

The Durango

An aftermarket conversion of a Ford Fairmont...
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The Ranchero is dead. Long live the Ranchero! So what have we here? Some call it a Durango. We call it a Ford Fairmont Futura two-door coupe with a pickup bed where the backseat folks used to sit. And a handsome vehicle it is; as at home doing the hauling chores as it is transporting a couple swathed in finery to a formal dinner.

Ford made a marketing decision which we're sure it'll regret; phasing out the old Ranchero. If you're not up on Ford's once-popular car/truck, be alerted that it had been based on the Torino marque. Current FoMoCo downsizing has eliminated the bigger-than-they-have-to-be's, and the Ranchero as we once knew it has gone the way of, errr, low-cost fuel.

But this is good news to National Coach Corporation of Gardena, California, who saw the handwriting on the wall of a Ford building somewhere and whipped up its own version of a passenger pickup by taking an '81 Fairmont and doing good things to it. In haste we point out that this is no one-off where, in automotive circles, a creative someone starts with a conventional car and changes it to suit his/her fancy. This Durango came off a full-fledged assembly line right behind dozens of other Durangos and ahead of hundreds more.

We lived with the Durango for a week's worth of a thousand miles, and a more appropriately sized, plushly appointed car/truck is hard to conceive—unless you want to think about Chevrolet's El Camino. But even though the El Camino is based on GM's newly downsized Malibu car line, it's larger in about every dimension than a Durango. And large isn't what cars and trucks are all about just now. Not that the Durango would qualify as small, either. It's, uh, handy-sized.

To put the Durango in perspective with the El Camino, the Ford has 7.6 inches less bed length and 7.5 less width between the wheelwells. But if you filled the bed of each with water and measured the volumes, the two would come out very close to the same. The Durango also has

11.6 fewer inches of wheelbase than the Chevy, eight fewer inches of overall length, and it tips the scales at 420 fewer pounds.

An interesting thing about the weight. Our Durango weighed 2920 pounds with 58 percent of it on the front wheels and 42 percent in back. The official Ford factory specs on an '81 Fairmont Futura coupe list the curb weight (drivable vehicle, with fuel and other liquids) as 2723 pounds. But not included are the options; air conditioning at 88 pounds, for example. So we totaled up the basic factory car and the weight of options on our Durango and came out within seven pounds; a difference equal to a gallon of gas.

So a Durango weighs, and is balanced, the same as the Fairmont from which it is derived; the sheet metal, glass, upholstery, and trim that have been eliminated are made up for by the addition of the bed, the tailgate, and the structural steel add-ons required. Interesting.

What this means, of course, is that since the Fairmont's weight has not been upset, handling, ride, and general roadability have not been adversely affected. A race would produce a dead heat between a Fairmont and a Durango, given the same engine and drivetrain. So if you can't find a Durango but want to try one on for size, jump into the nearest Fairmont coupe and flog it. You'll like it.

It's obvious that the Durango's bed is not a box in conventional pickup truck style behind the cab. It's integral; in fact, from a side view you don't see any bed at all. What you do see is a Fairmont coupe without sheet metal and glass behind the B-pillar—that's automotive jargon for the panel that divides the greenhouse (more jargon) between the door and quarter window.

The box is a vast, single insert of fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) that is secured into the void behind the passenger compartment after the rear half of the roof, the side and back glasses, and the trunk lid are unceremoniously junked. Of course, there is much welded-in steel so the car retains its strength integrity when the rear of the coupe is severed. But, all

of this is unseen in the finished version. To meet certification requirements, a Durango was crash-tested (rear end only, the rest is purely Ford and was certified separately) at 30 mph and it survived nicely, thanks.

The designers have shown considerable insight and styling awareness in producing the Durango. Nowhere must the Fairmont's exterior skin be revamped as with most aftermarket conversions like this. The tools that slice off the discarded pieces, and the cut lines followed, do nothing to mar the Ford's exterior. There's not even need for repainting the car after the conversion is done. Applause is hereby directed to the folks who engineered and designed the Durango. They have actually enhanced the lines of what to us was a rather ho-hum-looking coupe. By the way, the car's cut edges and the overlap of the bed insert are sealed and screwed, then the joints are neatly capped with bright trim work.

Floor length from the inside of the tailgate to the forward bulkhead is 72 inches; exactly six feet. Maximum width is 54 inches while the intruding wheelwells are 37.5 inches apart. Not commodious, but not your mini-truck either.

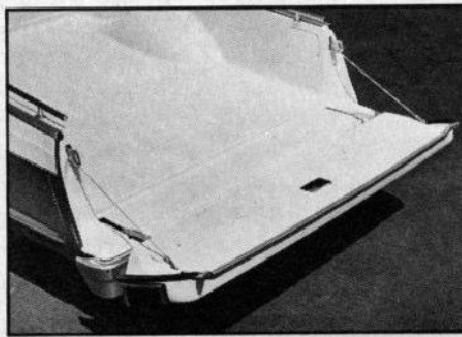
The floor increases by a sizable 27 inches when the tailgate is down—not that the 'gate is that deep, but because there's a lot of floor overlap when it's shut. You can't drive that way, though. The taillights and license assembly are fixed to the tailgate's exterior, and following traffic can't see them with the 'gate open. Besides, cargo could slide out since the FRP is on the slick side.

As for depth, the bed is shallowest at the rear corners and tailgate where it's 13¾ inches from the upper edge to the floor. Then the sides slope gracefully upward going forward, following the unchanged angle of the Fairmont's quarter panels until they swoop up into the sail panels, these lending a tunnel effect to the bulkhead housing the rear window but without hampering rearward vision.

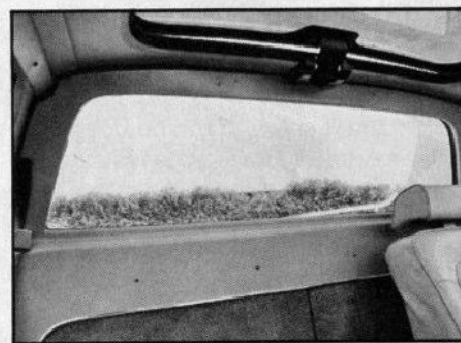
Attractive and firmly fixed (for once) side rails (a Durango option) allow the securing of bed cargo, there being no other hooks, stake pockets or anything



Stock Fairmont taillight / license assembly graces the broad tailgate which is steel-reinforced.



Tailgate swings down on cad-plated hardware, lies flush with the bed floor for easy cargo-loading.



It's a box-stock Ford Fairmont Futura up front but in back, oh my. National Coach Corp., builds it.

of that nature to help restrain gear. The floor is ribbed, which may help keep things from skittering about when the Durango is driven with alacrity, but it is likely a concession to construction strength and perhaps also to eliminate drumming.

The lowered tailgate lies flat and flush with the floor, and things of bulk must be lifted only 24.5 inches up from the ground. The gate itself is a wide 65 inches and like the bed insert, is of FRP. It's retained by cadmium-plated hardware and steel cables; very nice and professionally done, not the kind of thing you often see in a conversion. Tailgate operation is by a single-handed latch in a cut-▶



THE DURANGO

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out on the 'gate's inner surface. Spring-loaded hinges act as counterweights so the 'gate won't crash down when opened, and it closes with a satisfying *ker-chunk* when it is pushed shut.

PV4 has a penchant for calling a product as we see it. If the something that something is supposed to do doesn't do it, we say so. If a truck goes fast but handles poorly, we tell you about it. If it's slow but handles great, we tell you this too. National Coach President Bill Feldhorn was serious when he asked what we *didn't* like about the Durango. We had such a tough time trying to nitpick the car/truck, that we finally gave up. The Durango is good, period.

Of course, it isn't a truck/truck remember. It's a car/truck, meaning the suspension is rather mushy like your average boulevard sedan. But National can't be criticized for that. What National has done to change the coupe into a hauler, they've done well. The rest is Ford's doing, so you live with this but (and for once) the Fairmont comes out just fine as a drivable, roadable car.

Speaking of Ford, it has given the Durango its corporate blessings. Including an engineering blessing. Dearborn has gone over the Durango with computer and slide rule, and it is they who say that the upper cargo limit can be as much as 1400 pounds. Real-world capacity, however, is based on the engine/drivetrain/



suspension options of the base Fairmont, and the more accessories there are, the less the potential cargo weight.

Our Durango had the optional 200-cubic-inch Six with automatic transmission. The base engine is a whimpy 139-inch Four. Also optional is Ford's 255-inch V-8, and each of the three is available with auto or manual gearboxes. We expected a higher mpg number than was produced over our 1000 miles and considering the standard 2.73:1 axle ratio; a shade over 17 mpg. But we pushed the car/truck very hard and with the air conditioning on full-bore as well. Driven lightly and in cooler weather, the Six should see 19 mpg.

Western states' Ford dealers know all about the Durango. An Eastern plant is being set up so Durangos will be available there, too. These will be '82s, by the way, and the western facility will be

National Coach Corp. runs the Fairmonts down a regular assembly line, and Durangos emerge.

building '82s as soon as a shipment of new Fairmonts arrives from Ford. The project had been planned for an earlier date in 1981 than that which was finally achieved, so only a little over 100 units were assembled before the current-year model went out of production.

National can handle 200 cars a month. But when we toured the plant just 15 Durangos were on hand with a paltry four more raw Fairmonts before the '81 stockpile was diminished.

The bottom line: How much will a Durango cost? That depends on how the base car is optioned and it's up to the individual dealer to establish a price mark-up on the conversion. Be aware that you can't buy one from National, nor can you drive your own Fairmont in and have it converted. Anyway, figure roughly \$2000 above the Fairmont price for a Durango. This will put you in the \$10,000 area, but it's not a bad neighborhood when a similarly equipped El Camino is also 10 Gs. (Our test El Camino in the Sept., 1981 issue of PV4 had a sticker price of \$10,018.)

Ford is happy with the Durango arrangement, dealers are happy they have a car/truck to sell again, National is happy, and future Durango owners will be happy. But PV4 was unhappy. We had to return our Durango and that made us mad!