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South: Partly sunny. Storms in Tennessee Valley and northern Gulf Coast States. Isolated storms to the south. Sultry. Highs 85 to 95 in most places. Weather map is on Page 20.

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With Real Estate
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The New York Times **Sports Sunday**

The New York Times **Automobiles**

For Microcar Fans, It's a Small World After A

By ROB SASS

THE timely arrival of fuel-sipping small cars like the Honda Fit, the Nissan Versa and the Toyota Yaris may finally answer the question of whether Americans are ready to downsize their aspirations in automobiles.

Should gas prices continue to rise, drivers may be willing to consider vehicles smaller yet — even tiny urban runabouts like the stylish Smart ForTwo, which Daimler-Chrysler recently announced would go on sale in the United States in 2008.

Showroom success is far from certain for this new generation of petro-misers, though. America's previous flirtations with the microcar — a class loosely defined by collectors as cars less than 10 feet long with engines smaller than 1,000 cc — have all ended on sad notes.

Microcars in America go back at least as far as the 1930 American Austin (later sold as the American Bantam), a 1,200-pound 750 cc version of the British Austin built under license in Butler, Pa.

Though blessed with scale-model cuteness — the Depression-era roadster looked like a dodge-'em car that somehow escaped from Coney Island — the public was able to resist its charms. Aside from providing a sight gag for movies — usually with a very tall driver at the wheel — Bantams failed to catch on and the company did not produce automobiles after World War II.

Powel Crosley Jr., an appliance maker from Cincinnati, produced a full line of thrifty, innovative small cars from 1939 to

1952, but again, consumers were unimpressed. The microcar gained wide acceptance only in Europe, where a combination of congested cities, high gas prices and scarce raw materials created an urgent need for cheap transportation. Not surprisingly, Germany and Italy produced some of the most popular microcars.

With no demand for their military products after 1945, German aircraft factories turned to civilian products. In a plant that had built the world's first jet fighters, Messerschmitt started making the KR 200, a bug-eyed three-wheel microcar. It was relatively popular with Germans who could not afford larger cars but wanted something more than a scooter or a motorcycle.

Rather than swing-open doors, passengers entered the Messerschmitt KR 200 after flipping open the clear canopy — just like the feared Messerschmitt fighters. It even had an aircraft-style steering wheel. But the KR 200 could manage only about 50 miles an hour from its 9.7-horsepower engine. Gas mileage, however, was impressive — between 50 and 80 miles a gallon, depending on driving conditions. Messerschmitts are generally considered to be among the best engineered and most collectible microcars; they have an active following and a ready availability of parts.

One of the oddest microcar stories is that of the Isetta, a 7.5-foot egg-shaped car with a single front-hinged door and a 247 cc motorcycle engine of 13 horsepower. Conceived by an Italian refrigerator maker — continuing the peculiar tradition established by Crosley of appliance companies entering the microcar market — the Isetta was sold in Italy un-



Photographs courtesy of the Lane Motor Museum

der the Iso name.

Sensing a market for the car in a still-rebuilding Germany, BMW, then near bankruptcy, licensed the rights to build the car; it made more than 100,000 before moving on to larger cars.

Today, BMW has a sense of humor about the Isetta, though it is doubtful an Isetta will show up in advertising the way a vintage 2002tii has in the past, or that ad copy will proclaim: "BMW— from Isetta to iDrive in just 50 short years."

Isettas and Messerschmitts may be cheeky oddities in the United States — they are often called "bubble cars" — but there is considerably less affection for them in Germany. Unlike the atomic-age optimism that a boldly finned '57 Chevy evokes for Americans, an Isetta reminds older Germans mostly of the hardships endured before the West German economic miracle took hold.

Microcars have often found favor with collectors who have a sense of the absurd — and humble enough to embrace cars with minuscule engines, tiny tires and quirky styling. Isettats have sold for \$12,00 to \$20,000

Small World After All



Photographs courtesy of the Lane Motor Museum



Clockwise from left, 1957 Messerschmitt KR 200; 1965 Peel P50 on a 1970 Subaru Sambar; Isetta with its single forward-opening door.

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BMW

at collector auctions and on eBay Motors; one notable Messerschmitt brought \$25,000 at a British auction last year.

Because of their crowd-pleasing ability, microcars are now welcome at some exclusive vintage car shows. The Amelia Island Concours d'Élégance in Florida added a

separate microcar class this year; it was won by a 1950 Reyonah, a tiny French car that resembles a cross between a small speedboat and a praying mantis, owned by Bruce Weiner, a prolific microcar collector.

Their attractiveness has prompted many car museums to add microcars to their collections. The display at the Lane Motor Museum in Nashville includes lesser-known brands like the Peel and the Scootacar. The curator, Susan Lane, co-founder with her husband, Jeff Lane, enjoys introducing microcars to visitors. "You can explain the history and why these cars developed in gloomy postwar Europe and you'll get blank looks and questions like, 'Yeah, but can it drive on the road?'" she said.

Mr. Weiner's collection of microcars must surely be among the largest in the world. Mr. Weiner, who houses the cars in a museum in Madison, Ga., expressed his belief that devoted microcar collectors were the true iconoclasts and oddballs of the hobby. "Microcars were the sole domain of low-budget, blue-collar types with a sense of humor," he said, noting that these collectors do not need a big bank account or a three-car garage to have several microcars.

Mark Hyman, a classic car dealer in St. Louis, has sold many examples of the breed. He explains the psyche of the microcar buyer this way: "The guy who buys a microcar is looking for something different — pound for pound, a microcar is the greatest bargain in crowd-attracting fun in the collector-car universe," he said.

But safety may be an issue: although Mr. Hyman walked away unscathed, he has experienced a triple rollover in a Messerschmitt KR 200. The accident happened while backing the car up a driveway at less than 15 miles an hour — in front of horrified guests at his wife's birthday party.