

THE BEETLE IN INDIA

The Love Bug came to India via Portuguese Goa, sold by Antonio Avelar Barretto, till 1962 when Goa was liberated. From then to today, when you can once again buy a brand

new Beetle in India, its popularity has never waned. At the Rs. 20 lakh plus price tag, few would call the New Beetle the 'People's Car' anymore. And some may find the price too

steep for what is essentially a small car. But what you get is an iconic and brilliantly engineered car and a coveted piece of automotive history that will never go out of style. Of that there is no doubt!

# BEETLE-ICIOUS

THE ICONIC BEETLE COMES TO INDIA. RISHAD SAAM MEHTA WRITES ON WHAT MADE IT THE PEOPLE'S CAR



A horse rubs its head on the bonnet of a VW Beetle, 1974

GEORGE SWEENEY/REX FEATURES

FROM a 2-dimensional hand drawn sketch on a paper napkin in a Munich restaurant in 1932 to a strobe light lit launch on the lawns of a suburban Mumbai hotel, the Volkswagen Beetle has spanned generations and continents. It has won adulation everywhere thanks to its cute, happy look accentuated by its round lights or 'eyes' and the curved front resembling a smiling face.

The iconic star of the *Herbie* movies is the world's best selling car — ever!

## BUILD ME A PEOPLE'S CAR!

These very curves were reputedly drawn by Hitler — his shape of a people's car to bring mobility to the masses. In an era when only the most economic elite possessed cars, Hitler believed that all

Third Reich citizens should be able to own a car. He thought that a smart design could allow for reliability, enjoyment, and vacation travel.

When the first cars rolled off the line in 1938 the name given to this model was Kraft durch Freude (KdF)-Wagen, literally 'strength through joy car'. Its appeal was to be its simplicity and reliability. The specifics given to designer Dr Ferdinand Porsche by the Fuehrer in a 1933 meeting in Hotel Kaiserhof, Berlin were precise — it should carry blue-eyed Hans, blonde haired Hannah and their three cherubic children Manfred, Gretel and Otto in comfort, do an easy 60mph (96kph) on Germany's new Autobahns, and deliver 17 kilometres to a litre. He also demanded that the Volkswagen or 'People's Car' would retail at less than 1000 Reichmarks at which Dr Porsche certainly must have paled.

Ford, the cheapest car of the time, sold

at an equivalent of 2600RM

## THE BEAUTY IN THE BACKSIDE

Porsche drew inspiration for the Beetle's air cooled rear engine design from Tatra, a Czech car maker. In fact the Nazi SS used Tatra's rear engine, air-cooled vehicles as staff cars because they could do a comfortable 100mph with a full load. In that era speeds like that were the domain of only expensive sports cars.

Air cooled engines were desirable because back then there was no anti freeze and a car sitting out for long in the cold would have its liquid coolant freeze up. The KdF's air cooled 985cc, 25 horsepower engine came in a 'flat four' configuration and did not suffer from this problem. In fact the engine was so capable that the Kommandeurwagen or the military

version of the Beetle served on all fronts during the war. It handled the winters in Russia and zipped across the hot sands of the deserts in North Africa. Field Marshal Rommel once pointed out that a Kommandeurwagen would operate where a camel bogged down.

## POST-WAR POPULARITY

Only a handful of KdF-Wagens were produced before the war started. When British office Major Ivan Hirst arrived in 1945 to take charge of the Wolfsburg factory in Germany's British Zone, the first thing he did was to remove an unexploded bomb lodged next to irreplaceable production machinery. If this bomb had exploded the Beetle could have ended there and then. The factory started up again in a time



FUEHRER OF THE CAR: Adolf Hitler admiring the car he ordered Ferdinand Porsche to build, for the people AFP PHOTO

when people were looking for work and a meaning to life. By 1946 the factory was producing 1000 Volkswagens a month. The ideological KdF-Wagen name was dropped.

Then there was no looking back and production boomed in the following decade. The one-millionth car crawled off the assembly line in 1955. It was an era of hope. A time of change with dictators and empires been done away with. The power was with the people and the Beetle seemed to stand for all that. Its shape made a statement of style and free will that would be very in-tune with the mindset of the swinging 60's generation. Plus each car still fulfilled Hitler's original dictum to Ferdinand Porsche — simplicity and reliability. It had credible performance too, boasting tolerable road handling and a top whack of 115 kph. Its 1930's design air-

cooled engine was yet at the top of the game firing up immediately without a choke and delivering great driveability. It was about this time that the car earned its popular nickname — the Beetle. Interestingly this Volkswagen model was never officially named the Beetle until the New Beetle.

In 1972 the Beetle had broken the Model T Ford's record by selling over 15 million cars and today over 20 million Beetles have been bought. Rishad Saam Mehta has test-driven cars across India and abroad Email: [smdmail@mid-day.com](mailto:smdmail@mid-day.com)

## The New Beetle

ENGINE: 2.0 litre, 4 cylinder fuel injected petrol with an output of 115bhp. TRANSMISSION: 6-speed automatic

A motorcyclist passes a restaurant with the front of a vehicle sticking out its roof (August 2000) in Kathmandu. The vintage German "Volkswagen Beetle" marks the ongoing construction site for a future drive-thru restaurant AFP PHOTOS



A horse hitched to a Beetle on the streets of Hanover, November 1975

AFP PHOTOS



A vintage picture showing women looking out of the back window of a VW Beetle

AFP PHOTOS

SAFETY FEATURES: 4 airbags, Anti-lock braking system (ABS), Electronic Stabilization Programme (ESP) and engine immobilizers. STANDARD EQUIPMENT: 15" alloy wheels, 6-CD

changer in centre armrest, halogen headlamps, power steering and heat insulating tinted glass. PRICE: Rs. 23 lakhs (approx, on the road, Mumbai