

As Limos Stretch Definition of Luxury, Bumps in the Road

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New Long Rides Get Hung Up
On Hills and Tight Turns;
Bride Left at the Corner

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Rachel Chen's friends wanted to do something special for her bachelorette party last November. So they booked an extravagant evening out in Los Angeles for the 27-year-old. The plan: hop in an extra-long stretch limo, head out for a sushi dinner, then hit a club for an evening of martinis and manicures.

The trouble started as soon as their ride pulled up to Ms. Chen's Glendale, Calif., apartment building. The limousine, a 12-passenger Lincoln Town Car, was so long, it got hung up—"high centered"—on a slope in front of the building's garage. The rear wheels weren't even touching the ground. "It looked like a giant black teeter-totter," says Ms. Chen's younger sister, Miranda Watson, 25.

Ms. Chen's night on the town was marred by what's becoming a significant issue in the limo business: Over the past decade stretch limos have nearly doubled in length, and now can reach 40 feet, or nearly as long as an 18-wheeler. As a result, these leviathan limos are getting into all kinds of scrapes.

They're driving up on curbs and falling into ditches when trying to maneuver around tight corners. In the parking garage at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, they're hitting cars and a column on their way in, according to garage manager Anna T.

Figueroa. And on hills everywhere from Pittsburgh to San Francisco, they are getting high-centered.

Ms. Chen and her friends had to wait two hours last November before a tow truck could yank their limo off its perch and get it rolling again. Not only did they miss their dinner reservations and the martini-and-manicure stop, but Ms. Chen's fiancé broke his own car jack in a failed attempt to liberate the limo himself.

"We were basically sitting on the street, drinking champagne from the limo," says her sister, Ms. Watson. "It ruined the night."

Limo makers may also be stretching the government's patience. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is stepping up efforts to identify what one official at NHTSA described as "rogue" stretch-limo makers who don't follow safety standards. Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Corp., for example, both set limits on how far certain specific models can be safely stretched.

Stretch limos are made by small, independent coachbuilders. These outfits buy regular vehicles, cut them in half, add several feet of length and weld them back together again. They also install extras like additional seats, wet bars and smoke machines. The Cadillac Escalade sport-utility vehicle is particularly popular among stretch-limo makers right now, as are the Chrysler 300 sedan, the Hummer H2 and the Lincoln Town Car.

"We've been monitoring what's going on in the limousine marketplace," says Harry Thompson, chief of the vehicle-crash-avoidance division at NHTSA. "The darn things just keep getting longer."

Because so many of the longest limos are not new vehicles and technically qualify as buses under NHTSA's rules, the agency is considering teaming up with the federal government's bus-oversight agency, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, and

tagging along on its regular inspections. Among other things, NHTSA would be checking up on its required bus-safety features such as escape hatches in the roof or windows that can be opened and used as exits.

Some states and cities are also cracking down. Last year, Connecticut, which outlaws limos stretched beyond the auto maker's guidelines, started sending undercover employees to arrange phony wedding pickups with limo providers suspected of having vehicles that exceed length guidelines. One main target: stretch Hummers, which are illegal in the state since GM doesn't set stretch guidelines for it.

This past spring, Connecticut regulators also staked out high-school proms to bust illegal stretch limos, which led to 65 arrests. New Jersey is also increasing its high-school-prom sting operation. Unfortunately for prom-goers in Connecticut, their ride gets towed.

"The Hummers that we pulled away this year have by far surpassed the ones that we pulled away last year—they are bigger vehicles by at least two to three feet," says Dennis King of Connecticut's department of transportation. In most cases, the penalty is a fine.

Limo operators have long been in a race to offer bigger vehicles. But things changed dramatically in the late 1990s after builders started stretching SUVs like the Lincoln Navigator and Ford Explorer, which have stronger frames and can be stretched more than sedans can.

In a survey this year by *Limousine & Chauffeured Transportation Magazine*, 6% of limo operators said they have a stretch SUV, up from 1.6% in 2003. (The majority of the chauffeured-car business remains corporate sedans.)

Major makers of stretch limos defend their practices and say their vehicles are perfectly safe. "You have to meet federal motor-vehicle-safety standards, so we run tests to make sure [the vehicles]

do,” says John Beck, executive vice president of Krystal Enterprises, a stretch-limo maker based in Brea, Calif.

One thing new drivers at La Costa Limousine in Carlsbad, Calif., now learn in training: They aren’t allowed to go through restaurant drive-through windows. One of the company’s stretch limos got stuck a few years ago at an In-N-Out Burger in Orange County.

Some cities can be more problematic than others. Dan Scanlan, a vice president at AutoReturn, which handles towing for the city of San Francisco, was dropping off his son at school one day last year when he saw a limo stuck on the crest near Broadway and Webster streets. “The driver of that limo should have known better. It’s a very steep hill,” says Mr. Scanlan.

On San Francisco’s famously steep and winding Lombard Street, gardener John Smith has seen four long limos get jammed up and require a tow out this year. “It would be one thing if the cars were flexible like a caterpillar or something, but they are not,” says Mr. Smith.

Another problem area: the crowded, narrow streets of Little Italy in New York. Ken Strauch, who drives a stretched 31-foot Ford Excursion, says it took him at least 15 tiny, back-and-forth maneuvers earlier this summer to make it around a corner there, with a nervous out-of-town family in the back.

Jim Anderson, 25, of King of Prussia, Pa., was one of the passengers. “I just remember my mother saying, ‘Oh, you’re never going to make this, you’re never going to make this,’” he says.

Big limos are giving wedding planners another thing to worry about. Heather Snively of Weddings Unique, Winter Park, Fla., now makes sure to check driveway size after one of her newlywed couples had to be dropped off 40 yards from their reception in the pouring rain because their limos couldn’t fit into the

country club's circular driveway. "We weren't able to get a nice video of them crawling out of the limo and being all happy and everything being perfect," recalls Ms. Snively.

On her big day, May Nunan, a 29-year-old executive assistant, had to hike up an alley in strapless heels in San Francisco's Chinatown to get to her reception. Fearful of getting stuck, Ms. Nunan's limo driver refused to drop her at the restaurant. By the time she got to the reception, Ms. Nunan says, she was sweating and her makeup was smeared.

"I don't think I would ever use a big limo again," says Ms. Nunan.