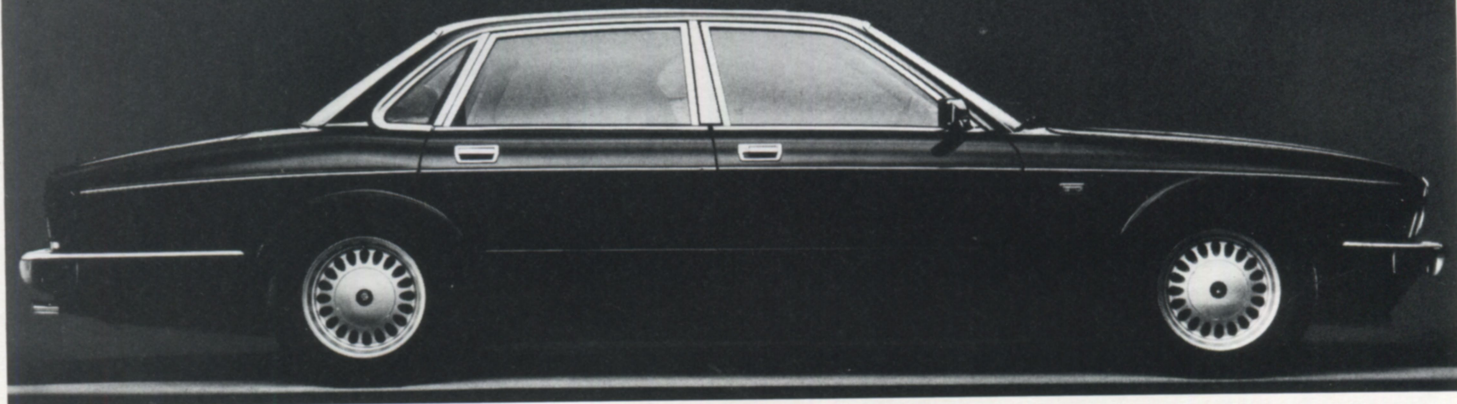


# KING OF THE ROAD

FORGET EVERYTHING YOU'VE EVER HEARD ABOUT THE JAGUAR.  
THIS FINE FELINE IS ONE  
OF THE BEST CARS IN  
THE WORLD.



They call it a Jaguar, the Jaguar XJ6 to be precise, but really it's a shark. Jaguars slink through the underbrush or laze in a tree; sharks rush headlong and confident into the void.

Take a look at this one here in the showroom. The low oblong grill over the front bumper makes a murderous set of teeth, and the sleekness of the body guarantees smooth running through deep water. Handsome, isn't it? The front tapers down slim and low; it swells to a rounded fullness enclosing the cockpit; then angles smoothly down to a trim, snug rear. With its eight layers of paint—here a deep and mysterious Solent Blue—the body is encased in something close to glistening sharkskin. Hear the music as its overhead cam six cylinder engine revs? It's the deep and throbbing bass line from *Jaws*.

Jaguars aren't all that popular, to tell the truth, but that's part of their appeal. Only 20,000 Jaguar XJ6s were bought in the US last year; BMWs and Mercedes each outsold them five to one. But, after viewing a Jag, who would settle for anything else? Particularly BMWs and Mercedes, the current snob cars.

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by John Sedgwick

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They are models of Prussian uprightness, and their partisans mistake their stiff verticality for status. Plus, they are more expensive—over \$50,000 for a car that is comparable to the \$38,000 XJ6.

Like many authorities, John White, *The Boston Globe's* respected automobile writer, gets downright testy as he contemplates the German luxury cars. "Compared to the Jaguar, the Mercedes is a piece of junk," he declares. "It's a boxy car with no style. And the BMW is a total fraud." And the Jaguar? "It's classy, it's got style, a sleek art-deco look. It handles well and it's really satisfying to drive."

Unlike its German competitors, Jaguars run long and close to the road. In the best British tradition, they keep a low profile; their power is under the hood. The cars eschew glitter for smoothness. The pocket doorhandles lie flush against the exterior. The four Halogen headlights are set snugly into their sockets, with slight arcing grillwork over the outer

two to stand as a pair of eyebrows, a wry joke the designer couldn't resist. Even the heralded sculpted jaguar that leaps from the hood of so many of the cars is an "after-sale" extra. You can see why the makers might not want it there—it snags the air and breaks the flow. But you can also see why a buyer might want to pay the extra \$250 for it: it tells the world the car is a Jaguar.

Go ahead, climb in. Slide down into the hand-sewn English leather seat, pull the door shut with the unmistakable thunk that conveys fine engineering and you have entered another world.

If the outside is sheer purpose, the interior suggests that there is more to life than getting where you are going. It is quiet in here and snug. A slight fragrance of fresh leather fills the air. A powered adjuster fits the seat to your frame like a glove to a hand. All the extras here are standard: power windows, locks, and steering; air conditioning; four-speaker Alpine stereo system, with Dolby; trip computer for calculating mileage, distance, gas. The steering wheel telescopes in and out at the twist of a lever. The dials in front of

you are large and round, as if they'd come off a forties racecar. A discreet mirror pops up from the flap inside the glove box for a lady to give the finishing touches to her makeup. The walnut paneling on the dashboard has been cut from a single tree. And the two halves have been aligned along a middle seam like a kaleidoscope, so that each precisely mirrors the other. You turn on the stereo, and then you hit the ignition . . . .

The Jaguar began life in the twenties as a motorcycle sidecar built by William Walmsley and upholstered by his sister at the seaside resort town of Blackpool in Lancashire, England. Humble as it was, the Walmsleys' Swallow Sidecar Company was a promising enterprise, and it attracted a young car enthusiast named William Lyons. Impressed by the Swallow Sidecar he had bought from a neighbor, Lyons joined up on his twenty-first birthday, September 4, 1922. The sidecars were but "tiny dirigibles painted in brilliant hues," as one

that would soon be Lyons' trademark.

He then moved onto his SS series, which dramatically elongated the hood into a symbol of potency no man could miss, juiced up the pushrod engine and, with the SS-100 of the thirties, produced a car that could reach a hundred miles an hour and sweep the field in international races.

In the middle of the 1930's, Lyons decided to branch out to something a little bolder and he turned to his publicity manager for a new name. The man drew up a list of animal, fish and bird names. From it, Lyons selected "Jaguar" because it reminded him of a powerful airplane engine he'd once seen.

The car was stunning. Compared to its gawky predecessors, the Jaguar had a long and elegantly flowing body. Its side fenders curved with grace and confidence around the wheels. Its long hood narrowed to a proud chrome grill. And its big round flat-lens headlights looked less like the pince-

impressive 250 a week.

Under the name the Jaguar Mark IV, the car came to America after the war—one of the first European cars to hit the US market. It had gained a built-in heating and demisting system, which it confusingly called "Air Conditioning" (the Packard was the first to offer the real thing, which it called "weather conditioner"), and the heater had a little trouble with American temperatures at first.

Despite the new name, the car was virtually unchanged from the pre-war Jaguars. It added a simple "J" to the rear bumper for identification, a lavish complement of tools in a box at the rear, and a radio to the dash. Still, the car's voluptuousness caught Americans by the throat. It was the first car to make Americans feel they might be missing something with their clunky Detroit models. As automobile historian Ken Purdy put it, "It made Buick owners feel somehow slobby."

If the Mark IV got everyone's attention, the next one—the XK-120—blew them away. Appearing in 1950, the XK-120 came up with yet another variation on the original overhead camshaft system to pull still more power out of the old horse. It looked like Lyons had stuffed a butterfly back into its larval sac. All the swishes and frills were pared down and smoothed over inside a vaguely ovoid shape. The front grill was slimmed down, the headlights pulled back into the flow of the hood, the cockpit made snugger, and the rear wheels covered with spats.

Like previous models, the XK-120 was named for its top speed, but it quickly surpassed that, and reached 132.6 mph on a flying mile in Belgium. With it, Jaguar started selling more cars abroad than at home. In honor of his international accomplishment, Lyons was knighted in 1957.

With many refinements, the XK-120 led to the beauty that you now see in Jaguar dealers' showrooms: the XJ6. Begun in the early sixties, the car wasn't available until 1969, for the com-

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PHOTO BY KEN WHITMORE

biographer of the Jaguar has put it. But in them lay the seeds of something far grander to come.

At that time, there were two kinds of automobiles being manufactured in England—custom-made luxury cars that were too expensive for all but the richest barons and industrial magnates, and creaky, ugly, funeral-black sedans for everyone else. Lyons recognized that a large market existed for a stylish car that was made affordable by mass-production. Lyons tried out his ideas on a two-seater roadster called the Austin-Swallow that placed a Swallow-built coach on an Austin chassis. Although it looked a bit too much like a motorized Hansom cab, it displayed some of the pleasing lines undergirded by terrific power

nez glasses of previous models, and more like beacons scanning the future. Its newly-designed overhead cam engine took the car from zero to sixty in 17 seconds. That dropped to a mere 10 two years later. Inside, the car had the fine leather upholstery and abundance of wood trim that drivers have come to expect from a Jaguar today.

Largely because of its low (under \$2000) price, critics declared it a "Wardour Street Bentley," referring to London's trashy theater district, but buyers knew a bargain when they saw one. A poll of dealers showed they expected it to be priced up around \$4000. When the war closed down production in September, 1939, the Jaguar's Coventry factory was turning out an

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pany was bedeviled by wildcat strikes and bad planning. When the car finally hit, the result was breathtaking.

Writes Purdy: "I drove one around in England for a week in May 1968. I admit, more or less cheerfully, that I loathed every Mark VII [the XJ6's immediate predecessor] I ever sat in; but the XJ6 is something else again, quiet, fast, (120 mph) and sure-footed on the road to a degree still uncommon in comparable American cars . . . The XJ6 spreads out a splendid impression of luxury, not more nor less than, say, a Cadillac, but of a different sort. It's a classic luxury, a virtuoso treatment of the solid-leather, polished-walnut, big-round-instrument theme."

The company hit the skids in the seventies, when it was taken over by British Leyland, the nationalized makers of Triumphs and Rovers. As Jaguar dealer George Chabot of Chabot Motors in Worcester says:

"You needed to buy two Jaguars back then, because one of them was sure to be in the shop."

But in the eighties, the company returned to private ownership once more. Reliability has been restored, as evidenced by the three year or 36,000 mile warranty that comes with every new model.



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Now, the XJ6 is set to reappear in an entirely new version, the XJ-40. Due out in April, the car has been in the works since 1980 undergoing intense testing and fine-tuning: 1.25 million miles in the heat of Arizona, 1.1 million in the cold of the Canadian winter, 1.8 million in the dust of the Australian outback, and, most

grueling of all, 79,000 in the canyons of New York City. The effort has apparently paid off. Britain's *Car Magazine* has declared it, "The finest saloon car in the world." That's British for a great sedan.

But the current XJ6 is no slouch. Nice as it is to look at and sit in, the greatest thrill is to turn the switch and drive it. The first thing you notice as the car comes to life is how heavy it is, how solid. It weighs over two tons and harks back to the days before the fuel crisis when a car was still a car and not a cookie tin. As you pull out, this one actually feels like more than a car; it feels like a ferryboat. But the power is there in such quantity, you don't lose your competitive edge to any of the Japanese or German devils in the other lanes. Instead, the heaviness extends the car's amazing grace into a fourth dimension—of motion over time.

As you press the accelerator to the floor, the circular white on black tachometer and speedometer dials perform a graceful ballet before your eyes. Instead of jerking forward, you gain speed in a stately fashion. (But don't expect great gas mileage: It only gets about twelve miles to the gallon in the city, and so is subject to an \$850 gas guzzler tax.)

The car's automatic shift gives only the slightest hint of the transitions through the gears as you move from zero to—ah—fifty-five. You are travelling briskly along, yet it is still so quiet inside you are jolted by the tiny hum of the heater kicking in. Despite the speed, the car's rack and pinion steering and thick Pirelli P5 215/70 tires allow you to make sharp turns smartly and with assurance. And you can stop on a tuppence with the 11-inch, servo-assisted disc brakes.

The English version of the car is called the "Sovereign," but that wouldn't have gone down too well in a democracy. Still, you see why the name fits as you bring the XJ6 up to cruising speed, settle back in the plush leather, and see the envious looks of bested drivers in your rear-view. In a Jaguar, you are indeed king of the road. ■



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