

We test an Iraqi Malibu, and it's not bad

I just tested the most maligned, controversial car ever produced in this country, the infamous Iraqi Malibu.

And it's not bad. Certainly, it is not the piece of junk the Iraqis would have us believe. After driving it, I'd have to conclude that the Iraqis, who have not been the most honorable trading partners the world has ever known, backed out of the deal for some reason other than the quality and performance of the cars.

General Motors, still red-faced at the Iraqis' handling of the whole affair and the media flap, will have no trouble selling 5,000 of the cars to bargain-hungry Canadians for the asking price of \$6,500 (FOB Oshawa, which means freight charges will be extra). In Oshawa on Friday, GM of Canada head office employees were talking about the local dealer who had sold 150 cars by mid-afternoon and a Toronto dealer who had written 80 orders for the Malibus.

What's a fair price?

It is very difficult to put a fair price on the Iraqi Malibu. First of all, it is a 1981 car that GM is not selling this year in Canada. The closest thing to it would be the 1982 Malibu Classic Sport Sedan, which is basically the same car, has the same engine and lists at \$9,742.

But the Classic has a much higher level of interior and exterior trim than the plain Jane Malibu, and the Classic has an automatic transmission while the Iraqi Malibu has a manual.

The Iraqis were going to pay \$8,300 each for the Malibus, specially built to their specifications.

If GM wanted \$10,000 for the car, about the average price of new cars in Canada today, I wouldn't touch it.

But for the price Chevrolet dealers are charging, it is probably a good buy, especially for someone looking for solid, basic, 4-door transportation without the frills.

It comes with cloth-covered bench seats front and back, cop-car hubcaps, black-wall tires and a body adorned only with a single chrome strip down the side.

The interior trim is fairly standard vinyl, nothing fancy but certainly serviceable and, I suspect, long wearing. The carpeting is a step up from indoor-outdoor but not the sort of thing you'd expect in the foyer of



LEN COATES

a fancy hotel or restaurant.

The transmissions are all 3-speed manuals with the shifter mounted on the floor, an item that hasn't sold in North American cars for years. They are the only possible answer, though, in countries such as Iraq where it is almost impossible to find a mechanic who understands the complexities of an automatic transmission.

This is not to say the Iraqi Malibus don't have some desirable features.

They are all equipped with air-conditioning, power steering, power brakes and an AM/FM stereo with cassette player. They have Chevy's 3.8-litre V6 engine with heavy duty cooling, which is not a bad feature if you have towing in mind.

Although not top-of-the-line steel belted radials, the tires are perfectly serviceable glass-belted radials.

That's stuff you don't usually find in \$6,500 cars these days.

Sweetening the deal

Just to sweeten the deal and allay any fears that these orphan Malibus will fall apart the day after the regular 12-month/20,000-kilometre warranty expires, the cars also come with General Motors' 3-year Continuous Protection Plan, an extended

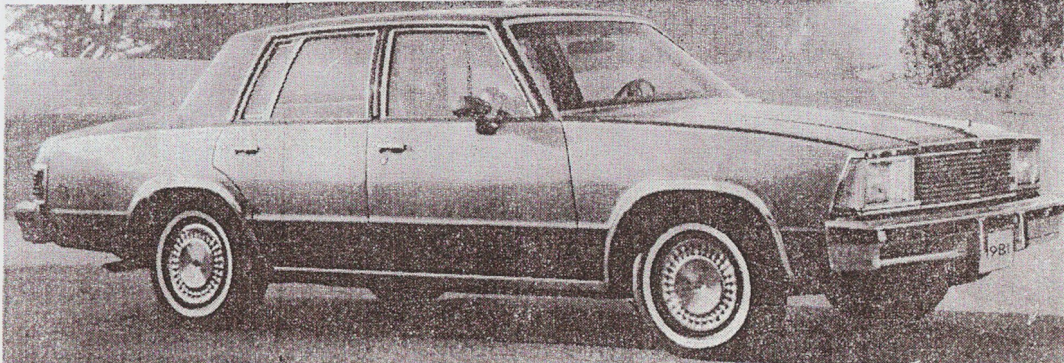
Warranty: Standard 12 month/20,000 km warranty plus 3-year Continuous Protection Plan

Model: 1981 Chevrolet Malibu 4-door sedan

Price: \$6,500 (FOB Oshawa). Does not include transportation, dealer prep, license or sales tax

Engine: 3.8-litre (229 cu. in.) V6, 2-barrel carb, rated at 110 horsepower

Final drive ratio: 2.73:1



Bargain-priced Malibu: Some 5,000 Iraqi Malibus are being offered to Canadian car buyers at \$6,500 each, which is \$1,800 less than the Iraqis were going to pay for them. The car accelerates well in first and

warranty that offers break-down insurance on major components for 50,000 kilometres. The CPP normally costs \$262.

Fuel economy ratings, based on Transport Canada's approved laboratory test methods, are not quite as good as the rating for the Malibu Classic. The Iraqi Malibu scored 10.2 litres per 100 kilometres (28 mpg) in a mix of highway/city driving.

The highway estimate is 8.2L/100 km (34 mpg) and the urban rating is 13.1 (22 mpg).

I tested the car in the cut-and-thrust of rush-hour traffic in Oshawa, found some curvy suburban

roads to check its handling and then sought out a lonely stretch of highway to allow the car to stretch its legs.

High top gear

The V6 doesn't breathe well enough to be a threat on a drag strip, but it puts out enough torque to leave 3-foot patches of rubber on the asphalt. It can also chirp the tires in second, a good intermediate gear that can be used for passing or accelerating up to about 120 km/h.

Top gear is very high, which

Equipment: air conditioning, power brakes, power steering, AM/FM stereo radio with cassette player (4 speakers); tinted glass; heavy duty cooling; heavy duty generator; windshield antenna; deluxe body side molding; bumper rub strips, bumper guards

Fuel consumption: Urban 13.1L/100 km (22 mpg); Highway 8.2L/100 km (34 mpg); combined 10.2 L/100 km (28 mpg)

Transmission: Muncie 3-speed manual synchromesh, floor shifter

Brakes: Front disc, rear drum, power

Steering: Power, 3.3 turns lock-to-lock

Tires: P185/75R14 glass-belted radial blackwall

Seating: front bench, rear bench, capacity 5

second gears and is set up with high gearing in top gear for good fuel economy. Car shown is a Malibu Classic, with different wheels, tires and body trim. GM expects dealers will offer some dressier trim items.

makes for good fuel economy, but hampers the car's ability to accelerate in the 60-120 km/h passing range. But that's normal with just about every top gear on any car these days.

The transmission shifts easily and the throw between gears doesn't have you reaching across the car to find second gear. The lever in this car, which had fewer than 60 kilometres on it, was a bit stiff, but I'd chalk that up to newness.

The Iraqis could hardly have complaints about the interior noise. The transmission growls a bit, but otherwise the Malibu is fairly quiet. The body on the car I drove was tight, so there wasn't a squeak out of it even when bouncing the car over some high-riser railroad tracks.

The backrest of the front bench seat is too upright for my taste, but that leaves plenty of knee room in the backseat. The car could carry five adults without any unwanted familiarity.

Seven colors

The ride is soft and comfortable, handling is somewhat marred by too much body roll in corners and the power steering is easy but vague, all of which is about what you'd expect in any North American intermediate. The Iraqis couldn't have been

surprised by any of this, and neither will most Canadians.

The paint colors available include two blues, silver, cream, jade green, light maroon and something called champagne. There are only two interior colors, blue and tan.

GM of Canada says dealers will likely offer the customers a few options, such as full wheel discs, white-wall tires and, possibly, a body moulding kit to spruce up the appearance of the cars. The car's appearance could be improved considerably by replacing the very plain hubcaps with something a tad richer.

GM is spending about \$200 a car to make the Malibus meet Canadian emission control standards. That involves installing a catalytic converter in the exhaust system, recalibrating the engine and installing a smaller neck on the fuel filler pipe for unleaded gasoline pumps.

The cars are for sale at every dealer in Canada, and there are indications they will be sold out fast.

Ironically, it could turn out that all the publicity about the Iraqi Malibus and the decision to offer them to the Canadian public, could turn out to be the best sales gimmick GM has come up with lately.

The Malibu may become one of GM's top sellers of 1982.