

CLASSIC DRIVER

[The perfect classic to explore the streets of Bangkok? This designer's Karmann Ghia](#)

Lead

Thailand is famous for its vibrant Porsche scene, but Tassanai Yan-Ubol has chosen a more subtle German design classic as his daily driver. Follow us as we join the architect for drive around Bangkok in his beautiful Volkswagen Karmann Ghia.



Sometimes, the most simple classics have the most interesting stories to tell. When we visited Thailand for [the opening of Curvistan Bangkok last September](#), we were blown away by the vibrance and level of the city's car culture and Porsche scene. But in a sea of boldly-coloured 911s, custom Dakars, and RWB restomods parked under tropical leaves in Curvistan's backyard, the car that intrigued us the most was a rather modest, ivory-white Volkswagen Karmann Ghia convertible. Designed by Luigi Segre and Felice Mario Boano at Carrozzeria Ghia in Italy and hand-built by German coachbuilding house Karmann on the floorplan, running gear and engine of the Beetle, the stylish sports car was launched as "A Volkswagen for people who couldn't stand the sight of a Volkswagen."



Between 1955 and 1975, almost half a million coupe and convertible versions of the VW Karmann Ghia were built – but while the Beetle-based Porsche 356s from the same era are still very present within today's classic car scene, the sight of this Italo-German sports Beetle has become increasingly rare. Spotting one of them in the heart of Bangkok, we were keen to meet the owner and learn more. As we quickly found out, the car belonged to architect Tassanai Yan-Ubol, Design Director of [the creative agency The Embassy of Design Territory](#) – and the man responsible for creating the exterior, interior and exhibition design at Curvistan Bangkok.



Sporting a black Bob Dylan shirt and Chuck Taylors, long hair and a friendly smile, the man could have easily time-warped back into 1970s California without attracting any attention. And after a quick chat over mango & sticky rice at the street kitchen on the other side of the road, 'Ball' – as his friends call him – took us for a ride around town. Instantly stuck in the city's notorious traffic, we had plenty of time to chat.



I have to ask: Why is your nickname Ball?

All Thai people have their own nickname. My father was a soccer player, so he named me Ball. *(laughs)*



That makes sense, but we want to talk about cars today. What's your first memory of a car? And where does your connection to Volkswagen come from?

In 1972, one year before I was born, my father had bought a blue Volkswagen Beetle. I still remember this car. Later, when I went to university to study architecture and had to commute there from home, I got my first car which was also a Beetle, from 1962. There were a lot of Volkswagens imported into Thailand back then, they were not very expensive and easy to maintain. But I have one special memory: one day, my girlfriend at the time borrowed my car as I had work to do for university. The next morning, she returned, crying. She had driven my Beetle into a river. Someone had jumped in and rescued her. I still married her, she's now my wife. *(laughs)* We also recovered and restored the car.



When did you first encounter a Karmann Ghia?

Next to my university there was a pub where I was often hanging out with my friends. One day, the owner of the place showed up: Long hair, wearing glasses and a guitar over his shoulder - he looked so cool, just like John Lennon! After the pub closed, he threw the guitar into the back seats of this beautiful convertible and drove off. I asked my friends what car it was and they told me it was a Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. Then I knew that one day I wanted to own such a car and be as cool as this guy.



But it took some time and effort before you finally owned this one, right?

I bought this car 14 years ago from a friend. He had a pretty interesting car collection – three Karmann Ghias, four Beetles, two Citroën DS – but he stored them in secret so his wife never knew about the cars. Like me, he's into vintage culture from the 1960s and 1970s. We both would have loved to be around in that era. And one day, I convinced him to sell me this Karmann Ghia, it's a 1600 from 1964.



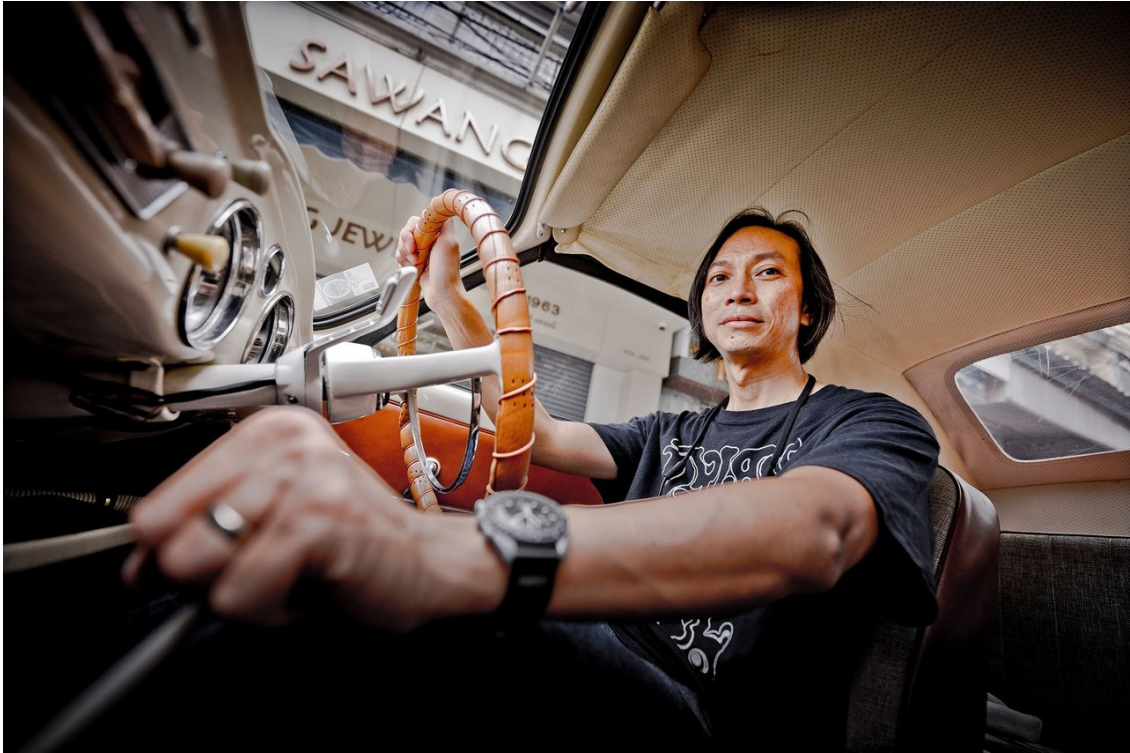
In terms of style, what do you like about the Karmann Ghia?

There are two types of Karmann Ghia, this one is a Type 14. It's very curvy and feminine, very beautiful. And it looks friendly – just like a Beetle or a Porsche 356. My friends who own classic Porsches are very interested in my car too.



Bangkok is infamous for its traffic. How is it to own a sixty year old car as a daily driver?

It's a stick shift, so it can get tiring. And my back hurts. It can not go faster than 120 kilometres per hour and it will be very loud with the engine noise and the wind. But I love the car, it's beautiful, it's light, it does not need much power. And it reminds me of the Beetle that I grew up in - so I keep driving it. New cars are convenient, but boring. My sister owns one of these new Chinese electric cars: you sit inside and everything is silent and cold. There's no sound, you don't feel anything. With the Karmann Ghia, I open the door and I love the smell - it feels like coming home.



You studied architecture, but your company is called “The Embassy of Design Territory”. How did that happen?

After I had spent some time in California, I returned to Thailand, waiting to get back into University for my master degree. I had to kill some time and my uncle asked me to help him on a project. He is an event organizer and had to set up a birthday party for a Skandinavian prince in Pattaya. We closed an entire hotel and created this safari theme party. We constructed a mountain that could open, with the prince sitting on a throne coming out of the top. Lots of special effects. The staff were wearing safari gear, we even had a real tiger. It was amazing. I knew this was what I wanted to do. I worked for my uncle for ten years, then I started my own company, The Embassy of Design Territory.



You created and built the exterior and interior concept for Curvistan Bangkok, but you also realized some of the sculptures. What is it exactly that you do?

We are a team of architects, interior designers, graphic designers, all working together on exhibitions, installations, sculptures. We bring together people with different skills. In Thailand, we call such a designer a duck. Because a duck can walk, it can fly, it can swim. It's very versatile. It was a great experience to work on the Curvistan project with [Curves publisher Stefan Bogner](#), who is also a very versatile duck, and with [Chanond Ruangkitya, the entrepreneur behind the project and the Porsche Design Tower](#). He always gives amazing opportunities to people with his projects.



Coming back to the Karmann Ghia: As Southeast Asia has many beautiful driving roads, have you planned any road trips with it?

I want to do a trip to Laos with some friends who also own classic Volkswagens. We would also love to do a drive from Bangkok to Germany, but we are all busy with work, so we will start with Laos.



Your other car is a Mercedes-Benz W124 station wagon, another all-time favourite of the Classic Driver team.

Yes, it's cool but also very practical, I use it for work. I can fit many things in there and drive our team around. But the Mercedes of my dreams is still an SL Pagoda. After all, it has been named after the pagoda temple towers of Thailand. That would be a great addition to my garage.

Photos: Stefan Bogner

Gallery

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