



sive doghouse down the middle seems a bit overpowering at first, but it soon becomes an acceptable (if not particularly welcome) shelf for elbows; at least the door-side armrests lie at the same elevation. The shift lever is a bit too far forward for our taste (the knob reaches the wheel plane only at the bottom of the H-pattern), but the feel through the lever is surprisingly transmissionlike, in spite of the fact that cables are actually doing the shifting.

We're not particularly thrilled by the instrument cluster. Although the necessary information is available (except for velocities above 85 mph), the main dials are too small, the designers have selected an awkward mix of round and square openings, and the whole array is spotted a good three inches too low. (Clearly, those who handled this phase of the creation could profit from a crash course at the Porsche school of instrumentation layout.) Otherwise, the interior is pure function wrapped in tasteful trim. Go for the up-level SE interior, and you get a nifty leather-covered steering wheel, genuine pigskin uphol-

stery, and lamb's-fleece inserts down the middle of the well-contoured bucket seats. Step up to the Fiero's killer sound system, and you get a pair of stereo speakers in each headrest.

One might fancy that a simple turn of the key and a punch of the right pedal would snap this illusion of sports-car supremacy into reality, but such is not the case. Escape velocity may be scheduled for next year, but for the time being the Fiero is a victim of its 50-mpg obligations. The best you can do is select the "performance" set of transmission and final-drive gear ratios (which drops the EPA highway fuel economy to 42 mpg). This boosts eagerness at low speeds to nearly acceptable levels, but the combination of short gearing and an engine that goes breathless at 4500 rpm produces more frustration than acceleration. Shift early and wait patiently for the 2.8-liter 60-degree V-6 that's just around the corner.

This year's four-cylinder does, in its own time, deliver you to the point where handling fun begins. The Fiero all but begs to be molded to your un-

der-, over-, or neutral-steer preferences. The nose drifts out mildly as cornering forces build, but it's a simple matter of lifting off the gas pedal for an instant to cut back smartly on the understeer. And then the Fiero is yours to play with as you drift across life's apexes with the greatest of ease. Stiction levels are excellent at 0.81 g.

The steering has much less feel than it should, but the ratio is satisfyingly quick. A power assist is not yet part of the deal (it will be later), but Pontiac has added a hydraulic damper to its rack-and-pinion steering gear in an attempt to limit kickback through the wheel over bumps. This ploy has been only partially successful to date; we found the Fiero's wheel busy over wavy terrain, although the ride is exemplary.

Development is far from finished, so we'd prefer to sit back and watch the Fiero fight its way through the trying stages of early production before passing final judgment. It's clear, however, that there will be some disappointment over the feeble power-to-weight ratios that will hit the streets this fall. Even so,