

Jay Leno's Tatra T87: The High-Mileage Cruiser of the '30s



BY JAY LENO

It looks like a hearse and drives like a motorboat, but the Czech-made Tatra T87—powered by a V8 and able to get 20 MPG at a time that other equally monumental cars got 6 to 9—was a cruiser ahead of its time. Jay Leno describes what it's like to drive one, and why it's like no other car he owns.

Jay's 1938 Czech-made Tatra T87 pioneered ideas in streamlining, suspension and fuel efficiency.

John Lamm

Ever hear of the Tatra? I didn't think so...

An expensive Czech equivalent to a Cadillac, the streamlined Tatra T87 was very fast for its day, with a top speed of 103 mph. But not many were sold outside Czechoslovakia. It's hard to sell something before its time. My Tatra T87 sedan was built in the small city of Koprivnice, in 1938. It's powered by a rear-mounted, cast-magnesium, air-cooled 2.9-liter overhead-cam Hemi-head V8 with a four-speed transaxle. The suspension is fully independent, with twin transverse leaf springs in front and a unique swing axle setup in back.

People go nuts for Tucker cars these days—they sell for over a million dollars—but the Tatra was developed a good 10 years before the Tucker, and it was much more advanced. It had a V8, not a flat six, and it didn't use somebody else's engine or transmission. The Tatra is really what the Tucker should have been—a truly aerodynamic car that got 20 mpg at 60 mph. In the '30s, fuel consumption for most big six-passenger cars was 6 to 9 mpg.

Founded in 1850 under a different company name that nobody here can pronounce, Tatra built carriages and wagons for decades. Then, in 1897, it became a carmaker, now the world's third oldest after Mercedes-Benz and Peugeot. Tatra built automobiles until 1999, then switched to manufacturing trucks, which it still does. The company's original engineers were two Austrians: Hans Ledwinka, who almost never built anything the way anyone else did, and designer Edmund Rumpler. In the 1930s—after a brief fling with a 12-cylinder, front-engine car—Ledwinka began working with his son Erich to build Tatra sedans with air-cooled, rear-mounted V8 engines. In 1934, the company obtained a license from Paul Jaray, the Hungarian designer of the Graf Zeppelin, to build the Type 77, a full-size fastback. When the Tatra team tested a model in a wind tunnel, its coefficient of drag was 0.24. When they tested a prototype, the Cd was 0.36. The norm for most cars of that era: 0.54. Ledwinka's 1936 Tatra T97 had a rear-mounted, air-cooled four-cylinder boxer-type engine; a central-structural-tunnel floor pan; rear-wheel drive; four seats; and a luggage compartment located under the hood. Two years later, when the first Volkswagen Beetle was introduced, Ledwinka brought a lawsuit against the manufacturer and its designer, Ferdinand Porsche, over the similarities between the two vehicles. When the Germans annexed Czechoslovakia in 1938, the suit was dropped.

My T87 is mechanically different from any other automobile I own. It has a rigid tubular-backbone chassis. Instead of constant-velocity joints, the car has two crown-wheel gears—one on each rear-axle shaft—that pivot around a pair of differential spur gears. The two spare tires are in front, an attempt to equalize weight distribution, but since the engine and gearbox are at the rear, the T87 is still tail-heavy and has a tendency to spin at the slightest provocation. A British automotive writer, Gordon Wilkins, said that driving a Tatra produces "the uneasy exhilaration which may be got from shampooing a lion."

I drive it swiftly, but I'm aware of its handling characteristics, and I don't lift off the throttle in a corner. It's like driving an early Porsche 356, with that car's tendency for the rear end to step out, but the Tatra is twice as long. When you go down the road, there's a motorboat sort of feel to the T87, but not disconcertingly so. The steering is so light, you can steer with one finger. When you lift off the gas at 60 mph, you don't get that braaaahhhh overrun. It doesn't freewheel; it cuts aerodynamically through the wind so well, it barely slows down.