

Renault 18i

American Motors' French connection challenges the Big Three

PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLIAM CLAXTON, CHUCK NERPEL



This fall, the car company that brought you the SC/Rambler, the Trans Am Javelin, the Gremlin and the Pacer will join the car company that

brought you the Dauphine, the 2CV, the Gordini and winning turbo Fl cars, as American Motors and Renault jointly debut the Renault 18i. The two companies, each of which has roots in the first decade of this century, have chosen a first project that has "winner" written all over it.

The Renault 18 was introduced in Europe in April 1978 to compete in the mid-size family sedan market. The new car represented an expansion of the Renault line that was designed from the

outset to be easily adaptable for export. In keeping with Renault's strategy of first solidifying the French market, then expanding the sales effort to the rest of Europe, and only then to long-distance markets, the U.S. market would have been a logical next step for Renault even before the AMC/Renault agreements. But corporate fates intervened (see related story) and the 18 will come to America with nearly two years of running changes and debugging-and two companies behind it instead of one.

The 1981 Renault 18i will be available here in two body styles: 4-door sedan and station wagon, same as in Europe, but without its 1397cc super economy engine. For the North American market, the 18i will use only the

1647cc engine, fitted with hemi combustion-chamber cylinder head and Bosch L-Jetronic electronic fuel injection. The basic engine is a mainstay in Renault's European cars, powering half a dozen different lines: 16, 16TX, 17TS, 18TS, 18GTS, and the 18 automatics. But the AMC-sold cars will have that magical injection system. Instant starts, no warm-ups, high economy and low maintenance balance well against the cost of the unit. In U.S. tune, the engine delivers 81.5 horsepower at 5000 rpm. In the chassis, the 4-cylinder all aluminum engine (using wet cylinder sleeves) is placed conventionally, with a long transaxle assembly behind it, driving the front wheels. American buyers will have to choose between a standard



Renault 18i

5-speed manual transaxle or an optional 3-speed automatic transaxle.

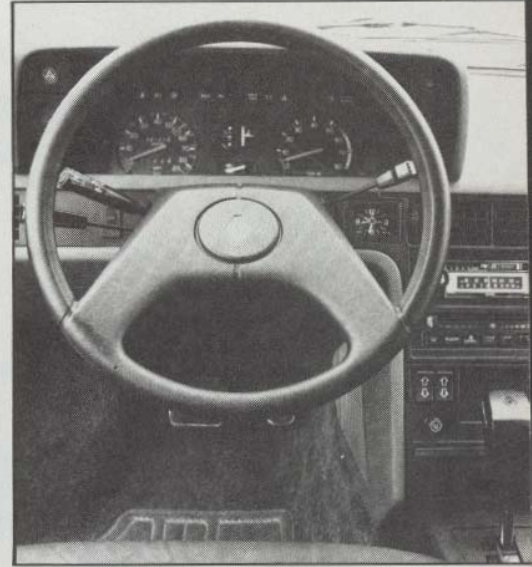
Renault is a charter member of the ever-growing front-drive manufacturers' club, and the 18i has all of the usual front-drive accoutrements, including 9-inch front disc brakes, 7-inch rear drum brakes, rack-and-pinion steering, steelbelted 175-series tires, and independent front suspension. The unitized-body 18i uses front upper and lower control arms with short struts and coil springs, upper trailing arms, and a stabilizer bar. At the rear, the car is suspended by a stamped-steel beam axle assembly with stamped trailing arms, a central upper control arm, and coil springs with concentric shock absorbers and a stabilizer bar as well. The 18i uses a 96-inch wheelbase with a wide, 55.7-inch front track and tucked-in 53.4-inch rear track. Both models measure 172.5 inches long overall, with a static height of 55.3 inches and a healthy 7 inches of ground clearance. In this configuration, the

front-drive 18i has a 60/40 front weight bias; but Renault has used power-assisted steering, power-assisted braking with proportioning, and suspension geometry designed to offset the normal negatives of front-drive: hard steering, torque steer, premature front tire and brake wear, and lack of rear wheel control in hard stops. The 60 and the 40 add up to 2263 pounds for the 4-door sedan and 2426 pounds for the station wagon, curb weight exclusive of options; not exactly on the razor's edge of lightweight construction technology, but not bad, either, for a vehicle rated as a 5-passenger car. The Renault 18i will pack a generous 14 gallons of gasoline but, in sedan trim, is rated at only 11.95 cubic feet of trunk capacity.

In a recent preview drive in an automatic sedan and an automatic station wagon, we found the Renault 18i very appealing. The tan wagon was mighty good, and the sedan, with its silver and black "masked marauder" paint job,

was even better. Both cars were loaded, including leather-upholstered Bio-Form seats, tilt steering wheels, power windows (front only), AM/FM stereo radios, air conditioning, reclining front seats, remote mirror adjusters, a different design alloy wheel for each car, and a roof rack on the wagon. In the translation from French to U.S. requirements, the 18i lost the covered headlamps and headlamp washers and wipers, and acquired new, fully integrated bumper systems front and rear.

Inside, the major difference between French and U.S. models is the dash, which is lifted straight out of the Fuego sports coupe version (see sidebar) for the U.S. market. It's a fully integrated, hooded amalgam of dials, gauges, lights, buttons, and wands dominated by a thick steering wheel using two downswept spokes. The air vents are huge and directable in two planes, and the controls are idiot-proof in their simplicity and well done aesthetically. The



Renault 18i

entire dash is soft, matte, non-glare, yet warm, and the Bio-Form seats in leather are throne-like; the automatic shifter handle is so stylish it looks like an electric razor on a stick. But it all hangs together like a complete French family sedan. Even automatics have 8000-rpm tachometers (redline is 6000 rpm for the 1647cc engine), and all models have a standard oil level gauge and brake-padwear warning light built into the instrument panel. The cloth interior looked as good in its own way as the leather did on the two prototypes, and there seemed to be adequate rear seat size on both models, though the wagon has so much more space. The station wagon uses its full-width, full-height hatch door and forward-folding second seat to good effect in the cargo area, where a person or thing 5-foot-8 tall can lie down flat between the wheelwells. The Renault 18i station wagon, with its roof rack, canted hatch glass and geometric rear side window treatment, looks eerily like a Hornet Sportabout station wagon

from AMC's recent past, or perhaps even an evolutionary Eagle.

In motion, the Renault 18i suspension system provides long vertical wheel travel, stable handling, and minimal body roll under hard cornering situations. A lot of its handling characteristics have been derived for U.S. customers from the bushings and calibrations of the previously mentioned Fuego sports coupe. The very stable suspension is enhanced by a power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering system that reduces effort but preserves road feel. The ratio is fast, with only three turns lock-to-lock, but there is no torque-steer feedback to the steering wheel, and the sensations of driving the 18i do not indicate that the front wheels are powered. In terms of acceleration, the 18i prototype's performance was comparable to that of other sedans in the same size, weight and style. The automatic-equipped sedan with a 3.56:1 final drive ratio, managed to accelerate from 0-50 mph in 11 seconds flat,

shifting up authoritatively at 5000 rpm at full throttle. Downshifting into passing gear at 40 mph yielded a 40-60-mph pass in 6.3 seconds. On the opposite end of the performance spectrum, the 18i is projected to get almost 30 mpg on the EPA highway cycle when equipped with the standard 5-speed manual transaxle.

AMC intends for the 18i to compete successfully against automobiles like the General Motors X-cars, the VW Jetta and Audi 4000, and the Chrysler Kcars, Reliant and Aries. And, though prices won't be set for another couple of months, base price of the sedan should fall between \$7000 and \$8000 and could easily go as high as \$10,000 for a loaded model. Renault has the manufacturing capacity to provide AMC with all the sedans and wagons it needs for a wider market segment than just the luxury compact portion, and both companies would like to see the 18i take over the title of "French Mercedes" now claimed by Peugeot.

Renault Fuego: Next off the boat?



For those potential customers who like the new Renault 18i but don't want a 4-door sedan or station wagon, Renault/AMC has something else to offer in America. The Fuego 3-door glasshatch coupe recently introduced to the European market has already donated its instrument panel and suspension calibrations to the 18i sedan/wagon series, and there may be enough customers out there who want the whole car to justify its eventual federalization by the AMC/Renault combine.

In its original European form, the Fuego uses reclining front bucket seats with shoulder wings; a split fold-down rear seat, a rimmed glass hatch; 1.4-, 1.6 or 2.0-liter engine; choices of a 4-speed, two different 5-speeds or 3-speed automatic transmissions, and seven different levels of trim.

But if the Fuego is indeed coming into North America, it will probably come in only one model, the GTS with 2.0-liter engine and 5-speed overdrive transaxle, which gives the best combination of acceleration, sustained high-speed cruising, and high fuel economy. The 2.0/5-speed will run 0-60 mph in European trim in a healthy 11 seconds flat with good fuel economy. But the potential American Fuego buyer will be as much interested in the car's appearance as anything else, and the Fuego offers a modern, high-tech look with true aerodynamic performance. Even without covered headlamps and integrated bumpers like its original European version, an Americanized Fuego might cause as much of an uproar with AMC customers as the original 2-neater AMX when it was introduced in 1968.

-Jim McCraw