

# Robb Report

FOR THE LUXURY LIFESTYLE™

## Auto Exotica

The cars featured on the following pages are among the world's rarest, each considered a treasure for collectors persistent or fortunate enough to get their hands on one. However, as one of our authors argues, rarity is hardly the sole measure of value. The aesthetic appeal of a car's design, the technical merits of its mechanicals, the innovative elements it incorporates, all contribute to its enduring value. But for many, the true measure of a car's worth lies in the heritage of its marque (a notion supported, our author insists, by the demand for the \$200,000-plus Bristol Blenheim) or, as is the case with the Tatra 87 or the Bizzarrini GT Strada, in the role the model played in forming that heritage.

### Tatra 87

*Weird, wonderful, and ahead of its time.*

Hans Ledwinka was an introvert, unassuming, given to talking to himself as he worked. But the machines that came from his drafting table demanded attention. *(Click image to enlarge)*



Ledwinka designed automobiles for Tatra, one of Czechoslovakia's better-known manufacturing firms, from 1897 to 1945. He built cars for the people and cars for the upper classes, each an imaginative blend of engineering and style. Sympathetic management at the company gave Ledwinka free rein to make his ideas reality, translating to success in the mass market and innovation in the upper echelon of automobiles. Essential elements of his people's cars were appropriated for Dr. Porsche's Volkswagen Beetle—the people's car—as an eventual multimillion-deutsche mark award to Tatra by VW would attest. And the flamboyant, futuristic Tatra 87 was a fit conveyance for the avant-garde of its day—and a treasure for the few modern collectors who have tracked down a surviving example.

Few, if any, of Ledwinka's ideas were totally original. What made his products special, the 87 in particular, was the way that he combined the ingredients. The 87's rounded Streamline Moderne body, with its central tail fin, was more efficient aerodynamically than many current sedans. Its light-alloy, air-cooled V-8 engine was mounted behind the rear wheels. The simple platform chassis served mainly to carry the power train and four-wheel independent suspension, while the body supplied structural strength. The 87's interior had ample space for six people, yet it appeared to be a midsize car from the outside. Other manufacturers had tried one or more of these concepts—none had put them all together in one car.

In 1936, the year the 87 debuted, the typical passenger-car body was about as aerodynamic as a Victorian house—a relatively primitive cast-iron, water-cooled engine mounted at the front but driving the rear wheels; axles differing little from those used on horse-drawn wagons; and a heavy steel frame supporting flimsy body panels. The layout's inefficiency generally resulted in either a cramped passenger compartment or a long wheelbase.

There were exceptions. In the United States, Chrysler noted public interest in streamlining—applied not only to objects in motion but to buildings and toasters—and introduced the Airflow in 1934. But under the skin of the Airflow, which was dowdy compared to the 87, it was utterly conventional. Meanwhile, the VW-to-be in Germany, for which initial running prototypes had been built in 1935, bore many mechanical similarities to the Tatra.

The revolutionary 87 evolved from Ledwinka's 1933 T77, a streamlined luxury sedan with an air-cooled V-8 in back. The basics were all there, but Ledwinka felt he could do better. In three years, he did.

Unfortunately, neither Czechoslovakia nor the rest of Europe was terribly interested in a futuristic luxury car in the mid-1930s. Those were difficult times, and over the next few years, things would only become worse. Tatra's main business was trucks—Ledwinka designed many of them as well—and moderately priced passenger cars. The slow pace of production on the 87 slowed further in 1938, when the Third Reich annexed part of Czechoslovakia.

For those fortunate enough to buy—or at least drive or ride in—a Tatra 87, it was a

revelation: quiet, spacious, and smooth. It was capable of reaching 100 mph (despite having only 75 hp) and was good for 20 mpg at a steady 50 mph. The 87 also had some clever extras, including a third headlamp on the front panel. Mirrors within the lamp moved as the steering wheel turned, aiming its beam in the car's direction of travel. A cruder version of this would be used in the Tucker; years later, Citroën installed turning inner headlights on some of its DS and SM models.

One negative of the 87 driving experience was visibility to the rear. The rear window, a double-pane affair designed to keep engine noise out of the passenger compartment, was covered by louvers needed to keep the engine cool.

There was one other problem: Comfort, reliability, and speed made the Tatra a prime target for requisitioning by German officers in World War II. The 87's extreme rearward weight bias gave it handling qualities eerily similar to those of the later Porsche 911. Enough 87s carried their high-ranking occupants backward off Czech roads to make the Wehrmacht bosses back in Berlin issue an order forbidding further use of them. A total of 3,056 Type 87s were built before production ceased in 1950. How many survived the war and the rigors of life in Communist-era Czechoslovakia is unknown. Some have escaped to the West over the years, and a diligent search can still turn one up in its native land. If found, the Tatra 87 is rare enough to be worth whatever price one is willing to pay.

### An American Tatra

Preston Tucker thought big. When the fast-talking Michigan entrepreneur decided to enter the auto business, he acquired a massive former aircraft plant in Chicago in which to build his cars. He avidly courted publicity, sold stock and dealer franchises based on drawings of a car that didn't yet exist, and later, when capital ran low, presold accessories (such as radios and heaters) for cars yet to be built. He touted the 1948 Tucker as "The Most Completely New Car in 50 Years"; awkward verbiage perhaps, but not far from the truth.



Some of Tucker's shenanigans—and some for which he was wrongly blamed—caused him to run afoul of the SEC, leading to a noisy trial in federal court. He was acquitted of all charges in 1950, but by that time his company had been destroyed. Even so, Tucker had conceived and built a real car, more advanced in concept and far better in execution than many of its peers. *(Click image to enlarge)*

Like Tatra's Ledwinka, Tucker envisioned modern cars with rear-mounted engines, aerodynamic bodies, and third headlamps that turned with the front wheels. When the time came to replace sketches and press releases with a functioning automobile, Tucker did it quickly. He hired chief stylist Alex Tremulis on the last day of 1946; a functional, finished prototype of the Tucker 48 premiered in June 1947. The production cars that followed in 1948 differed in detail, but the basics remained the same.

Beyond his interest in performance—48s hit 120 mph with their 168-hp flat-six engines—Tucker was a visionary in the field of safety. He wanted to put seat belts in his cars (eight years before Ford offered them) but was dissuaded. Still, occupants rode in an interior designed for maximum protection in a crash: The padded roll atop the dashboard, recessed handles, and pop-out windshield were features not found on other American cars for years to come.

Of the 51 cars that Tucker produced in 1948, 47 (plus the 1947 Tin Goose prototype) survive, most in the hands of fanatical owners. When Tuckers come up for sale, they are expensive. One pristine example auctioned recently for \$334,800—a belated tribute to an automotive visionary.

### Bizzarrini GT Strada

*Italian Beauty American Brawn*

Every blessing, they say, carries a curse. Such has been the fortune of the costly European GTs of the 1950s and 1960s, whose highly stressed engines translated into speed and grace on the racetrack—only to pour out pure frustration on the street. Once on the pavement, these elegantly styled power plants turned temperamental at best, hiccupping and coughing in traffic and constantly battling the mechanics whose unenviable chore it was to keep them in tune. *(Click image to enlarge)*



To remedy these deficiencies, a number of elite manufacturers looked westward to the opposite shores of the Atlantic, where practicality and reliability reigned in the American automobile market. U.S.-built V-8 engines could, with assurance, blast down the

quarter mile or, as required, idle unfazed in the most sweltering summer stop-and-go traffic—twin virtues that were not lost on engineer Giotto Bizzarrini, the father of Ferrari's famous GTO.



Bizzarrini in the early 1960s made the momentous decision to go independent, consulting with fledgling gran turismo constructors such as Ferruccio Lamborghini and Renzo Rivolta, whom Bizzarrini helped to create the Iso Rivolta 2+2 and Iso Grifo. In fact, it was during the Iso Rivolta adventure that Bizzarrini first tasted U.S. ponies. While Rivolta considered purchasing the rights to produce the Chevrolet-powered English-built Gordon GT prototype, Bizzarrini had the opportunity to evaluate its V-8 firsthand and, in his own word, was "shocked" by the experience. "It was," he remembers, "superior to Ferrari's engines, offering the same power with more immediate throttle response." His impression of the motor proved a lasting one, persuading him, when the time came, to choose the Corvette V8 to drive his own vehicles. *(Click image to enlarge)*

The first such car to carry the Bizzarrini badge, the Bizzarrini Grifo, was nearly identical to his Iso-produced competition Grifos that placed 14th overall at Le Mans in 1964 and ninth overall in 1965. The design retained the slinky, efficient shape of the Iso, but slightly embellished its lines through the use of chrome; the interior, though still spartan, struck a note of elegance with the addition of carpet and tooled leather. It was a marriage of European beauty with American brawn, a provocative stylistic and engineering statement that was Bizzarrini's own—the pinnacle of a career that, up to that point, had been largely preoccupied with making the names of Ferrari and Lamborghini famous.

Born in 1926, the son of a wealthy landowner in Livorno, this ultimate engineering hired gun was retained by Enzo Ferrari in 1957 as a test-driver. He had graduated from the University of Pisa with a degree in engineering in the early 1950s, and in 1954 he had obtained a position in Alfa Romeo's experimental department, where he worked under the mentorship of seasoned engineers and drivers Giovanbattista Guidotti and Consalvo Sanesi. As his tenure at Ferrari began, young Bizzarrini brought to the proverbial table an unusual combination of talents: As an engineer, he could not only diagnose the problems associated with new designs, but he could also furnish the solutions to fix them. He rose quickly in the ranks of Ferrari and had his hand in a number of the firm's most memorable cars, including the 250 SWB, the Testa Rossa, and the 250 California Spider.

Bizzarrini's big chance, however, came in 1961, when Ferrari put him in charge of the GTO project. The engineer worked in complete secrecy with a handpicked crew, completing the car in a matter of months. Then, in November of that year, the infamous walkout occurred after Ferrari fired his influential sales director, Girolamo Gardini. When Bizzarrini, chief engineer Carlo Chiti, and racing team manager Romolo Tavoni learned of this, they confronted Ferrari and asked (or, more likely, demanded) that he hire Gardini back. Ferrari's response was to fire all of them. Count Giovanni Volpi di Misurata of Scuderia Serenissima promptly hired Bizzarrini to develop the ATS, intended to compete against the Ferrari. ASA (Automobili Turismo e Sport) then came calling, and Bizzarrini applied himself to perfecting the company's diminutive 1000 GT for the road. Ironically, it was Enzo Ferrari who recommended him for the job.

In 1962, Bizzarrini designed and constructed the prototype Lamborghini V-12, an engine that became the basis for all of Lamborghini's subsequent V-12s. He also worked with Renzo Rivolta on his Chevrolet-powered Iso Rivolta GT and Iso Grifo A3C, the latter a competition machine that served as the basis for many of the cars Bizzarrini sold under his own name between 1965 and 1969. The Bizzarrini Grifo, however, did not bear the name for long: A row with Iso over the "Grifo" name prompted him to rechristen the model the Bizzarrini GT Strada. As with the Grifo, the Strada's body was made of aluminum, and the race-bred front suspension was independent, perfect for hugging the road at high speeds.

A fiberglass version with independent rear suspension, dubbed Bizzarrini GT America, joined the lineup in early 1966. Like the GT Strada, this car employed a 400-hp Corvette 327 engine, which was crowned by a Bizzarrini-designed cross-draft manifold featuring four Weber carburetors and positioned so far behind the front axle that, to service the distributor, one had to remove a panel on top of the dashboard. Although the carbs looked impressive, when Road & Track tested the first GT America in the United States for the December 1966 issue, it became apparent that these carbs thwarted Bizzarrini's original objective in selecting the Corvette engine—nontemperamental, reliable driving. What the out-of-tune V-8 did manage was to propel the 2,800-pound car to 60 mph in 6.4 seconds, achieving a top speed of 146 mph. Thanks to its front mid-engine design, according to Road & Track, "The Bizzarrini's handling borders on the fantastic for a road car. It comes closer than anything we've

driven to the contemporary racing machine."

Unfortunately, Bizzarrini, the consummate engineer, did not concentrate on refining and selling his product, but instead diverted his energies into new creations. He introduced a downsized version of the GT America, the GT 1900 Europa, to appeal to the European marketplace. But his most demanding (and damning) new project was the P538, a Chevrolet-powered mid-engine machine he entered at Le Mans in 1966. Although a broken water pipe sidelined the vehicle permanently after a reliable three-hour run, Bizzarrini, undaunted, built another for American racer Mike Gammino to run in the fledgling Can-Am series. By this time, Bizzarrini had invested his life's savings in the P538 project, convinced the car would be highly competitive for several seasons. But the ACO, endurance racing's governing body, instigated a rule change that stated the maximum engine size would be five liters in 1968, and that a minimum of 25 cars would have to be built. Overnight, Bizzarrini's world-beater became obsolete, and his company's fortunes plummeted.

Important cars would still follow: In 1968, Bizzarrini teamed with designer Giorgetto Giugiaro, who originally penned the lines of the Iso Grifo/Bizzarrini Strada/GT America, to craft the Manta, a sensational one-off based on the P538 chassis that proved to be one of the stars at the Turin auto show in 1968. Yet this flurry of activity only masked the problems besieging the firm: shady partners and difficulty in obtaining a consistent stream of bodies for the popular GT Strada/GT America. The company went into receivership just as the Manta was making its spectacular debut at Turin, and the last handful of GT Stradas was completed before the concern shut its doors in the summer of 1969.

Today, Bizzarrinis are a hot commodity in the collector car market—especially the first 25 that bear the Iso name. A favorite among Europe's historic racers, they can outstrip the much more expensive Ferrari 250 GTO. And that is as it should be. Its seductive shape coupled with its Chevrolet power and gearbox make the car as hypnotic today as when it first broke cover in 1963 under the guise of the Iso Grifo A3C. This and its pedigree: "I really view the Grifo A3 as my second aerodynamic study, after the Ferrari GTO," Bizzarrini reflects. "When I tested the prototype, I was quite impressed with its high-speed stability, and this reinforced that viewpoint.... If only Mr. Rivolta had agreed to build 100 examples for homologation, I really think we could have won the world championship."

### **Bristol**

*The Englishman's Enigma.*

Bristol is one of Britain's most venerated carmakers. For many collectors, the obscure automaker's products embody English handbuilt quality and understated exclusivity. The company takes that understatement so seriously that it actively discourages publicity for its current car, the Blenheim, and does without the services of dealerships entirely, preferring instead to work directly with its customers.

Baronet (later Sir) George Stanley Midelton White founded the car division of the British and Colonial Aeroplane Co. in 1946 to provide employment for his postwar workforce. After a partner "recovered" a 6-cylinder BMW 328 from war-torn Germany, Bristol's engineers tapped the services of ex-BMW designer Fritz Fiedler to help re-create, modify, and upgrade all of the car's major components and create "a proper gentleman's carriage." The resulting Bristol Type 400 was a major hit. Although the design was proto-BMW, right down to the kidney-shaped grille, the elegant machine found immediate favor among wealthy buyers. The car's craftsmanship and materials easily matched that of the day's Rolls-Royce, and the Bristol badge emerged as a discreet alternative for discriminating Brits. *(Click image to enlarge)*



The Type 400 had excellent handling, but its weight kept top speed to about 90 mph. The car continued in production without significant mechanical change until 1961, when the Type 407 appeared sporting a 5.2-liter Chrysler engine and TorqueFlite transmission. Suddenly, Bristols were very fast. They raced at Le Mans and generally held their own against Britain's automotive aristocracy.

Subsequent models continued to use Chrysler powerplants with a variety of displacements. And whether by design or economic necessity, production remained low, helping to maintain a thoroughly English air of exclusivity.

In 1966, George White and Bristol agent Tony Crook bought the car division from the newly named Bristol Aeroplane Co. After he was injured in a horrific car crash in 1969, White handed the company's reins to Crook.

By this time, Bristol's lack of resources was starting to take its toll. The company's

styling had become bland, and like Aston Martin, Bristol had to buy most of its switchgear and mechanical components from suppliers to mass-market manufacturers. The resulting pastiche in the 1975 Bristol 412, for instance, was ineffective and incongruent.

And yet Bristol kept going: hand-building small quantities of extremely expensive, mechanically simple motorcars—as it does to this day, long after most of the great names in English automotive history have died off or fallen prey to deep-pocketed multinationals.

Of course, Mr. Crook, who still heads the company, sees Bristol's current plight from a different perspective. The octogenarian and former RAF pilot protects Bristol's reputation with the ferocity of Cerberus, brooking no criticism of his cars and rebuffing complaints with righteous indignation.

Crook's protective nature—and distaste for publicity—makes a test-drive of the approximately \$230,000 Blenheim an impossibility. The story of how I got my hands on a model involves some truly Dickensian characters: quick-witted, long-suffering mechanics who labor in dark garages and devote their lives to restoring shabby Bristols to roadworthy condition; a short-tempered multimillionaire who believes that anyone who cannot afford a Bristol is in no position to judge one; and a motoring journalist whose florid poems to the marque are proof positive that love is blind. Suffice it to say, everyone I contacted either refused to speak to me or requested anonymity. Fortunately, one brave Blenheim owner stepped out from Tony Crook's long shadow, and we convened in front of a sturdy brick manse, bathed in afternoon sun.

The agreeable surroundings were not enough to mask the considerable shortcomings of the Blenheim's design. Its angular aesthetics were a far cry from the organic, streamlined forms of Bristol's earlier models. "What are the two things that can be seen from outer space?" the owner asked rhetorically. "The Great Wall of China and the panel gaps of a Bristol." His Blenheim had recently enjoyed a body-off restoration to eliminate body rot, which had been discovered after the car's paint had cracked. The cracked paint prompted a total respray, which seemed as good a time as any to fix the inoperative air-conditioning, incorrect shock absorbers, a failed exhaust system, blown window motors, axle whine, insufficient engine cooling—the list goes on.



But the Blenheim's interior easily eclipsed its operating flaws. The combination of wood, gigantic rocker switches, tiny mirror controls, '70s-style air conditioner, fiddly Japanese stereo, and seemingly random assortment of buttons and knobs was a farrago of ugliness—such a bizarre concoction of styles and textures that one owner felt compelled to redesign and rewire the entire dash. *(Click image to enlarge)*

Once under way, the oft-repaired Blenheim handled better than one would expect from a car whose chassis dates to 1946. It must have been a revelation at the time, but by today's standards there are rental cars that inspire more confidence. As for power, the 5.9-liter V-8 felt decidedly reluctant.

At the end of the day, as my father liked to say, it was "another myth exploded." The Bristol Blenheim I tested had dubious build quality, questionable reliability, and appalling aesthetics. Yet it cost more than a top-notch Mercedes, Bentley, or Porsche. Tony Crook will disagree to the point of apoplexy, but the only possible justification for buying a Blenheim lies in its rarity and its connection with Bristol's heritage. For a handful of wealthy owners, that is enough.

But is it enough to keep the Bristol Car Co. going? Probably not—which is why, under new co-ownership, Bristol will soon produce a car built around a Chrysler Viper V-10 engine. One can only hope that the Bristol Fighter signals a return to the company's glory days of meticulous build and innovative engineering. If not, no amount of understatement will save one of England's last independent marques.