CHICAGO (Reuters) - If that Hummer is draining your cash at the gas pump, Neiman Marcus Group Inc. (NMGa.N) has the perfect holiday gift: A fuel-efficient, $3.5 million "Skycar" that flies 350 miles per hour and burns environmentally friendly alcohol.

The luxury retailer's annual Christmas Book of gifts for the rich and richer shows no signs of scaling back in times of economic strain -- although there are a few stocking stuffers such as a $15 paperweight for those on a tighter budget.

The M400 Skycar prototype is a vertical takeoff and landing aircraft that gets 21 miles per gallon and is designed to be "as safe, affordable and easy to use as an automobile.

"A limited number of M400s is expected to be available within the next three years, but you can purchase the actual prototype for yourself or your favorite commuter now," Neiman Marcus said in the catalog.

Delivery is not included.

World toilet summit lifts lid on public hygiene

BELFAST (Reuters) - Delegates to the annual World Toilet Summit in Northern Ireland's capital Belfast could be forgiven for feeling flushed this week after sitting down for a three-day debate on the finer points of public sanitation.

"A lot was achieved, including the finalization of a protocol setting out global standards for the provision and hygiene of public toilets," Raymond Martin, director of the Irish Toilet Association, told Reuters.

Other highlights of the summit included the launch of a "Bog Standard Campaign" to push for better toilets in UK schools, and the unveiling of Belfast's first public UriLift toilet, a stainless steel urinal that rises hydraulically out of the ground at night to facilitate male revelers.

In terms of public toilet excellence, it was generally agreed that Singapore was a model for the rest of the world, with the UK somewhere around the middle of the league table.

Recipe for perfect sandcastle
WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A lesson learned by centuries of beachcombers has been distilled to a physicist's formula: to make the perfect sandcastle, use eight parts sand to one part water.

The physicists' study, released on Wednesday before publication in the journal Nature Physics, is entitled, rather grandly, "Maximum angle of stability of a wet granular pile."

And while it deals with sandcastles, it could also help determine the stability of retaining walls and the material they hold back, one of its authors said.

This study and those that follow on this subject might have implications for those preparing for or recovering from a watery disaster like a hurricane, physicist Arshad Kudrolli said in a telephone interview.

"Our study is the first step, in some sense, in trying to understand what's the most stable angle that one can build, say, a retaining wall," he said. "And if it fails, where would the material end up? How much part of the land will give way?"

Hairdressers battle over Merkel's hairstyle

BERLIN (Reuters) - Two top German hairdressers are fighting over who deserves the credit for Angela Merkel's new hairstyle after the conservative leader traded a low-maintenance page-boy cut for a more stylish look just before the election.

Celebrity hairdresser Udo Walz, who has also cut Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's hair, and rival Martina Acht are claiming they did the Merkel makeover before her narrow win in a September 18 general election over Schroeder's Social Democrats.

"She came to me for advice just before (U.S. President) George W. Bush came to Germany (in February) and ever since then her look has been completely different," Acht, whose salon is in the western city of Offenbach, told Reuters.

"Since then, she seems so much more feminine," added Acht, whose battle of the scissors against Walz has featured in tabloid newspapers this week.

But Walz, who is Germany's best-known celebrity hairdresser, told Reuters from his Berlin studio that he has long been working on Merkel's hair and that the 51-year-old has an appointment with him every four weeks.

Mating game is never over for male swallows: study

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Men who put on a little pot belly after marriage can give thanks that they are not barn swallows. A study published on Thursday shows females of that species keep shopping around even after mating.

And these females aren't looking for good providers or even good company. They want only the best-looking birds, a research team at Cornell University in New York found.

"The bad news for male swallows is the mating game is never over," said Rebecca Safran, who led the study while a postdoctoral researcher at Cornell.

"This is something that most humans can relate to -- think of how much time and money we spend on our looks and status long after we have established stable relationships," added Safran, who is now at Princeton University.

For barn swallows, known scientifically as Hirundo rustica erythrogaster, good looks equals a nice red breast and belly, Safran and colleagues report in Friday's issue of the journal Science. And the equivalent of a little hair dye serves them well.

09/29/05 17:01 ET

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