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NATURAL LIVING

ON THE ROAD

The All-Cotton Car

by Christine Barnes

Let's face it -- you can never make your car's interior completely natural, no matter how hard you try. But you can do a great deal to reduce exposures from synthetics by having an upholsterer replace the seats, headliner, and carpet with cotton materials.

Is It Worth It?

Before you begin looking for materials or a willing upholsterer, decide whether your car merits the expense. You won't be able to replace molded plastic parts or completely eliminate traffic fumes. But reupholstering with cotton can significantly lessen overall air pollution levels in your car.

For me personally, upholstering the car in cotton seemed a good investment. I plan to keep my car, a VW Scirocco, a long time, making the cost over the years very reasonable.

It took about six phone calls before I found an upholsterer interested in the job. I told him my goal was to eliminate every possible synthetic, which meant replacing the front and back seat covers, door panels, cargo tray, headliner, and carpet with cotton materials. He was agreeable to using natural fabrics and avoiding toxic substances such as foam and glue. The front seats presented the biggest challenge because, like other bucket seats, their bases were molded foam. The need to rebuild these seats with cotton batting put the labor estimate for the entire project at about \$800.

Locating Natural Materials

Finding all-cotton upholstery fabric suitable for a car was difficult. Manufacturers and upholsterers, of course, like synthetic fabrics for their stability and durability. You can look through an upholstery shop's samples, but don't expect to find *untreated* cotton. You might also look at home furnishings fabrics in larger fabric stores; some imported fabrics are all cotton and untreated. Several natural products catalogs offer medium-weight canvas and duck, but I eliminated these because of the cleaning problem. Denim is another possibility if you don't mind the inevitable fading.

Erlander's Natural Products catalog (PO Box 106, Altadena CA 91101, 818/797-7004) had just what I needed, a 100% Haitian cotton upholstery fabric, 60 inches wide and -- a pleasant surprise -- only \$5/yard. I chose light gray to match the car's silver and black exterior. I ordered 15 yards, soaked it in vinegar and then soda, and washed it twice in Erlander's washing compound.

I also bought 7 yards of 45-inch-wide cotton barrier cloth, a special 300 thread per inch fabric (\$12.95/yard) from The Cotton Place (PO Box 59721, Dallas TX 75229, 214/243-4149). It got the same soaking and washing treatment as the upholstery fabric.

Two king size cotton batts (72 by 84 inches, \$23.95 each) also came from Erlander's. This batting has no oil or fire retardant.

Locating suitable cotton carpet was the most frustrating part of my materials search. Delinger Custom Carp



(PO Drawer 273, Rome GA 30161, 404/291-7402) had undyed cotton carpet with no latex backing; you can also order carpet dyed to match. Enough undyed carpet for my car cost \$250, more that I wanted to spend. The sales representative and the upholsterer both discouraged me by saying that carpet without stabilizing backing would be tricky to install in a car. If I couldn't get a good fit, I certainly wanted to find less expensive carpet. I gambled on three mail-order cotton rugs (4 by 6 feet, \$25 each) from Conran's catalog (4 South Middlesex Avenue, Cranbury NJ 08521, 609/655-4505). The plan was to cut and seam them to make one carpet piece. Made in India, they had a strong odor that only improved after four soakings and washings.

Altogether, the fabrics, batts, and rugs cost about \$325.

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Christine Barnes, former editor for Sunset Books, is a freelance writer and designer living in Rough & Ready, California.

Getting The Job Done

The upholsterer began with the front bucket seats, rebuilding the seats over the existing metal frames. A layer of barrier cloth provided a foundation for channel stitching and a barrier to keep batting fibers from coming from the seat covers. He used the old seat covers as a pattern to duplicate factory-made upholstery. He was even able to rebuild the headrests with batting in place of the molded foam.

The back bench seat was a more straightforward job -- layers of batting over the frame, with channeling similar to that on the front seats. Because of its construction, the finished back seat was less firm than the front seats. Since I rarely have passengers in the back, I'm not concerned with the sagging that might occur if the seat were used often.

Installing the new headliner presented the biggest problem in the entire project. Constructed like the original one, with metal bows encased in the seams, the new headliner fit easily into the roof. The fabric edges were tucked into the rubber moldings, also called roof rails, just above the windows. But there was no rubber molding above the sloping back window, and the only way to attach the headliner across the back appeared to be to glue the edge under the rubber strip along the window. After considering riveting the headliner along that back edge, I decided to test a sample of contact cement sprayed on a scrap of fabric with dimensions equal to the band of glue needed. Once it had aired for a day, it was odorless and safe for me. (The upholsterer used a commercial contact cement with a higher solvent-to-solid ration than most available cements; it dries faster and outgasses less.)

The floors remain uncarpeted because the rugs I ordered turned out to be too loosely woven. As a temporary solution, I cut one rug into three pieces to cover the back, driver, and passenger floor areas. I'll be straightening the piece under my feet often, yet I think it's worth the trouble to have removable, washable rugs. They will also help with the noise. Once I find appropriate carpet, I plan to have the upholsterer rivet snaps to the floor perimeter and edges of a cut-to-fit piece of carpet. The fit won't be as smooth as a permanently installed carpet, but it will be more practical and convenient than the small rugs.

The Finished Car

There's no doubt about it -- my car is a little noisier without the foam insulation

under the original headliner and carpet. Still, I'd rather be rid of the synthetics and put up with what I consider a negligible increase in noise. To prevent the fabric from fading, I keep the car covered and out of the sun as much as possible.

Overall, I'm pleased with my all-cotton car. The seats are remarkably comfortable and, I think, even more attractive than the original vinyl and fabric ones. It's not perfect, but it smells better and I *feel* better while driving. For me, that's what it's all about -- living the natural life, even on wheels.

Auto Air Filters

The air inside automobiles is full of toxic contaminants -- from carcinogenic vinyl chloride outgassing from vinyl upholstery to carbon monoxide (a chemical that could cause you to fall asleep at the wheel) coming into the car from exhaust emissions.

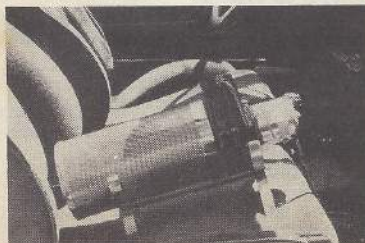
The quickest and easiest way to deal with the "indoor air pollution" inside your car is with an auto air filter. Each of the air filter manufacturers listed below makes an automobile model. For more information, contact each manufacturer, or send for our Special Report on Air Filters (\$5.00 from *Nontoxic & Natural News*, Inverness CA 94937, 415/663-1312).

AIREOX CLEAN AIRE 125
Aireox Research Corporation
(11015 Whitford Avenue, Riverside CA 92505, 714/689-2781)

ALLERMED AUTO AIR 2
Allermed Corporation (4324 Sunbelt Drive, Dallas TX 75248, 214/248-0782)

FOUST 160A
E. L. Foust Company (PO Box 105, Elmhurst IL 60126, 312/834-4952)

KING-AIRE ELIMINATOR
King-Aire (PO Box 149, Carmel IN 46032, 800/368-3795)



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