

DeLorean

The Fantasy

Becomes Reality

At last - a drive report on the long-awaited Irish-American sports car that's out to hit Porsche and the Corvette. Gary Witzenburg, one of the first outsiders allowed behind the DeLorean's wheel, reports from Belfast on the world's newest car - and its chances of success

DJohn Z. DeLorean was a wonder boy at General Motors in the 1960's. Hired at Pontiac as director of advanced engineering in 1956, he moved through assistant chief engineer to chief engineer to general manager at the age of 41 in 1965. Four years later he was general manager



DeLorean's gull-wing doors (above and right) lift easily on gas struts, allow good entry into the spacious cabin

Chevrolet and by 1972 was in charge of all GM's North American car and truck operations.

The following year, even though he was considered a sure bet eventually to hold the GM presidency, he suddenly quit. As a manager he was as controversial as he was brilliant, a maverick who ran in showbiz circles and refused to dress, talk or act like a proper, conservative, grey-suited GM executive. There was speculation that he was fired. DeLorean says he was merely dissatisfied and restless and yearned for a more exciting challenge ... like building his own car.

In 1976 he founded DeLorean Motor Company, with headquarters in New York City, and began the long and arduous process of

scraping together the necessary financial backing to turn his dream into reality.



No-one has started a major American car company and succeeded since Walter P. Chrysler opened his plant doors in 1925. The last to try was Malcolm Bricklin, who built flashy, gull-winged sports cars bearing his name for a while (his plant was in Canada) in the mid 1970's before financial tides sucked him under. So what makes DeLorean think *he* can succeed building flashy, gull-winged sports cars bearing his name, in a plant in Northern Ireland, of all places?

Massive self-confidence, for one thing, coupled with enormous experience, expertise, energy, enthusiasm, charisma, charm and a strong streak of salesmanship. Some people can design and engineer cars, others can manufacture them, still others can sell them to the public. Some are good at raising money, others at building and managing effective organisations. DeLorean seems blessed with a rare combination of such diverse, often-conflicting talents.

To know the man, to tour his plant to talk with the talented people he's hired to run it, and to drive his exciting and unconventional new car is to slip from the ranks of the sceptics towards the small circle of qualified believers ... qualified because the ultimate success of the DeLorean still seems a long-odds wager. But if any recent infant carmaker has had the



Chunky low rear (above) is certainly dramatic. Irish showed huge interest in the car.

goods to pull it off, this is it.

Complicating that task is the car itself, which is unlike any other ever built. DeLorean wanted it to last forever, so its skin is totally rust-proof, stainless steel. He wanted it light yet strong, so its body structure is glass-reinforced plastic (GRP) over a central backbone frame of epoxy-coated steel. He wanted impressive performance with reasonable fuel economy and bullet-proof durability, so he chose the light, strong, overhead-cam, fuel-injected aluminium 2.8 Litre V6 engine from the PRV combine of Peugeot/Renault/Volvo. He wanted sex appeal, so he picked Giugiaro's famous Italo Design studio of Turin to fashion the body's contours, complete with gullwing doors that swing up and over like hatches of a Darth Vader space shuttle. He wanted racer-like roadholding, so he contracted Lotus to help develop a fully-independent suspension around low, fat, Goodyear NCT tyres with a tread design patterned after Goodyear's best racing rain tyres.

The engine's oversquare bore/stroke ration of 91x73mm makes it a spirited high-revver, and its hemi-head combustion chambers and cross-flow porting give it exceptional efficiency. With Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection and breakerless electronic ignition, it develops 112kW at 5300 rpm in European trim (some 15kW less in emissions-controlled American

tune). Both the standard five-speed manual and the optional three-speed automatic transaxles are supplied by Renault and have lightweight aluminium casings. The five-speed is operated through a rod-and-cable linkage, while the automatic is electronically controlled with a manual override feature in first and second gears.

The box-section frame "Ys" at both ends into subframes that support the suspension and the rear-mounted drive train. Much attention has been paid to both corrosion resistant (epoxy coating) and passenger protection (controlled deformation) in this assembly, and it has the added feature of excellent torsional rigidity. Squeezed into the front Y behind the radiator and suspension cross member, under a shallow cargo and spare tyre compartment, is a 49-litre splinter-proof plastic fuel tank. The GRP body components (moulded in the DeLorean plant using a specialized, computer-controlled process) bolt to this frame assembly through isolating mounts and are steel-braced for structural strength in the roof, bonnet and other critical areas. Semi-rigid polyurethane facias provide bumper protection front and rear, and the stainless steel exterior panels are attached to the body with screws for easy replacement or repair.

The front coil-spring suspension used unequal-length links (an upper wishbone and a single fabricated steel lower link) both attached to the stub axle by ball joints, and an anti-roll bar doubling as a brake reaction rod. At the back is a fully independent, six-link, coil-spring system with unequal-length tubular transverse links, fabricated steel trailing arms and alloy hub carriers. Brakes are vacuum-assisted Girling discs at all corners, with separate hydraulic circuits fore and aft, and steering is rack-and-pinion. With the drive train over and behind the rear wheels, the front/rear weight bias is about 35/65 percent, but (as on a rear-engined race car) this is compensated for by the tyre and wheel sizes ... huge 235/60HR-15s on 15x8 inch alloy wheels at the rear and much smaller 195/60HR-14s on 14x6 inch rims in the front.

Walk up to the DeLorean and you're struck by how very low it is, just 1140mm front rooftop to tyre-patch ... belly-button high to a fair-sized man. The shape is a classic aerodynamic wedge: low and flat in front,



rising smoothly past a laid-back windscreen, tapering over a louvred backlight, terminating in a tall rear deck ... a blunt-tipped arrowhead to pierce the wind with a minimum of fuel-wasting drag.

Your eyes are drawn to the stainless steel skin, hand-brushed to a finish alternately dull and bright as the light reflecting from it changes in angle and intensity. If there's any major flaw in the look of this flying doorstop, it's that the finish sometimes looks unfinished (like primer grey) and the dull-silver plastic bumper end-caps don't match. DeLorean is adamant about shipping the cars unpainted because the non-corroding stainless steel is one of their most important features ... but he adds that dealers and buyers can easily paint them if they wish. Two other minor flaws might be the black front spoiler (silver would visually lower the front end) and the tiny dual exhausts (larger rectangular tips would better suit the car's contemporary design and racy personality).

You snick the doorhandle outward, and the heavy-looking gullwing almost opens itself, assisted by a specially-designed, cryogenically-cured stainless steel torsion bar. A gas-filled strut holds it open while you slip underneath and settle into a wonderfully comfortable bucket seat upholstered in rich, black leather. A light downward pull on the door thunks it closed. You adjust the seat position (there's plenty of legroom), the seatback angle and the steering wheel (up/down and fore/aft) for comfort, then turn the key. The V6 whrumps to life somewhere behind you and settles into an impatient idle

while instrument needles spring to attention in their canopied cluster behind the steering wheel.

Manoeuvring in close quarters is complicated by the low nose and restricted rear visibility (only a small "toll-both" window retracts, so you have to pop the gullwing door up to sight the bumper for backing), but once underway you soon feel at home. The driving position is excellent, and all controls are in easy view and reach. Clutch action

is easy and precise, while the shift linkage feels a little sloppy yet always comes up with the proper gear. Acceleration is short of awesome but quick enough at about eight seconds 0-100km/h with the five-speed, slightly slower with the automatic. The steering is precise but not too fast for comfort, and the four-wheel discs suck the car to a stop *con brio* with no trauma or fade. The suspension dances a bit when cornering hard on wavy surfaces at high speed, requiring little corrections to hold it on line, but there's no tendency for the rear-end to step out and lead. Charge into a corner too fast and you're greeted by mild, controllable understeer (despite the weight bias to the rear), and the front tyres sliding to scrub off speed. On the ride side, it soaks up rough surfaces with an easy grace, even at high speeds, that would give some other cars the shakes.

The cars we drove were early production examples of an all-new design, assembled by an inexperienced workforce in a brand new plant, and they suffered from niggling quality glitches ... poor fits, things working loose or refusing to operate. One leaked water through the gullwing door seal, another had wiper and washer troubles, and two (but not ours) pulled to the right under hard braking. Many of those still on the assembly line also had poor fits, especially around the hard-to-hang gullwing doors; but the first shipment of doors produced on the final production tools had just arrived, and they were far better than the earlier ones. DeLorean says he won't ship any to the car's primary (and only, at first) market, the United States, until it is further up the learning curve and the quality is right.

We had a few complaints about the interior despite our overall impression of convenience and extreme comfort. The console is too high and contains no storage compartment, probably because of the central frame underneath, and you find your elbow against the side of it and your arm reaching up and around to shift. The steering wheel has a very nice look, feel diameter and rim thickness, but its vinyl covering is too slippery to maintain a secure grip when driving hard. The entire cockpit is strictly black-on-black, without a trace of colour or contrast beyond the white instrument and control markings. There are no storage pockets, bins, or trays, essentially no place to put anything inside the car, except for a small glovebox in the upper-right panel and a small-item cargo hold behind the seats (suitable for briefcases and camera cases) with a safety net to keep the contents off your head when you have to stop in a hurry. If you do rest your arm on the console you'll inadvertently switch on the rear-window defroster control, located dead-centre about where your wrist will be.

On the positive side, the instrumentation is complete, pleasant to look at, easy to read and well shaded from reflections in its hooded module. The standard equipment list is lengthy: leather upholstery, power windows and door locks, four-speaker stereo radio with cassette tape player, dual electrically adjusting outside mirrors, air conditioning and tinted glass; there are no factory options for the moment.

No small-garage operation, the modern and sophisticated DeLorean facility consists of 12 buildings displacing more than 61,000 square metres of a 29 hectare sight in Dunmurry, near Belfast. It was constructed from a green field in approximately two years at a cost of \$42 million. The only items manufactured there are the glass-reinforced underbody sections, everything else being purchased from outside sources, mostly in Britain. In the assembly building are a trim line, a chassis line and a final assembly line, the latter using rubber-wheeled, computer-controlled robot carriers that silently follow cables buried in the floor.

Before settling on Northern Ireland (which has an aggressive industry recruitment and financial incentive program), DeLorean negotiated for a site with Puerto Rico, The city

of Detroit (Michigan, USA) and the Republic of Ireland. Initial financing came from dealers and private investors in the US, but the major money was loaned and granted as a job-creating gamble by the British Government on behalf of Northern Ireland. While his corporate headquarters remains in New York, DeLorean says he loves the country and its people and has had no trouble with its much-publicized religious tension.

It certainly was a lovely place to gather our driving impressions, offering varied and challenging roads winding through picturesque villages planted randomly in a beautiful garden of pastoral and coastal scenery. Everywhere we stopped, the people were friendly, and excited and extremely curious about the car. They know that a great deal of the taxpayer's money is invested in the tall, silver-haired American's venturesome dream, and that everything rests on how well it's accepted in the US market. To a man, woman and child, they all wanted to know what we thought about the DeLorean.

I'll tell you the same thing we told them. It's a well-engineered machine under a nicely-designed piece of automotive sculpture, impressive to look at, enjoyable to drive. The major questions are quality and price. Quality had a way to go when we were there; the price seems not unreasonable at about \$US25,000, compared to, say, a Porsche 924 Turbo and to more expensive exotics such as the Lotus Espirit.

If the quality is good, and the price stays where it is for a while, DeLorean's 340 US dealers should have little trouble moving the 20,000 or so a year he's hoping for. The company should then beat the odds, confound the sceptics, make some money and survive. It will even have a second car, a four-door sedan, on the market in two-three years. But if the quality is not up to the potential buyer's high expectations, and/or the price climbs unreasonably high and fast, everyone who wants and can afford one will buy one in the first year or so; and then John DeLorean will join Preston Tucker, Malcolm Bricklin and other courageous dreamers in the trash bin of broken would-be carmakers.

And that would be a tragic shame.