

Limité, Économe, Facilité

Text and photography by Eric Dahlquist

Some thoughtful sage once noted that change is the only constant in the human predicament. Still, we were not quite prepared to find our first test Simca 1204 GLS, the smash of the 1969 Simca-Rootes long-lead preview, judged by 20 writers as perhaps the best car in this year's entire Chrysler line, dulled by heavy, vague steering, uncertain cornering and unpredictable throttle response. It could not be. No matter what you camouflage Raquel Welch with, you've still got Raquel Welch.

As we bobbed and weaved toward home through the Santa Monica mountains over the tangled asphalt thread of Benedict Canyon Drive with a '69½, 1204, symptoms and remedies grappled in our consciousness. The throttle obviously had some kind of return retard attached, probably for emissions, so the engine came back to idle slowly; languidly enough that when someone ahead stopped quickly the engine purred merrily on toward disaster. The negative alloy of these failings even tarnished the pleasure of Simca's soft, real coil-spring seats that give you the support many such buckets deny, standard reclining seatbacks and room, an acre of space to uncramp in.

Arrived at goal, the plan was to learn if the Simca's flawed beauty was a hairline scratch or a San Andreas fault. In the driver's manual, they suggest escalating front/rear tire pressure from the normal 24/26 front/rear to 26/28 should you anticipate long, high-speed drives. In this instance two pounds do a difference make. The rack and pinion steering lightened noticeably and general adhesion of the 145 x 13 five-ply Goodyear radials bit hard on the road. Where you felt your way carefully before, now you could slam into a turn full bore and swing its arc like a U-control model airplane. Of course, with 2.91 x 2.76-inch bore/stroke, 73 cubic inch, four set crossways in the front of the machine, like an Austin America, you expect oversteer and you are not disappointed. Yet, the front-wheel-drive pulls the car around so well and the 58/42 weight distribution is such that you sometimes forget the driving wheels are at the wrong end. Simca has done the same sort of job subduing the feeling of snatchy, front-wheel-drivenness as Oldsmobile did in the Toronado only better because they did not compromise away any of the design's attributes.

The throttle hangup was alleviated by the simple expedient of removing the vacuum line from the diaphragm retard mechanism and blocking it. This improved driver control not only from the accelerator side but shifting as well since the rather loose-knit linkage seems less inclined to balk going into gear with the revs down. It is almost unreasonable with the transmission just a couple of feet away under the engine, that there should be any gear change problem, but the powerplant is anchored on large rubber biscuits to reduce vibration transfer into the body, legislating the shift linkage flexible enough to tolerate a degree of engine movement.

With the distractions put away, you begin to explore the wonders of the 1204, a car one Chrysler department chief said they could never duplicate in the States because the cost of such advanced, precise engineering would be too dear. At 158.6 inches overall, the Simca is 3.3 inches shorter than the 1500 VW yet, because it is a more contemporary design with small wheels out at each end of the 99.2-inch wheelbase (VW is 94.5), passenger space is perceptibly larger and there is thirteen cubic feet of trunk. Besides that, whether you choose a two- or four-door sedan, two- or four-door wagon, the back of the car swings up like a wagon, the rear seats fold flat like a wagon and you have

utility like a wagon. It is the next ramification of the Alec Issigonis Austin Mini/Austin America concept where you put the engine over the transmission and apply front-wheel-drive to keep the motive force as compact as possible. Small wheels, flat floors, no overhang equal an impossibly large interior-to-overall-length ratio. This is the only solution for places like New York City where you can't double the street area; but if you diminish the size of the vehicles using the streets by one half, the result is the same anyway.

Enjoying the luxury of Austin's experience and the bankroll of parent company Chrysler, the French picked the good facets of Issigonis' concept and discarded what they believed could be improved. Where Austin engine/transmission share a common oil supply, Simca has chosen two

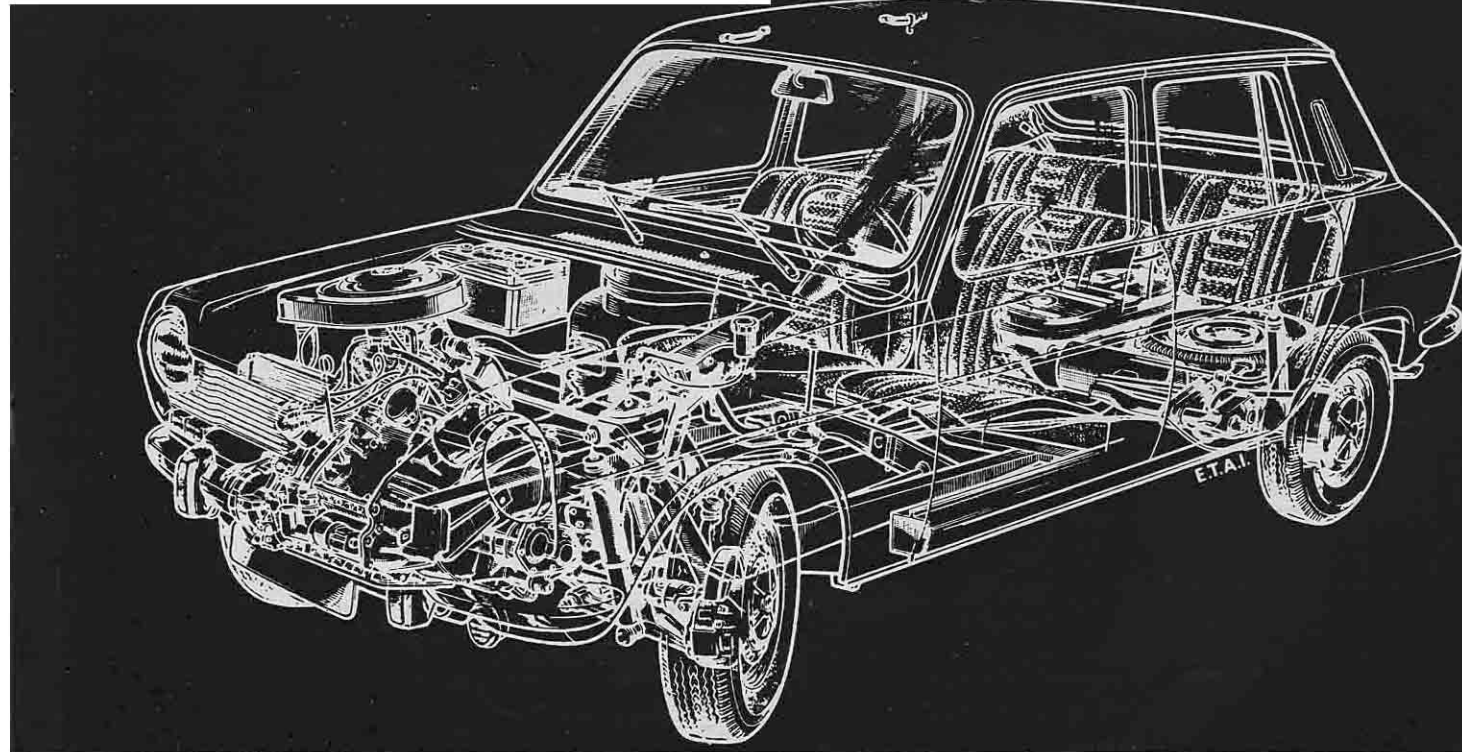
separate sumps for the economy of having normal oil changes. Also, Simca's engine is slanted back 40 degrees for easier service. The wheels on the 1204 are one inch larger than the America and have a greater cross-section which helps the ride. And instead of liquid, hydrolastic suspension they use all torsion bars; longitudinal in front like you-know-whose Detroit machines, and criss-cross in back. Both front and rear wheels have very long travel which, combined with the long wheelbase, allows you to zoom through swales at speeds that would demolish most other vehicles. On the road the car is very stable, a general characteristic of front-wheel-drive, but the ride is excellent too with little pitch. However, that big flat floor makes a dandy base speaker for bump noise on severe washboard

surfaces and resonant booming from the tailpipe above 60 mph. Let's hear it for more sound deadener and maybe a few stiffening ribs.

Although the 1204 is heavier than a Beetle (2050 vs. 1995 pounds) and 296ccs down in displacement, Simca's acceleration is in the same general perimeter. Which is to say, it's no hemi. We had heard Chrysler engineer Scott Harvey was successfully campaigning a 1204 in trials like the Canadian Winter Rallye where he and co-driver Ralph Beckman, plus the team of Jones/Peters, copped the Manufacturers' Team Award with the aid of some "prodifications." These turned out to be a tuned intake, exhaust manifold package and Weber carburetor offered by Paris' version of *Honest Charley, Auto Bleu*. While items from the *force de frappé* pack were in short supply, we discovered that moving the initial distributor advance from the factory's four degrees After Top Dead Center (ATDC), to six degrees BTDC, and exchanging the #125 main Solex carburetor jet for a #130 would improve our 1204's all-around driveability.

Working these mods plus raising the float level was enlightening. With Road Test Editor, Bill Sanders, aboard the re-timed and re-jetted Simca sliced a clean second from all its acceleration times except the 50-70 mph range where it lopped off three (18.2 to 15.2 seconds or 264 feet)! More savory was the generally robust attitude of the engine and the fact that cold starts were improved about 100 percent. Of course you must pay for this new-found vigor; half-a-buck for the jet (at your local VW-Porsche dealer) and in the neighborhood of 1.5 mpg of fuel. It is a more than fair ex-

In a machine of many surprises, perhaps the biggest surprise of all was the easy way it roared through the boondocks. Exceptionally long wheel travel allowed zooming into old stream beds (left) without fear. Smaller on the outside, bigger on the inside, remember that one? That's the 1204's strong suit.



Facilité *continued*

change for 264 feet of passing distance. Happily, these simple modifications are not a detriment to the rugged five-main-bearing 4's lifespan. Harvey's much hotter rallye job has showed no signs of distress though continually revved to 7000 rpm (5800 is the recommended shift point).

We learned two other lessons at our test day. For your continued peace of mind, the 1204 doesn't interrupt a long French tradition of superior brakes. Time and time again, the car's disc/drum anchors pulled us down from 60 mph immediately and without fuss. While Detroit reels from the staggering costs of producing jet-aircraft-like anti-skid brake systems, the Europeans are busy adding simple devices like the 1204's front/rear proportioning valve that inhibits rear wheel lockup. Sure, it's not as good as a full-bore computerized system, but the cost is only a fraction and you can have it now. Demanding just 128 feet of room to brake from 60, the Simca was one of the most consistent stoppers we've tried.

It is also the fastest off the pavement, nothing has been lost in the weeds. That great suspension doesn't know what's going under the tires: asphalt, dirt, gravel, sand, rocks, yel, even snow and ice, it's all the same. We've been told for years four-wheel-drive is the antidote for treacherous footing and we are here to tell you Bonnie and Clyde would still be on the loose if they'd hotwired a 1204. Front-wheel-drive notwithstanding, much of Simca's agility can be laid to the long, well dampened suspension and structural integrity of the unit-body, featuring as it does

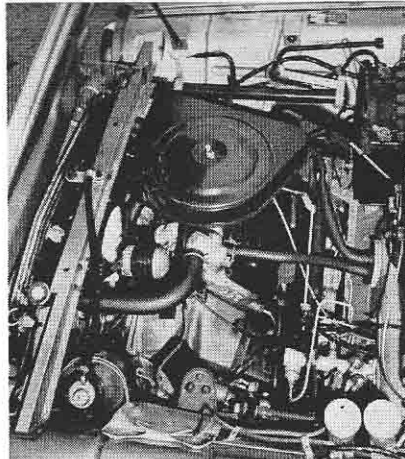
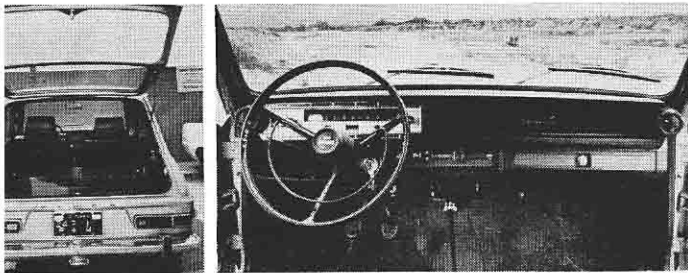
a full perimeter subframe as substantial as the frames used under some non-unit American cars.

A high ceiling and lots of glass means you can see forever, a panorama unencumbered by blindspots. It also means the 1204 sedan looks like a contemporary version of a scaled-down telephone-booth Model T Ford but this definitely is not a handicap. The flow-through ventilation with directional spot coolers works wonderfully at anything over ten mph and could be improved only if the blower fan were incorporated into the circuit. We don't know about French winters but the Simca's heater is like a gas furnace. The straight-cut transmission gears are noisy on trailing throttle but again extra sound deadener would keep the interior decibel level as low as it is most other times under 65 mph, when the engine seems like a distant Sunbeam electric mixer. Above 65, powertrain noise was not objectionable except for one area between 70-74 mph where some kind of harmonic hijinks roared out.

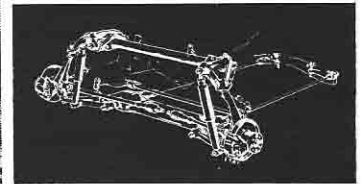
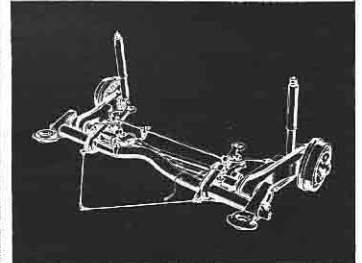
If you people at Chrysler are really serious about the economy car market, you will rectify those faults in the 1204 we outlined plus shoring up dealer enthusiasm to the point where they won't cop-out and push self-sellers like the Road Runner. And advertise it. Another Barracuda, the forgotten sporty car, you don't need. A fully automatic box would be advantageous but be thankful VW doesn't have anything more sophisticated than your own Porsche-like select-shift. You see, the Simca 1204 is really what the Maverick should have been; an inexpensive, quality-built, soundly-engineered, good performing, fun-to-drive machine that is relevant to an ever uptightening metropolitan America. Don't blow it, men. /MT



How about four, big, wide doors (left)? Easy to get in and out, hmmm? And on all the 1204s the back of the machine opens up like a wagon (below left), the seats fold flat like a wagon and there is wagon room. Dash (below), is Detroitish, one gauge.



Engine (above), is slanted back for very handy servicing of things like spark plugs. Air cleaner ducts in cold air from grille. Suspension uses torsion bars front and rear. 1204 ride is very balanced.



ACCELERATION standing quarter-mile (2 aboard)

	seconds					
	0	5	10	15	20	25
Opel auto				60		18.9
VW auto					21.43	60
Austin America auto				60		20.6
Camaro 2-speed auto (6)				60		18.7
VW 1600TL auto					60	21.1
Datsun 510				60		19.91
Saab wagon				60		18.95
Fiat 124				60		19.6
Volvo 164			60		16.47	
Simca 1204 GLS				60		20.02

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: In-line four-cylinder. **Bore & Stroke:** 2.91 x 2.76-inch. **Displacement:** 73 cu. in. **HP:** 74 @ 5800 rpm. **Torque:** 65 lbs.-ft. @ 3400 rpm. **Compression Ratio:** 8.85:1. **Carburetion:** Solex 1 bbl. **Transmission:** Four-speed, all-synchro. **Final Drive Ratio:** 3.94:1. **Steering Type:** Rack & pinion. **Ratio:** 13.5:1. **Turning**

Diameter: 32 ft. curb-to-curb, 3.2 turns, lock-to-lock. **Tires:** 145 x 13 Goodyear radial-ply. **Brakes:** Disc, front/drum, rear. **Suspension:** Front: Independent with longitudinal torsion bars. Rear: Independent trailing-arm with transverse torsion bars. **Body/Frame Construction:** All-steel unit with subframe. **Dimensions, Weights, Capacities:** Overall Length: 155.3 ins. Overall Width: 62.5 ins. Overall Height: 55.7 ins. Wheelbase: 99.2 ins. Front Track: 53.8 ins. Rear Track: 52.6 ins. Curb Weight: 2006 lbs. Fuel Capacity: 11 gals. Oil Capacity: 3.1 qts.

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration: (2 aboard)	Stock	Modified
0-30 mph	5.2	5.0 secs.
0-45 mph	10.3	9.5 secs.
0-60 mph	18.7	17.5 secs.
0-75 mph	38.3	32.1 secs.

Standing Start 1/4-mile

Stk. 63.8, Mod. 64.3 mph, Stk. 21, Mod. 20.0 secs.

Stopping Distances:

from 30 mph	25 ft.
from 60 mph	128 ft.

Mileages:

Range: 20-24 mpg, Average: 22 mpg