

Inspired

WORDS DAVID DOWSEY
PHOTOS WAYNE PREUSKER

BY THE CLASSICS



This beautiful roadster has Art Deco styling and speaks French with an Aussie accent



No, you're not looking at a 1930s Delahaye, Bugatti or Delage with Ficoni and Falaschi, or Saoutchik coachwork.

This is a 2009 Devaux Spyder, made in Melbourne by a designer too young to see his inspirations on the road at their peak.

David Clash was 25 when he sketched his first Devaux Coupe in 1988. He had just graduated in industrial design from Melbourne's RMIT University and wanted to respond to the blandness of contemporary machinery.

"Modern cars are superbly made," he tells ACC. "But they are as dull as dishwater. I love Art Deco cars – '30s teardrop shapes. But you just can't buy them."

So in 2002, David decided to build his own Art Deco-inspired vehicle. Constructed around his sketches, he produced a prototype, based on a shortened 2.5-litre Riley chassis, with a 1956 Jaguar XK 3.4-litre six-cylinder engine and 'Moss' gearbox.

Utilising the garage of his girlfriend (now wife) Lynn, he painstakingly produced a full-size plaster buck, in the Italian style, from which he took moulds and made 'proper' glass-fibre panels. The skills he learned from his industrial design background primed him for the task, along with lessons passed on from his electrical engineer father and car-nut brother, Chris.

When David finally finished the prototype, he put it on club registration and thought for a while that that was that... but it wasn't.

"It was a fantasy for me. I was tinkering and having a bit of fun," he says. "Then a friend and fellow car enthusiast, Geoff Bott, said to me: 'It looks so good, why don't you re-engineer the car and market it?'"

David exhibited the prototype at the 2004 Melbourne Motor Show, and his life hasn't been the same since. His website was flooded with 75,000 enquiries from all over the world, including Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, Germany, Mexico, and of course, from the UK and USA, requesting production cars.

But the Devaux's unexpected popularity caused a problem.

"I showed it, but I was not in a position to make it," he says. "There was enormous interest, but I am a designer, not a businessman."



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2009 DEVAUX SPYDER

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SPECS

2009 DEVAUX SPYDER

Body: Two-door roadster

Suspension: Fully-adjustable double wishbones with coil-over dampers (front); live axle with four-bar links and Panhard rod with coil-over dampers

Brakes: Discs all round

Weight: 1125kg

Drivetrain: Front engine, RWD

Engine: 5.7-litre V8

Power: 270kW/470Nm

Transmission: Four-speed automatic

Price: \$195,000

Website: devauxcars.com



■ ABOVE The spare wheel leaves little spare room in the boot. ■ BELOW The Spyder's LS1 Chevrolet V8 hooks up to a four-speed automatic transmission.



Everybody around the world wanted one, but it took me two years to get into a position where it could be sold. I presented too early and spent an enormous amount trying to catch up.

"I had two lives with this car – the hobby life and the business life. It was fantastic, but it has been difficult. There have been a lot of tears shed along the way.

"People suggested that I put it out as a kit car. But I wouldn't be able to control the build quality, so I said to myself: 'I have to build this.'"

David was working as a designer at Melbourne's Science Works museum, developing interactive displays. But he left full-time work five years ago to concentrate on developing the Devaux Cars business.

As a child, David sketched countless car designs in the family home in Sussex, England. His mother used to send them to Maserati in Modena, Italy. Charmed, the people at Maserati reciprocated by posting the youngster Italian-language car magazines and brochures. Even at this impressionable age, the bug had bitten him.

It was David Clash's father's dislike of cold weather that brought the car designer to our shores. Clash senior first moved the family to South Africa when David was three. They later returned to the UK where David completed high school, after which the family moved to Australia.

David became a classic car enthusiast, and over the years has owned Plymouths, Pontiacs, a Triumph TR3A, TR4 and Herald, a number of Volkswagens and – his pride and joy – a 3.8 Series 1 e-Type Jaguar. But he "let them go" to fund and launch Devaux Cars in 2004.

The Devaux name comes from his mother. "I was looking a lot at French cars and coachbuilders and I thought: 'This car has to have a French name.' My mother is of French Huguenot ancestry and Devaux is her maiden name. It was perfect. I wasn't aware that in America in the 1920s a car company had used that name also."

After constructing the prototype, David knew he had to get serious about production if he wanted to capitalise on the worldwide interest. He was happy with the body shape, but a lot of work was required under the skin.

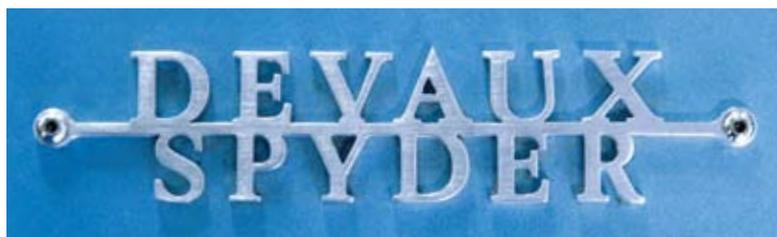
After building the first 'production' car, a blue coupé, he sold it to a customer in Hamburg, Germany. So far, he has produced a prototype, three complete coupés, and delivered one coupé body to a customer in country Victoria, who is currently building the car to David's prototype specs: 2.5-litre Riley chassis with Jaguar XK running gear.

He has also recently unveiled the stunning Spyder and has another in production. But the global economic crisis has hit him hard.

"This Spyder is such a Hollywood car," says David. "But an American told me that all the Hollywood stars want to appear to be doing the right thing, so they are driving around in cars like the [Toyota] Prius."

The Devaux Spyder is built on a mild-steel chassis frame (made in house), with an internal glass-fibre tub and scuttle.

It sits on 16-inch (406.4mm) centre-lock spoked wire wheels, shod in Dunlop 215 70 R16 tyres. Hiding behind the chrome wires are 300mm disc brakes all-round.



■ RHAPSODY IN BLUE

The Spyder pushes the boundaries of automotive beauty and style – from the beautifully trimmed cabin, to the knurled aluminium dash with VDO instruments, to the coachwork inspired by the French and Italian coachbuilders of the inter-war years.





“With only a bit over a tonne to haul... the Devaux can get up and boogie very nicely”

■ HANDS-ON Devaux founder and designer David Clash adds his personal touch to the cars he describes as “emotional art pieces”.

At the back is a Borg Warner rear axle, with a 3.45:1 diff ratio, four-bar links and a Panhard rod with coil-over dampers. The front suspension, by Rod-Tech in South Australia, consists of adjustable stainless steel double wishbones with coil-over dampers.

Powering the roadster is a 270kW/470Nm Chevrolet LS1 5.7-litre V8, hooked up to a four-speed automatic transmission. It has a custom-built aluminium fuel tank, with 85-litre capacity and a bespoke radiator that is so beautifully constructed, it's a shame it is hidden from normal view.

The body is, like the Coupe, hand-laminated GRP construction, but David says aluminium bodies can be done if customers are willing to part with an additional \$100,000 for the hand-beaten body.

The Devaux is reminiscent of, and just as glorious as, the fabulous pre-war French and Italian coachwork performed on such iconic machines as the Bugatti 57 SC Atlantic, or the Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 B Lungo.

“One good thing is that the design is locked into a time frame, from the past,” says David. “So the design is not going to age like a modern shape would. That has helped, considering it took two years to get the first car out.

“It is a car, of course, but it is more an emotional art piece. A lot of people gravitate towards this car, especially

women. If something is attractive it stirs up an emotional response.”

The ‘cosy’ cabin is typical of the 1930s era, with a knurled aluminium dash plaque fitted with bespoke-faced VDO instruments. All cars come with air-conditioning and heating, while the floors are fully carpeted and the seats and doors are trimmed in aviation-quality leather.

The ‘wood’ trim is photographic veneer, coated with numerous layers of varnish. It looks and feels just like the real thing. Other beautiful handmade touches include the billet air-conditioning vents on the dash-top and auto-shifter indicator on the transmission tunnel.

A Jaguar steering column, door handles and brake booster can be spotted, but there are many bespoke parts on the car.

David designed and hand-made/laser-cut the hinges, bonnet stay, covers, clips, radiator grille and window surrounds, and there is a beautifully-made wiring loom by the very talented Darren Hellenen at Retro Looms. The attention to detail is stunning. The cars even come equipped with a comprehensive tool roll and specially written manual.

Virtually any colour and trim can be specified, but requests for V12 and other engines have been turned down.

David says each car takes one year

to build. The new Spyder didn't need a ground-up redesign, as the body is not load-bearing. Most of the work was in adding window quarter lights, reshaping the rear deck and boot, strengthening the window frame and making the hood mechanism. The hood itself was made by Comino Trimming, while the interior was kitted-out by Fine Cut.

Thankfully, as a low-volume carmaker, David wasn't required to complete crippling crash testing. Meeting emissions requirements, though, has “been a nightmare”.

Finished in Blue Ice, which suits the roadster perfectly, and at nearly five metres long, the Devaux Spyder is an imposing sight, and an imposing drive.

Getting into the Spyder is more gymnastics than grace. But once in, I was reasonably comfortable.

With a very wide transmission tunnel, almost mandating two-foot pedal operation, and a fairly narrow track, accommodating my beefy body was a stretch. So as an interstate hauler, I would pick another, more comfortable, option.

Perhaps the most awkward aspect of the cabin design is that my left knuckles barley cleared the left-side door panels when holding the timber-rimmed Moto-Lita steering wheel (it is an LHD car).

From the comfortable driver's seat, the split windscreen provides an expansive view over the long bonnet, with all its 128 louvres. All that was required was, appropriately, a push of the engine starter on the dash to fire up the LS1 V8 under the bonnet.

The big Chevy V8 sounds menacing, and with the knowledge that the car



■ ARTIST AT WORK
Inside Devaux HQ, in Melbourne, David Clash checks coupé designs, surrounded by his unfinished masterpieces and their parts. The sketch is one of his originals from 1988.





weighs only 1125kg, it was 'easy does it' for the first few kilometres. With its long wheelbase and the chosen suspension geometry, manoeuvring the Spyder around backstreets at lower speeds took some adjustment.

It's not a spritely track star; it's more a boulevardier, and it drives like that. Fans of older cars will be familiar with how it steers, but from there the modern running gear and disc brakes make it a joy to pilot.

With only a bit over a tonne to haul and 270kW/470Nm on tap, the Devaux can get up and boogie very nicely. It is a fast car, and highway cruising and overtaking are performed with ease. There are plenty of 'smiles per mile' with this eye-catching machine.

"Devaux has great possibilities," says David. "But I don't know what's going to happen in the future."

Hopefully, Australian customers will snap up the Devaux, so that future generations of 'classic' enthusiasts can see these gorgeous cars on local roads in the flesh. ACC

