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## 1955-1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari

by the Auto Editors of Consumer Guide

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### Introduction to the 1955-1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari

By 1955, Pontiac was trying to redefine its dull-but-dependable image with the 1955-1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari. What better way to do that than with a "dream car"?

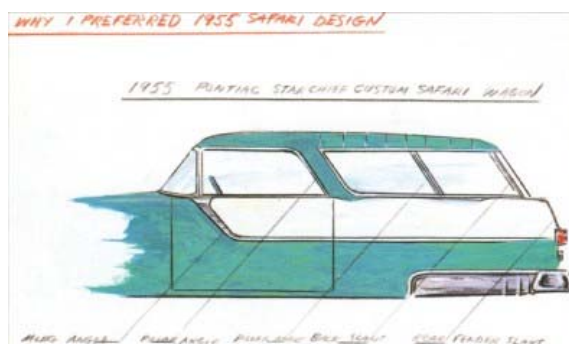
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The 1956 Pontiac Safari was longer, more lavishly trimmed, and more expensive than the Chevrolet Nomad. See more [classic car pictures](#).

Safari -- the word has a lovely ring to it. The mind conjures up an expedition with the hunting party dressed in khaki suits topped off in pith helmets. An African setting: large animals, large guns, fine cameras. A couple of Land Rovers, steamy heat, a trace of an English accent.

Wrong! For General Motors' Pontiac Division in 1955 "Safari" represented the fanciest and sportiest of all station wagons ever manufactured, the Star Chief Custom Safari -- an expedition into the unknown, marketing-wise. The car was to be low in production, high in cost, striking inside and out, and it would enjoy a life span of only three years (though the Safari name would carry on at Pontiac and/or GMC).

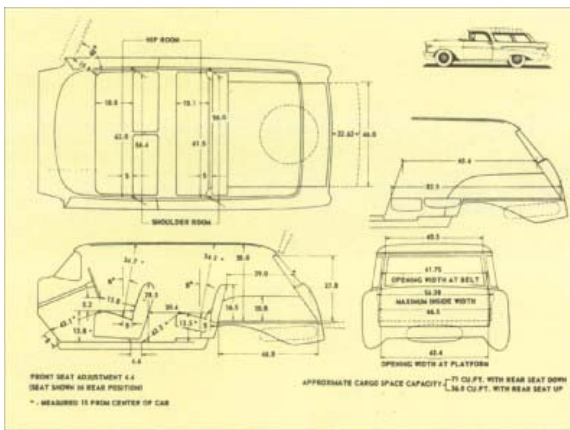


**Paul W. Gillian, Pontiac Chief Designer from 1951-1958, preferred the 1955 Safari over the 1956-1957 designs.**

Paul Gillian, who directed the Pontiac Styling Studio in the 1950s, came up with that wonderful name. The Pontiac Star Chief Safari's closest relative at General Motors was its near twin, the Bel Air Nomad, over at Chevrolet Division -- which is where the whole idea started. A great many people felt then, and still do, that these were two of the prettiest station wagons designed in the post World War II era.

Station wagons. Their heritage was an interesting one, dating back to early Cantrell-bodied "depot hacks" and 1923 Star wagons. Originally, these were

meant to be high-volume haulers that really transported people to depots and stations to meet trains.



**Interior body dimensions of the Nomad and Pontiac Star Chief Safari were virtually identical.**

It was not happenstance that Pontiac's Safari wagon was such a remarkably striking design. Consider Safari's lineage as a General Motors Motorama show car. Remember seeing or hearing about those styling extravaganzas produced in the 1950s, which traveled major U.S. cities showing off flashy and elaborate automotive designs of tomorrow? Dream cars! Well, this styling dream came true in the form of 9,094 Pontiac Star Chief Safaris and 22,375 Chevrolet Nomads.

Several thousand people went down to their local Pontiac and Chevrolet dealerships from 1955-1957 and purchased those handsome station wagons. Little did they know that later both cars would later be awarded "Milestone" car status by The Milestone Car Society.

For more on General Motors Motorama show cars, see the next page.

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#### General Motors Motorama Show Cars

Let's look back at those General Motors Motorama show cars and Harley J. Earl, vice-president of General Motors Styling Section from 1927 to 1958, who made those dreams come true.



**The Corvette Nomad was a favorite at the 1954 General Motors Motorama show.**

Like all things General Motors in those days, Pontiac Star Chief Safari and Nomad styling began with Mr. Earl. In this case, it was a dream car based on the 1953 Corvette. That Corvette itself was the first General Motors dream car to go into production substantially unaltered, just five months after it debuted at the January 1953 Motorama at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City.

As preparations were made for the 1954 Motorama, Clare MacKichan, who directed the Chevrolet Styling Studio from 1953-1961, was encouraged by Earl to see what could be done for a Corvette encore. At this point, work was begun on the 1954 Motorama Nomad, a station wagon version of the Corvette. Commented MacKichan, "As far as we can recall, Mr. Earl should get the credit for suggesting it."



**By March 11, 1954, design work was largely completed, though the rear wheel openings seen here are much smaller than on the production Nomad.**

MacKichan continued: "The Chevrolet studio in 1954, unlike that of a year earlier, was deeply involved in the dream car project. Mr. Earl brought ideas in from many other areas. A young man named Carl Renner, who was working in a special studio, had come up with a sketch for a station wagon roof that caught Earl's eye.

"Bringing this idea to the Chevrolet studio, Earl asked that it be incorporated into a station wagon version, as one of the Corvette idea cars at the 1954 Motorama." As it turned out, a production open Corvette, a hardtop version, a fastback Corvair (combining the words "Corvette" and "Bel Air"), and the Corvette Nomad station wagon were shown.



**A design study, the GMC Expedier van embraced the Nomad/Safari hardtop styling and slanted B-pillars.**

Although Harley Earl had an elaborate plan for the Nomad roof -- the stainless steel rear portion would telescope, forming an opening -- it never got beyond the conceptual stage. But it did influence the final design, as the roof exterior had nine grooves in it, and the interior headliner was distinguished with corresponding horizontal chrome bows, a carry-through of Earl's concept.

This was explained by Earl, who at six-foot-four towered over the delicate and low Nomad, in an interview with *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1954: "To an average man, the Nomad's roof was now visible as a part of the car's conformation. So, for perhaps the first time in automobile history, we had to give this unbroken roof expanse a decorative treatment. We grooved it."



**The 1955 Pontiac Safari shared its greenhouse, front doors, and tailgate with the Chevrolet Nomad.**

The original Corvette Nomad was built on a 1953 Chevrolet station wagon chassis, had Corvette-like front and rear styling, and was a tasteful combination of two very popular body styles -- hardtop and station wagon -- which at the time made up one-third of the automotive market.

As it revolved on its Motorama turntable at the 1954 Waldorf-Astoria debut, the Nomad heralded a generation of stylish, luxurious station wagons to follow. Noticeable was its hardtop front door glass framing, wide B-pillar and forward-sloping rear quarters, wraparound rear side glass, full rear-wheel housing cutout, seven vertical accent strips ("bananas") on the tailgate, and the fluted roof.

It was reported that the Motorama crowds raved over the Nomad's styling, but MacKichan put it this way: "They were enthusiastic ... but I don't think that's what really got to Harley Earl. The friends he associated with were so enthusiastic that he told his manager, Howard O'Leary, to get me on the phone. He said, 'When I get back in two days, I want to see that whole car, and how you would do it on a 1955 Chevrolet.'"

To find out how these design ideas translated into the 1955 Pontiac Star Chief Safari, continue to the next page.

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### 1955 Pontiac Star Chief Safari

It was at this point that Carl Renner, who had much to do with the design of the Corvette Nomad, set to work on the 1955 Pontiac Star Chief Safari. His job, which was done in the body design studio, was to cut apart a full-size drawing, stretch it out, and mate it to the 1955 Chevrolet lower body, windshield, and other elements.



**The 1955 Safari rode a 122-inch wheelbase, seven inches longer than the Chevrolet Nomad.**

The Nomad/Safari treatment was translated directly back of the cowl, where it shared precious little sheetmetal with 1955 wagons or any other body styles. But engines, transmissions, chassis, frame, and running gear were identical to the regular Chevrolet/Pontiac lines. The more production body parts Renner could use, the lower the costs would be for what ultimately became a very expensive wagon to manufacture. Windshields and ventilator glass from hardtops and convertibles were used, as were floors from two-door wagons and door inners from two-door hardtops.

One of the remarkable things about the debut of the production 1955 Pontiac Star Chief Safari and Nomad was the ability of both divisions to finish their projects in just one year. Consider this: The mandate issued in January 1954 to put the Corvette Nomad into production (for Chevrolet and Pontiac) had been carried out in time for a January 1955 Motorama debut. This seemed nothing short of a miracle!



**The Pontiac Star Chief Safari's smaller wheel openings and two-piece rear bumper set it apart from the Nomad.**

The basic differences between Pontiac's Safari and Chevy's Nomad -- and there were many -- were predictable, dictated by each division's assignment. Pontiac's was to build a larger, heavier, more powerful, luxurious, and expensive model. Though both shared the GM A-body, the all-new styling, engineering, and overhead-valve V-8 engines were unique to each. By the mid-1950s, Pontiac preferred dignified phraseology like "Power and Beauty."

And it is important to note that Pontiac was caught up in a transitional period in 1955 -- near the end of Indian heads and Silver Streaks and about to evolve into what would soon become the very popular "Wide Track" Pontiacs. Meanwhile, Chevrolet's new and youthful image was clearly stated in three words, which became legendary: "The Hot One."



**Pontiac Star Chief Safari cargo capacity with the rear seat up was 36 cubic feet, but when down this expanded to a more useful 71 cubic feet.**

By February 1955, the \$2,571 Nomad and \$3,047 Safari entered a hotly contested station wagon marketplace consisting of 52 entries ranging in price from the \$1,869 Nash/Hudson Rambler to a \$4,209 Chrysler. The contemporary automotive press, represented by *Motor Trend* magazine, was quick to honor Chevrolet's Nomad by pronouncing it "The longed-for styling wedding between the production sports car and the family workhorse."

Pontiac's Safari certainly wasn't overlooked. It made the cover of *Motor Trend's* August 1955 issue, wherein Walt Woron described it as "a portent of the



future with its 'leaning forward' look." His road test drew attention to the Safari's comfortable ride and Greyhound "Vista Dome" visibility.



**Inside the 1955 Pontiac Star Chief Safari, one found a lavish use of chrome, deluxe leather seats, and Pontiac's own dashboard.**

Safaris and Nomads were the same from the beltline up. Inner wheelhouses, glass, doors, roofs, and tailgates were interchangeable; rear quarters and floors were not.

It is important to remember that the Nomad's wheelbase measured 115 inches, the Safari's 122 inches. The latter presented a much heavier look with its extra seven inches between the wheels, massive bumper-grille, not-so-clean taillamp treatment, and elaborate side trim as compared to the Nomad.

And indeed, the 3,636-pound Safari was heavier, by 300 pounds compared to the Nomad V-8. Offsetting that was a larger overhead-valve V-8: 287.2 cubic inches versus 265, 200 horsepower with four-barrel carb versus 180 for the Chevrolet with Power Pack.

To follow the Pontiac Star Chief Safari story into 1956, continue to the next page.

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#### **1956 Pontiac Star Chief Safari**

The changes between the Pontiac Star Chief Safari and Nomad became less distinct as the year wore on, and with the debut of the 1956 Pontiac Star Chief Safari.



**The Pontiac Star Chief Safari continued its luxury theme for 1956.**

Meanwhile, for 1955 only, Nomad carried over features directly from the Corvette show car: chrome headlamp, front fender, and door trim, and full rear-wheel openings. For 1955 only, the Nomad was upholstered in a waffle/ribbed vinyl (like the 1956-1957 Corvette interiors), whereas upscale Safari seats in Star Chief Custom trim were covered in leather all three years, complementing the fancy vinyl headliner and chrome roof bows common to both for all three years.

For 1955, Pontiac Star Chief Safari's rear seat differed from Nomad's, being deeper and more comfortable. Its folding arrangement was unique in that the back folded down on the cushion and then the whole seat folded forward in the manner of jump seats in a limousine.



**The 1956 Pontiac Star Chief Safari's grille, side trim, and two-toning were new.**

For 1956-1957, Pontiac Star Chief Safari's rear seats were interchangeable with Nomad's. Safari's rear cargo area and tailgate interior were carpeted, the stainless strips ran vertically. The much plainer Nomad rear deck and tailgate interior were covered in linoleum and outlined in stainless steel trim.

For 1956, Pontiac and Chevrolet did pretty much the same thing, though staying in line with each division's traditional role. That meant a face-lift a la Harley Earl's longer, lower, and wider dictate, plus refinements in 1955's all-new engineering to improve handling, power, and performance.

Not surprisingly, designers felt that the styling face-lifts, by their very application, detracted from the original and clean 1955 body. Happily, though, the tastefully unique show-car-inspired styling above the beltline carried over for both wagons through 1957.

The Safari's V-8 was bored to 316.6 cubic inches for 1956, upping the standard horsepower to 227 with Hydra-Matic.

With stick shift, output was 216 horses, but reportedly only 10 Pontiac Star Chief Safaris were so equipped. Chevrolet, meanwhile, stuck with its 265 V-8, rated now at 162, 170, and 205 horsepower.



**The 1956 Pontiac Safari interior continued to be luxurious; base price was now \$3,129.**



**As in 1955, the 1956 Pontiac Star Chief Safari was longer and more deluxe than the Nomad.**

Chevrolet also fielded a special 225-horsepower 265 with twin-four barrel carbs, and Pontiac countered with a 285-horsepower mill, also with twin-quads. These were intended for racing, however, so very few -- if indeed any -- were installed in the wagons. Pontiac also boasted this year about its smoother-shifting "fluid-flow" Strato-Flight Hydra-Matic, which replaced the old Dual-Range Hydra-Matic on Star Chiefs.

Pontiac Star Chief Safari's 1956 two-tone paint treatment was separated by side trim which flowed in an exact reverse direction of the 1955 sweep. Nomad's two-tone paint drifted down to the lower body, giving the car a much flashier look. Taillights of both wagons became more elaborate, grilles widened and became heavier.



**The dash of the 1956 Pontiac Star Chief Safari continued the feel of luxury.**

Safari continued with all-leather upholstery, but due to the high cost, the Nomad's "waffle" seats and door panels were replaced by a combination of nylon-faced cloth and leather-grained vinyl, and these materials returned in a somewhat different application for 1957.

See the next page for more on the 1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari.

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#### **1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari**

For the 1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari, Pontiac stroked its V-8 to 347 cubic inches, boosting horsepower to 270 (244 with manual shift). Chevrolet, meanwhile, bored out its 265 to 283 cubic inches, and most Nomads came equipped with the 185- or 220-horsepower versions. As before, both makes listed special high-performance engines, Pontiac's being a 290-horsepower 347 with the soon-to-be-famous Tri-Power (triple two-barrel carbs), but again these were mainly for racing.



**It was customary in Detroit that a three-year-old design received a heavier face-lift than a two-year-old, and the 1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari was no exception.**

Side trim for both wagons in 1957 lost the splashy two-tone look, though the Safari sported a narrow, full-length, rocket-shaped contrasting color at mid-body height and Chevrolet's rear fenders carried anodized aluminum inserts. Nomad went to an expensive bumper-grille design, though not as heavy as Safari's.

Tailfins were becoming an important design feature, especially from a profile view, but Chevrolet and Pontiac merely hinted at them -- at least when compared to Chrysler's highflying rear fenders. A lower stance was achieved by reducing wheel diameters from 15 to 14 inches, an industry-wide change.



**The 1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari was not a sales success, probably due to high price and two-door body style.**

One of the most memorable changes for 1957 occurred at Pontiac: The Silver Streaks and Indian symbols were stripped off forever, one of the first dictates of Semon E. "Bunkie" Knudsen, who took over as Pontiac Division general manager in July 1956. Never mind that Bunkie's father had been instrumental in establishing the hallmark by which everyone had identified Pontiacs for two decades.

Though the Pontiac Safari and Chevrolet Nomad story centers around styling, a great part of the historical importance of these beautiful station wagons is based on the year in which they bowed: 1955. It was a time when the exuberant post [World War II](#) automotive scene had reached its zenith.



**The most noticeable changes for the 1957 Pontiac Star Chief Safari were the removal of the famous Silver Streaks front and rear, but front and rear fenders, grille, and taillights were new, too.**

Vehicle production was at an all-time high -- over nine million cars and trucks. More than 50 percent of them had been manufactured by General Motors, then King of the Road in America. With brand-new styling and engineering from both Pontiac and Chevrolet, plus the very successful 1955 small-block V-8 engines which became legends in their own time, the handsome hardtop station wagon design was simply the richest icing ever to top off a crowd-pleasing, all-American cake.

In retrospect, some unfriendly fire was aimed directly at Safaris and Nomads, pointing out that their two-door design was impractical for maneuvering people in and out and for hauling, that they were more expensive than top-of-the-line convertibles, that they were prone to considerable leakage through the hastily engineered liftgate/tailgate area. Probably at least partly for these reasons, sales were disappointing -- but that has little historical influence on how the cars are judged today.



**The 1957 Pontiac Safari design was outstanding when the car was new -- and it's truly appreciated today!**

During that postwar mid-1950s boom time the word "suburbia" described a new way of life in America. And the Safaris and Nomads -- their sleek, one-off dream car styling contrasting sharply with the contemporary high-production, workaday wagons -- were just about the best way ever to haul groceries and Little Leaguers in the daytime, and arrive at a posh country club dance at dusk.

"Elegant inside; flashy outside." The Safari was indeed a fabulous wagon for the fabulous Fifties!

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