



RENAULT R-8 1100

Nobody is going to kick sand in the faces of Renault R-8 owners now that their 98-lb. weakling has developed a full set of muscles

One Cadillac limousine, two taxis, one VW, one MG-B and a '58 Pontiac were sleepily groping their way onto Manhattan's East River Drive from the Brooklyn Bridge early on a rainy May morning. Just when they were all strung out in a ragged line around the bumpy, tightening turn, a small gray sedan went whooping past—tail-end hung out ever so slightly—and left them all grumbling in a cloud of spray.

If anyone reading this was in one of the cars mentioned, he should know that the small gray sedan was our Renault R-8 1100 test car, and its two occupants—doubled up with laughter and feebly pounding each other in editorial glee—were the editor/publisher and the managing editor of this journal. By the time we gave that marvelous little car back to Renault Inc. we'd probably incurred the wrath of practically everybody. The new R-8 is so much fun that the DAR and the American Legion will probably come out against it at their respective annual conventions. We are certain that many of the people we passed must have thought us drunk, just because of our idiotically de-

lighted facial expressions and the desperate speed.

Before continuing onward and upward with this hyperbolic spiral, let us acquaint you with the unvarnished facts about the new R-8. It is a four-door sedan, utilizing the almost universal (in Europe) unit body construction. It weighs 1610 pounds. It has a wheelbase of 89.5 inches. It has disc brakes on all four wheels (the only car in its class to offer that worthwhile advantage). It has a sealed cooling system, so that it is in the almost-unique position of being a water-cooled car that uses no water. It seats four adults in surprising comfort. It has coil springs on all four wheels, with swing axles at the rear and wishbones at the front. It is the fastest 1100cc sedan we have ever driven. (The engine's capacity is actually 1108cc, but we don't think those extra eight cubic centimeters are particularly significant.)

There are three powerful impressions that make themselves felt immediately. The first is the vast comfort of the front seats, which are better than those of most cars—at any price. The second is the amazing ride and overall stability—this factor, in combination with the superb seats, makes the car seem more expensive, more luxurious, and larger. The third is the great willingness and enthusiasm of the five main-bearing engine. It's a powerplant that fairly begs for abuse, and it has ample power in every speed range. Its flexibility is so improved that the necessity to row the little dear along with its shift lever has been almost completely eliminated.

It's hard to choose which one of these three powerful blandishments will most appeal to the potential buyer. We'd guess though that interior comfort and apparent luxury will be the strongest selling feature on the car. It simply doesn't feel like a little bitty imported sedan. It has the ride and performance of a good American six-cylinder compact, with the dimensions of an MG-1100 or a VW.

The enthusiast will tend to be a little stunned by the acceleration, which is coupled with really good handling. The car is very stable and quite neutral in all situations, save those where the driver has elected to be silly, or knows what he's doing and just wants to have an absolute flat-out go. When pressed past normal limits the tail twitches out with a kind of insulting feistiness, but a compensating twitch on the steering wheel and a little moderation with the loud

pedal will make everything all right again. There's a popular myth, not unknown to the pages of some of the purist magazines, that says more-throttle-cures-everything-and-all-you-got-to-do-is-keep-your-foot-down. Bat Guano. Your foot is what got you into trouble in the first place—use it with temperance and restraint and you won't have to explain how you could cave in the tail of your oversteering car without anybody running into you.

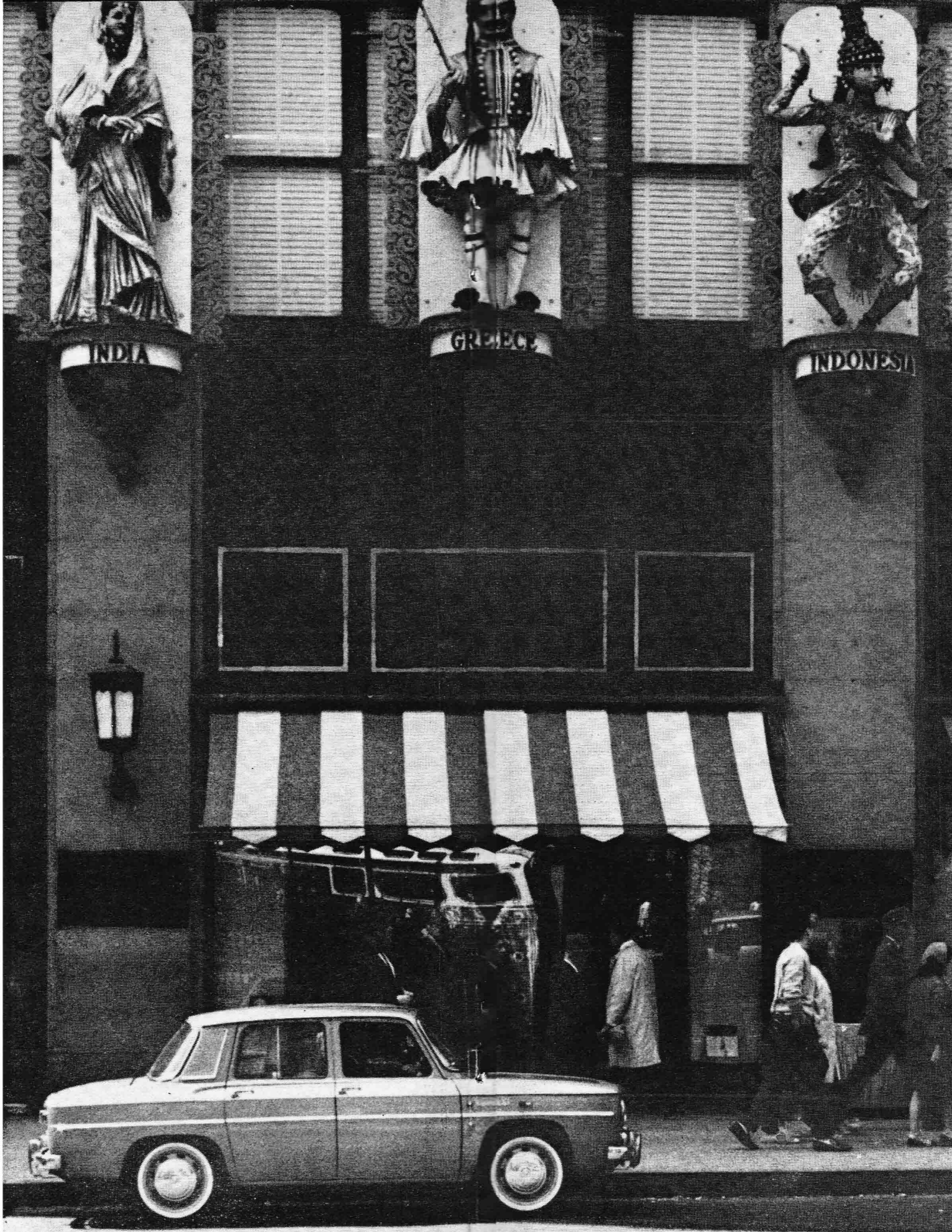
On the subject of the R-8's steering—the Renault people have built in a considerable amount of artificial resistance, so that the steering feels much heavier than one accustomed to rear-engined cars would expect. This, combined with a strong self-centering tendency, makes the car feel rock steady and extremely positive while being hurried. In fact, nearly everything about this car's running gear seems to have been done with three aims firmly in mind: 1. Make it stable as hell. 2. Make it under-steer right to the bitter end. 3. Fix it so nobody can tell which end the engine's in without looking. And by George, they did it.

At one point, while trying to lure some unsuspecting citizen in a Porsche Normal into a drag, we started wondering just how many different cars the R-8 could beat to sixty. A partial list is edifying. It includes such makes as the Corvair Monza, Falcon and Fairlane sixes, Peugeot 403 and 404, Rambler American, Rover 2000 and 3-Liter, Sprite/Midget, Sunbeam Alpine GT, Triumph Spitfire, Valiant six, Volvo 122-S and Volkswagen 1500-S. That it will blow off everything in its own class goes without saying. It does 0-50 in 9.8, 0-60 in 13.8, and 0-70 in 20.1 seconds, under the best conditions. Equally impressive, however, is the fact that we got one 0-60 run of 15.1 with a 430-pound test crew and a full tank of gas, running on wet pavement. Not bad for a car that will deliver an honest 25-plus miles per gallon and can be bought for \$1695.

The R-8's bodywork is solid and well-executed. It does not have the safe-like, one-solid-block-of-steel feeling that you get from a Volkswagen 1200, but it's as good or better than contemporary English or American cars. Panel fit is universally good, and it is generally tight and well-sealed. The front luggage compartment lid opens back-to-front, which insures that it will never fly open on the road, but does necessitate loading everything in over the fenders. The engine compartment lid is wide and deep and engine accessibility is quite good. One is a little unnerved by the apparent lack of any provision for filling the sealed cooling system, but we suppose that should be viewed as a reassuring statement of faith on the part of the designer. The gas filler cap is in the engine compartment, and this should serve to encourage regular checking of the oil level—I mean, as long as you've already got the hood open, you might as well. Right?

Entry and exit from the front doors is not difficult, but the rear doors tend to restrict entry as much as they facilitate it. There just aren't any easy answers to the problem of fitting four wide, tall doors on a sedan that is neither tall nor wide. Once in, however, things improve considerably. The front seats, as already mentioned, are paragons of princely luxury. They are bigger and more commodious than anything offered by any of the R-8's competitors, and they even feature a handy recliner mechanism for the backrests. The back seat is not the sort of place where you'd like to spend the rest of your life, but it's still as good or better than anything available from the other cars in this particular price class.

Leg room is a problem, front and rear. To get the



overall interior dimensions they wanted, the Renault designers had to push the front foot well right out between the front wheels. This means that the wheel wells intrude severely on the foot room and make it necessary to offset the pedals sharply to the right. The passenger finds him- or herself trying to use the right hand wheel well as a footrest, but this is a not-too-satisfactory solution—particularly for men in kilts or ladies in skirts (the former, we find repellent—the latter could cause traffic accidents).

The controls are not up to the standard set by the rest of the package. The switches are little plastic rockers, unlabelled and disposed at random about the steering column and instrument panel so as to utterly baffle all but the most experienced Renault owner. The shift lever is vague and spongy in use, although the fastest shifts imaginable are not only possible, but the usual thing. The lever's real sin is its affectionate proximity to the driver's knee and calf. The normal stance when driving the R-8 is heels-together, knees-spread, but when it comes time to shift down to second, or to find reverse, this must abruptly be changed to heels-apart, knees together. It could be a very popular variation on dances like the Mashed Potatoes or the Frug, but we don't like it as a regular part of our driving technique. Instrumentation is adequate, with the usual complement of gauges and warning lights, but no doubt the purists will bewail the lack of proper oil pressure, manifold pressure or vacuum gauges, not to mention the unspeakable absence of an altimeter, electric compass, and cumulative engine rev-counter and geiger counter.

It is our impression that this new Renault could sell like mad in the United States. It overcomes nearly every traditional objection to economy cars we've ever heard. Whether or not it will, is in the hands of the Gods of car marketing, and Renault's rejuvenated American organization. Like Peugeot and Citroën, France's other two entries in the imported car sweepstakes, it has a very spotty dealer system. Renault Inc. has made giant strides toward resolving this problem and we sincerely hope that 1964 will show an upturning of this keen little car's fortunes. We were never really sold on the Dauphine, but the R-8 is quite another story. It has already had the benefit of a number of modifications and improvements resulting from two years' world-wide service reports.

The 1100cc Renault R-8 comes closer to meeting our demands in a little sedan than anything we've tested in the past year and a half. We have been criticized again and again for trying to apply sports car standards in evaluating family sedans. The Renault R-8 should certainly vindicate us as far as that charge is concerned. It is fast, well constructed, good handling, and it has the best brakes in its class. On top of all that it still offers better-than-average accommodation and ride comfort. Whether or not it can deliver the same endless reliability as the Volkswagen 1200 must remain to be seen. Whether Renault can build a Volkswagen-style dealer organization for the successful propagation of the faith is another problem. But we like it as a car, and we'd like to see it get a chance to compete product-for-product in its class. Every trend seems to promise another big boom for imports in this country, with Volkswagen leading the parade. This might be just the car to help broaden the base of that boom—along with the Cortina, the Opel, and the MG 1100—and thus relieve VW of some of the responsibility of doing it singlehanded.

C/D