



Dark Horse

The unusual Aro Hunter 244 might be emerging as the best four-wheel deal in town.

By Colin Sargent

It's cool—it looks kind of Soviet.”

The man standing with a group of friends in Dock Square, Kennebunkport pronounces Soviet so that it rhymes with sobriquet.

Another person just stops, drops his hands.

“Is this...?”

I nod my head yes to his unfinished question, his Larry Rivers of a question.

“I love the way it looks! It's got that Land Rover mystique or whatever!”

Yes, it does.

Driving up to an automatic bank teller in Portland, I see a teenage driver behind me lean out his window and then get very animated. “This isn't one of those Romanian-imported cars they were talking so much about a few years back, is it? Like they have at the International Terminal? It is? No way!” Way.

I am test driving the Aro Hunter 244, and I've never felt so delighted, or so

surprised at having my expectations exceeded or my preconceptions reversed, in quite some time. Everybody wants to stop and talk about this car.

It's tight, hums wonderfully with an all-U.S. drive train and 130-hp. 4-cylinder fuel-injected 5-speed engine (automatic transmissions are also available), and is decidedly “not Soviet!” says Catalin Tutunaru of Aro North America/Maine, the “automobile factory outlet” distributing the cars here on the coast of Maine. In fact, this vehicle is the pride and joy of a free Romania. With pickup like an NFL running back and a tiny 16.5-foot turning radius, the Aro Hunter 244 spins as nimbly as a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter swiveling over a spot.

It's incredibly sporty and fun.

Its detailing is in brushed stainless steel, not plastic.

And in spite of its low price (\$9,500 new; used as low as \$5,500 or \$6,000), from all external appearances, I don't think anyone's built a more solid

chassis on a moving hunk of metal since the B-17 Flying Fortress.

“I didn't know I'd like these so much,” says a man on Forest Avenue, who has walked up to it in a parking lot. “It's built like a tank!”

With five doors and a seating capacity of five, augmented by a panther of a 4-wheel drive, the Aro Hunter 244 makes short work of Maine beaches, back roads, climbs (a snap up Mount Agamenticus, all the way to the fire observation tower), and fields. It's comfortable in the rough and tumble, reverberates silently over cobblestones along Commercial Street and Silver Street in the Old Port, yearns in its heart for ski country.

Getting onboard, you should bring your oxygen mask—this is a very stable *and* a very high vehicle (at 6 feet overall height far taller than a Jeep Cherokee or Ford Bronco). In fact, the Aro 244 is a good deal more spacious than these cars, has much bigger windows for a panoramic-view effect, and, if the Land Rover is the index of style for the breed, then the Aro leaves many other models in the dust in that intangible Year-Of-Living-Dangerously category as well. It's somewhere impressively between a Range Rover (around \$40,000) and an Isuzu Trooper (around \$20,000).

Standard features include a great two-way rear door; rear window defroster; intermittent wipers; super-duty alloy trailer hitch; full instrumentation, including tachometer; power steering; electrical outlet for trailer; swing-away door and swing-away full-sized spare; key light indicator, map pockets, inside hood release; lighted glove box compartment; performance-style bucket seats forward with headrest; center floor console; day/night rear view mirror; passenger vanity mirror; forward-folding (and removable) rear seat; insulated head-liner, and overhead hand grips. In short, though eminently practical, there are more goodies than I expected.

Looking actually more British than Soviet, the Hunter 244 makes you feel a sort of kinship to Peter Jennings at the wheel, or some live CNN newscaster on assignment with press passes in Burma or somewhere like East Turkey, the old Peter Jennings, maybe, back when the poor guy was ambulatory.

I was first fascinated by the Aro

when I saw 41 of them stacked up at the International Terminal this past summer. Their limbo attracted the bargain-hunting beachcomber in me—they were blue and maroon and red and silver and white, all awaiting re-certification due to their original certification having lapsed during delays caused by the Romanian Revolution.

They were very attractive dark-horses.

Now, having easily passed this second certification test, these 1992 Aro Hunter 244s will hit the regional market this year as new cars carrying sizeable discounts, possibly the best automotive values in the state.

Their condition is extraordinarily good, and as a Maine resident, you have a special advantage. You live near the Aro North America/Maine factory outlet for these automobiles, on 486 Elm Street in Biddeford, which looks like but is totally unlike a retail dealership in its organization.

"This is the only automobile factory outlet in America," says Catalin Tutunaru of Aro of North America/Maine, "and that is why the price for the 244s is so affordable. This is significant. We're placing cars all over the country," he says, citing journalists in both New York City and Chicago as recent buyers.

If you like this type of car, you owe it to yourself to at least test drive an Aro Hunter 244.

More technical data? Aro sport vehicles have a base curb weight of 3652 pounds and can carry a payload of 1,548 pounds.

Payload for a new Isuzu Trooper is about 1,345 pounds.

Dollar for dollar, base price for a new Isuzu Trooper is around \$20,000; tag for a new Ford Bronco is around \$21,000; the Jeep Grand Wagoneer has been advertised at \$27,865; Range Rovers are around \$40,000; Land Rovers weigh in at circa \$35,000.

The telephone number for Aro North America/Maine is 283-8601.

Am I enthusiastic? Sure, though obviously I'm a driver and not an automobile reviewer, e.g., I know fun when it rolls over the sand dunes toward me. Am I objective? Of course not! After all, with a value like this, what better car is there to lose your objectivity in? ■

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