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# For pity's sake, Fritz, please stop fiddling

*MINI Countryman Cooper S ALL4*

After much careful consideration over the festive season, I've decided that God is almost certainly a German. He created the world and festooned it with all sorts of unusual creations, none of which he liked very much. So then he killed them off and started again. Then he didn't like that lot either, so he turned all the dinosaurs into birds and gave one of the apes opposable thumbs.

Geologically, he's never satisfied. Originally, he placed Scotland in the south Pacific, but he obviously thought the feng shui was wrong, so he moved it to a spot in the middle of what we now call the Atlantic ocean. Then he didn't think the world should have Scotland at all, so he buried it under what has now become South America.

And then he thought that actually England looked a bit lonely sticking out of the top of France, so he dug up Scotland again and placed it on the top of Northumberland, like a jaunty, lopsided hat. And then he decided that England shouldn't really be joined to France any more, so he created the English Channel.

Today, he's decided that the Himalayas should be a bit taller and that there really is no point to Greece, or any of those silly low-lying islands in the middle of the Pacific. And he's realized that the polar bear is so ugly and vicious that it has no place in his toy box.

He fiddles with the weather, too. At first, he thought it should be a hot and steamy planet but then he thought that, actually, it ought to be extremely cold. He's still fiddling today, which is

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driving all the eco-loonies insane. Just as they think it's getting hotter, the whole of Europe gets covered in snow.

Germans are the same. Give them a country and they want the one next door as well.

There is an upside to this, though. When a German creates something excellent, he does not go home to celebrate with a glass of beer. No. He goes straight back to his office so that he can set about making improvements. In Germany, being better than everyone else isn't good enough. You have to be better than yourself.

They even do this with their wine. Having created the liquid perfection that is Niersteiner Gutes Domtal, they went back to the drawing board and decided that the only way to make a better wine would be to add flecks of gold leaf. So they did. How brilliant's that? Wine that glitters under the lights. Stunning.

Things are very different in Britain. Prince Charles, for instance, thinks the world would be a better place if all progress had stopped in about 1952. And every planning department is run by people who want Britain to look like the front of a Dorset chocolate box. If God were English, your route to work would be blocked every morning by a brontosaurus.

Red telephone boxes were a prime example of this. They were useless and smelt of urine, and you could die of hypothermia before the pips even began. But there was a huge furore when someone – probably a German – suggested they should be updated. Change? Here? In Britain? Are you mad? We are a nation that puts *The Two Ronnies* on every Christmas, even though one of them is dead.

This attitude really doesn't work and it especially doesn't work in the car industry. When the first Range Rover came along in 1970, everyone could see that it was very excellent indeed. So the team responsible for designing it was sent home and the model soldiered on, with almost no changes at all, until 1994. By which time it was a relic.

There's a similar problem with the Land Rover. The car you

buy today is pretty much the same as the car you could have bought after the war. Can you imagine BMW doing that? Designing a car and then keeping it in production for sixty years? It's inconceivable.

But when it comes to resting on your laurels, the crown must go to Alec Issigonis. He made the Mini, which in the late 1950s was an inspired design, and then he decided to leave it alone for ever. Occasionally someone would nail a bit of wood to the side, and they once changed the radiator grille, but, fundamentally, it just kept on rolling down the production line, powered by an engine that could trace its roots back to a time when Scotland was off the coast of South Africa. It would still be soldiering on today, had BMW not arrived on the scene and said, 'For you, Tommy, the warhorse is over.'

Unfortunately, the Germans' obsession with self-improvement is now starting to get a bit silly, because in addition to their original Mini, and the various derivations of that, we now have the convertible, which is fine, and the Clubman, which is fine too, providing you are impervious to its looks and don't want to see out of the back. But sadly we also now have the Countryman. And that's not fine at all.

First of all, it has four doors, seating inside for five and a large boot. This has been achieved by making the car much bigger. So it's not really a Mini any more, is it? At 13½ feet in length, it's a third longer than the Issigonis original and should really be called the Maxi. Or maybe the Twinset.

There's another problem, though. BMW's first effort looked good, and still does, whereas the Countryman looks absolutely stupid. It's like a Mini that's been putting on weight for a part. It doesn't look cool or interesting or practical. It looks fat.

Of course, you might not care about how it looks or what it's called. Fine. But I bet you will care about the cramp it gives you when you drive it in traffic. It's the second Mini on the trot that has done this to me, come to think of it, and you will definitely care about how easy it is to stall, and how hard it is to get going

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again thanks to the stop-start eco-gadgetry that shuts down the engine whenever you're stationary.

To make matters worse, it's not especially nice to drive. The ride's not bad but the steering is nervous, the dashboard is bonkers and you feel like you're sitting on it rather than inside it. I arrived everywhere late, exasperated, looking silly and with a lightning bolt of pain in my left shin.

On the upside, the Countryman is available with four-wheel drive. It's a simple system that would be flummoxed by the weather we had recently but would get you up and down a farm track easily enough. The thing is, though, that the model I tested – a Cooper S – costs more than £22,000. And that makes it about £3,000 more than the similarly powered Skoda Yeti.

Don't be a snob about this, because the Mini isn't a Mini and the Skoda isn't really a Skoda. It's just a Volkswagen. More pointedly, the Mini is terrible and the Yeti is surprisingly good.

And on that note, can I just wish you all a very happy and exciting new year.

2 January 2011

## No nasty surprises in this gooey confection

*Audi A7 Sportback 3.0 TDI quattro SE*

Well, there we are. ‘Public transport’ was a very interesting social experiment, but after the debacle of last year, it’s probably in everyone’s best interests if we all agree it simply doesn’t work.

Let us take the trains as a prime example. As we know, they all grind to a halt whenever it is too warm or too cold or too autumnal, but of course the problem is much bigger than that. A railway locomotive is extremely expensive. I don’t know how much it would cost to buy one, but I’m guessing that it would be several hundred pounds.

Then you have the rolling stock – and I do know that each carriage costs more than £1m – and the mile upon mile of track that need to be linked and monitored and governed. Just maintaining it costs £2 billion a year. The upshot of all this is very simple. Divide the total cost of the railway network by the number of people who want to use it, and the average price of a ticket should be about £4m. Soon, if what we’re hearing is correct, it will be.

I realize, of course, that in theory a high-speed train linking the north and the south of Britain is a fine idea. But since it needs to cross at least five Tory constituencies, it will never happen. And nobody would be able to afford to go on it, even if it did.

Then we have air travel. In principle this should work quite well, but the concept has unfortunately been hijacked by busybodies who now insist on taking photographs of your gentleman sausage and confiscating your toiletries every time you want to go somewhere. This doesn’t work. And it doubly doesn’t work



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when planes are now grounded by everything from a bit of weather to a volcanic burp near the Arctic circle.

This leaves us with buses, and oh dear. They really don't work at all because they are simply too full of diseases and knives. No, really. The next time a bus goes by, have a look inside, and I guarantee that the passenger – there's never more than one – will not be the sort of person you would allow within 500 feet of your front door.

I accept that in rural areas the elderly and the infirm need to get to the post office, but why send a supertanker round to their village five times a day? Nobody needs to go shopping that often. Why not send a small Transit van round once a week? Or, better still, why not give those who cannot drive an internet and let them do it all online?

So, we're all agreed that whether you want a pint of milk from the shops or a holiday in the south of France, the car is better, safer, cheaper, faster, more comfortable and less annoying to others. Plus, nobody pats your breasts before you set off and you don't emerge at the other end of the journey with deep vein thrombosis, diphtheria, a knife in your eye and no luggage.

Of course, there are many annoying things about using the roads. Interfering governments have decided, for instance, that the amount of tax you pay should depend on the composition of the gas coming from your tailpipe. This means that cars will soon have to have two motors. One to move you about and one to assist on hills. Even Ferrari is going down the stupid hybrid road.

Then there are the speed limits. For some reason our government thinks that motorway travel should be undertaken at no more than 70 mph, because that was a safe speed when your dad's Ford Anglia had drum brakes. I know. Ridiculous. But there we are.

There are countless other problems, too, but despite everything, the car is still good. The car still works. There is still no alternative. It's just a question of deciding which one to buy.

There was a time when Audi made cars only for German cement salesmen, but in recent years it has decided to make a car for absolutely everyone in the world. There's the Q5, the Q7, the R8, the A1, the A3, the A4, the A5, the A6, the A8 and now the A7.

I'll let you into a little secret at this point. They are all the same. Oh, they may look a bit different, and some are bigger than others, but in essence they are all made from the same components.

Think of it this way. Cakes, buns, Yorkshire pudding and pancakes all look and taste different but they're all made from the same thing. That's how it is with Audis. Flour and eggs mixed up in different ways to create twenty-one different cars.

At first you think Audi may have actually tried something radical with the A7 because it has an all-new platform. But then you learn that this platform will be used in the next A6. It's the same story with the engines and the four-wheel-drive system and all of the interior fixtures and fittings.

However, the engineers can make a difference by fiddling with the steering and the suspension setup, and I must say that in the A7 they have. This does not feel like an Audi. It feels better. The ride is beautifully judged, the handling is lovely and the steering is spot-on. It's not a sports cake but it's not a Yorkshire pudding either. It's just right, in fact, for the fiftysomething chap who wants a stylish hatchback that doesn't break his spine every time he goes over a catseye. Although, when I say stylish . . . it isn't, really. The back looks as though it's melted and the front is just sort of Audi-ish. Mind you, it must be said that it does have an enormous boot and loads of room in the nicely trimmed cabin for four. Not five, though. There is no centre rear seatbelt.

Apart from this oversight – which is bound to have been the result of a marketing meeting at which someone stood up und said, 'Zer is no such sing as ein sporty car mitt five seats' – the only problem is the positioning of the accelerator pedal. The car may be able to keep going when the weather would rather it

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didn't, thanks to four-wheel drive. But if you are wearing the sort of shoes that enabled you to get through the snow to the car in the first place, you will end up pressing the brake pedal every time you want to go faster.

Despite this, and the melted rear, the A7 struck me as a good car. A bit heavy, perhaps, but good nevertheless. Until I checked out the prices. A top model dressed up to the nines will set you back a massive £91,500. The model I drove, a 3-litre turbodiesel with a seven-speed double-clutch gearbox and four-wheel drive, is the best part of £50,000. And I'm sorry, but it simply doesn't feel worth this much.

Yes, it's big and striking and practical and – we're told – extremely safe, but underneath, it's just eggs and flour. And for £50,000 you could do better. The Mercedes CLS springs to mind. So, too, does the Jaguar XJ.

It's nice to have the choice, though. Because that's what you didn't ever get with the failed experiment that was public transport.

9 January 2011

## Oh yes, take me now, Lady Marmalade

### *Citroën DS3 Racing*

Over the past few years, the sort of people who find recycling exciting have predicted the end of the internal combustion engine and said that 2011 will herald the bright new dawn of silent, zero-emission electric motoring, where no one dies and town centres actually look like the models architects make when applying for planning permission.

There's no doubt, of course, that many car manufacturers are working hard on hybrids – which are normal, petrol-engine cars that have a second, electric motor to keep the rule makers in Brussels happy. But pure electric cars? I don't see their Blu-ray/VHS/Sky moment until someone commercializes a hydrogen-based system for recharging the batteries. And that's not going to happen in 2011. Or 2012. Or any time in the foreseeable future.

What I do see happening in 2011 is car makers peeping from behind the terrifying double-dip curtain of financial uncertainty and presenting us with a flurry of machinery that will keep the disciples of internal combustion as happy as if they'd landed the role of 'chauffeur' in a French porn film.

Aston Martin, for instance, will present two new cars this year. One, called the Cygnet, is a 1.3-litre version of the Toyota iQ. Engineered solely to keep the average fuel consumption figures of the Aston range down – and therefore the Euro law makers happy – it will be treated as a joke. The other will not.

It's the One-77, which is made from carbon fibre, has a

hand-built V12 and boasts a top speed of 220mph or more, making it by far the fastest production car Aston has made. The only trouble is that it will cost £1.2m, which is a lot.

Lamborghini is also planning a limited-edition, mega-money car for 2011 and, because it doesn't have to worry about average fuel consumption figures – Lambo is owned by Volkswagen, which makes the Polo – it will be a replacement for the Murciélago.

That, however, will be overshadowed by the new McLaren. Named MP4-12C – or OCD for short – it will have a twin-turbocharged 3.8-litre V8 that develops 592 horsepower. So, with a price tag of just £168,500 – about half what McLaren charged for its last car and around a fifth of the price of the one before that – it will be less expensive and more powerful than the Ferrari 458. I can't imagine it will be better but who knows.

You want more evidence that the economy's recovering and batteries are on the back burner? Well, there's going to be a convertible version of the epic Mercedes SLS and a long-wheelbase option for the Rolls-Royce Ghost. Then we have the new Porsche 911, which will be exactly the same as every other 911, and a hardcore derivative of the car most Formula One drivers use when their sponsors and engine suppliers aren't looking – the Nissan GT-R.

In the real world, BMW is working on yet another version of the Mini – it'll be a two-door coupé. There will also be a handsome-looking new 6-series and a £40,000 M version of what BMW calls the 135 coupé, even though it's actually a saloon.

Never mind the muddle, though; this is one of the cars I'm most looking forward to driving, partly because I reckon the standard car is already the best model in the BMW line-up and partly because, with a twin-turbo, 335-horsepower straight six and a straightforward front-engine, rear-drive, no-styling,

no-nonsense approach, it will be a genuine successor to the simple M cars of old.

I'm also looking forward to the new Mercedes SLK, although I'm a bit alarmed that industry insiders are saying it'll be a more hardcore experience than the 'soft' outgoing model. Having owned an SLK 55, which I sold because it was way too uncomfortable, I am a bit worried that the new car might not have any suspension at all.

Strangely, though, in this sea of wholesome goodness, the car I've been anticipating with the most eagerness is Citroën's DS3 Racing. I realize that this is like booking a table at the Wolseley in London and then looking forward most of all to the bread rolls. But the fact is this: when the sun is shining, I like a simple two-seater convertible most of all, but when it isn't – and this is Britain, after all – the type of car that I most enjoy driving is a hot hatchback. And the DS3 Racing is about as hot as hot hatches get right now.

You might argue that the optional paint job, with checks on the roof and all sorts of slogans and symbols that would only make sense if they were splashed on the deck of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier, is a bit stupid. But I disagree. They're a laugh. I even like the warning above the petrol filler cap. 'Caution. Attention', it says. And why not?

Inside, it's just as bonkers, with a bright orange dash, a carbon-fibre steering wheel and epic seats that would be more at home, you feel, in an F-22 Raptor.

After a period in which car makers have looked backwards for inspiration – I'm thinking of the new Beetle, the new Mini, the new Chevrolet Camaro, the new Ford Mustang and the new Fiat 500 – it comes as a refreshing change to find Citroën has decided to face the other way, while taking inspiration from both the US navy and Airfix. Mind you, I suppose that if Citroën had looked backwards, we'd have ended up with a reborn 2CV. And no one this side of the *Guardian* wants that.

## 12 What Could Possibly Go Wrong . . .

I realize, of course, that looks and style are a matter of taste and that some of you may find the Racing garish and idiotic. But without wishing to sound childish, this is my review and I really like it.

However, it would all be for nothing if its body were writing cheques its engine could not cash. Well, let's get one thing straight from the off. It's not, as the name would suggest, a racing car. It's just a DS3 with a few racing-style bits and bobs added into the mix. That said, it's powered by a 204-horsepower version of the turbocharged 1.6-litre used by BMW until recently in the Mini, so it'll do 146mph. And thanks to a lower ride height, a wider track and firmer dampers than the basic DS3, it handles crisply, too.

Yes, there's a fair bit of torque steer and I will admit that the Renault Clio 200 Cup is a tad more dynamic. But the Citroën is more comfortable and less noisy and, of course, every time you see your reflection in a shop window, you will feel like you're on the bridge of the *USS Dwight D Eisenhower*. Whereas when you see a reflection of yourself in a Renault, it's just a reminder that you will soon break down.

In short, I loved the DS3 Racing as much as I thought I would. I loved driving it. I loved looking at it. I love the feeling now that it's parked outside my house and I can use it for a trip to town this afternoon. It is a car that's excellent to drive but, more importantly, it's a car that makes me feel happy. And, of course, because it's a hot hatch, you get all the fun as well as a big boot, folding rear seats and space inside for five.

Issues? Well, the adjustment on the seat is so crude that you either drive sitting bolt upright or flat on your back, and I must say, for a whopping £23,100, I would have expected a few more toys. When you are paying BMW 3-series money for a small Citroën, the least you would expect is satnav.

The worst thing, though, is that to bypass costly legal tests, Citroën has declared the Racing a 'low-volume' car and will make only 1,000. Just 200 will come to Britain. On the upside, there is

a loophole in the law that allows Citroën to make a modification to the engine that no one will notice and that lets the company make 1,000 more. Get your name down early, but don't be surprised to find you're behind me in the queue.

16 January 2011



## It's hardly British but learn to haggle

*Mitsubishi Outlander 2.2 DI-D GX4, 7 seats*

Alarming news from among the potted plants at your local plate-glass car dealership. It seems that six out of ten people who buy a new set of wheels these days don't bother to haggle over the price.

I should explain that I'm one of them. Mostly, if I'm honest, it's because I have to pay the full sticker price or the *Daily Mail* will run a story saying that I'm on the take and cannot be trusted. But you do not have the *Mail* breathing down your neck every time you eat food or go to the lavatory, and so you really should try to beat down the man with the cheap suit and the boy-band hair.

If you pay cash, even a Ferrari salesman will give you free door mats. Whereas with something like Citroën, he'll probably give you a 100 per cent discount, £1,000 cashback, 0 per cent finance for 300 years and an evening with his girlfriend and one of her better-looking friends.

I realize, of course, that you are not an Egyptian market trader and that you find haggling completely revolting. You don't try for a discount when you are buying a stamp or a box of corn-flakes, so why would you try for one when you are buying a car? It would be ghastly. If you are English, you would rather vomit on a salesman than negotiate with him face to face over money. But come on. The whole process of buying a car is so unpleasant, a bit of toing and froing over price is nothing.

You've already dealt with the balloons. This is just one example of what the car dealer thinks of you. He reckons that you are so moronic that if he hangs a few colourful balloons outside his

showroom, you will think there is some kind of 'do' on, so you'll be unable to drive by.

Then there's the decor. A car showroom, even the fancy ones on Park Lane in London, has all the visual appeal of a railway station's lavatories. You want to get out as soon as possible. But you can't because the man with boy-band hair is on his way over with the handshake of a dead haddock and a silly earring. And he's got lots of impertinent questions about where you live and what you do and your credit rating. As a general rule, it should also be noted he knows less about the cars he's selling than you do about the moons of Jupiter.

Then there's the worst bit. When he grabs a form and steps outside to tell you what the car you wish to part exchange is worth. In short, it's worth about an eighth of what you thought. This is because the man from Take That has found a scratch, and it's grey and grey's not very popular at the moment. Except for the fact that 75 per cent of all cars sold in Britain are one shade of grey or another.

Then, of course, it's time to sit down and choose some options for the car you're buying. And this is a terrifying place to be because when you are spending £25,000 on the car, £200 sounds like nothing. So yes, you decide you'll spend £200 on a DVD player and another £200 on metallic paint and another £200 on a sunroof, and pretty soon you notice Jason Orange has grown a third leg. By the time you've finished, the money you're spending would be enough to clear up a medium-sized oil spill.

All of this, however, assumes you've been able to choose what sort of car you'd like to buy in the first place. Obviously, some people are swayed by balloons, or dealers would stop using them as a marketing tool. And many simply buy an updated version of what they have now. But some people insist on buying the car that best suits their needs. This is like being thrown, naked, into an acacia tree. You're going to end up thrashing around for a while. And then you are going to become dead.

Let's say, for instance, that you have a family. Many people do.

So you'd think it might be a good idea to buy something practical. Obviously, you cannot have a Citroën Picasso or a Renault Scénic because nothing says you've given up on life quite so succinctly as a mini MPV.

Then you decide that the mini MPV would be all right if it had some Tonka toy styling, a raised ride height and perhaps four-wheel drive. Four-wheel drive implies that you go hunting for bears at the weekend, and besides, it will be useful should the snow come back.

So, you want lots of space, four-wheel drive and chunky styling. That's narrowed your choice down to pretty well every single car maker in the world. And to make matters even more complicated, many of the cars that appear to be different . . . aren't. Take the Citroën Cross-Dresser, for example, or the Peugeot 4007. Underneath, they are Mitsubishi Outlanders. They're even built by Mitsubishi. So which do you pick?

Well, if you are suffering from rabies, forget the French offerings and go for the recently updated Japanese original. There are many symptoms of this debilitating ailment – agony and frothing at the mouth are two – but so is an extreme thirst. And on this front the Outlander scores well because it comes, in the front alone, with no fewer than five cupholders.

What's more, in the back, there's seating for five on two rows of seats. Though a word of warning here. Anyone volunteering to sit in the boot should remove their head and legs first.

Mitsubishi says there's another reason for picking its offering. In the blurb, it claims the Outlander has a distinctive 'jet fighter' grille. Well, I've studied the front end for quite some time, and I don't think this is quite correct, mainly because jet fighters don't have grilles.

Perhaps the best reason for choosing the Itchy Pussy is because, unlike the rivals from Peugeot and Citroën, its 2.2-litre diesel engine comes with variable valve technology. That means fewer emissions, better power and more miles to the gallon. Absolutely, but it also means a very narrow power band and the

consequent need to change gear every one and a half seconds. There's even a light on the dash instructing you to shift up, constantly.

Other problems? Well, it's boring to look at, boring to sit in and extremely boring to drive. It feels like the suspension and steering are made from cardboard. Apart from a few joke cars from the former Soviet Union, I cannot think of any other car that feels quite so inert.

Of course, if you are not an enthusiastic driver, this will not matter. You will be far more interested in the promise of great reliability, a genuinely good satellite navigation system and all those cupholders, in case you are bitten by a French dog.

But really, are you better off with this, or the Peugeot, or the Citroën, or the Land Rover Freelander, or the Nissan Kumquat or Honda CR-V, or a Ford or a Jeep or a Volkswagen? The answer, with cars of this type, is very simple. Since they are all largely the same, simply telephone the dealers, ask for their best price and buy whichever is the cheapest.

If you end up with the Outlander, it's not the end of the world. But don't expect the earth to move, either.

23 January 2011

## Try this moose suit for size, Mr Top Gun

*Saab 9-3 SportWagon Aero TiD 180PS*

In the days of the cold war we knew we had four minutes to respond to the Soviet threat and we developed the hugely powerful English Electric Lightning fighter to deal with that. But up in the frozen north, Sweden had its face pressed against the Iron Curtain and needed even faster reactions. Which is why it came up with the Saab Viggen.

This was the most powerful single-engined fighter in the world. For a while it held the international speed record and it remains the only fighter to get a missile lock on an SR-71 Blackbird spy plane. It also packed the most powerful cannon and a very advanced radar. But it was a bit more than brute force and a big fist.

Because Sweden covered the West's northern flank against the Soviet Union, the Scandawegians reckoned that if the balloon went up, their airfields would be destroyed in short order. So, when a Viggen's nose wheel hit the deck, reverse thrust was triggered instantly, allowing the plane to stop in little more than 500 yards. This meant it could be operated from roads, frozen lakes, even school sports pitches. It was also extremely economical.

Unfortunately, the Swedish government refused to sell military hardware to any country it considered to be undemocratic. Which meant that the Swedish air force had to buy every Viggen that rolled off the production line. And that's why, for a while, it was the fourth-largest air force in the world.

Still, at least there was one accounting upside, because here in Britain everyone thought that if they bought a Saab car, they

were actually getting a Viggen with a tax disc. That still holds true today. But actually this hasn't been entirely accurate for some time. And not only because the Viggen's engine was made by Volvo.

In the early days, it's true, the aircraft designers were employed to work on the car's aerodynamics, but that stopped years back. The car is not a jet. It's a Vauxhall Vectra in a moose suit.

Oh, Saab is still banging on about the aircraft connection. It fits a button that turns off all the dashboard lights at night, so you can feel like a night fighter pilot. But you don't really. You just feel as if you might be running out of petrol.

Other features? Well, Saab says, 'A wide range of functions can be pre-set according to personal preference.' Sounds good. But one of the things listed is the clock. Yes. You can set it to whatever time you like! And another is the air-conditioning system. Wow! So it has a heater that can deliver a range of temperatures.

It seems, then, that I was dissing it unfairly when I said it was just a Vauxhall Vectra in an antler suit. In fact, it's a Vauxhall Vectra with a heater and a clock. And a diesel engine that produces no torque at all. Technically, this isn't possible. But somehow Saab seems to have managed it.

If you dribble up to a roundabout in second gear at 5 mph, spot a gap and put your foot down, you will roll into the gap you spotted, still doing 5 mph, only now the van driver you pulled out in front of is leaning on his horn, mouthing obscenities and wondering why you don't get a bloody move on.

Once you're moving, and provided you keep it in the right gear, the power is not too bad. But when the turbocharging is on song, the steering wheel does protest mightily, writhing about as though it's in physical pain. And guess how much you're expected to pay for all this. Yes, £29,000. That's more than BMW asks for the 318 diesel estate.

To make matters worse, there was recently a great disturbance in Saab's force. General Motors had bought half the company in

1989 and the rest in 2000, but realized last year it didn't want it any more. The production lines stopped and for a while it looked as though the company would be gone. But then it was rescued by a Dutch outfit that makes the Spyker supercar.

In many ways this is a bit like Mr Patel from your local corner shop deciding to buy Harrods. It sounds terribly romantic, but if you're going to take on the big boys, you need to have deep pockets. A billion won't cut it. Toyota probably spends that on pot plants.

But here's the thing. I do not want Saab to go. I'm glad that in Britain 6,000 architects decided to buy one last year and I hope that number continues to grow. Which is why I have a tip for the new company.

The 9-3 is old. It has a nasty engine. And, while I acknowledge the standard fitment of both an adjustable heater and a clock, it is also quite expensive. But it does have one feature that sets it aside from almost every other car on the market. It's comfortable.

Today all car makers have got it into their heads that, despite the traffic and the price of fuel and the war on speeding, what motorists want is sportiness. A hard ride. Nervous steering. Bucket seats. Big power. There was a time when Volvo sold itself on safety and VW on reliability and Mercedes on quality. Not any more. Now, they all make racing cars.

Before a new model goes on sale it is taken to the Nürburgring, where final tweaks are made to the suspension to make sure that it can get round the 14-mile track as fast as possible. This is fine, of course, if you live in the Eifel mountains and you use the Ring on the way to work. But it's not fine at all if you live in Esher and your office is in Leatherhead. And it's also not fine if you ever encounter a pothole or have a bad back.

I know that people in a focus group will tell the inquisitors in the polo-neck jumpers that they would like their next car to be 'sporty' because that's the motoring dream and has been since

Christopher Plummer roared away from the battle of Britain in his zesty MG. But in reality, sportiness is a pain in the backside.

Recently, I bought a new sofa because it looked good. Sharp. Modern. Crisp. It's an aesthetic masterpiece, but after a hard day at work, when I just want to slob out in front of the television, I'd be better off sitting on the floor.

At my age I crave comfort, and that's why I have enjoyed my week with the Saab so enormously. It's dreary to drive and underpinned by one of the worst car platforms in modern history, but the seats are superb, and the suspension is capable of keeping the pothole bomb blasts to nothing more than a shudder.

Plus. And this is the really good bit. As I cruised about, with the adjustable heater providing me with just the right amount of heat, and the clock telling me precisely the right time, everyone else – apart from the occasional van driver – was looking at me and thinking, Ooh, look. It's Chuck Yeager.

30 January 2011



## Titter ye not, it's built for the clown about town

*Nissan Juke 1.6 DIG-T Tekna*

To this day, I remain baffled by the Ford Scorpio because at some point someone must have walked into an important board meeting and said, 'Well, everyone. This is what it's going to look like.'

Why did no one present say, 'Are you joking?' or, 'Have you gone mad?' or, 'Take some gardening leave, you imbecile?' They obviously just sat there thinking, Yes, we have had cars in the past that were designed to look like sharks and cars that were designed to look like big cats. So why should we not now have a car that looks like a wide-mouthed frog?

It's strange. I know who designed almost every single car in recent times. I know who did the Lamborghini Countach, VW Golf and Volvo 850. I know several people who claim to have done the Aston Martin DB9. But nobody in all my years has ever put their hand up and said, 'Yes. It was me. I did the Scorpio.'

I bet you would have a similar struggle if you set out to find the man who did the Toyota Yaris Verso – the only car ever made that is five times taller than it is long. I pulled up alongside one yesterday and studied the driver for some time. Do you realize, I wondered, how utterly ridiculous you look in that?

Then there's the Pontiac Aztek, which was unusual in that it managed to look wrong from every single angle. Normally, even the most hopeless designer gets one tiny feature right by accident – the rear tail-lights or the C pillar, for instance. Even the Triumph TR7 had a nice steering wheel. But the Aztek looked like one of those cardboard cities you find beneath underpasses in Mexico.

And let's not forget the SsangYong Rodius. Plainly, they set out to build a coupé and then decided at the last minute that what they actually wanted was a removal van. And then, when those two concepts had been nailed together in the most unholy merger since Caligula fell in love with his horse, they realized that the only wheels they could afford were the size of Smarties.

It's easy, when you look at a SsangYong, to imagine that the designer simply doesn't know what he's doing. But that ain't necessarily so. Remember the Musso? That was as awful to behold as a frostbitten penis and yet, amazingly, it was styled by the same man who designed that old warhorse the Aston Martin Vantage and the Bentley Continental R.

The problem is that there's a language to car design. Some of the language is written down. Ideally, the wheels should be half the height of the car, for example. But mostly, it's a dark art. All I know is that the car must look like it's capable of great speed, or else it looks wrong.

Look at the kink at the bottom of every BMW's rearmost pillar. The one between the back window and the back door. It's got a little kink and that makes the car look like it's pushing forwards, straining at the leash. BMW is also very good at making the body look like it's been stretched to fit over the wheels. As if there's barely enough skin to contain all the muscle.

This doesn't just apply to sporty cars, either. Look at the new Vauxhall Astra. It's a handsome thing because it's all straight lines and sharp angles. There's a whiff of the fast patrol boat. And that gives a sense of howling turbochargers and sea spray – even if the engine under the bonnet is a miserable diesel.

This brings me on to Nissan. A few years ago, it decided to try to make a car that didn't look fast. The company reckoned that in a world of road rage, traffic and simmering rage, it would be good to have a car that was friendly and unthreatening. So it produced the Micra.

I hated that car. It had the sort of face you wanted to punch.

And because it was 'happy', it was bought by the sort of people who were never in much of a hurry. I'd love to know how much of my life has been stolen by Nissan and its Micra experiment. One day, I may send it a bill.

But in the meantime, the company has changed tack again and come up with the Juke. It's not ugly by any means but it is, without any question or shadow of doubt, the stupidest-looking machine to see the light of day since the Ronco Buttoneer.

What were they thinking of? Why, for instance, are its rear wheel arches bigger than those you would find on a modern tractor, even though the wheels are the size of Polo mints? And why are the front lights mounted on top of the bonnet? It's all completely ridiculous.

I first encountered it at Heathrow airport early one Monday morning. The office said it would leave a car for me in the valet parking bay and so there it was, sitting among the Maseratis and the Mercs, like a big comedy hat at a funeral.

At first, I assumed it was some kind of electric car, and that filled me with horror and dread as a busy week lay ahead and I really didn't have the time to spend eight hours a day looking for somewhere to charge it up and then another eight hours drinking coffee while the batteries replenished themselves with juicy electricity. Made from burning Russian gas.

Happily, as I turned the key, I was greeted with the welcome sound of internal combustion. So why, I wondered, have they made it look so mad? Perhaps, I thought, it's a four-wheel-drive crossover vehicle. Well, for sure, there is an all-wheel-drive version but the model I had was based on a front-drive Micra.

So maybe, then, it has the silly body because it's somehow capable of doubling up as a bus. Nope. It has seating for just five and a boot that is surprisingly small.

Then I noticed something odd. In the middle of the dash is quite the most baffling onboard computer I've ever seen. It tells you every single thing you don't need to know, including, wait for it, how much g you are experiencing at any given moment. So

this idiotic high-riding car with its small wheels, street lighting and arches from a Massey Ferguson thinks it's a jet fighter.

It really isn't. Yes, the engine's a turbocharged 1.6 that produces 187 horsepower, but it doesn't ever feel fast. Or exciting in any way. I'm not suggesting that it is nasty to drive or that it kept crashing into trees, but it's not good, either. It is just some car.

And that means I'm stuck. Normally I can tell what sort of person might be interested in a particular car and I try to tailor my conclusion to meet their specific requirements. But I've trawled my memory banks and I can't remember ever meeting anyone who might be interested in buying a car that looks absolutely stupid.

The best I can come up with, therefore, is this: if you just want a normal five-seat hatchback, buy a Golf or a Ford Focus. If, on the other hand, you want a normal five-seat hatchback but you enjoy people pointing at you and laughing, then the Juke is ideal.

6 February 2011

## Those yurt dwellers have got it right

*Land Rover Freelander 2 eD4 HSE 2WD*

The phone rings. It's a friend who's just crashed his Jag and is thinking of spending the insurance cash on a new Range Rover. I explain that, all things considered, it's probably the best car in the world, but advise against buying one brand new. First, I say, the initial depreciation can be alarming and second, I am aware the battery on new models goes flat rather too easily.

I therefore advise him to buy the last of the old diesels from the second-hand market and am rather surprised by what he says in reply.

He explains that he lives in a part of the world where middle-aged women pour paint on friends if they are caught buying eggs from a battery farm. Come election time, you could be forgiven for thinking, as you see the posts in people's gardens, that there is only one party, and it's not blue, red or yellow. This is north Oxford. This is where the ultimate status symbol is a wicker trolley on the back of your bicycle and where everyone secretly wants to live in a yurt. As a result, my friend doesn't want to buy the old model. He wants the new one because it's more eco-friendly.

Hmmm. Although he doesn't realize it, he has a point. It is far more eco-friendly to buy a car built just 50 miles away, even if it is a massive off-roader with a turbocharged V8, than it is to buy a Toyota Prius, the components of which have covered half a million miles before they are nailed into the vague shape of a car and shipped to your front door.

However, as eco people are not very bright, I fear my friend's neighbours may not see it this way. And I'm absolutely certain

that his argument about the new car being more eco-friendly than the old one won't wash even a tiny bit. In north Oxford a Range Rover of any sort is the devil.

I'm regularly told by people there that cars caused the hole in the ozone layer, usually when they are getting something from their trendy old fridge, or applying some deodorant. The other day, someone even blamed the motor industry for deforestation, even though the only car company still making its cars from wood is Morgan. And I hardly think a cottage industry making seventeen units a year in Malvern can be blamed for all the logging in southeast Asia.

However, because there is so much claptrap floating about in the ether, a company such as Land Rover must feel like it's under siege. And that's before we get to the rather more important question of fuel consumption. I had a supercharged Range Rover on loan recently and in one week of normal motoring it gulped down £250 worth of fuel. That is catastrophic.

As a result, it must be extremely tempting for Land Rover's marketing department to do something stupid . . .

It is, of course, extremely important that I approach every single car that is reviewed on these pages with an open mind and no preconceived ideas of what might lie in store. However, because it's so much more fun to write about a car that is rubbish than one that is OK, I do occasionally book test drives in cars that are likely to be awful.

And that brings me to the new Freelander 2 eD4 – the first car in Land Rover's long and important history to drag itself into the market using only its front legs. I can see the logic, of course. Better fuel consumption and more ecoism.

But, I'm sorry, the notion of a front-wheel-drive Land Rover is idiotic. It's as daft as Tarmac launching a new scent. Or Spear & Jackson moving into the lingerie market.

There's more. Because when all is said and done, a front-wheel-drive Freelander is simply a very expensive and hard-to-park alternative to, say, a Ford Focus. They have the

same number of seats and don't be fooled into thinking the Land Rover is better able to withstand a barrage of everyday bumps and scrapes. It looks that way thanks to a trick of the stylist's pen. But it isn't. And because it's so tall, your elderly dog will struggle to get into the boot. So you'll have to pick her up and that will make your hands all dirty.

As a result of all this, I approached the Freelander wearing the cruel smile of an SS officer who'd been given some pliers, a dungeon and a freshly downed Tommy airman to play with. I was going to torture it. Ridicule it. And then rip it to shreds.

Unfortunately, it's a bloody good car. First of all, the chintzy bits and bobs that ruin the look of the modern Range Rover look rather good on the baby of the Land Rover range. It may only be a hatchback on stilts but it looks expensive. Regal almost.

And although it may be hard to load an elderly dog, those stilts do make you feel imperious as you drive along. There are many 'soft roaders' on the market these days, but none offers such a commanding view as the Freelander.

Inside, many of the features are lifted directly from the Range Rover, which can cost nearly three times as much, so again, you don't feel like you're driving around in something from the pick'n'mix counter at the pound store.

However, the best thing about this car is the way it drives. The removal of the four-wheel-drive system has resulted in a weight reduction of 75kg and you can feel this as you bumble about. I'm not going to suggest for a moment that it feels sporty, but it does feel agile. The steering in particular is delightful and the ride is sublime. Driving this car is like lying in the bath. It's brilliant.

Of course, it's not going to get as far into the woods as the four-wheel-drive version, but if you needed to go into the woods, you wouldn't have bought it in the first place. However, that said, because of the ground clearance, it will get you further in tricky conditions or bad weather than a normal five-seat hatchback.

The only drawback I could find in the whole package was the engine. It has slightly less power but more torque than the previous 2.2-litre Freelander engine and that's fine. You get quite a big punch when you put your foot down. But while I have no complaints about the performance, this is certainly not one of those cars where passengers say, 'Is this really a diesel?' In fact, as they sit there, vibrating, they may ask what you are using instead of fuel. Pebbles? It's like a powerplate with a tax disc.

It's so unrefined when it starts that after a while I disengaged the system that cuts the engine when you stop at the lights and starts it again when you put your foot on the clutch. This may save half a thimbleful of fuel but it drove me mad.

Because of this roughness, the car cannot have a five-star rating. However, it does get four. Which, is four more than I was hoping to award. The fact is, though, that the cost of fuel and the blinkered prejudice found in the nation's mental yurt-heads has resulted in something that's pretty damn good.

13 February 2011



## Little Luigi's turbo boost

*Fiat 500 0.9 TwinAir Lounge*

I spent most of last week playing with the new McLaren MP4-12C and I must say that, in a technical, mathematical, common-sense, add-up-the-numbers sort of way, it is extremely impressive. Plainly, it has been designed for the serious business of going fast. And yet there are no histrionics at all. In fact, in road mode, it rides and sounds like an S-Class Mercedes. It's also beautifully made, so, unquestionably, this is a car that you could use every day.

As a result, even though it's a bit more Ron Dennis than Ron Jeremy, it is certainly the best car ever to wear a McLaren badge. It's definitely better than the old F1, which I hated. And it's definitely better than the more recent SLR, which had a switch masquerading as a brake pedal – you either went through the windscreen, or you didn't slow down at all.

It may even be better than the Ferrari 458, which is not something I thought I'd be saying any time soon. And yet I don't yearn to own one.

It was the same story with the Bugatti Veyron. Yes, it was a masterpiece, a composite and magnesium firestorm of brilliance, perseverance, engineering persistence and planet-stopping power. But at no time did I ever think, Crikey. I'd love to have one of these on my drive.

I experienced much the same sort of thing at Heston Blumenthal's new restaurant in London the other day. He makes food in the same way that McLaren and Bugatti make cars. The duck is stripped down to a molecular level, treated with exotic gases and then reassembled before being cooked by a team of men who are

dressed up like the guards in a Bond villain's lair. Even the ice cream is made with a sewing machine.

The results are simply spectacular. Without any question or shadow of doubt, Heston's rhubarb mousse is the second nicest thing I've ever put in my mouth, and although the texture of the duck fat was a bit like a quilted anorak that's been left in the rain, it tasted astonishing. It was a duck plus. A super-duck. A duck Veyron.

And yet, while I admire Heston's skill and respect his knowledge of food preparation, I'm not sitting here yearning for the day when I can sample his wares again. Did I like it? Yes, very much. Am I glad I've tried it? You're damn right I am. But will the day ever come when nothing but a plate of his bone marrow will do? I doubt it.

I think it's because, in our complicated lives, we yearn only for the simple. An evening in front of the telly. A nice sit-down. A game of cards. At a drinks party, I can find myself talking to a fascinating and beautiful woman who's just written a book about something interesting and clever. But what I yearn for is to be in the pub with my mates.

This is especially true of food. When I am struck with a sudden craving, it's always for something simple: a chicken sandwich, an apple, some tongue or, more usually, a pot of crab spread. It's never a truffle in a rich jus made from a koala's ears.

The same can be said of cars. I like the Mercedes SLS, the Jaguar XKR, the BMW M3 and the Ferrari 458 very much. But the car I yearn to own most of all is the Citroën DS3 Racing that I wrote about on these pages last month. And close behind is the little Fiat 500.

Of course, you are familiar with the 500. Your estate agent's daughter probably has one. And unless you are James May, the chances are you like it very much. You like the cheekiness and the way it's both retro and very modern at the same time.

It gets better, because while the Fiat is very similar in concept to the Mini – they're both fashion statements first and cars

second – it is much cheaper. And as a little bit of icing on the cake, here is a car that doesn't have to be grey or silver like 75 per cent of all the other cars on the road. It can be powder blue or egg-yolk yellow or child's lipstick red. You can even cover it in stickers. And you should.

In short, the little Fiat is a joyous machine that makes you smile, but the car I'm talking about today is different. And better. It's the new TwinAir, so called because it has an engine quite unlike anything else we've ever seen before.

First of all, there are only two cylinders, which is not a revolutionary idea. The original Fiat 500 was similarly equipped. However, in the new version, there is no camshaft. Instead, the exhaust valves drive the inlet valves using hydraulics and electronics, and that sounds like the greatest ever solution to a problem that doesn't exist. But the end result is spectacular.

First of all, there's the noise. Remember that sound you got when you put a lollipop stick in the spokes of your bicycle wheel? It's that. Only amplified. It is one of the best engine noises I've ever heard. It's nearly as good as a Merlin.

And then there's the grunt. Yes, it may be tiny – just 875cc – but it is turbocharged so you get 85 horsepower. That means you can cruise down the motorway with ease. And it takes off from the lights like it's being kicked into action by Toby Flood.

There's more. Because there is much less friction in a two-cylinder engine than there is in a four, it is incredibly efficient, which means it produces less carbon dioxide than a fat man on one of Boris Johnson's rent-a-bikes. As a result, you don't have to pay the London congestion charge.

Certainly, this little car is ten times more environmentally friendly than the Toyota Prius because it's smaller and it's made from fewer parts and Fiat doesn't have to plunder the Canadian countryside and cause acid rain to make its batteries. With this little car, everybody wins.

Especially the oil companies, because unfortunately, the TwinAir is not what you'd call economical. It could be, if you

drove it sensibly, and if you press the eco button on the dash, it probably is. But you won't deploy the eco button. And you won't drive it sensibly because it's impossible. It's as impossible as expecting a puppy to sit still.

I've had the car for a week and because I've enjoyed the noise it makes so much, I've averaged just 38 mpg. I got more from the hot Fiat 500 Abarth. And to make the economy argument even less palatable, the TwinAir costs around £1,000 more than a similarly specced model that has twice as many cylinders. So it's not cheap to buy and, unless you have the will power of a donkey, it's not cheap to run, either.

And it doesn't matter because, as you sail through central London, flicking V-signs at the congestion camera and beating bikes off the lights and revelling in that fantastic noise, you really won't care. The 500 is a great little car. And now you can have it with what is almost certainly the best engine . . . in the world.

20 February 2011

## I don't fancy Helga von Gargoyle . . . Can't think why

*Porsche Panamera 3.6 V6 PDK*

I don't like marzipan. I'm aware that it is categorized as a food-stuff and that you are supposed to put it in your mouth and move it about and swallow it, but honestly, I'd rather lick the back of a dog.

I don't like kidney beans, either. Or Piers Morgan. I know that he has a nose and a liver and all the other things that qualify him to be classified biologically as a member of the human race, but he grates, and I find myself gloating in an unkind way over the true fact that his new television show now has fewer viewers than *Kerry Katona: The Next Chapter*.

We all have likes and dislikes and it's often hard to find rational explanations. I don't like whisky, for instance, and I can't understand why. Everybody else I know likes it, but as far as I'm concerned each sip is a nose-busting reminder that in the morning I shall wake in a puddle of sick with a headache. It's the same story with calvados.

And Surrey. I have many friends who live in its dingly dells. I even work there one day a week, but each time I visit, I am consumed with an irrational need to leave again as soon as possible. It's strange.

Nearly as strange as my unbridled hatred of Marks & Spencer. It is a proud boast that in all of my life I have never bought anything from M&S, even though I am aware that its clothing is well made and its sandwiches are nutritious and delicious.

I think I don't like it because of the flooring or because I have it in my head that everyone in the queue for the tills is going to be a magistrate with firm home-county views on youth crime