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RENAULT CARAVELLE



CITROËN DS



GLAMOUR MODELS

FRENCH CHIC ON THE CHEAP - GO GET SOME OOH-LA-LA! p18

PANHARD 24CT



MATRA BAGHEERA



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French flights of fancy

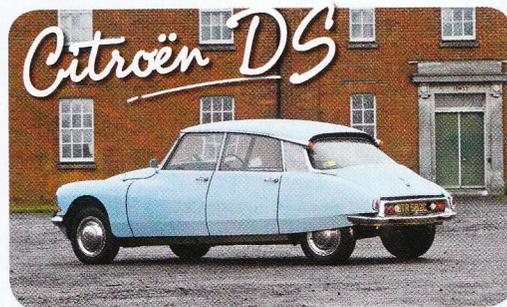


Glamorous, affordable and with their engines in the most interesting of places – Ross Alkureishi samples four remarkable Gallic classics with distinctly unique characters

PHOTOS: MICHAEL BAILIE

In a concerted attempt to better understand our moustachioed near-neighbours, we've gathered four of their finest thrusting musketeers. All adhere to a similar build philosophy but couldn't be more different in one important way: engine location.

So, sit back, think of la République and enjoy the mesmeric charms of our forward-, front-, mid- and rear-engined Gallic courtesans as we help you to discover your inner Francophile.



There are two ages in European motoring: Before DS (BDS) and Anno DS (ADS). Under the fervent leadership of chief designer André Lefèbvre – a renowned free thinker – the self-taught engineers at the Citroën Bureau d'Etudes embarked on the task of replacing the Traction Avant. It was a mammoth undertaking because Lefèbvre wanted the car to adhere to an aerodynamic teardrop shape, yet still maintain practicality. He also desired a highly flexible suspension system to ensure that its wheels never left the road, giving the safest possible driving experience.

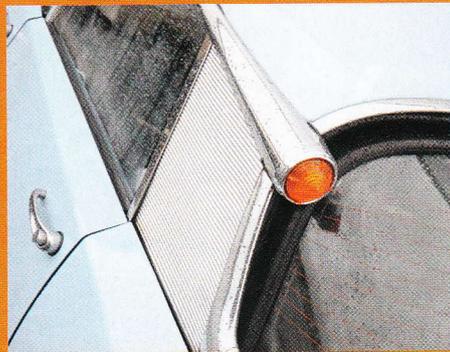
Originally scheduled for 1940, it took another 15 years before it finally arrived, like an intergalactic vision, at the 1955 Paris Motor Show. The wait had been worth it. The DS's ultra futuristic styling was like nothing seen before by a Europe used post-war scrimping. ➤



French flights of Fancy

CITROËN DS

ENGINE: 1911cc/4-cyl/OHV
POWER: 75bhp@5250rpm
TORQUE: 98lb ft@2500rpm
GEARBOX: 4-speed manual
TOP SPEED: 96mph
0-60MPH: 15.6sec
MPG: 32.3
LENGTH: 189in (4801mm)
WIDTH: 70.5in (1791mm)
WEIGHT: 1245kg



Volume car design had never been so radical as the DS shape, and there's been nothing to beat it since. Thereafter, Citroën has trodden a more conventional route.

Price new: £1339
Value now: £900-£6750



The Citroën's 1911cc four-cylinder engine is adequate rather than sporting.

Beneath the Citroën's radical bodywork lay an engineering pièce de résistance with a pressurised, self-levelling gas and oil system that ran the suspension, brakes, clutch, gearchange and steering. In comparison the engine, an updated version of the 1911cc Traction Avant 'four', appeared positively mundane, but it wasn't enough to put the public off, with 12,000 orders placed by the end of the first day.

For all its space-age appearance and technical innovation, the DS's front-wheel drive and front-engined layout means, incredibly, that it's the most conventional of our quartet. No car polarises opinion quite so much, Flaminio Bertolini's striking design is either gloriously elegant or an utter abomination.

It fires up with a hint of the agricultural and the self-levelling suspension rises in a decidedly male manner. Inside, it's full of cutting edge plastics and a voluptuous bench. Once on the move, you're introduced to one of the most comfortable driving experiences known to man. The steering through the futuristic single-spoke steering wheel is light while the unique suspension cosssets you, smoothing over the worst of UK tar macadam.

Even the much-maligned engine performs with aplomb; it's no sporting unit but its 75bhp propels you forward with effortless elegance and an exhaust note that's part petrol lawnmower, part SodaStream.

If the DS is the automotive equivalent of the most difficult sexual position in the Kama Sutra, then its four-cylinder power plant is missionary style with the lights on. It's rather like pulling Brigitte Bardot only to find Hyacinth Bucket at the core.

This car transformed Citroën's image from that of a staid, safe European car manufacturer to one of innovation and cutting edge design. Nothing came close to it when new and that still holds true today.



America has a lot to answer for. Yes folks, the good ol' US of A may have many negative points: line dancing, aerosol cream, and a irony-deficient population. But if it hadn't been for its huge export market then many of the delectable classics we now take for granted simply wouldn't exist.

RENAULT CARAVELLE

ENGINE: 1108cc/4-cyl/OHV
POWER: 55bhp@4500rpm
TORQUE: 65lb ft@3000rpm
GEARBOX: 4-speed manual
TOP SPEED: 88mph
0-60MPH: 12sec
MPG: 31
LENGTH: 168.7in (4260mm)
WIDTH: 61.8in (1570mm)
WEIGHT: 823kg



The Floride was renamed Caravelle for the USA market and restyled with smooth air vents and a squared-up roofline. Running gear and suspension came from the Dauphine Gordini.

In 1956, Renault managing director Pierre Dryfus and director of research Fernand Picard crossed the Atlantic with the aim of improving the company's market share. Inspired by the success of the Karmann Ghia – a re-bodied Volkswagen Beetle – and buoyed by discussions with the Renault dealership network, they decided to emulate their German cousins and produce a small, elegant convertible.

Italian coachbuilder Ghia had already styled the Renault Dauphine and was approached to design it but, already in cahoots with Volkswagen, it farmed out the contract to Frau. His dashing unibody design was manufactured by Chausson at coachbuilder Brissoneau and Lotz, and mated to the running gear and suspension from the Dauphine Gordini.

The Renault Floride – so called after the American state – was an immediate sales success but dealers in America identified one major flaw: the name. Jim-Bob from Nantucket was prone to saying: 'I ain't buying no Florida,' before grabbing his crotch and depositing a tobacco-laden globule of saliva on the floor. It was switched to Caravelle in the USA, predating the European change, which coincided with a body restyle by Frau and the new chassis and uprated running gear from the Renault 8. Styling differences between Floride and Caravelle are subtle – connoisseurs of these cars know they share the same body contours but will spot

'One the road, the Renault is a jewel. It's easy to see how this diminutive car charmed America. The Caravelle beguiles and bewitches in equal measure'

Price new: £1191
Price now: £1000-£5000



the smoothed side vents, squared up roofline and individual letters of the word Caravelle, which replaced the Floride crest on the nose. Although there's an elegant touch to the car's lines it can appear a little ungainly from some angles, but move your head a couple of centimetres and it all comes together again.

On the road, the little Renault is a jewel. The 1108cc, five-bearing overhead valve 'Sierra' engine sits in the boot and kicks out 54bhp, providing performance at odds with the daintiness of its exterior. The four-speed gearchange, via a floor-mounted gearlever, is crisp and disc brakes all round provide decent stopping power.

Rear placement of the engine means it is a little flighty; needing just 14psi on the front tyres in comparison with 24psi at the rear. This combination results in super-light steering – you can throw it into corners but you'll need to keep your wits about you, especially in the wet. It's easy to see how this diminutive car charmed North America.

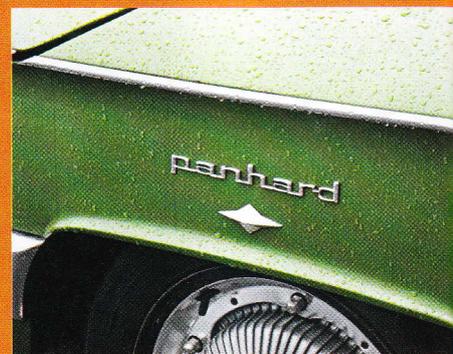
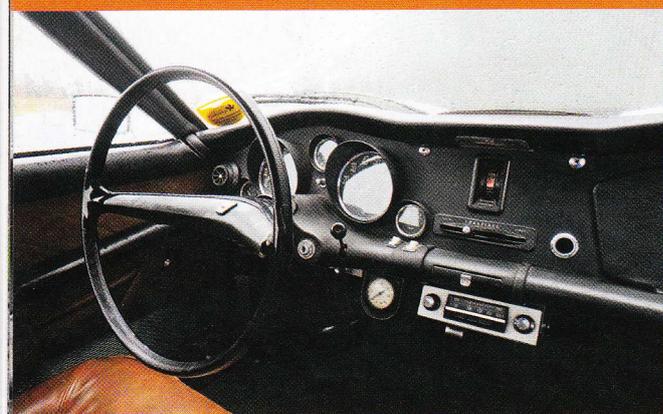
The Caravelle beguiles and bewitches in equal measure, and just £5000 will buy you a top example. ➔

French flights of Fancy



PANHARD 24CT

ENGINE: 848cc/2-cyl/OHV
POWER: 60bhp@5250rpm
TORQUE: 56lb ft@3500rpm
GEARBOX: 4-speed manual
TOP SPEED: 100mph
0-60MPH: 22.3sec
MPG: 40
LENGTH: 168in (4267mm)
WIDTH: 63.8in (1620mm)
WEIGHT: 840kg



The 24CT was Panhard's passenger car swansong – it cost its owner Citroën too much to manufacture. The Panhard plant was switched over to making vans.



When all around are following the crowd, it's time to stand up for your principles and go with your heart. Quite simply, it's the Gallic way. Panhard – formerly Panhard et Levasor, arguably the world's first complete car manufacturer – had developed a reputation for cutting edge engineering craftsmanship, reliability and performance.

Allied to this, it had an internal culture devoted to expensive innovation – which was difficult to maintain given the post-war socialist government's policy of affordability for the masses.

So it was that Citroën, already a 25 per cent shareholder in the company, took full control in 1965. The Panhard board viewed it as a way of ensuring its cars appeared in more showrooms; unfortunately the

Price new: £1258
 Price now: £600-£6000



The air-cooled flat-twin Dyna allowed a low front end – and excellent aerodynamics.

parent company saw it as a method for sub-contracting and keeping a rival in check. When developing its new 24-series car, Panhard was politely informed that it must be a two-seater and should be powered by the company's traditional flat-twin Dyna engine, lest it encroach into DS territory.

In 1963, the world's most expensive two-cylinder car, the 24CT, was released. It was immediately acclaimed for its handling, appearance and innovative interior – the sales brochure proclaimed an astonishing 1764 possible seating positions.

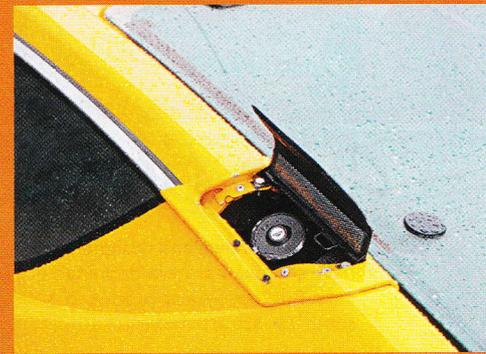
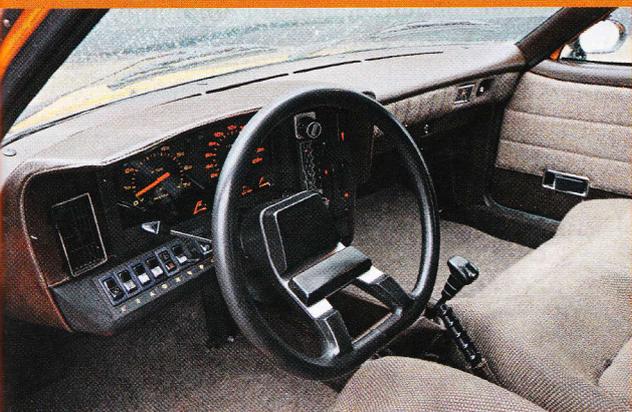
The bodywork, mated to an incredibly strong separate tubular steel chassis, was timelessly elegant with a reinforced roof panel that allowed thin symmetrically styled front and rear window pillars. This, combined with the finishing touch of cowled-in lights behind glass – later to be adopted by the Citroën DS – made it look as if it had been sculpted rather than constructed.

Power came from a forward-mounted, air-cooled, flat-twin Dyna – or tuned Tigre – engine. The lack of a radiator meant that the front end of the car was exceptionally low, resulting in excellent aerodynamics.

Citroën had to decide whether to continue to build what was a prohibitively expensive car or to turn the facilities over to the production of its own vans. Following in the footsteps of Cain and Abel it chose the



**MATRA-SIMCA
BAGHEERA 'S'**
ENGINE: 1442cc/4-cyl/OHV
POWER: 90bhp@5800rpm
TORQUE: 90lb ft@3200rpm
GEARBOX: five-speed manual
TOP SPEED: 115mph
0-60MPH: 11.6sec
MPG: 27.5
LENGTH: 158in (4013mm)
WIDTH: 65.8in (1671mm)
WEIGHT: 970kg



The exotically-styled Bagheera was different but pricey – it cost more to buy in Britain than a Fiat X1/9 or even a TVR 3000M, and it wasn't anything like as quick.

latter, effectively killing off Panhard. This meant that a proposed Citroën-Panhard, with a 143bhp, four-cylinder engine, never saw the light of day – imagine what could have been achieved with that chassis.

Crank up the 24CT, and you're immediately greeted by a cacophony of twin-cylindrical thrashing; imagine a pair of Red Bull-invigorated ferrets going hell for leather in a sack. The small-capacity Tigre engine produces an incredible 60bhp and 100mph – impressive for a design that has its roots in the Forties.

Torque is almost non-existent at low speed and there's a general roughness but it smooths out delightfully at higher speed. It really is edge of your seat stuff. Triple torsion bars on the rear, carhorse style, offer a typically soft French ride but it doesn't roll too much and that engine mounted forward of the front axle helps to ensure sublime handling.

The last of the Panhards, the 24CT, remains a classic reminder of the innovative output of this definitively French marque. If you dare to be different, then £6000 will put the best Tigre in your tank.

Price new: £5370
 Price now: £600-£3500



Frenchman René Bonnet launched his groundbreaking Djet in 1961, ensuring that road car design would never be the same. The mid-ship location of its transversely mounted engine proved to be a masterstroke, resulting in near 50:50 weight distribution and a magical effect on handling.

The Bagheera can trace its lineage directly back to the Djet. Matra, a French company specialising in advanced aerospace technology, had strong motoring connections and supplied the plastic panels for the original car before taking over production under its own banner in 1964. Nine years later, with the company looking to replace its bizarrely styled and unloved M530, it teamed up with Chrysler's French subsidiary Simca to embark on a new project.

'Crank up the 24CT, and you're immediately greeted by a cacophony of twin-cylindrical thrashing; imagine a pair of ferrets going hell for leather in a sack'

Interiors



Citroën DS.



Renault Caravelle.

Car cabins don't get quirkier than these. The Matra's three-abreast layout is the weirdest.



Panhard 24CT.



Matra Bagheera.

Sacre Bleu!

French engineers and designers have created many era-defining cars. But they've also produced some less attractive creatures...

Citroën Ami 6/8

This attempt at an upmarket 2CV included a reverse-angle rear window and a bonnet that looked as if it was constructed by dripping candle wax on to the wings before allowing the mess to set.



Renault 12

The last of the rear-engined Renaults featured spectacularly bland three-box styling and similarly uninspiring performance.



But, like the Citroën Ami, the 12 sold by the bucketload.

Peugeot 104

Another in a long line of mundane French fare, the country appeared to have two settings: unorthodox stunners or bog standard merde



like the Peugeot 104. Behold France's Allegro.

The goal was an inexpensive sports car that would predominantly use off-the-shelf parts, while providing speed, economy and ease of maintenance. Codenamed the M550, Matra's bosses provided the designers with a simple brief: it should look like a Ferrari. Jean Toprieux, Jacques Nochet and Antoine Volanis attacked the task with relish; the result was an impressive and elegant Italianesque sports car.

The new model, now named after the panther in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, was unveiled at the Le Mans 24-hour race in 1973; from a marketing point of view it couldn't have been timed better, as a Matra 670B took the honours.

The Bagheera featured the 1294 cc, Simca 1100Ti power unit, mounted transversely, producing 82bhp and a unique three-abreast seating arrangement, which resulted in the obligatory *Ménage à Trois* headlines.

Reviews were mixed. All agreed that Matra-Simca had produced an economical, comfortable, refined, and reliable sports car but its exotic styling created a problem. *CAR* magazine called it a 'Sheep in wolf's clothing,' stating that: 'Simca's Bagheera looks like a five-litre V12, goes like a 1300cc straight-four'.

In Great Britain, there were other issues. At £5370 it was expensive. For two-grand less you could experience similar mid-engined shenanigans in a Fiat X1/9. Even the V6 TVR 3000M could be picked up cheaper and that was in a different league. Matra-Simca responded with the Bagheera S; capacity increased to 1492cc and power output to 90bhp.

Step into a Bagheera today and the Seventies cabin transports you back in time. There's so much tucked in the roomy cabin that it's like sticking your head in Mr Bean's wardrobe. From the outside, the exhaust note is a little uninspiring but ensconce yourself within, crank her up and you're immediately aware that the driver has been saving all the Cadbury's (sorry, Kraft's) goodness for himself. Nailing the throttle results in a purposeful

'Reviews were mixed. CAR magazine called the Bagheera a sheep in wolf's clothing''

induction roar from the twin Weber 36 DCNF carburettors. Power delivery is velvety smooth and the handling superb but like most mid-engined cars, when it comes loose, it'll do so with a vengeance.

To denounce the Bagheera for a lack of power is to do it a disservice. Matra-Simca set out to produce an affordable, stylish driving experience and to this day, that's exactly what you get. Driving a Bagheera marks you out as a man in the know.

Dénouement

In life, position matters. Take the undercrackers department – careful placement allows a gentleman to go through the day with a modicum of comfort.

Apply the same logic to our French beauties. The nimble Renault provides light-footed, rear-ended flair while the Matra-Simca is stylish, mid-engined, handling perfection. If it's thrash metal and Gallic forethought with aplomb that you want, then the Panhard's for you.

But it's the front-engined DS that showed them all the way; so astounding is it, that in comparison, entering Doctor Parnassus' Imaginarium is almost like crossing the threshold of a drab bungalow in suburban Slough. We should intellectualise the analysis of these cars and finish with something high-brow like a quote by Descartes, but instead we'll keep to the spirit in which they should be enjoyed: 'Monsieur, with these fine automobiles you will be spoiling us.' ■

THANKS TO: Neil O'Shea, Kevin Howell, John Passfield and Roddy Michael for their help with this feature.