MICROCARS

5 November 2021 – 7 August 2022

Large print guide

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Microcars
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MICROCARS

After WWII factories across Europe, no longer making military aircraft and equipment, re-tooled to meet a new demand: freedom!

It was a period of austerity but with the war over people could travel freely. Tiny, economical cars were a perfect innovation for the time. Companies such as Messerschmitt, BMW, Heinkel, and Lambretta combined scooter engines and super lightweight bodies to create microcars.

In the 1950s these appealing, if cramped, vehicles were exported all over the world. The United Kingdom, Japan and Australia all had a go at making their own, but by the mid-1960s the microcar trend had waned.

The early 2000s produced a new generation of electric and hybrid microcars. Many contemporary enthusiasts argue microcars could reduce society's dependence on large petrol-powered vehicles and help save our planet.

Morgan Three-Wheeler

GREEN

Morgan Motor Company, England, 1946

The Morgan Motor Company, a British sportscar manufacturer founded in 1909, pioneered the three-wheel design and modernist aesthetic which became hallmarks of later microcars. The designers of the original Morgan Three-Wheeler were inspired by the elegant luxury of racing cars, but it was the austerity policies that swept Europe in the wake of WWII that fuelled the international craze for three-wheel microcars. This vehicle has been in the owner's family, and continuously roadworthy, since 1957. The body has a unique bullet-shaped tail, only seen on Morgans made for the Australian market, while the engine is a Matchless 1000cc V twin.

Generously lent by Greg Dalsanto

Messerschmitt KR200 Super

SILVER AND BLUE

Messerschmitt Works, Germany, 1955

This is a replica, made in the late 1950s, of the special edition Messerschmitt KR200 Super — of which only one was ever built, in 1955. A single-seater racing model, the original broke 22 international speed records in its class including the 24-hour speed record; which it set at 64 miles (103 km) per hour. The record proved this microcar was a bona fide road vehicle and was a successful marketing stunt for the regular KR200. This vehicle was restored in 1983 by its owner and his best friend before being featured in Mondo Rock's 1984 music video for 'Modern Bop'.

Generously lent by Paul Tonitto and Jaz Fox

(elevated in centre)

Messerschmitt KR200

RED

Messerschmitt Works, Germany, 1955

After WWII aircraft manufacturer Messerchmitt Works retooled its factories for microcars. The design pedigree of its Bf 109 fighter aircraft is evident in the KR200. Driver and passenger sit in a cockpit, and the vehicle is steered by handlebars. It was a hit in West Germany and exported across Europe, the United Kingdom, and United States. This car was used as a daily drive until the 1980s and can be seen in Baz Luhrmann's forthcoming biopic of Elvis Presley, who owned one. Messerschmitt stopped making the KR200 in 1964, but in 2021 announced plans for two new microcars (one gasoline and one electric) inspired by it.

Generously lent by Fred Diwell

BMW Isetta

YELLOW

Bayerische Motoren Werke AG, Germany, 1957

The Isetta was created in 1953 when Italian manufacturer Iso Rivolta designed the tiny bubble car with a front door reminiscent of one of its refrigerators. The model was licensed to several European car manufacturers, including in 1954 to then struggling motorcycle and luxury car maker Bayerische Motoren Werke AG. The Isetta's cute design and fuel efficiency made it the top-selling single cylinder car in the world, and saved the company now known as BMW. This Isetta was built at a converted locomotive workshop in Brighton, England. Amazingly, it has had only three owners in its long life.

Generously lent by Graham Sims

(elevated in centre)

Mazda R360

CREAM

Mazda Motor Corporation, Japan, 1963

The company now known as Mazda sold its first car in 1931, but didn't focus on automobile manufacturing till the 1950s. Like most Japanese manufacturers the group had primarily produced military equipment during WWII. The Mazda R360, launched in 1960, was part of a wave of tiny lightweight Japanese microcars. These 'kei cars' — also made by Honda, Suzuki, Nissan and Daihatsu — sold better in Australia than European microcars. This Mazda R360 was discovered in Bathurst, NSW when its current owner was buying a valve radio for his parents 50th wedding anniversary. It still runs in almost totally original condition.

Generously lent by Victor Fenech

Lambretta FLi 175

WHITE AND PINK

Innocenti, Italy, 1960

Innocenti was an auto manufacturer based in Milan, Italy known for their Lambretta brand which helped popularise the motor scooter. Lambretta motors were also used to power a range of microcars and microtrucks. The FLi 175 is a tiny three-wheel delivery cart designed to navigate narrow lanes in a very economical way. This model, with a cargo tray, was probably the first microute. It was purchased by the current owner with a restored chassis, but a cabin and engine in dire need of restoration. The whole family, including his 7-year-old daughter who chose the colour scheme, worked to bring it back to life.

Lent by Ric Fantuzzi

Goggomobil Coupe

RED AND WHITE
Hans Glas GmbH, Germany
Buckle Motors, Australia, 1959

In the 1950s, Bill Buckle travelled to Germany searching for a small affordable car to sell in his family's auto dealership. He bought a license from Bavarian company Hans Glas GmbH to distribute its Goggomobil Coupe in Australia. Later he struck a deal to import the mechanical parts and assemble them with a locally produced body made from fibreglass rather than steel. The Buckle Motors Goggomobil Coupe was born. In 2018, this car was driven from Perth to Sydney to celebrate 60 years of the Goggogomobil. It made it in a month with no mechanical issues.

Generously lent by Bill Buckle

Goggomobil Dart

WHITE AND TURQUOISE
Hans Glas GmbH, Germany
Buckle Motors, Australia, 1959

Following the success of its Goggomobil Coupe, Buckle Motors' next collaboration with Hans Glas GmbH was the Goggomobil Dart — an inexpensive two-seater sports car designed to appeal to young people. A simple yet elegant doorless design meant this microcar was fabricated from just two parts, one moulding for the upper body and one for the lower. Cheaper and easier to manufacture than a traditional vehicle, another advantage was increased body strength. Customers could order it in any colour or two-tone combination, although most opted for sporty red. The creator himself chose this one in white and turquoise.

Generously lent by Bill Buckle

(elevated in centre)

Bartschcar

ORANGE

Dieter Bartsch, Australia, 2013

As a boy, Dieter Bartsch used an aluminium wing tank from a WWII bomber to make his first car. Over the past 40 years, the retired Sydney-based mechanical engineer has built 34 microcar prototypes. This is the only surviving example. It has an air-cooled, single cylinder four-stroke, 9.5 horsepower motor with continual output, automatic transmission, reverse gear and one-chain driven rear wheel. Now in his 90s, Bartsch is passionate about microcars and their potential as an environmentally friendly alternative to larger cars. If commuters embraced microcars it could lower carbon emissions, ease traffic congestion, and reduce land requirements for carparks at bus and train stations.

Generously lent by Dieter Bartsch

Sinclair C5

LIGHT GREY

Sinclair Vehicles, United Kingdom, 1985

In 1985 Clive Sinclair, a British inventor and entrepreneur famous for his eponymous pocket calculator and early home computer, launched a microcar — the Sinclair C5. The recumbent single-seater, battery-powered, electric tricycle with pedal assist wasn't technically a 'car' so it was exempt from road taxes. Promoted to young urban professionals as the 'future of transport' the Sinclair C5 suffered from being ahead of its time. Battery technology of the day was not up to scratch for the Sinclair's intended use as an urban runabout. It was also very unsafe. While a commercial failure, the Sinclair C5 did foreshadow a future of electric-battery powered microcars.

Generously lent by Malcolm Faed

Renault Twizy

GREY
Groupe Renault, Spain, 2012

This tiny but striking two-seater electric vehicle is an increasingly common sight on European streets. The Renault Twizy is a battery powered microcar that can be charged overnight on a standard household electricity socket. This model can reach 80 km per hour, so has no trouble keeping up with city traffic. Its compact size also means three can fit into one standard car space. The Twizy's international success comes as more consumers seek to reduce their carbon emissions and reliance on fossil fuels. This Twizy was imported to Australia by Renault for promotional events with trendsetters, lawmakers, and road authorities.

Generously lent by a private collector

Smartcar

GREY AND RED
Daimler-Benz, Smartville, France, 2004

In the late 1980s Swatch boss Nicolas Hayek had the idea for a 'Swatchmobile'. Inspired by the success of Swatch's affordable, colourful fashion watches with interchangeable wristbands he saw a market for small, cheap, customisable cars. Hayek shopped the concept around to Volkswagen, Fiat, and Renault, before forming a partnership with Daimler-Benz AG, the makers of Mercedes-Benz. Smartcar was founded in 1994 and released its first microcar in 1998. The distinctive looking Smartcar has been sold in 46 countries and made the biggest impact in the Australian market of any microcar to date. However worldwide sales are in decline and local distribution was discontinued in 2015.

Generously lent by John Lambeth

Zeta ‘Runabout’ Wagon

CREAM

Lightburn & Company, Australia, 1964

A subsidiary of washing machine manufacturer Lightburn & Company, Zeta was an Australian brand of microcar. Between 1963–65 it produced approximately 400 vehicles from its factory in suburban Adelaide. Harold Lightburn designed the Zeta Wagon after recognising his company’s experience manufacturing products from fibreglass could be applied to making a lightweight body for a small car. To overcome one of the main shortcomings of other microcars, he incorporated luggage space. The Zeta Wagon was marketed as the ‘Runabout’ positioning it as an ideal second family car for use running local errands.

Powerhouse Collection, purchased 2012

Zeta Sports

RED

Lightburn & Company, Australia, 1964

After the Zeta ‘Runabout’ wagon, came the two-seater Zeta Sports. The body design was based on the Frisky Sprint, by English engine and gearbox manufacturers Henry Meadows Ltd, while it was powered by a German engineered Messerschmitt microcar engine. Just 48 Zeta Sports were produced, and this is the only one ever made with a surfboard rack. The car was purchased by its current owner in Adelaide, SA and driven back to Sydney, NSW in 1990. It was an eventful trip, that included searching for a detached windscreen wiper in the bush and running out of petrol on the Hay Plains.

Generously lent by Fred Diwell

Goggomobil Carryall

WHITE AND TURQUOISE
Hans Glas GmbH, Germany
Buckle Motors, Australia, 1958

Another model that Buckle Motors manufactured in Australia was a diminutive van it named the Goggomobil Carryall. This practical carry-all cargo van features a side door, allowing goods to be loaded or unloaded from the footpath. The roll-a-door slides into the roofline saving space. The Goggomobil Caryall was built on the same chassis as the Goggomobil Dart and fitted with a roof moulded from a Holden FC station wagon. This one was originally purchased by its current owner in 1969. Having sold it in 1972, he repurchased it in 1998 and his son Martyn has since completed a total restoration.

Generously lent by Bob Billiards

Heinkel Kabine

RED
Heinkel Flugzeugwerke, Germany, 1960

The Heinkel Kabine was created in 1956 by Ernst Heinkel, a famed designer of WWI and WWII German war planes. It was lighter than competitor the Isetta, had rear child seats, and was one of the first microcars with a reverse gear. A canvas canopy had the unintended benefit of an easy escape when the door was blocked. Made in a three-wheeler and four-wheeler model, this is an example of the latter — although the two rear wheels are so close together that no differential is needed. Manufactured by Dundalk Engineering Company, Ireland in 1960, this Kabine is one of only two in working condition in Australia.

Generously lent by Graham Sims

(elevated in centre)

Scootacar Mark III

LIGHT GREY
Hunslet Engine Company, UK, 1964

Built in Leeds, England by a locomotive manufacturer, the Scootacar was the United Kingdom's answer to the Isetta and the Kabine. The driver straddles a narrow seat, much like a motor scooter, with a passenger able to sit behind pillion style. Steering is by means of handlebars. The original owner drove this Scootacar Mark III on a grand tour of Europe before selling it in 1969 for £30 to an English villager for use as regular transport. It was purchased by the current owner and shipped to Australia in 1970, spending many years in storage before being restored to its original glory.

Generously lent by Gordon Sandes