

TORONADO vs. RIVIERA

AN ON-THE-ROAD COMPARISON

AT FIRST LOOK, the only logical reason for buying an Oldsmobile Toronado over the Buick Riviera might be to obtain the mechanical novelty of front-wheel drive. Size, styling, passenger accommodation and performance, at least between Riviera and Toronado, are nearly on a par. But, where the Riviera retains tried-and-true, traditional front engine/rear-wheel drive, the Toronado offers a new front engine/front-drive arrangement. It's a powerful selling point, but is it a justifiable one?

Car Life sampled two early-production versions of the Toronado and Riviera and concluded that the Riviera is the better planned and finished car and that the Toronado is more roadable and stable under varied conditions.

In this latter context, the Toronado is outstanding. It has styling distinctive enough to make it stand out in any parking lot, and that styling shouts, "This is a front-wheel drive!" In a time when the outpouring of U.S. automotive design not only looks very much similar but is virtually identical in mechanical specification, the Toronado at least offers its buyer relief from the endless similitude.

The Riviera, too, has a distinctive styling and CL's reviewers found it the more refined and tasteful. But the Riviera has a drive-train just like that of every other Buick produced, so can offer no special appeal in this area.

Different people prefer different things. Good taste is good taste, no matter who likes or dislikes a design. The Riviera is a good example of good taste and good design. The Toronado is reasonably good design, but because of less refinement of its lines is not necessarily an example of good taste; it isn't gross enough in trim, proportion or finish to be in bad taste, it just doesn't come off as gracefully curved and pleasingly proportioned as does the Riviera. Side-by-side, or nose-to-nose,

comparison quickly reveals the differences. The Riviera proclaims by purity of line and understatement that its occupants have enough confidence in their tastes to eschew ostentation.

Interior fittings tell the biggest story. The Riviera has all the elegance and attention to detail one must expect in a \$5000 car. The Toronado appears to have been short-changed in this area in order to offset the expense of the much-costlier drive-train.

The Toronado with its flat floor develops one distinct advantage over the Riviera. With the standard bench front seat, the Toronado easily accommodates six adults. With the same seat, the Buick also seats six, but the two in the middle have to be either short-legged or uncomfortable. Otherwise, seating, knee-room, head-room and leg-room dimensions are virtually identical.

Straight-line accelerations are roughly comparable, unless weather or road-surface conditions are added to the consideration. Then the Toronado's greatest single advantage is immediately apparent. Wheelspin on takeoff is virtually impossible, even when Toro's front wheels are inches-deep in water. Traction on muddy, rain-slick streets is phenomenal—every bit as good as Olds claims it to be. On the other hand, the Riviera's rear-wheel drive skitters and slips all over the place when the throttle is injudiciously applied on even dusty pavement. The reason is obvious: Toronado has 61% of its test weight on its drive wheels where the Riviera has only 45%.

Over-the-road handling is the final major consideration and here again the Oldsmobile comes out ahead. Though a driver needs some experimentation before he can get the most out of the car, he will find the Toronado drives much like a normal car. On the other hand, the Riviera handles like a normal car in all

situations; straight-line driving is comfortable and non-traumatic, curves taken too fast result in the car plowing off the road nose-first. The Toronado, has the great understeering nose-plow, too, but something can be done about it. When the driver finds he has entered the turn too fast and is being led head-first off the outside of the curve, he can slant his front wheels toward the inside of the curve, back off and then stand on the throttle and let the front wheels pull the car on around the turn. But, on straight, or mildly curving expressway, few non-enlightened drivers could tell the difference between the front and rear-wheel drives.

The Riviera scores mightily over the Toronado in the braking tests, achieving deceleration rates of 22 and 21 ft./sec./sec. in the first two all-on stops from 80 mph. The best the Toronado could do was 18 and 12 ft./sec./sec. and that was accompanied by rapidly building brake fade. Riviera went to five consecutive stops from 80 before fade made the brakes temporarily unreliable. Here, the hefty forward weight bias works against the Toronado.

The strong points for the Riviera, then, are quality of finish and esthetic appeal and good brakes. For the Toronado, advantages are a soundly engineered drive system which produces outstanding traction for both handling and adverse road conditions, and better utilization of interior space.

Either car should prove reliable and durable in the hands of the owner-driver. Both have a mechanical quality far above many cars in the same price range. But, the choice still comes down to whether or not the buyer with \$5000 to spend wants the conversationally prestigious attributes of front-wheel drive over the esthetic appeal of the rear-wheel drive model. ■

