
From Malibu to Saint Tropez - the best buggies for the beach

29 May 2015 | Simon de Burton

Simon de Burton longs for the days when we could drive on the beach without being apprehended by the long arm of the law. Here he sums up his best of beach transport, on the sand and... in the air. No, seriously.

Remember when... ?





There are many things you can't do in our modern, progressive world that you used to be allowed to do, 40 or 50 years ago. And a lot of them involve cars - like, for instance, driving on the beach. I've only ever done that once (legally) and it was in Australia.

But back in the day, one gets the impression that there were almost as many cars built for beach life as there were boats built for the sea. It was a trend kicked off by the Californian engineer and artist Bruce Meyers who, in 1964, produced the original 'Meyers Manx' beach buggy by bolting a glassfibre tub to the shortened chassis of a VW Beetle.

McQueen and the Manx



With fat tyres and the weight of the engine over the back wheels, the Manx positively surfed the sand and spawned a whole genre of similar machines - including, of course, the legendary 'Queen Manx' that took to the air with Steve McQueen at the wheel (and Faye Dunaway be-scarfed in the passenger seat) in one of the more memorable scenes from *The Thomas Crown Affair*.

But while McQueen's buggy packed a 200-horsepower, flat-six Chevrolet Corvair engine, the cars in which Europe's riviera set tended to head for the dunes were small and built more for style than

speed.

A Jolly good fellow



Take, for example, the shamelessly comical 'Jolly' which was a conversion of the Fiat 500, 600 and Multipla, carried out - at considerable expense - by coachbuilder Ghia. Sold around the world, these miniscule cars with sand- and sea-repellent wicker seats, easy access, cut-down sides and absurd, fringe-laden 'Surrey' tops proved hugely popular with yacht owners (including Aristotle Onassis) for haring around ports and between beach and villa.

The darling of the jet set



Likewise the Mini Moke, with its doorless body, canopy roof and nippy Mini mechanicals, rose from its original position of failed military vehicle ('not fit for purpose', said the Army procurement board) to become the default wheels for jet-setters all the way from the Caribbean to the Cote d'Azur - not least, as our shot of Brigitte Bardot and canine friends demonstrates, because the Moke was a practical load-lugger as well as being 'très bon' fun.

French kicks 'sur la plage'



Indeed, the French have proved rather good at making beach cars themselves, notably in the form of

Renault's '4'-based Rodeo and the Citroën Mehari, a Moke-like creation based on a 2CV platform which had a tendency to take off when a high wind caught its canopy - but didn't, unfortunately, fly nearly so stylishly as the Queen Manx.

Photos: Getty Images / Rex Features / Citroën / Artcurial, Bonhams, Gooding, RM Sotheby's

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