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TOPCAR

White *Russian*

Russian tuners are almost unknown outside the Motherland, but one company has gone global with the help of Mercedes-Benz's best selling SUV

WORDS AND IMAGES IAN KUAH



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TOPCAR



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TUNER CAR Top Car ML Inferno

JUST AS IN OTHER COUNTRIES all over the world, car tuning and customising in Russia encompasses enthusiasts from two extremes: those who crave raw power and speed, and those who just like to sit in their car and cruise.

The really hard core speed junkies take part in the popular Moscow Unlimited 500+ event, a side by side, standing mile drag race for standard and modified supercars held on the very long runway at the Minsk-1 Airport. There are two categories: fastest car over one kilometre, and fastest car over one mile. While this event is not about trading pink slips, honour is most definitely at stake.

The counterpoint is aftermarket customisation with the conventional blend of body styling, wheels, suspension and special interiors. While most of the well-known German tuners are represented in Russia through local partners, there is also a small but vibrant home grown customising industry that caters to the specific tastes of Russian clients.

Depending on social class and higher education, the taste of a Russian client can be either similar to, or radically different from that of European as well as Arab and Far Eastern customers. Thus it is important that a local tuner or customisation specialist is able to meet their clients' needs with a total understanding of what is expected in terms of style, materials and colour. For instance, Russia is the only market where crocodile leather is a popular material for car interiors. I have personally seen several Russian owned Bentleys and Mercedes in Marbella and Monaco with dashboard top rolls and other interior trim made from real or imitation crocodile skin.

SPECIFIC TASTES

However, mimicking German tuners using home grown body styling and interiors with a local twist, is far from where Russian car customisation begins and ends. In the former Soviet Union, new cars and spare parts were relatively scarce, although not to anything like the extent they are in Cuba. During the communist times, the wealthy and well connected could always get imported cars and service support, but the average person had to put their name down for a Lada and wait several years. Needless to say, spares for the local

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▷ machinery were also hard to come by, to the point where you were advised to remove your windscreen wiper blades when you parked your car on the street!

It was no wonder then that the best motor engineers and mechanics from the former Soviet Union countries exhibit world class ingenuity and creativity, as they often had to make from scratch what was not readily available. That ingenuity was allowed to shine on the world stage after the Berlin Wall fell, with a very special one-off car from a Moscow based company called a:level that briefly become the doyen of the international press.

RENEWED FOCUS

A bespoke coachbuilder whose fanatical pursuit of exclusivity for its wealthy clients meant that it only ever made one of everything. A:level created its iconic Volga V12 Coupe from a stretched, widened and modified Gaz-21 Volga saloon shell, underpinned by the mechanicals and interior from a BMW

850CSi. Sadly, a:level no longer exists, as there was apparently a problem with its overseas investor after the debut of the convertible version of the Volga car in 2006. But the vision and talent that made these and other unique cars possible showed the world that the Russians play second fiddle to no one in this potentially lucrative business.

Moscow based Top Car is a bit more conventional in its approach to tuning, using current Porsche models as the canvas on which it places its distinctive stamp. Rather than being a coachbuilder, for whom business depends on finding high net worth individuals as patrons, Top Car is organised along the lines of German Porsche tuners like Gemballa and TechArt, but with a unique Russian twist. The man behind Top Car is Oleg Egorov, whose very successful advertising company in Moscow is his core business. A

passionate car enthusiast, Oleg originally set up a company in 2002 to represent Gemballa in the Russian Federation.

"As much as I loved Uwe Gemballa's designs, I was frustrated by

erratic supplies and other issues," he explained.

"It was at that point I decided the only way to make the business work was to establish my own brand and control the supply chain from A to Z," he said. Top Car was founded in August 2004 to do precisely this, and under Oleg's watchful eye, has gone from strength to strength, hosting its own 10th anniversary party at the 2014 Moscow motor show.

The Top Car concept took a lot of planning and organisation before it became a reality, but with the Gemballa experience, and his extensive advertising and media awareness, Oleg had a pretty good idea of all the potential pitfalls, as well as what was required to create a slick operation. "I brought together a team of designers and engineers who now do everything from start to finish," said Oleg. "Today, over a decade down the line, we have almost 70 staff, 40 of whom are specialists in designing and crafting the special interiors that our clients are increasingly demanding."

YOUR WISH IS THEIR COMMAND

At this level, only high quality carbon fibre will do for the aerodynamic styling components, he explained. "We make these in Russia so that we



▷ The owners of this Inferno are more than happy with the results.



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can keep a close eye on quality. However, the raw materials come from western European sources like Germany and Luxembourg, who produce the best automotive grade carbon fibre." Of course using the best materials is of little consequence if the fit and finish of the parts is not also world class. "That is why we spare no expense to ensure that our tolerances are as exact as possible," Oleg continued. "We use a state of the art, laser dimensioning machine on an actual car to get its measurements down to a fraction of a millimetre. These readings form the basis of our prototype parts and the subsequent moulds," he explained.

Certainly, the aerodynamic kit on the Top Car ML350 CDI was most impressive in fit and finish, standing up to close examination when I gave it a good eyeballing outside Top Car's operation in Marbella, Spain. Many people feel that the current W166 ML, recently renamed GLE, is a bit too smooth looking, and lacks the more butch off-road appeal of its predecessor. The Top Car styling kit puts that purposeful stance back into the mix, without being over the top like some of the more flamboyant German tuner conversions.



△ Top Car has also worked on the latest GLE model.

◁ Additional LEDs outline the ML's gaping mouth.

▽ Striking silver carbon fibre for this ML's cabin.



Top Car is organised along the lines of German Porsche tuners like Gembella and TechArt, but with a unique Russian twist



△ American made ADV1 forged alloy wheels, size 22-inch, fill the arches.

△△ Colour coded diffuser with Italian Supersprint four-pipe exhaust system.

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△ These are just three of the styles Top Car offers in the ML.

Central to this tougher look are the big wheelarch flares whose lines and contours suit the ML perfectly. The deeper front spoiler and new rear valance continue this philosophy, with character and detailing that harmoniously blend with the rest of the conversion. These visual cues alone gives the styling strong Mercedes connotations, underlining how Top Car's stylists understand the original design philosophy and go with the flow rather than trying to impose a conflicting design language on the base car. The company's aim was to create a look inspired by Black Series AMGs.

INSIDE AND OUT

All the vacuum formed carbon fibre parts of the 'Inferno' aero kit, which include the front bumper/spoiler, bonnet, wheelarch extensions, side skirts and rear bumper with diffuser are colour coded to the bodywork. The only purely decorative parts of the kit are the vertical insert on the trailing edge of each front wheelarch, and the faux air intakes aft of the front arches. The front features twin rows of LED daytime running lights on each side – one above each big air intake with one on the spoiler lip.

The only change to the interior is the silver carbon fibre trim inserts on the dashboard, centre console, doors and steering wheel. This is a very mild upgrade as this car was one of the first to be built and shipped to Marbella. "As you can see from the photos of some ML interiors we have created [see left], wealthy Russians love individual tailored interiors that can cost up to €30,000 [£23,500] depending on materials," Oleg explained. "In this case, it would have been a waste to find that a

prospective buyer did not like the special interior in our test car, so we decided to leave this as a blank canvas."

Sitting on its American made, 10Jx22 ADV.1 forged alloys, shod with 295/30ZR22 Yokohama Advan ST tyres, the car rides 30mm lower on the H&R fully adjustable suspension kit that normally goes with this conversion unless you have the Airmatic option.

For those who want a power bump, the Bluetec turbodiesel motor, normally with 254bhp/457lb ft torque, can be boosted to 301bhp with 509lb ft. However, the Spanish couple that own this car were attracted to its appearance, using it as their everyday work car and for carrying their dog, so the three-litre engine remains stock.

If you have the GLE63 AMG, which Top Car says is the most common base model for the Inferno conversion, three states of engine tune are offered. The first of these increases power from 577bhp and 560lb ft torque to 631bhp with 723lb ft, the second to 681bhp with 811lb ft. Finally, the no holds barred engine upgrade is good for 750bhp, accompanied by 848lb ft of torque. The unique Inferno sports exhaust is made for Top Car by Supersprint in Italy.

Ten years is an eternity in the automotive industry, but Top Car has come a long way in that time. Russia no longer exports the cars of its miserable state run auto industry, but in the aftermarket tuning and customisation business Top Car can hold its head up high with standards of design and quality that aren't overshadowed by the best of its world famous German and American rivals.

The no holds barred engine upgrade for the GLE63 is good for 750bhp, accompanied by 848lb ft of torque

