

Thunderbird 1977 to 1979

Ford's Mid-Size, Middle-Class Luxury Liners

By Steve Repergel

1977 marked a big year of change for the Ford Motor Company. For starters, the Elite was no longer available from the selection of middle class luxury vehicles. In addition, Torino was now deleted from the lineup and replaced by the new LTD II. The biggest change, however, was saved for the large, heavy-weight Thunderbird. Knocking off ten inches of excess length, the revised Thunderbird body was positioned onto a 114-inch wheelbase and ranked as a mid-size automobile.

The all new Thunderbird, or T-Bird as it was affectionately coined some twenty years earlier, received all new sheet metal and a price that dropped by a whopping \$2,700. The relief in cost quickly faded, however, as customers learned that Ford now offered less standard equipment, meaning buyers had to spend more money on optional accessories if they wanted to spruce up their shiny new T-Bird.

The 1977 Thunderbird had style, charm and class. The exterior was impressive with a chrome wrap-over roof molding and beveled glass opera windows. Uniquely, the rear side windows were offset and sat higher than the door windows for a more dramatic appearance. Up front, square flip-up doors gave way to large, round, single headlamps while the fenders were attractively accented by side louvers. At the nose of the car was a crosshatch grille chrome plated with bright surround molding and dominant horizontal bars. It was hinged at the top so the bottom of the grille could swing inward to avoid damage under a slow speed impact. Park and signal lenses rakishly appeared at the front fender tips while a stunning, full-width taillight assembly spanned the back

underneath a sculpted decklid. The Thunderbird nameplate was situated on the centre trunk section between the taillights, prominently displaying the car's heritage to those behind.

Under the hood sat a smaller, redesigned 302 cubic-inch V-8 engine with the newly advertised Dura-Spark ignition. California buyers, however, received the 351 Windsor cubic-inch engine with the option of purchasing the 400 cubic-inch V-8 with either a two-barrel or four-barrel carburetor. At the chassis level, large front and rear stabilizer bars made handling easy along with the aid of higher rate rear springs. For maneuvering, HR78x15 steel-belted radial tires held the road and were moved by a SelectShift automatic transmission.



The Ford Thunderbird models were equally appealing on the inside with a simulated burled woodgrain dashboard angled for easy viewing from driver point-of-view. Note the tilt steering wheel option on this particular model.

Inside the comfy cockpit there was seating for six on a Wilshire cloth/vinyl bench seat, or optional split. For those who wanted even more amenities, an interior Décor Group offered Ardmore and Kasman Knit cloth upholstery, bucket seats with fold-down

armrests, a reclining passenger seat with visor vanity mirror, and color-keyed seatbelts. At the driver's position a five pod instrument cluster faced the driver with European-type graphics all behind a simulated burl woodgrain dashboard. Standard accessories included power steering and brakes, a coolant recovery system, electric clock, wheel covers and an AM radio, just to name a few.

Town Landau models came with distinguishing stripes on the upper portion of the body, accent paint on wheels and fender louvers, a die-cast hood ornament with a color coordinated acrylic insert, and Town Landau script silk screened on the opera windows. Turbine spoke cast aluminum wheels were also included along with dual sport mirrors and cornering lamps and the owner's nameplate finished in 22K gold. Inside, a Town Landau plaque was aimed at the right of the instrument panel. Other features included an illuminated entry system, a day and date quartz clock, a leather-wrapped sports steering wheel and an automatic temperature control air conditioning unit.

By mid year, Ford announced a Silver/Lipstick feature package. This included a body colour in either Silver metallic or Lipstick Red with the same vinyl roof treatment. Inside, a Dove Grey all-vinyl décor group offered matching door and trim colours along with a split-bench or bucket seats, Lipstick Red accent straps, and carpet molding.



Although a rag top was never offered in this series of Thunderbird models, Ford issued a T-Top option in 1978 to help appease customers who were in the market for a convertible. (Photo courtesy of *Illustrated Thunderbird Buyer's Guide*)

In 1978, Ford had plans to refine its highly successful and stylish new Thunderbird models which garnered record high sales of 315,000 units the previous year. The company proudly introduced six new body colours along with four vinyl roof colors, cloth bucket seats and a new russet interior trim. Ford also announced a cool-looking T-Top option at a cost of nearly \$700 to help satisfy customers who were hoping for a convertible model. However, the biggest news came mid year with the arrival of the limited production Diamond Jubilee Edition to commemorate Ford's 75th anniversary. It was the most exclusive Thunderbird at the time with a base price of over \$10K and included several items never before offered on a T-Bird. The Diamond Jubilee had a unique monochromatic exterior offered in just two colours - Diamond Blue metallic or Ember metallic and a thick-padded vinyl roof that corresponded to the car's exterior paint. The model was given special quarter-window treatment; a jewel-like hood ornament; turbine cast aluminum wheels; colour-keyed bumper strips, and wide bodyside moldings with accent striping. Diamond Jubilee Edition script marked the opera windows along with a hand-painted monogram of the owner's initials on the door.

The interior of the Diamond Jubilee offered a unique split bench seat with biscuit style cloth, a leather covered steering wheel, twin illuminated vanity mirrors, and seatbelt warning chimes. Diamond Blue models came with a matching colour interior while Ember bodies were done in a rich chamois-colour. Facing the driver was an additional gauge package including a tachometer positioned below a hand-stitched leather-covered instrument panel. Finishing off the interior were ebony wood tone appliques and a 22K gold-finish owner's nameplate. Standard features included whitewall tires, AM/FM stereo with power antenna, dual sport mirrors, and a reclining manual passenger seat. By year

end, nearly 19,000 Diamond Jubilee models were produced by the company.

In 1978 the Town Landau models came in 14 different body colours. Standard accessories had not changed from the previous year, yet six velour trim colours were now available along with optional leather seating surfaces. Town Landau models also offered a SelectAire air conditioner, AM/FM stereo search radio, day/date clock, trip odometer, wide vinyl-insert bodyside moldings, a six-way power driver's seat, power windows and locks, cornering lamps, and an interior luxury group.

Thunderbird's optional accessories included a Sport Décor Group. This boasted a bold, blackout grille, unusual imitation decklid straps, twin remote mirrors, spoke-style wheels, and tan vinyl roof with colour-keyed rear window moldings. New options for 1978 included a power radio antenna and a 40-channel CB. The standard engine remained the 302 cubic-inch V-8 with a SelectShift automatic transmission, power steering and brakes. Both the 351 cubic inch V-8 and 400 cubic-inch V-8 were optional. Sales surpassed all expectations at 325,000 units.



Standard equipment included a rather tame 302 cubic-inch V-8 engine with 129 horsepower and an 8.4:1 compression ratio.

1979 would mark the last year of the true mid-size, middle-class luxury liners from Ford. Thunderbird was now at the peak of luxury boasting a much bolder, heavier-looking

automobile. The nose carried the large grille that underwent subtle styling changes in its final year. A new spoiler was positioned below the front bumper. Clear fender-tip parking lamps with adjoining amber marker lenses marked each fender along with side louvers. A single backup lamp stood between the taillight lenses.



At an additional cost, the Ford Thunderbird could be equipped with an interior Décor Group, which offered Ardmore and Kasman Knit cloth bucket seats and wide folding armrests for both driver and front passenger comfort.

Under the hood Thunderbird added a new electronic voltage regulator and performed a few refinements to the carburetor of its semi-economical 302 cubic-inch V-8 engine. Door and ignition locks were upgraded for theft protection. Eight body colours along with five vinyl roof colours, and four interior trim colours were also new for 1979. Standard seating included a bench seat with Rossano cloth seating surfaces and large fold-down front armrests. Headlamp covers held a bird insignia, plus a Thunderbird nameplate on the front passenger side.

A posh new Heritage edition replaced the Diamond Jubilee Edition in 1979. 'Heritage' script went on the huge blank 'C' pillar as that model had no large rear side window. Heritage had two monochromatic body colour themes in maroon or light medium blue, with matching formal padded vinyl roof. Equipment included 36-ounce cut-pile

carpeting, split bench seats in either soft velour cloth or optional leather, a leather-wrapped steering wheel, sports instrument panel with tachometer, driver's lighted visor vanity mirror, and AM/FM stereo radio.

Town Landau had a new extended-range 27.5 gallon gas tank, AM/FM stereo radio with cassette, mud/stone deflectors, and an ultra-soft leather/vinyl upholstery for Heritage models. Bucket seats and a console could be ordered separately or as a no-cost extra with the Interior Décor Group.



Striking at any angle, the 1977 to 1979 Ford Thunderbird models were a sleek design and could be nicely optioned. This particular 1979 T-Bird Landau model came equipped with stylish chamois-colored polycast rims, white wall tires, chrome trim, wide vinyl bodyside moldings, and upper body pinstripes.

By the end of year sales had tapered off as the U.S. economy was in a recession, yet more than 280,000 units sold in 1979, marking an end of a successful three year run for the seventh series Thunderbird. More than 25 years later, the 1977 to 1979 mid-size Fords are still appreciated for their style, reliability and influence on middle-class luxury. They are in essence the more affordable version to the big luxury Lincolns of that era. However, much like the Lincolns of the late 1970s, most of the 1977 to 1979 Ford models fall short in garnering any high price tags in today's collector car market. While it is unlikely that any of these models will set record breaking figures for sellers anytime in the near future, they will always be remembered as some of

the finest mid-size, middle-class luxury liners produced in the company's history.