



'55 DeSoto Fireflite

We expected its near-complete ease of driving, but not its new sure-footed feel



DeSoto pulls down under maximum deceleration, keeps bumper well above the road surface. Stopped straight, fade-free

by Jim Lodge

YOU WON'T ALWAYS find exciting phraseology and impressive performance in MT's road test reports, but you will find something that does come up with striking consistency in the write-ups on the DeSotos—improvement of details from year to year in nearly every respect. It's a car that has yet to swap a time-honored reputation earned as a subdued-but-willing family car for the glamour of new car sales appeal.

Test car: A 4-door sedan, 200-hp Fireflite series. PowerFlite transmission, power steering, and power brakes, automatic seat adjustment, and power window lifts.

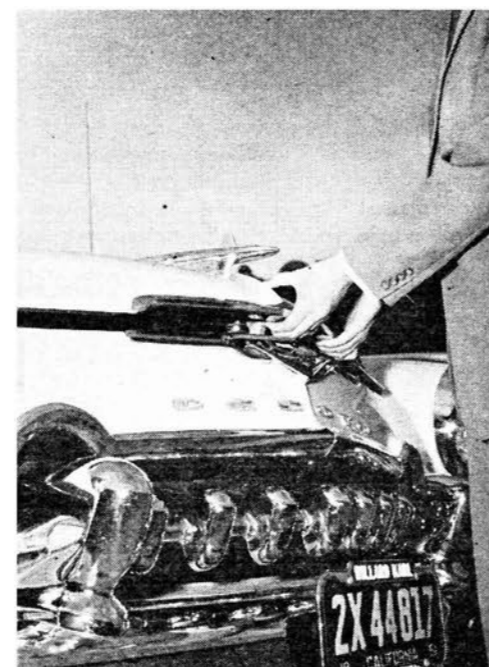
Engine: Upped 30 hp from last year, ohv V8 retains original Chrysler hemispherical combustion chambers but now mounts 4-barrel carburetor. Displacement greater by 14.9 inches (now 291 cubic inches), torque now 274 foot-pounds. Intake and exhaust valves are larger than in '54, valves lift higher.

Other options: You name it, the DeSoto dealer has the optional equipment. Alternate basic car is less powerful (185 hp),

less deluxe, less expensive, but wholly satisfactory FireDome DeSoto. It uses the lower-ratio gearing of '54 DeSoto 6 with all transmissions: its PowerFlite axle is 3.73, should give no better economy, fair performance at low speeds, not equal to Fireflite at any speed. Synchronesh, with or without overdrive, available in either.

What the car is like to drive: It's comparable to the '55 Dodge (see road test in March MT), which means real easy. Good-sized wheel, comfortable driver position, plenty of vision fore and aft. New double cowl design is real sporty, has a great future. Clock should be first to go with modifications; purists will term it unsafe, most call it awkward. DeSoto has had better setups for quick-glance instrument legibility than golden numerals that blend with background.

PowerFlite panel control lever has been worked over in early reports from Detroit on all Chrysler Corp. products, and in our Plymouth and Dodge road tests. But here's something new: We didn't like the way DeSoto's lever aimed its tapered plastic tip at passengers, and questioned Chrysler Engineering about it. We found



Easy-to-release safety catch is under air-scoop slot; hood is light but well braced

the lever is made of SAE 1010 steel, soft grade that bends easily. About 10 pounds force will snap lever off flush with or slightly below surface of panel. As double precaution, lever is dog-legged, or bent, so it'll bend or break just right!

With that cleared up, on to driving. Brake pedal is fairly high (for leverage), but more vital, it's usable for left or right foot braking. Nothing new about accelerator except car's response to it.

Ease of handling: Smooth, quiet, no work involved. Don't worry about getting used to the DeSoto. No-muscle steering eases car out of streetcar tracks, out of ruts or soft shoulders with hardly a movement in the wheel. Car is big and heavy; try wheeling into a tight, hard turn—then recover with or without throt-

Photos by Lodge and Moore

tle action. No matter how, it's easy. Maybe you misjudged car or parking place. If you got halfway in and have to work out again, you won't need a shower.

Acceleration: Take-off was smooth and easy, but it carried some authority. Comparative analysis: '54 car 0-60 in 17.9, standing quarter-mile in 21.3; '55 test car 0-60 in 12.8, the quarter in 19.2 seconds. Using LOW in the 0-60 runs won't get you there any quicker; DRIVE does

the same all by itself, shifting out of LOW just at 60. In a longer run, LOW does the most if held in up to about 65-68 mph.

We don't know anyone who buys his family car for top speed; but if you're interested in the DeSoto from age-old-argument standpoint, it averages 103. Down where power counts, acceleration is good. This year's DeSoto cut about 5 seconds off its former 50-80 time. Low speed acceleration is boosted by PowerFlite design change. Smaller diameter torque converter allows higher engine speeds for more getaway power.

Braking: Straight-line pull-down, little fade. Brake checks a no-fuss, no-muss proposition inciting one comment: Has least amount of nose-dive among Chrysler-built cars (said prior to the Chrysler New Yorker road test). Credit newly positioned shock absorbers, decent weight distribution. Stopping power for '55 better across the board, big improvement at 60 mph.

Roadability: Consider riding quality here: with this in mind, roadability rates genuinely good. Sticks in curves with confidence (on behalf of both driver and car); heel-over is there, not sloppy. Front end inclined to wash out when things get fast and rough; never reached the critical point in our 50-65 mph constant-curve tests. At these speeds comes a tire-moaning drift with rear end right in line with front. Don't look for needle-sharp precision in car controls. Do look for DeSoto's help in keeping you out of trouble.

Behind tales of roadability lie these facts: As in Plymouth and Dodge setups, Oriflow shocks have much freedom, now contribute more to suspension in ride and directional stability. Along with Chrysler

and Imperial, DeSoto has nearly 4 inches wider front tread. Redesigned, well-braced frame puts rear springs more than 5 inches farther apart than in '54.

No wander coming out of dips, little or no rebound. Snakes across washboard roads like it had eyes. Some body movement, but at worst, it's transmitted thru wheels to vibration in driver's hands. Take your hands off the wheel (with a last twist for good measure) and the DeSoto explores its way back to straight and narrow without heading for the nearest ditch.

Ride: Definitely in style, definitely top feature in '55 Fireflite. Excellent compromise in a car noted for upholding pillowy ride of the Chrysler line. Sidesway not too noticeable—even to Lonesome George riding in the rear seat by himself. He'll sit fairly steady, won't slide too much on turns, won't pitch to the ceiling in a highway hole, won't get that rising-elevator sensation in a shallow dip. Long-liked DeSoto seats add firmness as well as long-trip comfort. Floor-to-seat, seat-to-seatback setup means 50-75 miles more before a rest stop.

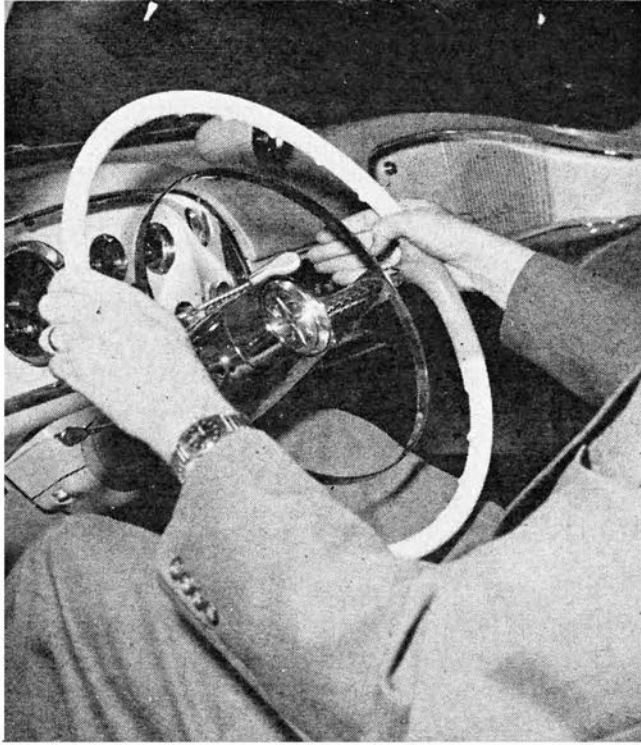
What the car is like to live with: Like good-quality materials, a touch of glitter, plenty of living-room comfort? It's here. Things that'll impress you: Plenty of room to move around; wide-opening doors for easy entry and exit; nylon loop pile floor mats (sponge-rubber backed), quiet, soft; nylon and vinyl upholstery and trim, colorful, durable, up-to-date; bright map-reading or courtesy lights up under each panel cowl; larger glove compartment this year. Livability isn't limited to passenger compartment; trunk space is family-size, finish, loading ease average.



Grille remains customizers' gold mine (they like the "teeth"), hides hood latch. Chrome is lavish per sales demands



And here's the crux of the sequence: A flat hood without head-denting overhang makes it easy to work on Fireflite V8



Panel-mounted shift lever is contacted about where column shift would be touched. See text for unusual shift lever detail



Doors open to nearly 90 degrees for easy entry, exit. Car is almost 2 inches lower than '54, headroom is only 3/4-inch less

'55 DESOTO FIREFLITE

continued

Economy and ease of maintenance: Do-it-yourself fans can cut costs; engine components and accessories fairly accessible, there for all to see or dismantle. Valve train ready for service; carburetion, ignition, other components little different from other ohv V8s in accessibility. Sparkplugs hard to remove.

If MT's test car indicates what you'll be getting, you'll be happy with general detailing inside and out. Good paint job, normal tattoo of file marks barely discernible on door posts, quarter panels. Good fit to upholstery, trim; not-so-good fit where windshield molding meets instrument panel. But no squeaks or rattles. Here's a tip: The DeSoto held up unusually and remarkably well under some of the roughest tryouts we've given any car on our test courses.

Fuel economy: Don't look for economy in your weekly tank mileage; instead, you'll probably find it in the year-end tally of maintenance costs. Steady-speed fuel economy off slightly this year. Tank average lower, primarily because the 2 vacuum-actuated barrels on the carburetor give more pep (you're inclined to lead-foot a livelier car), take extra gas in the process. (Except for mentioned change in PowerFlite, drive train is like '54s, with 3.54 rear axle ratio.) But by using regular grade gas (we used Mobilgas Regular in all the tests) as recommended by the manufacturer, you can apply the pennies to vacation costs or sundry costs peculiar to Mr. Average Motorist.

GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE: Ohv V8. Bore 3.27 in. Stroke 3.344 in. Stroke bore ratio 0.879-1. Compression ratio 7.5 to 1. Displacement 291 cu. in. Advertised bhp 200 @ 4400 rpm. Bhp per cu. in. 0.687. Piston travel @

max. bhp 2452 ft. per min. Max. bmep 138.2 psi. Max. torque 274 ft.-lb. @ 2800 rpm.

DRIVE SYSTEM: STANDARD transmission is 3-speed synchromesh using helical gears. RATIOS: 1st 2.57, 2nd 1.83, 3rd 1.00, reverse 3.48. AUTOMATIC transmission is PowerFlite, 3-element torque converter with planetary gears. RATIOS: Drive 1.72 x converter ratio and converter only; Low, 1.72 x converter ratio; Reverse 2.39 x converter ratio. Maximum converter ratio at stall 2.6. OVERDRIVE transmission is standard shift with planetary gears. RATIO: 0.7.

REAR AXLE RATIOS: Standard 3.73, PowerFlite 3.54, Overdrive 4.1.

DIMENSIONS: Wheelbase 126 in. Tread 60.2 front, 59.6 rear. Wheelbase/tread ratio 2.10:1. Overall width 78.3 in. Overall length 217.9 in. Overall height (empty) 62.7 in. Turning diameter 46 ft. 4 in. Turns lock to lock 5.5 (3.5 with power steering). Test car weight 4300 lbs. Test car weight/bhp ratio 21.5:1. Weight distribution 54.2% front, 45.8% rear. Tire size 7.60 x 15 tubeless.

PRICES: (Including suggested retail price at main factory, federal tax, and delivery and handling charges, but not freight) FIREHOME 4-door sedan \$2498, hardtop \$2541 and \$2654, convertible \$2824. FIREFLITE 4-door sedan \$2727, hardtop \$2939, convertible \$3151.

ACCESSORIES: PowerFlite \$178, overdrive \$108, power package \$40, radios \$110 and \$128, heater \$92, power steering \$113, power brakes \$40, power seat \$70, power windows \$102, air conditioning \$567.



TEST CAR AT A GLANCE

'55 DeSoto Fireflite with PowerFlite

REAR WHEEL HORSEPOWER

(Determined on Clayton chassis dynamometer. All tests are made under full load, which is similar to climbing a hill at full throttle. Observed hp figures not corrected to standard atmospheric conditions.)

59 road hp @ 1700 rpm and 23 mph
72 road hp @ 2000 rpm and 38 mph
88 road hp @ 2500 rpm and 58 mph
Max 105 road hp @ 3025 rpm and 72 mph

TOP SPEED

(In miles per hour over surveyed 1/4-mile.)
Fastest 1-way run 106.0
Slowest 1-way run 101.1
Average of 4 runs 103.2

ACCELERATION

(In seconds, checked with 5th wheel and electric speedometer.)

Standing start 1/4-mile (75 mph) 19.2
0-30 mph 4.3
0-60 mph 12.8
10-30 mph 3.6
30-50 mph 4.9
50-80 mph 14.3

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

(Checked with 5th wheel and electric speedometer.)

Car speedometer read 32 @ true 30 mph
48 @ true 45 mph
63 @ true 60 mph
79 @ true 75 mph
108 @ top speed

FUEL CONSUMPTION

(In miles per gallon; checked with fuel flowmeter, 5th wheel, and electric speedometer. Mobilgas Regular used.)

Steady 30 mph 19.7
Steady 45 mph 18.2
Steady 60 mph 15.7
Steady 75 mph 11.9

Stop-and-go driving over measured course 12.4
Tank average for 613 miles 12.2

STOPPING DISTANCE

(To the nearest foot; checked with electrically actuated detonator.)

30 mph 39
45 mph 90
60 mph 146