

They're Tiny. They're Slow. And People Are Obsessed.

In an era of supersized pickups and SUVs, Kei cars and trucks bring a (very) little piece of Japan to the United States. Getting one on the road can be complicated.

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By Scott Cacciola

Reporting from Alexandria, Va.

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Aaron Corn spent a recent afternoon adding some pizzazz to his 1991 Subaru Sambar, a white pickup truck that looked as if it had shrunk in the wash.

As his wife, Laura, packed the Sambar with drinks and snacks, Mr. Corn carefully applied decals to its side paneling that contained the Japanese symbols for Fujiwara Tofu Store, a fictional business in the manga series, “Initial D.”

In the series, the main character drives a hatchback. But near his home in Leesburg, Va., Mr. Corn, 50, tools around in his Sambar, a type of vehicle known as a Kei truck. Ubiquitous in Japan for decades, Kei trucks are extremely small, decidedly slow and, despite a series of federal and state laws that can make them difficult to import and register, quietly growing in popularity among American consumers.

Mr. Corn, who works as a consultant, recalled the moment he first spotted a Kei truck in the wild, at an auto repair shop about three years ago.

“They had been on my radar,” he said, “but when I finally saw one in person, I knew that I had to have one.”

After he finished applying his decals, Mr. Corn and his wife, 39, braved bad weather, downed trees and closed roads on a two-hour drive to Alexandria, Va., for an evening meet-up of the Capital Kei Car Club.



Andrew Maxon's Autozam AZ-1 managed to stand out even among the other Kei cars thanks to its distinctive gull-wing doors. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times



Lowell Detwiler, left, and his father, Wayne, had room to spare in a 1997 Mitsubishi Minicab Bravo GT Super Aero Roof. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

A smorgasbord of Kei cars and trucks soon filled the parking lot at Yates Car Wash & Detail Center. Daihatsu Hijets. Honda Actys. Mitsubishi Minicabs. Each built to Kei class standards — about 11 feet 1 inch long and 4 feet 10 inches wide, or smaller, and powered by three- or four-cylinder engines. Nearly all of them had personal touches that made the vehicles seem as if they were aware of their limitations.

A red FIRE MISSILES button where the cigarette lighter goes. Vanity plates like VRYSLW and ANARKEI. Bumper stickers that alluded to the presence of enough horsepower to mow a small lawn.

In an age of cultural and political bombast, Kei vehicles are oddly defiant, drawing attention for everything they are not: big, loud, showy. Instead, amid a churning sea of steroid-fueled S.U.V.s and oversize sedans, Kei cars and trucks traffic in discretion — and stand out because of it.

“You go get gas and people are like, ‘What the heck is that?’” Mr. Corn said.

Kei, pronounced like “Hey,” is short for kei-jidōsha, which loosely translates to “light vehicle.” American enthusiasts list a host of reasons for the vehicles’ surprising emergence, starting with their affordability. Others cite a fondness for all things “J.D.M.,” which stands for Japanese domestic market, and a budding nostalgia for the anime, video game and film franchises of their childhoods.

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“I think a lot of millennials with disposable income are reliving their ‘Need for Speed’ dreams,” Mike McDonald, a product manager at a tech startup, said in a telephone interview. “We had a bunch of video games that let us drive mid- to late ’90s J.D.M. cars, and now they’re becoming available.”

The only difference, of course, is that no one driving a Kei vehicle is burning rubber.



Aaron Corn, left, is so proud of his 1991 Subaru Sambar that he wore a T-shirt with an illustration of the model to the meet-up. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

“There’s no machismo or hostility or toxicity within this community,” said Andrew Maxon, the founder of the Capital Kei Car Club, which has about 100 active members. “We don’t go out and street race, because all of our cars are slow as hell.”

Old, too. The federal government requires foreign vehicles to meet certain safety and emissions standards in order to be imported. And while Kei vehicles almost always fall short of those standards, foreign vehicles that are at least 25 years old are exempt and can be imported as classics or antiques.

Translation: The latest models now on American roads are from the year 2000. In Japan, there are parking garages that house Kei vehicles that are eagerly awaiting their 25th birthdays so they can be shipped off and hit the open road (or, perhaps, a quiet suburban street) an ocean away.

And at a time when cars can be painfully expensive — the average new car sells for nearly \$49,000, according to Kelley Blue Book, while the average used car sells for more than \$25,000 — imported Kei vehicles often cost less than \$10,000, sometimes much less.

“A lot of younger people feel like the American auto industry has lost its way,” Mr. Maxon said. “The smallest U.S. pickup truck you can get is still monstrous, and nobody I know wants that. You don’t need a 30-foot-long Ford F-150 to go get mulch from the hardware store.”



Many of the Kei cars look sporty, even if their engines keep them off the race track. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

Sergey Hall, 23, who works at Yates and helped organize the meet-up, arrived in his 1992 Suzuki Cappuccino, a two-seat sports car that rides so low that it appears to be in danger of being swallowed by a pothole.

“It’s like a road-legal go-kart,” he said.

The model first captured Mr. Hall’s attention when he was flipping through his father’s copy of Hemmings, an automobile magazine. After finding one for sale at Duncan Imports & Classic Cars, a dealership in Christiansburg, Va., Mr. Hall went to take a look, and drove it off the lot the same day.

Potential consumers in the United States typically face a choice: buy one from a business that already went through the byzantine process of importing the vehicle from Japan, or attempt to save some money by doing the legwork themselves.

Those who choose the latter often say they feel a sense of personal investment because of the time and energy required — the vehicular version of giving birth.

“You come out of it feeling like you really earned it,” Mr. McDonald said. “You have this bond with this vehicle now: I found you!”

Mr. McDonald, 32, described himself as someone who “collects vehicles that are very use-case driven.” When he lived in Colorado, for instance, he leaned heavily on his Toyota Tacoma, a rugged pickup that could handle the weather and the terrain. He also owns a BMW M2, a sports coupe, which has been customized to the point that it is nearly impossible to drive on city streets.



The small cars are often accessorized with stuffed animals, toys and various references to their inadequacies. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times



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But after moving last year to Austin, Texas, Mr. McDonald wanted a practical vehicle for running errands, he said. After joining his brother at a Kei truck meet-up, he started asking around: How do you get your hands on one of these? Informed that it could be tricky, Mr. McDonald made obtaining one a personal challenge.

“I bet I could import a truck, right?” he recalled saying to himself. “How hard could it be?”

Mr. McDonald detailed the process in a blog post that he named “Importing Kei Cars.” Weighing in at 5,582 words, the post includes 67 links to other websites, 87 bullet points, more than 20 acronyms, two charts and countless tips for others who are thinking about entering the Kei game.

Still, Mr. McDonald was not the first person to import a Kei vehicle — far from it — and he was able to consult a number of Kei community watchdog groups, including one on Facebook that aims to protect consumers from “shady JDM importers.” Those resources helped, Mr. McDonald said, especially when there were so many unknowns. Atop that list: Was he going to get scammed?

“Your dealer is like, ‘Hey, send \$3,000 to this address,’” Mr. McDonald recalled. “And then you don’t hear from them for over a month until they’re finally like, ‘OK, your vehicle is on this ship.’”

Jeremy Chamblee, 36, of Huntington, Va., sourced his 1997 Honda Street himself after consulting several Reddit threads and YouTube videos. He found the process fairly straightforward, he said. The only problem was that the ship carrying his van had been rerouted to New York after the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed, largely blocking traffic in and out of the Port of Baltimore for 11 weeks.

Since landing safely in his possession, the van has been a joy to drive, Mr. Chamblee said. He even takes it on the highway for his short commute to work, at a fire sprinkler company, which he considers a calculated risk. He has a bumper sticker that reads “Slow Car Club.”

“Kind of a warning to other drivers,” he said. “But also, I don’t have an airbag, so please don’t hit me.”

Most Kei vehicles are not designed for highway driving. The Daihatsu Midget II, for example, which bears a vague resemblance to a popcorn booth and is billed as the smallest pickup in history, is reportedly capable of accelerating (if that’s the right word) from 0 to 60 in a leisurely 35 seconds.

“Let me tell you,” said Mr. Maxon, who owns one, “when it gets to 60, it’s mad about it, man.”

The point is usually moot, since Kei vehicles are banned from most highways. Some states, including New York and California, have even more stringent rules aimed at preventing their use, citing safety and environmental concerns. Aside from having engines that, according to Mr. Maxon, “scream for mercy” at high speeds, many older Kei vehicles have suboptimal braking systems and wafer-thin crumple zones.

But as Kei enthusiasts often point out, motorcycles aren’t particularly safe, either.

“If you just have an around-town commute or even a farm, these things are super useful,” Mr. Maxon said.



The absurdity of the cars was apparent, even when pictured with a cat on a leash. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

Todd Gatto, the president of HVNY Imports in Goshen, N.Y., said he had sold about 1,000 Kei trucks since he opened his doors about four years ago. Customers, he said, benefit from knowing that the vehicle will be reliable, which is not always the case when they import one themselves.

“It can be a coin toss,” he said. “There are no guarantees. What happens if you get one with a bad motor?”

HVNY Imports also handles nearly all the paperwork, Mr. Gatto said. For customers who live in New York, where the registration of Kei vehicles is largely prohibited, Mr. Gatto works with an asset holding company in Montana that will register the trucks there and outfit them with Montana license plates.

Mr. Gatto offers advice to new owners before they leave his lot. “Don’t take it on the highway, keep it 45 miles an hour and under, and it will last forever,” he said.

Several states have taken steps in recent years to more formally legalize the vehicles.

In Texas, State Senator Kelly Hancock, a Republican from a district that includes Arlington and Fort Worth, introduced a bill in March that sought to codify into law the “titling, registration and operation” of so-called miniature vehicles — namely Kei trucks. The bill passed both chambers.

Mr. Hancock, who recently resigned from the legislature to become acting state comptroller, said that he wrote the bill after a childhood friend brought the issue to his attention. Mr. Hancock soon became a minor celebrity among the Kei crowd. Some, he said, came by his office to shake his hand.

“I have pieces of legislation that seem to be a lot more impactful, but these people — it’s their vehicles,” he said in a telephone interview, adding: “And we’re Texas. We’re all about freedom, so we were all for it.”

Even once you successfully acquire a Kei truck and get it registered, there is plenty of learning to be done. Because they are meant for use in Japan, where people drive on the left side of the road, the steering wheel is on the right side. Most of them have manual transmissions, which requires drivers to learn an antiquated skill, and to do it with their left hand. Mastering the metric system is useful as well, since the speedometer is in kilometers per hour.

“You can’t have a big ego and drive a Kei car,” Mr. Maxon said, “especially when you look like an idiot getting in and out of it.”

For Mr. Corn, the Sambar has become a family affair since he bought it in December. His wife had no issues learning to shift with her left hand. The problem was the turn signal, which is on the opposite side of the steering wheel.

“I kept turning the windshield wipers on instead,” Laura Corn said.

Their 15-year-old daughter, Olivia, who is into cars, has gotten a kick out of the Sambar, too. And before long, her parents said, Olivia will be hitting the clutch and shifting into (a modest) gear.

She can apply for her learner's permit in three months.

Scott Cacciola writes features and profiles of people in the worlds of sports and entertainment for the Styles section of The Times.

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