

Matra Sports Djet V



I have 3 French toys (& a warm 1310 Moke).

First, a '66 Renault R8 1100 that my mother bought new (& which I recall fanging around the Adelaide hills as an undergraduate hoon). When it came to me on her death, I fitted a (44kw at the wheels) single 40 DCOE 1.4 motor & made other modifications to improve its handling. I now fang it around Tassie hills as a superannuated hoon. If I have "daily driver", then that's it.

The second is a heavily modified '58 4CV which I've written of elsewhere. It has an R5 Alpine motor with twin Weber 40 DCOEs making 65kw at the wheels (about 120bhp gross at the flywheel assuming a 25-30% loss) & a string of other modifications (to the extent of requiring modification approval & certification). I bought it in standard from the original owner in January '68.

The last, & my focus here, is a '66 Matra Sports Djet V. Given that the RCCQ has already run a (2010) article on the Djet, I shall limit my general remarks to some brief introductory ones & talk more about my particular Djet.

Most of you will know of Alpine's A110 Berlinette of rally winning fame & will have likely seen one of the several in Australia. The Djet is similarly R8 based, steel backboned & plastic bodied but with a mid-engine, Renault Estafette commercial van transaxle & a proper wishbone geometry & double jointed half-shaft rear suspension. Its designer, René Bonnet, started the series in '62 as a road car version of a circuit racer & it was the first production mid-engined car in the world. 'Djet' is pronounced 'jet', as in jet engine - they had another, R4-chassis based cabriolet called the Missile!

(One ought be thankful that there was no Fregate based model called the Bomb.) Matra, an Aerospace firm, had done the aerodynamic work for Bonnet (Cd .26) & was building the glass-reinforced polyester bodies. When he went bust , it took over the firm & made some modifications to the Djet (some of which were designed by Bonnet's son Claude). It then had some minor commercial success. After a bewildering variety of minor name changes, production ceased in '68 as Matra switched to a replacement vehicle, the Ford Taunus V4 engined 530. Matra continued to make vehicles until a few years ago (notably the Espace & including two more, Chrysler-Simca based, mid-engined sports coupes). It is now amalgamated into E.A.D.S., the Airbus manufacturer. Around 1700 Djets were made in total, &, as far as is known, less than half that number remain. Many "died" in competition.

My Djet's first owner was the son of the Olympic skier Jean Louis Allard & he reportedly ran it as a private entry in the '66 Criterion des Cervennes rally (despite it only being a 70bhp V, not the 94bhp Gordini -engined V S). It was then almost immediately bought by an Australian journalist, Frank Palmos, who was a student in France at the time. Palmos became based in England as a journalist & the vehicle was stored there until 1976 when Palmos moved back to Perth in Australia. The Djet had long periods in storage unused owing to Palmos being on extended assignments overseas & also to it having its windscreen broken in transit to Australia.

Palmos owned it until 1996 when it was sold to a Melbourne architect, Peter Carmichael. At this stage, the Djet had only done 32,000 km since new. Carmichael gave the Djet a thorough restoration with parts bought from Matra & fitted a brand new 1397 motor modified to the specifications of a Renault Australia prototype sports motor which was intended for use in a quasi R12 Gordini sports model of the R12. (That model did not proceed to production.) Fitted with a Dellorto 40 mm twin throat side-draught carburettor and a pulse-effect Lynx inlet manifold (pairing 1 & 4 cylinders to one throat & 2 & 3 to the other) the motor gives about 45kw at the wheels. I still have the original, Gordini modified, 70bhp non-hemi 1108 engine but won't be refitting it.



Carmichael also fitted 4.5x14 wheels (R16TX centres with reversed rims). I have reverted to them (with 165/65-14 Conti Premium Contact 2 tyres - lovely "wet"-compounded beasties) from the standard 4x15 wheels refitted at one point.



Carmichael owned the car for almost 15 years and then circumstances dictated its sale. The car was briefly owned by Chris Ralph (who ran an orange Ford Perana in the 2012 Targa Tasmania rally) & then Clive Massel (an ex champion classic racer in South Africa in BMW 2002s) before being bought by me from Massel in February 2012. The Djet had received further refurbishment from Ralph & was returned to its original 4x15 wheels & fitted with Vredestein Sprint Classic 155x15 tyres (not a tyre I would recommend if crisp response & wet grip are priorities).

Apart from looking quirkily cute, the Djet's main merit is its dynamic prowess. It turns in crisply, will four wheel drift nicely & will throttle-adjust its line mid-corner in a perfectly predictable & controllable way - even in the wet. It's very un-mid-engine-like in its extraordinarily benign & "tossable" behaviour around the limit of adhesion. I attribute this partly to its relatively long wheelbase - although the "quick" R8 Gordini rack helps. I have been driving a variety of brisk rear-engined Renaults for 50 years & my 4CV is particularly well sorted but the handling of the Djet is on another plane. Delicious!

When sold to me, the Djet had done 37,700 very well documented kilometres from new & I had met or spoken with each Australian owner (including Palmos who I now surmise was the person who had given me a ride in a Djet at a University party in Melbourne in 1978). Colin Stark, at Alpine Affaire in Melbourne, did the pre-sale inspection for me so I knew I was buying a car in sound condition. At the time of writing (September '13), it has done another 8,000 km in my hands. (I am thus its most intensive user to date - Tasmania has loads of twisty "C" roads and I live semi-rurally among them.) As far as is known, & I'd love to be wrong about this, it is the only Djet still in Australia (although there have been two or three others -the Sydney Djet featured in the '66 Sports Car World article on

them, one that the French consulate in Melbourne had & a possible sighting of a derelict one in Queensland at Burleigh Heads).

Alongside an A110 & an R8 Gordini (R1135), it has just gone into the National Automobile Museum of Tasmania's French car theme display which is on until Xmas '13 (& that Delage is stunning to see).



And, having had some inappropriate oil eat the brass of my synchro rings, it is undergoing a transaxle rebuild at the same time. That last exercise is a testament to the worth of car clubs (in this case, Club Djet in France). What might have been a nightmare exercise in sourcing parts for a "boite" which was never in an Australian-sold car, is much less worrying with the club's help & advice.



As with my other toys, the Djet will never be sold by me but will be kept until either it dies or I do (quite conceivably at the same time in the same, albeit untoward, event).

