

A timeless design

The Ford Fairmont crewcar is a legacy in ground transportation.



Driving in a Ford Fairmont crewcar is certainly a memorable experience for a corporate pilot.

CREWCARS have always been a part of a corporate pilot's life. Whatever the motivation, be it saving the company a few bucks or simply getting a bite to eat, every corporate pilot must have some experience with the Ford Fairmont crewcar.

Writers and aviation historians are fond of using the word ubiquitous when describing an airplane that nearly everyone has seen or flown. Since it seems that there is one at every airport, the Ford Fairmont

crewcar is certainly ubiquitous.

In the early 70s, Ford designers foresaw the need for a mode of transportation to fill a specialized niche—extremely inexpensive pilot transportation. Thus the Fairmont was born. Ford marketing and engineering gurus got together in November of 1970 to lay down the first specification for a car that would forever become a part of aviation Americana. Indeed, by Christmas of that year the halls of the Glass House were abuzz with the rumor that for the first time since the Tri-Motor and the B-24 (built by Ford in Ypsilanti MI), the Ford Motor Company would reenter the aviation business.

Specifications

The Fairmont was to revolutionize the concept of a cheap loaner vehicle. This car had to fit neatly into its environment, run on any type of fuel, be maintainable by linemen and have a failsafe design, in that multiple systems failures would not compromise mission capability.

Toward fitting into the environment to which it was dedicated, the Fairmont is shaped exactly like a brick. While the reasoning behind this clever shape escapes most, any pilot who has driven one will attest that despite some poor steering characteristics, a Fairmont can be shoehorned into almost any park-

ing space and still have room to open a door.

The Ford Fairmont is powered by a six-cylinder internal combustion engine and designed to run on conventional automobile fuel. Ford engineers had the foresight to imagine that from time to time an airplane would be misfueled and require complete fuel system draining. This potential waste of fuel is considered abhorrent to any FBO manager. To this end, Ford made the Fairmont engine run on any aviation fuel mixture not exceeding 7% Jet A. Additionally, the Fairmont fuel gauge always indicates less than 1/4 tank, thereby causing the nervous driver to put in a few gallons of gas "just in case."

Minimizing maintenance downtime was of prime concern to the engineers at Ford. Special design features abound in these "made for abuse" vehicles. For instance, the gas filler door is of the breakaway type and, when gone, does not affect the car's driveability. Gas caps are interchangeable with any that you may find on top of a gas station pump; even an old rag may be used. Tire size is another factor that will not ground a Fairmont. As many as three different sizes may be used at one time. Wear-through carpeting, automatic stress-relieving dash pads, and a zero-energy temperature control system round out the maintenance delayability features designed into this car.

Out to the parking lot, we do a cursory walkaround of this powder blue baby. Rust, in all the right places, serves as clever camouflage for perforations that supply outside air to augment the heat/air-conditioning system. Only one hubcap to worry about. Rub your hand over that paint job. That's not paint chalk-
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away you're feeling. That's an ingenious self-cleaning feature that puts Mother Nature in charge of car washing.

Going for a drive

Once the engine starts, rev her up a few times. Now you can see, hear and even smell that this will be a trip to remember. As the front wheel comes off the top of the curb, note that the entire frame is tuned to the same frequency. This is the reason for the quality of the ride as you bounce over potholes and snake through road construction sites. Full braking should be available as we note that the brake pedal goes all the way to the floor. Pulling into traffic, we observe that even the sleepest corporate pilot will stay awake thanks to the "vibra-wheel" steering system installed on this car. Acceleration gives us strong aural cues, leaving us with the impression of a much larger vehicle.

All cars are judged on turning performance. On this test drive we find out why the directions to the restaurant were, "turn left out of the lot, then turn left at the light, Denny's is on the left," this Fairmont only turns left.

Time is short and all too soon we must return to the FBO parking lot for the parking trials. This is where that bricklike contour pays off. Our first approach is to the parking space from which we departed, marked by a large oil stain. We approach from the right to find that because the car is restricted to left-hand turns we must execute a missed approach using noise abatement procedures. A left-turning circuit around the parking lot leaves us established on an angling final to our spot. I am reminded by my partner and safety pilot, Roger

'Flameout' Fisher, to begin pumping the brakes early, as I have collected too much speed in the unstabilized approach. It was at this time that I reflected on those Ford engineers who, when designing this crewcar, supplied it with an automatic transmission capable of being shifted into park while rolling to augment stopping power. This is not the first time that I have parked a Ford Fairmont crewcar, but due to the length of time since I had last parked one, I had lost the feel necessary for a real greaser.

Old crewcars bring back feelings and emotions long dormant—nostalgic, if you will. My short reassociation with the Fairmont crewcar was no different. The windows that were stuck closed, the overflowing ash trays, the pop cans that rolled from under the seat when I ran into the curb at Denny's, all of those things take me back to a simpler time. A time when AM radio was all that was installed in new cars, a time when good folks would stop to help a stranded motorist, a time when suits and dry cleaning were more affordable.

Questions asked

Why, you might ask, has Ford not developed a follow-on model? What happened to the Fairmont crewcar? Our pilot report has so far focused on the outstanding characteristics of this individual car. We asked, "If this car is representative of the entire fleet and we know that the price is exceedingly low, why doesn't each FBO operate a fleet?"

When I took a poll of operators to build the database for this article, a surprising number of perceived deficiencies emerged. Most centered around seat spring protrusions and beer cans materializing on the rear floor overnight. But some surprised us. One operator complained of exhaust reingestion on downwind starts. Another said that a large hole developed in the trunk area causing him to lose luggage and other valuables.

One area of the operation where FBOs can placate their bean counters is crewcars. At \$75 to \$250 per vehicle, the Ford Fairmont crewcar may be just the vehicle to help drive an FBO's bottom line into the black.

A legend in its own right—the Ford Fairmont crewcar.

