

ROCKET MOM: DREAMING OF THE RIGHT STUFF

By Joni M. Fisher

Reaching middle age drove me to get in touch with my true geek self—my inner astronaut—who understands the seduction of speed and power. Earning a pilot’s license, then an instrument rating failed to satisfy me because part of my life remained stuck in low gear behind the wheel of the family van. I wanted satisfaction in a vehicle that suited the real me. That’s when fantasy whispered that I’d have to win the Florida Lottery to afford my dream vehicle.

My attraction to the Space Shuttle was lust at first roar. I ask you, what’s not to like with a vehicle that cruises at 17,322 miles per hour? Nothing says speed like three Gs pressing on your chest. Accelerating from a standstill to Mach 1 in sixty seconds, the shuttle offers the ultimate thrill ride. Can you imagine the rush of being pressed back into the pilot’s seat to *exceed the speed of the sound* of the booster rockets one minute after starting them? The fastest NASCAR vehicle would look like it was racing in reverse against the shuttle. Wheeeha! Now wouldn’t that kind of pick up come in handy for merging into highway traffic? And thanks to the plumes from the solid rocket boosters, no one would dare tailgate. Talk about the ultimate in off-road vehicles, who needs roads?

And wait, it gets better. The Space Shuttle seats seven. The five-point harness seatbelts far exceed highway safety recommendations. And cargo space?

It hauls 22,000 pounds of gear, the equivalent of three and a half disassembled Lincoln Navigators.

As I test drove SUVs of various makes and models, I dreamt of serious engine power. Just as a Harley engine turns heads with its distinctive growl, one booster rocket could drown out an entire Harley Rally. That's what I'm talking about.

While a salesman cooed about tinted windows of the Ford Expedition, I remembered the shuttle's thermal protection system, designed to keep the passenger area cool even when external temperatures soar to 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit. Features like four-wheel anti-lock brakes and side airbags sound so lame compared to deployable twin parachutes.

When another salesman pointed out the nifty combination TV VCR in the Oldsmobile Silhouette, my mind envisioned the shuttle's closed circuit television system, spiffy S-band phase modulation transceiver and the state-of-the-art Ku-band rendezvous radar.

The shuttle's sales representatives would never point out cup holders or the vanity mirror or any of the other stuff unenlightened salesmen feel compelled to show women. No, siree. If I were buying my dream vehicle, a team of engineers would fly in to answer my questions. They'd paint it whatever dang color I wanted. It would be made to order. I would demand that the engineers do something no automobile manufacturer has managed to get right—design a place where a woman can stash her purse within easy reach. That single feature would make me the envy of the car pool set.

Okay, okay, beyond terrific bragging rights, would the space shuttle satisfy my other needs? The Toyota 4Runner had well-labeled controls that I could operate on my own, whereas the shuttle had 100 times more displays and controls. Sigh. Even though I'm an instrument-rated pilot, the shuttle's control panel looked daunting. I bet the owner's manual comes in volumes. Who wants to read those things?

There were no mileage statistics in the space shuttle press kit, so I contacted one of the friendly geniuses through the NASA home page. After he stopped laughing, Dave Williams, of the National Space Science Data Center, gave a rough calculation of 400,000 miles a day. Based on my driving style, which is to go as far as possible per tank, I used the maximum flight time recommended for the shuttle—18 days. At 400,000 miles per day, that came to 7,200,000 miles between fill ups. Of course no mere van or SUV could compete with that, but the fantasy started to unravel when I discovered that refueling the space shuttle would require going to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida or the Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

When I bought my previous mom-mobile van in 1991, it cost \$21 to refuel the van and \$613,040 to refuel the space shuttle. Hmm. I'm afraid to calculate what it would cost now. It's one of those situations in which if you have to ask, you probably can't afford it. So fuel charges would consume the rest of my imaginary lottery winnings.

Then there's the problem of vehicle size. The space shuttle won't fit in the garage, even if my husband parked his car in the driveway. Though I'd always be

able to locate the space shuttle in the mall parking lot, did this feature outweigh the others?

My dream vehicle couldn't tow a boat without melting it. Parallel parking would be out of the question. How would I execute a U-turn on a four-lane road to backtrack to the intersection I missed? Would the space shuttle possess that wonderful new vehicle smell?

Lottery winnings aside, the deciding factor would have to be availability. New shuttles just aren't on the market. Really, deep down, who wouldn't prefer a new vehicle over a used one? Of all the vehicles I test drove, the Toyota 4Runner emerged the winner, though it was a slower, less fuel-efficient production vehicle than the space shuttle, a new 4Runner suited my lifestyle. True, it was a sacrifice of speed in favor of handling, but all vehicle buyers contend with such choices.

So to satisfy my mid-life yearnings, I bought the Toyota 4Runner Limited Edition in Millennium Silver and named it Rocket. My front license plate read "FLY." You'll recognize me as the forty-something woman hauling a carload of teenagers. I'll be embarrassing my daughter by playing the "Top Gun" soundtrack on nearly full volume, riding with the moon roof open and letting the wind blow through my hair. You can't do that on the space shuttle.

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