

Chevrolet Sprint/ Sprint Turbo

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It had just 70hp, yet a 7.5-psi turbocharger helped it hit 60mph from rest in just over 9 seconds; run the ¼ mile in a tick over 16, and manage a top speed of more than 100mph. GM's famed performance guru Jon Moss even owns one (albeit with an LT1 V8 packed under the hood).



The car? Chevrolet's 3-cylinder Sprint Turbo, available for just two years in the U.S. market as a pocket rocket imported directly from Suzuki of Japan. As debuted for the 1987 model year, it was based on the Chevrolet Sprint, a car launched in 1985 and the smallest ever to wear the bowtie.



A combination of factors had brought these two hatchbacks to market. For a start, Detroit had found out in both 1973 and, again, in 1980 that it was at the mercy of gas price shocks. In a reactive mode, Chevrolet itself had responded with the Chevette, featuring space-sapping rear-wheel-drive that, thanks to emissions regulations, had not the power to take advantage. Its econoboxes all being similarly compromised, Detroit had made no bones about what cars it would rather build.

Secondly, there was the introduction of another small car to consider, one first shown at the Los Angeles Auto Show in 1984. When the little Fiat 128-based Zastava Yugo promised a \$3,999 base price, it was catalyst enough for both GM and Ford to delve into their global resources to find a low cost car that could compete for the affections of the lowest end of the market.

GM noted that, in October of 1983, Suzuki had released its 1.0-liter, 3-cylinder Cultus. Distributed outside of Japan as the Forza, Swift, and SA-310, it was also quickly becoming popular in India (as the Maruti 1000). So, weighing just 1,490 lbs, the little Suzuki debuted in the U.S. with the only changes being its badging and its speedometer units. GM referred to these cars as *M-Body* vehicles, offering both two- and four-door versions on knobby 12-inch wheels and with fiddly 4- and 5-speed manual transmissions. With 48hp @ 5,100rpm, and 56 lb-ft @ 3,200 rpm, the three-cylinder revved well in typical Suzuki fashion. A later 3-speed automatic, however, turned the car into a billboard for slow progress.



The rear seats folded individually, 50/50, expanding trunk space from 8.4 cubic feet to 21.9. Inside, things were remarkably pleasant for a car so cheap, with excellent visibility and thoroughly contemporary ergonomics.



With a need for neither power steering nor power brakes, the Sprint actually approached that oft-mentioned ideal for small cars: go-kart-like handling – until, that is, one pushed it moderately hard. Perhaps for ease of entry/ egress, Sprints actually sat surprisingly high off the ground (given their size). The solid rear axle, a function of cost-effective manufacturing, not only gave the car a bouncy ride but was unable to cope with as much roll as the MacPherson-strut-boasting front suspension could. The car would thus oversteer clumsily under excessively tight cornering. The editor once slid one into a side street in a burst of minimalist enthusiasm with three frightened passengers aboard (themselves loading the rear axle up still further!)

It must be said, though, that despite a short wheelbase, the behavior was readily correctable. Combined with incredible gas mileage, these cars could be fun. With 19,000 imported initially, their time appeared to have passed as the gas crisis grew further in the rear view mirror – but GM saw more potential for the car than just its gas mileage. In 1987, the two-door Sprint Turbo was launched, in white or red, and adding 130 lbs. to the base model. Straight-line performance, as noted, was little short of astounding.

Ford eventually came up with the Mazda 121, badged it the Festiva, and brought it over. Without the charisma or fizz of the three-cylinder Sprint, the Festiva never pretended to be any more than simple transportation. Mind you, GM was about to do something similar, exchanging character for refinement. For 1989, the Sprint's body style would change; the engine would gain a cylinder, and the vehicle would be rebadged as a Geo Metro. The turbocharged model was gone, never to return (much to Suzuki's detriment, as it had by now begun selling the Metro as Swift, under its own badge, in the U.S).

Nearly ten years later, for 1998, Geo ended and Chevy sold 3-cylinder Metros under its own name before ceasing altogether until 2004 – when the Korean-built Aveo (Daewoo Kalos) appeared to take its place. At time of writing, the Aveo is the best-selling car in the budget U.S. market.