



Official name: Suzuki Motor Corporation.

Owned by: Volkswagen (19.9%), Suzuki family members, Japanese banks, General Motors (3%) & Fuji Heavy Industries (1%), plus public shareholding.

Formerly owned by: General Motors (20.4%).

Owns: GM-Daewoo (14.9%), together with a host of joint ventures around the planet.

Current situation: Suzuki is the 9th largest automobile manufacturer in the world by production volume. Suzuki factories build passenger cars, commercial vehicles, motorcycles, offroad vehicles, engines, outboard motors, marine and power products, motorised wheelchairs, and electric vehicles for senior citizens.

Suzuki operates 141 subsidiaries and 37 affiliates across 23 countries worldwide.

Chances of survival: good.

Thanks to a recent massive cash injection from Volkswagen, Suzuki can afford to expand its loyal customer base globally. Being a major manufacturer of small, economic vehicles at a time of uncertain energy prices gives Suzuki a unique opportunity to prosper •



A brief commentary on Suzuki

Michio Suzuki – the son of a peasant farmer – began the *Suzuki Loom Works* in 1909. He had developed a pedal-operated loom that sold very well.



MICHIO SUZUKI

The company grew to dominate the market, but there were few export opportunities and a limit to how many looms the local market could absorb. Keen not to waste decades of industrial development, Suzuki looked to car production. Suzuki imported an Austin *Seven* from England and cloned it in 1938. However, World War II began and the project was shelved.

In the chaos that followed Japan's defeat in World War II, the company barely survived. Then Michio Suzuki's son, Shunzo, reputedly came up with the idea of bolting a motor to his bicycle while riding home from a fishing trip. Suzuki began making these motorised bicycles in 1952. Their first model – the *Power Free* – was such a success that Suzuki changed its name to Suzuki Motor Corporation two years later.

Suzuki quickly grew into a major player in the motorcycle business, but it was also a car maker from very early on. Suzuki's first modern car, the *Suzulight*, was released in 1955. However, success in the car business was a little slower. Most of the early Suzuki cars were 'Kei class', meaning lightweight and fuel efficient vehicles specifically designed for Japan. At the time it didn't occur to anyone that these lightweight cars were death-traps. It was only when Suzuki began export-



ing that the message gradually sank in at home, but it took many decades. Thus, many Westerners' memories of early Suzuki cars are of ghastly little compact models with unreliable two-stroke motors that sounded like lawnmowers.

Later models used more conventional designs, but the reputation for tinniness and vulnerability remained for a long time.

Suzuki didn't just have an image problem; it had a reality problem – Suzukis feature disturbingly often in lists of early-'80s vehicles involved in fatal or injury crashes in Australia. It wasn't just Australians who suffered. In 1994, more people died in a particular Suzuki offroader than any other car in America. This does not mean modern Suzukis are unsafe. However, it does show how unsafe many early models were.

Late-model Suzukis are generally much better than their predecessors, and they have moved out of the budget market into the mainstream. A recent investment from Volkswagen should assist Suzuki to become a major player.

However, from a customer point of view, there are still a few problems with Suzukis: Suzuki's heritage as a motorbike company shows through in every car. Every gram of excess weight has been shed in the interests of handling, performance and fuel economy. The price you pay for this loss of weight is a vehicle that doesn't have a wide margin for error. For example, on the previous model Suzuki Swift, the rear axle can be bent if you simply go a bit too fast over a speed bump. Actually, you can bend the rear axle just by using it to jack the vehicle up to change the tyre. This style of flimsy, just-strong-enough engineering has always been the curse of Suzuki passenger cars.

Szukis are generally pretty nice cars to own, even though they're a little lightweight for our tastes. Would we spend our own money on a Suzuki car? Actually, we probably would, but we'd treat it gently and sell it before it grew too old •

