advice he offers may prove just as valuable for car buyers in Britain.

How to buy a used car

IF YOU'RE in the market for a used car, now is the time to start looking around. For reasons which defy logical analysis, most new car buying goes on in spring and early summer, so by now most dealers have a good stock of cars which they have taken in part-exchange for new models.

It goes without saying that their smooth tongued and oily haired salesmen are trying to get rid of as many of the trade-ins as possible before winter starts blemishing the micron-thin chrome on the car bumpers.

Now that you know how I feel about the garage trade, here are a few points which might help a prospective secondhand buyer keep his motoring end up against that greatest international fraternity of them all – the car dealer.

First of all, what to buy. Small engined cars are usually cheaper to run than bigger ones. But small engined secondhand cars often sell for ridiculously high secondhand prices, simply because the demand for them is so great. Just look at used small car prices if you need convincing.

Used small cars are very often far more clapped-out after a relatively low mileage than a medium-size car would be. A small car with more than about 25,000 miles can very often turn out to be a big purse and heart breaker.

And one shouldn't forget that small cars are often bought as town cars, or as second cars, for the wife. At the risk of getting assaulted by a Women's Lib Commando, I would suggest that there are distinctly better buys to be had than this sort of car.

A town car of this type can usually be recognised by bumpers which look like one

of those fashionable chromium sculptures produced by setting off a hand-grenade under a piece of sheet steel.

Another sort of car to avoid is the sales rep's. They have very high mileages run up in a short space of time, having usually been whanged from Geneva to St. Gallen five times a week at full throttle.

The trouble is, this sort of car still looks very good from the outside, and if the dealer's been clever you'll have trouble telling it from the one fastidious owner, low mileage example just waiting for you at the next garage down the road.

Let's assume that you want to buy a used car. First of all, make a short list of the two or three models that come into consideration for you.

If you want a Ford, I would suggest you go to a Ford dealer. The chances are that the previous owner wouldn't have bought another car of the same make unless he had been satisfied with the previous one.

A dealer for make A is also obviously better able to repair a used car of make A. And usually the larger dealers have a guarantee system for their used car, which is certainly worthwhile if you're not looking for a bargain basement model.

Now you're standing next to the car of your choice with Smiling Alphonse, the Used Car Ponce, hovering at your elbow. Don't kick the tyres: this only tells you about the quality of your shoes, not the car.

If possible, always take a friend along as he can see how much blue smoke comes out of the exhaust when you blip the throttle after the engine has been idling for some minutes. A small puff is permissible – if

there's more, don't buy.

If you're buying an air-cooled car like a VW or a 2CV, it's not much use listening for engine knocks from outside the car. They always sound like a nail going round in a cement mixer. And if you're going to listen for noises anyway, it's best to compare them with the noise made by a newish example of the same make.

Always look for leaks under the car – usually a bad omen. And check the play in the steering.

There's an old myth that you can tell something about a car's condition from the way the pedal rubbers are worn. This theory has been passed around by just about every motoring magazine since my tricycle riding days, and probably before that as well.

All that I can politely say about this is that my car is now 10 months old, has done 10,000 miles, is in top nick, but the clutch pedal rubber has worn right through (new ones will be gladly accepted).

There are a few points which you can watch about a car's interior though. Cars that have been driven solo most of the time (often company cars) usually have sagging or fairly worn driving seats, while the others are pristine.

Former taxis have either collapsed rear seat cushions, or even more likely, suspiciously new-looking rear seats. But I wouldn't say that a very clean interior is necessarily a sign that the car has been carefully driven.

And if you see teeth marks on the dashboard, you can be pretty sure the car has had an accident or a bulldog as co-driver.



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The Japanese increased their share of the Swiss market by almost 27 per cent, Datsun boosting their own sales by a spectacular 41 per cent. Pictured: the Datsun Stanza.

Japanese cars setting the pace

CAR sales in Switzerland hit a new peak last year, with Japanese makes up 23.7 per cent and setting the trend on what is considered the world's most competitive market. But British cars took another beating.

Overall car sales totalled 291,418 units, 3.7 per cent more than in 1980 according to the Swiss Importers Association.

Volkswagen increased its sales by 3.1 per cent to 33,007 and retained its number one position with an 11.3 per cent share of the market.

Opel, the German subsidiary of General Motors and the second most popular car in Switzerland, gained 4.2 per cent to 31,811 for a 10.9 per cent market share.

The aggregate Japanese share of the Swiss market went up from 22.5 to 26.9 per cent. Datsun boosted its sales by a spectacular 41.6 per cent to a total of 16,726, while Mazda sold 15,324, or 35.5 per cent more.

Subaru, a late entry with its four-wheel drive, registered a 47.3 per cent increase at 9,769. Toyota (the number one Japanese seller) was the only Japanese make to do less

well, down 7.6 per cent. But latest figures indicate that the Toyota trend is now being reversed.

British, French and American makes all had to register shrinking market shares in Switzerland, which has virtually no car industry of its own and has a liberal import policy.

British Leyland was among the makes faring worst, with sales dropping by 25 per cent to 2,777 units. Among French cars, Renault sales declined by 13.1 per cent to 20,205 to yield the number three position in Switzerland to German Ford. Peugeot sales were down 17.2 per cent at 10,522.

Italian cars did better for the second consecutive year, ranging from Fiat (up 9.5 per cent to 21,161) to Lancia (up 22.6 per cent to 4,831).

Sweden's Volvo sales continued to decline, dropping 6.8 per cent to 5,845, while Saab gained 17.0 per cent to 1,658.

Geneva show breaks all records

THE 1982 Geneva Motor Show has closed its doors after attracting a record number of exhibits and visitors.

This year's 10-day show, the 52nd, drew more than 1,200 exhibits from 27 countries, ranging from cars and motorcycles to petrol station accessories. And the show attracted nearly 600,000 visitors - more than double the population of Geneva itself.

So many motorists flocked to the event at weekends that there were 10-mile traffic jams - and, ironically, the organisers had to appeal to the public to travel to Geneva by train.

An early row blew up between European and Japanese car manufacturers when some European companies put up signs urging the public to buy their vehicles and help European workers keep their jobs.

Japanese exhibitors reportedly threatened to withdraw from the show unless the signs were removed, and the organisers ordered that the signs be taken down.

Japan has now secured 27 per cent of the Swiss market and is gaining ground on West Germany, with 30 per cent. Consequently the show was dominated by Japan's relentless export drive and the European industry's struggle to fight off the challenge.

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