



Ford ramps up for Ranger's popularity

Looks like the UAW workers at Ford's Michigan Assembly Plant will be getting some overtime this month. Reports are that Ford will be adding production shifts to accommodate demand for its new **Ranger** midsize pickup.

January's sales topped 1,200 and Ford claims more than 300,000 potential customers say they plan to buy a Ranger. Ford got out of the mid-size pickup market when it killed off the Ranger in 2011. There is a demand there for this size vehicle in Ford's stable, it seems, especially as its best-selling F-150 has gotten larger and more expensive lately. The revived Ranger will compete against segment rivals Chevrolet Colorado, GMC Canyon, Toyota Tacoma and the all-new Jeep Gladiator. Base price starts at \$25,395.



Who are America's worst drivers?

Everyone likes to complain how the drivers around them are the worst. But one company has stepped up to quantify that. Insurance policy comparer Quote Wizard has crunched the numbers and discovered exactly which state has the most dangerous drivers. The study — which cross-referenced Quote Wizard's own database with Federal Highway Administration data from all 50 states — looked at fatalities as well as car crashes, DUIs, speeding tickets and other traffic citations. It found **Maine** to be the worst offender. A proliferation of DUIs gave the number two spot to **South Carolina**, where half of all fatal car crashes were alcohol related. Speeding and other citations put **Nebraska** at third in the study. **California** and **North Dakota** rounded out the top five. (For the curious, **New York** came in at 34.) Sadly, Quote Wizard's study found that American roads are getting more dangerous. Factors such as cheaper fuel prices mean drivers are on the road more, and issues such as texting-while-driving are on the rise, accounting for more than 3,450 deaths from distracted driving. Overall, car crashes accounted for more than 40,000 fatalities in 2018. On the up side, the best drivers are in Michigan, followed by Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arizona and Illinois.



Volkswagen's battery-powered dune buggy will be unveiled next month in Geneva.

VW's electric dune buggy

The venerable Volkswagen Beetle was made to be practical, and it wasn't long before hobbyists found you could bolt almost anything to its frame and powertrain: Italian-designed Ghia bodies, fiberglass British car replicas and, especially, aftermarket dune buggy kits.

The Beetle-mounted dune buggy dovetailed perfectly with 1960s SoCal beach culture to become a classic, but now a post-Dieselgate VW has updated it with an environmental slant.

Volkswagen has been teasing us with images of this concept electric vehicle, which looks for all the world like a streamlined modern take on the Meyers Manx fiberglass kits of yore.

Of course, manufacturers whip up such projects all the time as technical exercises and publicity stunts. VW is no doubt using this opportunity to show off its new electric MEB platform, demonstrating its adaptability



for lower-volume production models in VW's ambition to have that platform adopted by other makers as a kind of global standard.

Either way, VW has confirmed this e-dune buggy is indeed a one-off.

Still, with its electric retro minibus re-creation headed for production as the **I.D. Buzz**, we can always hope. The dune buggy concept is scheduled for official unveiling at the Geneva Motor Show, which opens on March 7.



Now that the new A-class sedan is in the house as the entry-level Mercedes-Benz model, the second-generation CLA (pictured) grows in size and makes more power.

M-B moves the CLA up-market

With the Arrival of the **A-class** compact sedan and hatchback that becomes the automaker's entry-level model, note that the **CLA** takes a hard turn up the product lineup for the 2020 model year.

The CLS-inspired sedan (M-B insists on calling it a coupe) was a hit right from the get-go when it launched for the 2014 model year, even though it was built on a front-wheel-drive platform.

The second-gen model is longer and wider and has more aggressive styling. The base turbocharged 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine makes 221 horsepower and 258 pound-feet of torque, up from 208 horses. The peak torque number is the same.

Shortly after its late-2019 arrival, higher-performing CLA35 and CLA45 models will be added, with output ranging up to 400 horsepower. Base should be around \$34,000.

TEST DRIVE

2019 Lexus LS 500

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will soon max out against the seatback. Ditto and more so, as your feet encounter the tight foot well beneath the front seats. When the rear seats are in their normal, upright position, they conspire with the shallow, rear backlight to hinder the driver's rear visibility. So blind spot monitoring is necessary, and as noted earlier, it's standard equipment.

Beyond the Luxury package, LS 500 shoppers can also avail themselves of select stand-alone options, such as a 23-speaker, 2,400-watt Mark Levinson

surround sound audio system (\$1,940; good sound but not outstanding), a panoramic sunroof (\$1,000; not the ideal time of year to test), a heated wood- and leather-trimmed steering wheel (\$410; a nice indulgence on cold mornings) and a bird's-eye, panoramic view monitor (\$800; always useful).

All-wheel-drive takes the wiggle out of turning into slushy streets, and tamps down winter driving anxiety in general. Providing the power for the LS 500 is a 3.5-liter six-cylinder engine, linked to a 10-speed automatic transmission. The



Many of the Lexus LS500's settings are absorbed into the 12.3-inch central display screen, accessed via touchpad on the center console. The process is inexact and distracting, and the system also buries items that should be more easily accessible

twin turbo V-6 is rated at 416 horsepower @ 6,000 rpm, and 442 lb.-ft. of torque @ 1,600-4,800 rpm.

The six is smooth and has sufficient muscle to move the Lexus from 0-60 mph in the low to mid five second range, which is quick, for a 2½ ton vehicle.

It's also a suitably muted performer, never raising its voice to disturb what is overall a soothingly quiet cabin. The suspension is dialed to luxury, rather than sport, and it delivers a fine ride and

confident handling.

Those seeking a little sharper edge should investigate the F Sport model.

Those keen on using less gasoline should look into the hybrid, which improves fuel economy estimates (on AWD models) from 18/27/21 to 23/31/26.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 25 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 180 calendars.

