

**TALKING AUTOMOTIVE:***The Ins and Outs of Car Repair*By SUE PASCOE  
*Staff Writer*

With the stock market acting like a manic depressive off his meds—highs, lows and no indication of where it will go next, and economists declaring a recession but giving no clues as to when it might end, many consumers are electing to keep their current cars rather than buying new ones.

“I find that when the economy is like this, my business goes up,” said Malibu Motors owner Albert Bavajas, who specializes in Mercedes repair. “If a person’s lease is coming up, they’ll keep it an additional few years.” Malibu Motors is a family run shop, with brothers Albert, John, and Henry part of the successful team.

Adjacent to Malibu Motors is Morris Automotive where owner David Morris agrees with Bavajas’ assessment. “We’re going to get more people maintaining existing cars,” Morris said. “It’s cheaper than buying a new car, especially factoring in the insurance and registration.”

The two automotive shops are located at the corner of Colorado and 14th Street in Santa Monica. Morris specializes in American and Asian makes and Bavajas works on Mercedes, BMW’s and Jaguars.

Morris admits he has been a “motor head” ever since he was in high school at St. Monica. He opened his first automotive repair shop near 14th Street and Pico in 1987. The next year he hired his first employee and in 1990 he moved to his current location, which includes spots for six cars. He now has five employees and numerous testimonials from customers who have been with him since he opened.

“People want me to work on their car because I’ve been their guy for the last 10 years,” Morris said. “They’d rather we do it, because they know us and trust us.”

Since Morris works on such a wide variety of cars, he was asked if there any models he would avoid. “Yugo or Kia, or any of the Korean cars, I can’t get any parts for them, they’re not made to be fixed,” he said. “They’re like throwaway cars.”

There are some cars he wouldn’t recommend because “they’re expensive and they need a lot of maintenance, and then they break down for no reason,” Morris said, who drives a Nissan pick-up and owns a classic 1977 Cadillac Seville. If a customer is thinking of buying a new car, the shop offers a new car dealer inspection.

If someone were thinking about buying a used car for perhaps a teen driver, he recommends a Nissan, Camry, Honda Accord or RAV 4. “They’re reliable, usually break down less, and you have less trouble with them. They’re better engineered,” Morris said. “If you wanted to go American, the Chevy Blazer or the Buick Century are also good.”

Morris Automotive will inspect a used car that you might be thinking about buying. In addition, Morris recommends looking at the reliability report and car facts. “Research on a used car is important,” he said.

“I like BMWs, they’re fun to drive, there is low maintenance, but the service is costly,” he said. “Volvo has a good reputation, but they’re expensive to maintain.”

Car repair has changed over the years. “When I started, there were no computers,” Morris said. Now the cars need to be checked out with the diagnostic

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MERCEDES REPAIR SPECIALIST

equipment, which is done through a software package. Every model of car needs a different package.

“I constantly have to update them,” he said. Another issue is finding workers who can deal with the early model cars, like a 1965 Mustang as well as doing the computer diagnostic work on a 2004 Nissan. “The younger technicians don’t know how to adjust a carburetor or points or timing, which is the basic stuff people used to do.”

Is there a point at which he would say it isn’t worth repairing a car and a person would be better off buying new? “Mainly if a transmission is going bad or is having problems, I’d recommend getting rid of it,” he said.

Morris suggests that when you take your car to a shop you should check on the mechanic qualifications. His shop is AAA approved and has received an Automotive Service Excellence Award, meaning his technicians have had to pass various tests at automotive schools.

An AAA rating means at least one technician has received a master’s status, requiring a person to have taken and passed tests in eight different areas: brakes, steering and suspension, engine repair, heating and air conditioning, engine performance, manual drive and axles, automatic drive and electrical and electronics system. Ratings must be reevaluated every four years.

In order to prevent breakdowns on the road, “It’s critical to do the service check-up,” Morris said. “You can go to Jiffy Lube and change the oil, but nothing else is checked. If you come into the shop, we’ll do a courtesy inspection. It prevents the customer from coming back unexpectedly. It’s a safer way to live—it’s safer for everybody.”

“The ideal would be for our customers to come in two to three times a year, that’s the way we like to train our customers,” he said.

Bavajas echoes Morris in regards to car maintenance. “Change the oil, it doesn’t sound like a lot, but it maintains the engine,” he said. “When you bring your car in for the change, we check out everything.”

Malibu Motors opened in 1979 at the corner of Topanga Canyon Road and Pacific Coast Highway, and moved to Santa Monica in 1982. Bavajas and his brother John got interested in Mercedes through a German gentleman they met in the 1960s, and after working in Mercedes independent shops, were hooked. “It’s a nice car,” Bavajas said.

The six technicians in the four bay garage go to school to keep up with the latest technology. “We also go to seminars to learn the new technology,” said Bavajas, a Santa Monica High graduate. “We go every year, every other year. If something is

built in 2004, generally 2005 stays the same.”

“One of the most expensive cars to maintain is a BMW or a Lexus,” Bavajas said. “Everyone thinks Mercedes is the most expensive maintenance-wise, but it’s not.”

He points out that by going to an independent dealer, a Mercedes driver will save money. “Generally dealer labor cost is \$130 to \$190 an hour, but an independent will charge between \$90 to a \$100.”

Bavajas drives a Mercedes E320 station wagon and also has a classic 1970 280 Excel. “I love the old cars,” he said. “I like the classics, the 70s models. The new ones look the same. Mercedes, BMW, Lexus all have the same body styles.”

The newer cars are more efficient with emissions, but they also have more technology, which can have a downside. “They’re overbuilt,” he said. “But you plug it into a computer and it tells the mechanic what’s wrong. Overall, the technology and safety is better.”

“We get a lot of customers, once the cars are out of dealer warranty,” Bavajas said. “We’ve been in business for 30 years and our business has been word of mouth. We have the same clientele and now we’re seeing their kids, who are bringing their cars in. A Mercedes owner should feel comfortable wherever they take their Mercedes.”

*Malibu Motors is located at 1323 Colorado Avenue in Santa Monica. Call (310) 394-3171 or visit: [www.santamonicabenz-repair.com](http://www.santamonicabenz-repair.com)*

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