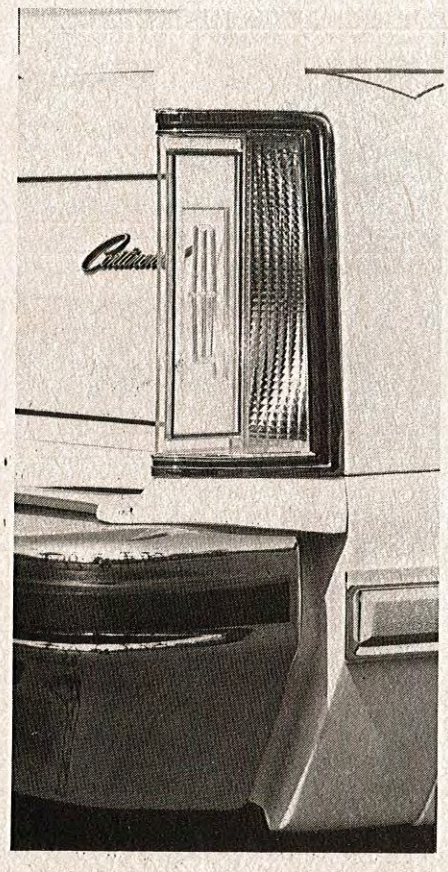
# CONTINENTAL MARK V

## On the evolution of luxury

by Mike Knepper



DRIVING Impression

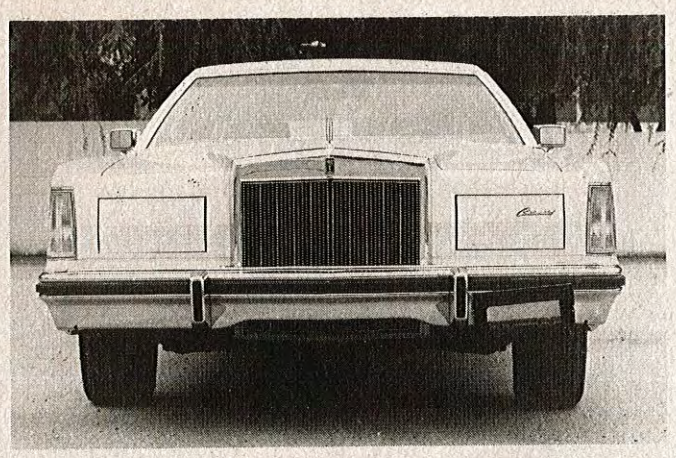
I like luxury and gimmicks as much as, if not more than, the next guy. A power seat, power door locks, power antenna, power windows, power sunroof, leather upholstery, tilt steering wheel, stereo radio, automatically releasing seatbacks and parking brake. Cruise control and lighted vanity mirrors behind the sunvisors. If it's on the luxury options list, I like it. It's just the hedonist in my soul.

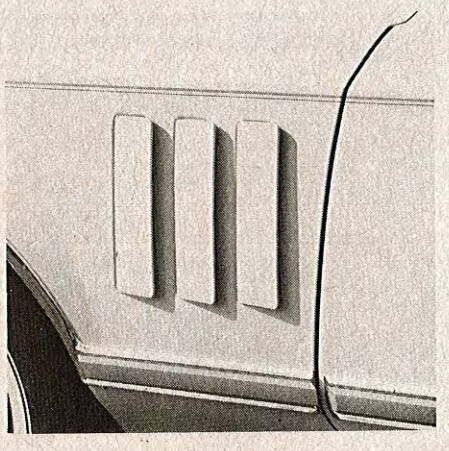
Well, then, you can imagine how I drooled when Ford delivered to our doorstep a hot-off-the-assembly line Continental Mark V complete with all the above, and more.

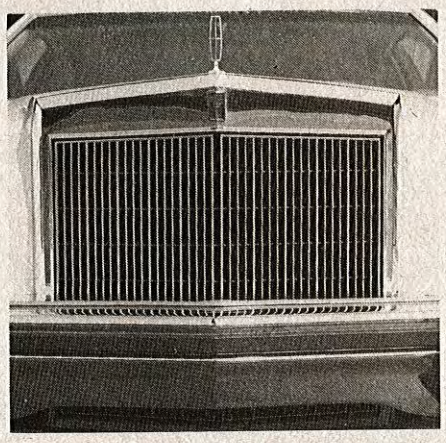
Talk about your luxury and gimmickery; this cream-colored baby had it all. Hugh Hefner's playroom couldn't possibly be more of a monument to man's desire to indulge himself. I immediately made plans for a weekend trip. A Mark V, a motel room overlooking the ocean, a New York strip steak medium rare and a bottle of California Cabernet all in the name of automotive journalism. Grab the kid, mamma, we're off for a hard weekend of research.

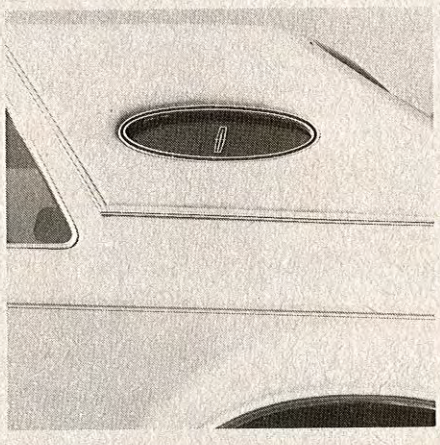
For awhile last year there were pretty strong rumors drifting out of Dearborn about an all-new Mark, a smaller, lighter, more Seville-like Mark. We got hold of a spy picture or two that seemed to verify the rumors. But as the year progressed and rumors gave way to authentic bits and pieces from Lincoln-Mercury, it became obvious the Mark V was not a revolutionary new Mark, but an evolutionary version of the Mark IV.

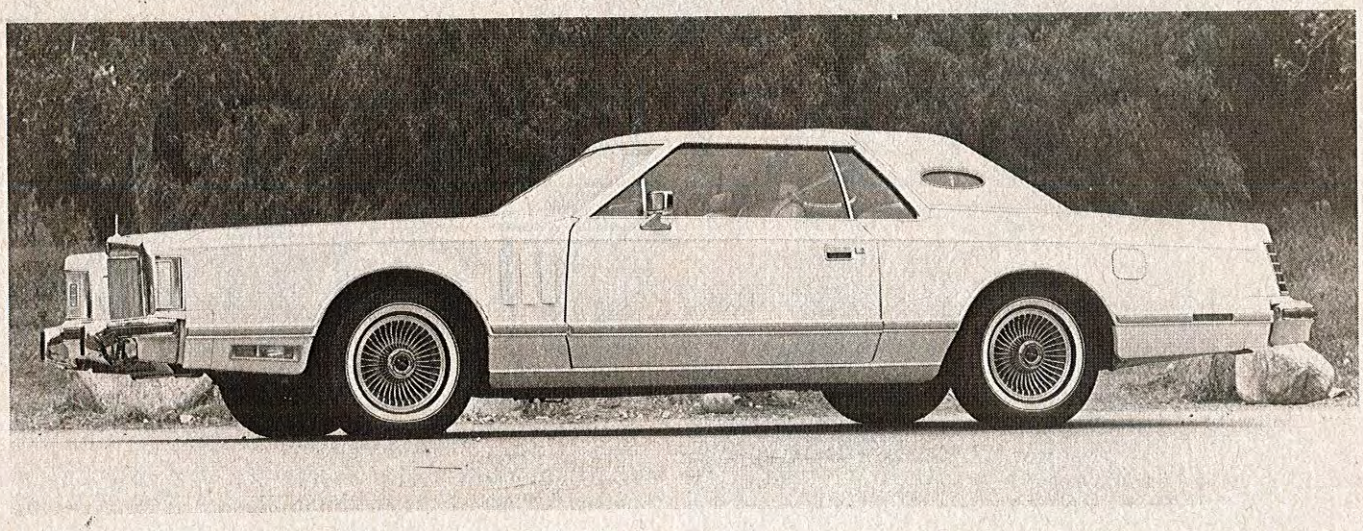
I got my first look at the Mark V early last summer when I was offered a sneak preview at the Ford test track. I was slightly disappointed. At the time I was still expecting something really new. What I saw, however, seemed little changed from last year. There was that familiar long nose and short rear deck with the falsie spare tire bulge. The roofline











was unmistakable, there was the single oval opera window, the hidden headlights and the Mercedes-like grille. But then a Lincoln engineer pulled up in a '76 Mark, and the difference suddenly stood out markedly.

Where the old Mark had rounded, soft lines, the new car is sharp and angular. A sculpted line now extends below window level from front bumper to rear. The C pillar is angled forward much more sharply, and three ugly, but functional, shark gills have been stuck on just forward of the doors. The new car is a classic example of the designers' ability to change a car without changing it.

A glance at the car's specification sheet shows a couple of hidden changes. Although the wheelbase is the same—120.4 in.—the overall length has been increased 2.2 in. to 230.3 in. However, the engineers have been able to pare out almost 400 lb to bring the Mark V's curb weight down to 4873 lb. The 460cid 4-bbl carries over for '77 except for California, which can have only a 400.

My mobile self-indulgence center was a 49-state version, and the acceleration was, well, sedate. I know that few Mark owners are going to care about such things, or about the 14.5 mpg on the MT fuel loop, but I personally would prefer my Mark to exhibit a bit more verve in the acceleration department.

The route I chose for my weekend of research into things Continental offered a wide range of driving situations. It took me from the smog-filled lowlands of the L.A. basin, up through the coastal mountain ranges, over into the straight, flat and high-speed desert of Central California and finally down U.S. 1 along the Pacific. Only a relatively small portion of the 500-mile trip was on freeway/interstate type highways. In retrospect, that route may have had the Mark out of its element.

The car is heavy and is sprung in the true luxury car tradition. That makes for a good bit of wallowing about in the twisty bits, and believe me, we found some in the mountains.

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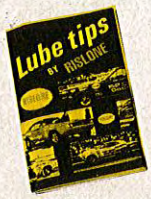


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## CONTINENTAL MARK V

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The steering is just too light and imprecise. Keeping that long, wide prow precisely between the edge of the road and the center stripe requires constant attention. The car will wander to either side with alarming regularity. If I took my eyes off the road for an instant of scenery gazing, off to the side it would wander. The reason is that insensitive steering. The steering wheel is so isolated from any road feel, the car can deviate from its course quite a bit before the driver gets any sensory inputs, other than visual, on the problem. And then rather large steering inputs are required to correct the problem.

Although the Mark was quite a handful on the twisty bits, on those flat desert stretches the Mark's long touring legs could be appreciated. It was arm-chair comfortable and living room quiet. Well, living room quiet if you have the front window open and there is a brisk breeze blowing. There was too much wind noise in the Mark, but it all seemed to be emanating from the leading edge of the window on my side. A little judicious monkeying with the weather-stripping would probably handle the problem.

Wind noise was also a problem with the bronze-tinted electric "moon roof." The moon roof is a beautiful thing so deeply tinted it never allowed enough of the sun through to affect the interior temperature. It also is equipped with a sliding cover on the inside to completely block it off if that's your desire. However, at anything above 30 mph the noise and the wind in the cockpit were uncomfortable.

No driving impression of a Mark would be complete without comment on that special feeling only a $15,449 car can impart. (That's $11,396 base price with $4053 in options.) Part of the time I felt a little uncomfortable—mentally, not physically—about being seen in the car. To one who knows he is way out of his price class, the beast seems more than a little ostentatious. But that feeling soon passes when you accept the fact that for all the world knows you have another one at home in a different color, and one at the villa on Ibezia. That's when you start looking for people looking at you when you pull out of McDonald's. ("Look, Martha. All that money and he still likes Big Macs.")

As a paid critic I can find fault with the Mark V—the steering, the lack of power, the wind noise—but as an appreciator of luxury and exclusivity I think the Mark V makes it. ■

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