

TRENDS

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ANTHONY COHEN with the giant Hummer: "These vehicles give you exclusivity."

LOOKING to buy a new car? Forget fuel economy, easy parking and child seats – how about something designed to carry a platoon of GIs through a warzone?

The Hummer – a US military wagon adapted for the street – is just one of the amazing array of cars attracting envious looks at American Car Imports.

With David Beckham and Jude Law among its satisfied customers, the firm has gained a national reputation as the place to go for a style statement on wheels.

As director Anthony Cohen explains: "These vehicles give you exclusivity, it's something different."

Mr Cohen fell in love with the cars during a trip to the States, and started selling second hand imports from his home in 1991.

The business swelled, and from its base in Coburg Road, Wood Green, the firm now gets through around 150 vehicles a year.

It seems Mr Cohen is not the only Brit to succumb to the charms of American motoring. More and more people are arriving at his door in the search for something a little bit different, and Mayor Ken Livingstone's tirade against four-wheel-drives has done nothing to dent enthusiasm in what Mr Cohen calls "the 51st State".

"A lot of British people go to America for holidays," he says. "They hire these cars from Hertz, and when they come back they want to get hold of them but they're not available anywhere.

SO MACHO

We're satisfying that need, it's the forbidden fruit of the car market."

The business has had a stream of celebrity clients – England footballer David Beckham bought a Lincoln Navigator, actor Jude Law beefed up his machismo with a GMC Yukon Denali, and Harrods' boss Mohammed Al Fayed snapped up a Harley pick-up truck for his daughter.

They even supplied Robbie Coltrane with a mighty 1950s convertible for his TV trip across the US.

Mr Cohen says: "All these people have come to us, to a small street in Wood Green. We don't need a showroom in King's Road, people will find us."

In the cash-addled world of luxury cars, American Car Import's vehicles are surprisingly cheap. A new Hummer will set you back around £50,000 – less

than a Range Rover. And if that's too rich for your blood, Hummer has started producing mountain bikes in the same butch mold for around 800 quid.

But Mr Cohen insists the amounts paid are academic. More important is the feeling of not so much keeping up with the Joneses, as leaving them coughing in your exhaust fumes.

"It's got nothing to do with price," says Mr Cohen. "It's to do with the fact that these American vehicles are not available in Europe. They're buying something with a lifestyle to it. They like American things, and want to have a bit of America in the UK.

"The risk of them being stolen is actually very low," he adds. "If you see a bright yellow Hummer driving round Wood Green it's going to be quite hard to hide."

With their expertise in

American cars it was only a matter of time before the firm got involved with the most star-spangled motorsport of all – drag racing.

Mr Cohen's description of the sport as "very quick" turns out to be a bit of an understatement. Their racer will get you to 100mph in a heartbeat, and five seconds later you'll be steaming along at 270mph.

The drag car does 24 gallons to the mile, needs a new set of wheels every three miles, has no brakes and a steering wheel more fitting to a dinky toy than a rocket engine on wheels.

But it obviously does the trick. The firm's team – with its 61-year-old driver David "Grumpy" Wilson – has taken on the Yanks at their own game and won, at least in one contest. They are the first non-American team ever to win a drag race on American soil.

Mr Cohen says: "We're the most successful drag racing team in Europe."

Big country... big cars... and now some of America's mightiest motors are attracting big names like David Beckham and Jude Law to a Wood Green car importer's to buy a bit of the star-spangled lifestyle

By **GEOFF WHITE**