

Renault Fuego V6 by Graeme

'It needs more power' said my business partner and Fuego pilot Pete, one morning. Pete who lives at Mount Glorious and really enjoys the drive to Brisbane and back every day. He reckoned the poise of the car could be augmented by a meatier delivery from the engine. 'Maybe a Renault V10 would fit straight in?' he offered jokingly.

But life being life and things being things, talk of an engine swap remained a joke for some time. Then one Monday morning, Pete arrived at work and whipped up the bonnet, explaining that all was not 100% with the engine. Although there was no overheating or poor running evident, plainly the coolant resembled mayonnaise! Oil in the water! After keeping an eagle eye on it for several days, it became clear that the engine was prepared to go on as usual. This suited us well as after having been in our 'fleet' and used as everyday transport for five years, we'd so far had no need to peer at the engine's innards. After some thought we decided to keep it that way. Weighing up all the pros and cons we could think of, we decided that although the car certainly looked like an old bomb, in many ways it still had a lot to offer. We tried to think of another vehicle which could offer what a Fuego could for the price. Maybe you've tried this exercise with various cars as well? It was hard to find something in the price range that was sufficiently well designed for us to bother spending both time and money on. Perhaps this is the quantifiable part of being an enthusiast; the other part is feelings and Goosebumps and can't readily be explained to our relatives.

Now was the time to do something drastic. Suddenly Pete's joke became serious! This was his chance to really push for an alternate engine! He didn't waste any time amassing some (circumstantial) evidence to convince me that the Peugeot-Renault-Volvo V6 would fit in a Fuego. Some more measuring and chin scratching had us thinking something like 'This is crazy enough to work'. The alloy V6 is a lovely overhead cam device which likes to rev and is quite light (we didn't know just how light at this stage). We thought that it would not be so much of a lump it would upset the car's poise.

Next step was to enquire of the legalities. Once we were assured that this side of things was all right we hunted down an engine. The one we bought was a Volvo unit that had recently coupled with a Celica 5 speed box in a mud-plugging Datsun ute. Of course we thought this engine would feel more at home in a Fuego!

The idea was to use the Fuego transaxle and so far so good. Some pondering led us to believe the original clutch should be strong enough for the job as well. Studying radiator sizes also allowed us to put faith in the standard unit. So: simply adapt the transaxle and clutch to the V6 and make some engine mounts and the job would be done, yes?? Another joke.

A six week wait for welding and machining of the flywheel and bell housing was both infuriating and enthusiasm-numbing. The cost of this work was as big as the delay had been. Next time we'll see about an adaptor plate to bolt the engine and trans together. We'll doubtless be getting a quantity made so perhaps the unit price may reflect this. Anyway, once having bolted the powerpack together, we were able to dangle it around in the engine bay and make up mounts and so on.

Finally it came time to start the engine that we'd never heard running. The exhaustless ROAR was punctuated by the occasional deafening BANG. A crowd began to form. Mark, the mechanic from next door was very interested in this noisy behaviour and after some consideration pointed out that we were using a points distributor, but with the ill-suited cap from an electronic distributor. So we changed to the electronic distributor we had. Of course this didn't work at all. Experts required! An auto electrician sorted out the ignition module and coil we needed. At least it ran again. Delving into the mysteries of Bosch K-Jetronic injection allowed better running. Unfortunately the delving also allowed me to drop a small bolt down a hole in the top of the bellhousing.

The car sat very high at the front, much higher than with the 4 cylinder engine. Measuring the ride height and comparing it to the height we'd measured before the swap showed the conversion was about 40 kg lighter!! Even mild acceleration allowed the light front end to rear up almost to full height, and this combined with worn castor bushes and a noticeably torquey engine meant driving the car required the use of an extra couple of lanes and some frantic twirling of the steering wheel as you wandered along the chosen path. Still, we saw that giving the car an engine that was both lighter and more powerful was pretty much a good thing.

We didn't drive it much before giving the brakes the once over. All done. Then a bit of road testing around the block. Then as Pete was trying a hard stop out front of work, the engine went CLUNK and stopped at about the same time the car stopped. Remember that little bolt I dropped down behind the clutch? Well I shamefacedly admitted that it had probably gotten caught up and jammed the flywheel! Obviously the engine had to come out. This was accomplished by leaving the transmission in the car. No trouble at all because of the shorter engine. A new cross member we'd added allowed the transmission to rest nicely and wait. This was when an annoying oil leak was fixed and the engine bay was painted to gleam again. Pete sorted out the wiring and we managed to get everything looking less chaotic.

With the engine back in we had to address the wayward road manners. Some advice from knowledgeable club members had us fitting urethane bushes to the castor arms. This took care of the torque steer tendencies of the car. Because the engine is lighter than the standard unit, the front road springs had to be shortened. This proved to be another ordeal. We almost lost count of the number of times front springs have been in and out in an effort to achieve an acceptable ride height. Beware the spring works! Our inability to tune into their thought processes (and maybe some communication deficit on their side) made shortening a pair of springs a long process. This should be quite easy as all you have to do is take your springs along and request a specific length. After all, this is what they do. But time after time they were much too high, then much too low, until eventually they were just right (more or less). 'A bit like Goldilocks' says Pete.

The car is once again commuting daily between Mount Glorious and Brisbane and we are very enthusiastic about the conversion. It feels strong at any point in any gear, and winding sections become beautiful progressions up and down the ratios. You can simply play the throttle to make delicious howls and cackles in lower gears or you can just keep on flicking up to the next gear even along short straights and up steep bits, enjoying the torque of the engine before setting up for the next bend. Of course, it cruises without effort and overtaking is instinctive. We like the V6 Fuego so much we already have another car (mine) ready to become a convert.

And so my Grim Tale ends like a Fairy Story. As Goldilocks might say if she drove one - a V6 Fuego is 'Just right'.