

Der Journalist Phill Llevellin,
einer der bekanntesten britischen Auto-Journalisten,
fuhr mit diesem Tatra von London na Tschechien
und zurück in nur drei Tagen und sagte,
dass sich das Auto besser fährt, als es aussieht...
Andere Pressereaktionen sind weniger optimistisch



Czech Create

A red-eyed Phil Llewellyn drives a Tatra from London to the Czech Republic - and back - in just three days. He finds it goes better than it looks

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD NEWTON

Have you heard the one about the executive Skoda?

There are certain adjectives which stick to a car and help to shape its image. The Jaguar is sleek. The Mercedes is prestigious. The new Vauxhall Corsa is cute. Two words spring to mind in relation to the Tatra, a £30,000 saloon from Czechoslovakia — Pig Ugly. From the ridiculous downward curve of its bonnet to the unexpected aerodynamics of its rear end, the Tatra oozes discord.

The reason is simple. Its origins are from behind the Iron Curtain in an age when designers either had to guess what other car manufacturers were up to, copy their efforts from the past, or just get on and do their own thing.

The predecessor for the Tatra 613/5 Sports Saloon was styled by Vignale of Italy. The Czechs then added their own ideas over the years, making it progressively more ugly. The result is a car which bears a coincidental resemblance to several famous marques, but is really like nothing else on earth.

Imagine it was fashioned by aliens from another universe. They had heard about the vehicles which earthlings drove and tried to make one which resembled an amalgamation of all of them. On the planet Tatra, it is undoubtedly the finest vehicle on the road. In the UK, the biggest surprise is that it doesn't talk to petrol pumps. 'It is a car, Jim — but not as we know it.'

In reality, the Tatra has quite a pedigree. Although the brochure will probably skip delicately over this, Hitler conducted his political campaigns from one. 'This is the car for my roads,' he declared, little realising that legions of Ford Mondeos would be driving all over them within a few decades.

The Tatra is nevertheless the proudest product of one of the world's oldest car manufacturers, flagship of the country which gave us the Skoda. But comparing it to the erstwhile reputation of Skoda — once considered second only to the Reliant Robin for keeping comedians in work — is grossly unfair. The Tatra turns heads. It has a lusty V8 engine and 138mph top speed, with a 0-60 time that is

Czechoslovakia's most famous export has kept comedians in jokes for years. Now there's another one — the Tatra. PAUL HARRIS reports on a car in search of a cult.

Photographs by
STEVE POOLE

quicker than most BMWs. Nor, like many of today's anonymous saloons, does it look like it came out of a jelly mould. Its very ugliness makes it appealing.

In fact, the Tatra has everything it needs to be a cult car ... except, for the moment, a cult.

Tim Bishop is hoping to put that right. In a converted forge on the A5 near Towcester he is cleaning and leathering off a T613/5, finished in decadent red and burgundy. He and his trusted business partners have helped to develop the Tatra for the UK by improving the engine, handling and usability of what was already a finely engineered car. They have set themselves up as concessionaires and are about to start selling them in the UK.

Sitting in the showroom, the T613/5 looks frighteningly old-fashioned at first glance. But the truth is that it features some of the most up-to-date computer tricks available. They include a 'learning' microchip which looks after the fuel system and another which tells you in a dashboard display, for instance, if your tail light isn't working. With one press of the key fob on a winter's morning, it will obediently defrost itself and warm the interior while you are enjoying fresh coffee and toast indoors.

But the essence of the Tatra lies more in

JASPER CARROT AND many other comedians were invisible companions as Tim Bishop and I boogied across Germany in the car that Bishop likened to a five-seater Porsche 911. We were heading for what used to be Czechoslovakia — home of Skoda, the marque that has inspired more cruel jokes than any other. Bishop's daunting mission is to convince a small number of ever so slightly eccentric Brits that the Czech Republic's other car maker, Tatra, produces an executive express good enough to sell for the same sort of money as the Jaguar XJ6 4.0-litre, BMW 730i and Mercedes E280.

Tatra (GB) Ltd's full-time employees can be counted on the fingers of two hands.

Enthusiasm and know-how help compensate for what is lacking in the way of corporate muscle. Bishop's can-do philosophy is endorsed by the fact that he has invested £250,000 and a truly mind-boggling amount of time to make Tatra happen in a country where the name is recognised by just a few car nuts.

He certainly fits that description. The passion for characterful machinery was probably inherited from his grandfather, EB Ware, who raced three-wheeler Morgans at Brooklands before World War Two. Bishop's cars include a Morgan three-wheeler, one of the last two-stroke Trabants, two Austin Champs and a very rare NSU Spyder with the Wankel engine. He amazed the staid Swedes by driving an ancient

double-decker bus while working for Saab in Trollhättan. Jaguar was another big-name employer before he took the go-it-alone plunge in 1989.

Bishop and his colleagues worked around the clock, and then some more, to finish the first pre-production version of the 'British' T613/5 that we were to drive to the Czech Republic and back. It promised to be a tough test, because my hectic schedule dictated covering the 2000 miles in three days, one of which was set aside for meetings and a tour of Tatra's museum. The car was a less than perfect example, despite the marathon stint, but near enough to give an impression of what the car will be like when it goes on sale here.

The T613's predecessor fascinated me when I travelled through Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. Cars of any sort were few and far between in the self-proclaimed workers' paradise, so the big, black, rear-engined 603s really stood out. You had to be a very important party official to run one, just over 20,000 having been built when production stopped in 1975.

Bishop outlined the T613/5's specification as we headed for Sheerness and the overnight ferry to Vlissingen. Tatra's history includes a lot of front-engined cars, one of which boasted a 6.0-litre V12, but those who know of the marque and its great engineer, Hans Ledwinka, tend to associate it with rear-mounted, air-cooled motors. The T613/5 has a 3.5-litre V8 that has four overhead camshafts. Most of the fuel injection, engine management and exhaust systems were designed by Bishop and his henchmen, much of the credit going to Mark Berry, whose career embraces Rolls-Royce, Lotus and Jaguar.

Mounted far enough forward to warrant a mid-rear description, Tatra's engine cranks out 200bhp and 220bhp at 5750rpm. On tap when needed, the extra horses arrive when full-throttle acceleration tells the management system to stop driving the big cooling fan, which absorbs what John Major might describe as a not insignificant amount of power. The almost plateau-like torque curve climbs to 224lb ft at 3500rpm. There was no chance to Czech the performance figures, but the T613/5's ability to cruise at 120mph-plus made the claimed 138mph maximum look reasonable. Bishop quotes 0-60mph in 7.7sec.

Fuel consumption? Neither the odometer nor the trip recorder were working, so what should have been a simple chore was impossible. Bishop's figure of about 22mpg overall is based on a lot of brisk miles in Britain and mainland Europe. Factors that stimulate his taste for spirited motoring include the big,

'Any doubts about its ability to attract attention vanished long before the Tatra reached Sheerness. It's no beauty, but it certainly has character'

torquey engine, a competent chassis and a braking system whose quartet of huge, ventilated discs with four-pot callipers could have been engineered to stop runaway trains. The front suspension features MacPherson struts while semi-trailing arms do duty at the rear. There's an anti-roll bar at each end and the front-to-rear weight distribution is 45:55.

Any doubts about its ability to attract attention vanished long before the Tatra reached Sheerness. The 18-year-old shape may not win many beauty contests, but it certainly has character; 'Vignale did quite a good styling job,' said Bishop. 'Tatra then made it progressively uglier, year after year. We can't change the major body panels, of course, but we have done our best to make it look better.'

The relationship with Tatra started with nothing more formal than a mail-shot offering his Motive Power company's services. Bishop first visited the factory in Koprivnice, about 200 miles south-east of Prague, in the spring of 1991, initially to discuss fuel injection and catalysts. Tatra had always kept a close watch on international safety legislation, he explained, but because the company catered for Iron Curtain markets there was no pressure to make the V8 socially acceptable by western standards.



Rear-mounted 3.5-litre V8 engine (left) pumps out 220bhp at 5750rpm and 224lb ft at 3500rpm. Tatra claims a top speed of 138mph and 0-60mph in a sprightly 7.7sec. Large, deep side windows provide good visibility, but look a little ungainly (below)





Grosse Pläne – 4 Autos gebaut

its refusal to move from the past. The dashboard, for example, is made from burr elm and the interior is upholstered in leather — although, like virtually everything else on the car, Tim Bishop will change them to customer requirements.

Some aspects of the car, however, need to catch up by about 20 years. The trip recorder on the pre-production model we drove registered every tenth of a mile with a click like a grandfather clock. The gear change was not only dreadful, but bore no relation to the commonly-accepted 'H' pattern of gear changes in the civilised world. Both of these throwbacks will be eliminated before it goes on sale here.

On the road, it is a gutsy performer. At 70mph, it has the aerodynamics of a wardrobe but the comfort of a bed. Because the engine is mounted just above the rear axle, the car's weight distribution makes it unusually stable during enthusiastic driving, of which Tim does much.

But what of its cult status? It already has one fan. An elderly man with a Jewish-sounding name wrote to Tim saying that when he was a young man in Czechoslovakia, his father had promised him a Tatra when the family could afford one. But he had to flee the country under persecution — and felt he was now too old to drive.

Then there is the member of the Williams racing team who wants to test drive one. And a woman who thought the car looked stunning in green.

To test its wider appeal, we took it to Milton Keynes. There, Mr Aubrey Senior, a security

guard, pondered the lines of the car. True, it was a shock to learn that the beautiful-looking, air-cooled engine was at the back and the boot was up front — but he found this acceptable when told it was the same as in a Porsche 911.

Then, the obvious question: 'How much did it cost? Thirty grand!' he exclaimed. 'I could buy me a nice Roller for that.'

Tim was unphased. He and his colleagues aim to sell only about 25 to 30 cars in Britain next year and think they have identified the market niche. Sales director John Marriott said it would appeal to people who appreciated engineering excellence and wanted something different from the Jaguars and BMWs they have probably already owned.

It is a bold mission. But for the planet Tatra, the UK could be the final frontier.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £30,000, depending on specification

Engine: V8 alloy air-cooled, 3,495cc.

Performance:

max 220bhp; estimated top speed 138mph;
0-60 in 7.7 secs.

Length: 200in (5m). Long wheelbase version also available

Width: 72in (1.8m)

Weight distribution:

55 per cent rear, 45 per cent front

Details from:

Tatra (GB) Ltd on 0327 830438.



TOP RIGHT: The 613-5's 3.5 litre DOHC air-cooled V8 sits over the rear wheels. Alternator, power steering pump and aircon compressor are mounted on separate frame and face the engine, the reverse of normal practice
BELOW: At speed in the grounds of Stowe School, Farmer says stability at speed is little short of superb.

The Right Stuff

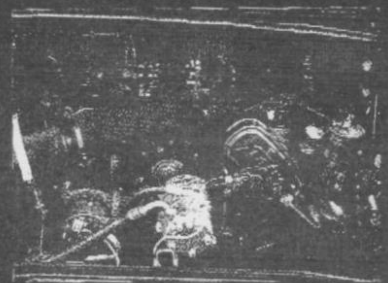
Gavin Farmer can rightly claim to be the first Aussie journalist to drive the big new Tatra.

The 613-5 — Type 5 stands for right-hand-drive — is a big car. It's about the size of a Ford Falcon. On a 2980mm wheelbase it's five metres long and weighs a hefty 1690kgs. With Tim's styling modifications it has the strong and aggressive stance of a sporting sedan emphasised by the very short overhangs front and rear — three of its five metres of length are between the wheels. But so skilfully has it been styled there's absolutely no way you would guess it has a rear engine. The glass area is huge, the almost flat rear window recessed behind small buttresses and the roof pillars quite slim. Perhaps the only giveaway to the design age are the window frames. Far from being flush like today's glass, what you get are expensive double-sided separate frames hand-made from chromed brass that fit snugly into conventional double door rubbers.

The driver's door swings open with the merest of pressure on the handle. It feels heavy, a fact confirmed when you close it with a bank vault-like subdued thud. You sit high on the driver's chair — it could do with more lateral support — and have a commanding view forward. A turn on the key has the V8 idling quietly and smoothly. Flip the throttle and it responds with a deep, whoofy power rumble. But it really sounds good.

Out on the road initial impressions are of considerable width, how sensitive the steering is, and how quiet the interior. The five-speed manual gearshift takes a little getting used-to. The throws are short but ill-defined — a totally redesigned mechanism is on the way — but the close ratios are beautifully stocked and perfectly match the engine's power and torque characteristics.

Acceleration is strong for such a big, heavy sporting limousine.



Claimed time for the 0-100km/h rush is under eight seconds and Tim Bishop has run for hours on the German autobahnen at well over 210km/h. 'We move over only for the big Bimmers, Mers and Porsches, nothing else,' he said with a wry smile. The engine's enormous spread of torque — 310Nm at 3500 rpm — was shown by the way the 613 accelerated smoothly and increasingly rapidly from a walking pace to well over 160 in fourth. It's an easy engine to admire. From idle to the 6500rpm red line it is totally smooth with no vibration periods at all. There is a deep rumble from the exhaust that grows deeper as the revs rise in with a strong, seamless surge of power.

Handling is very Porsche-like but without the heart-in-mouth oversteer. With a static weight distribution of 45:55 front to rear the 613's turn-in is razor sharp with the steering alive with messages for the driver. It is quite unlike any other system I've come across, where any feel tends to be artificially generated. This one is alive.

Body lean through a corner is practically non-existent. The 613 sits flat and feels neutral even when generating high forces. Viewed from outside, the only giveaway is the tyre distortion. Mid-corner bumps have absolutely no effect on the 613's line at all. Road noise from the wide Avons is absent. A little wind noise from the tops of the A-pillars does intrude, but only over 130km/h.

At high speed the Tatra's stability is arrow-straight, once you get used to the steering. Drivers used to more conventional systems will try to correct the car's slight movements but left to its own devices it tracks itself. All you need do is gently guide it with your fingers, the car does the rest. One of the things Tatra GB didn't have to change was the brakes. The 613 produces amazingly short stopping distances for such a heavy car. Even though there's no ABS (yet) the pedal is nicely weighted and can be easily modulated for cadence braking.

Under the front bonnet is a deep and wide rectangular luggage compartment that will take four medium-sized cases plus soft bags. In a sub-compartment in the floor of the boot are the brake booster, air-conditioning control unit and the petrol-fired heater that can be electronically pre-set to warm the car's interior while you have breakfast.

Tim Bishop and Mark Berry have developed a remarkably competent luxury car. The 613-5 is a real driver's car, one that you can interact with. It will not appeal to every one but enthusiasts who want to enjoy driving again would be completely satisfied by the Tatra's combination of eco-sensitivity, design and engineering excellence and commitment to the future.