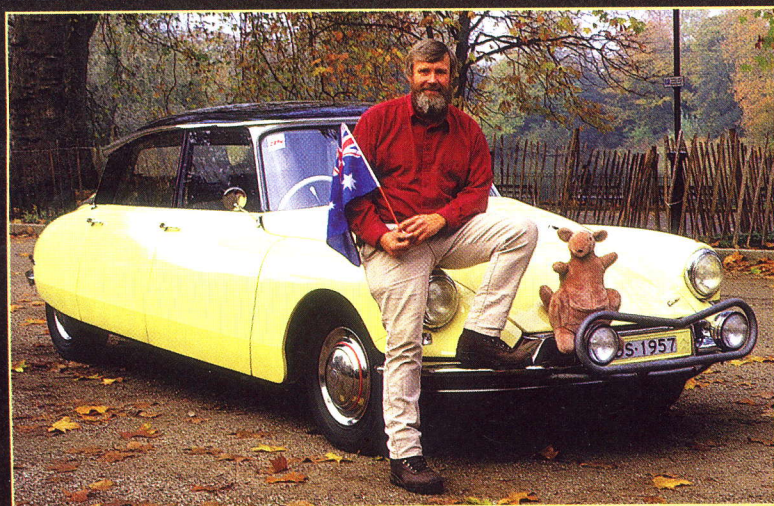




62 days, **10,000 miles**, 12 litres



It takes a courageous man to drive a Citroën DS around the world – riding on cooking oil. That's Australian Bob Dircks and his faithful steed 'Buttercup'

PHOTOGRAPHY: LYNDON MCNEIL

FEW PETROLHEADS would dispute it takes a brave man to lift the bonnet of a Citroën DS, with its complex hydropneumatic suspension and hydraulically operated semi-automatic gearbox. Even fewer would dare tempt fate and tamper with the way it works. But when you're an adventurous inventor from Down Under, where you can't always get your hands on the bits you need, you're probably open to trying everything *and* the kitchen sink. Or stove, for that matter. 'I've converted the hydraulics to run on cooking oil



of chip oil. One Citroën DS

after the real stuff became hard to find,' says Bob Dircks, an Australian industrial machinery designer who's been tinkering with DSs for more than 30 years. 'I first made my own concoction using brake fluid and castor oil, but that screwed up the paint so I had a go with canola oil. It works a treat after a few adjustments to the damping rates.'

He clearly knows what he's talking about: he's already racked up 120,000 of his 1957 DS19's half a million miles. It's also reckoned to be the oldest surviving DS in daily use and still has its original body panels and engine. Even the exhaust silencer dates back to 1963. The car's longevity is partly thanks to the dry Australian climate and Dircks' rural location in New South Wales. 'Each time it starts it does at least 50 miles,' he says. Of course his DS isn't entirely original on the hydraulic front and Dircks admits the cooking oil modification has a few side effects, including the wafting aroma of your local chippy while on the move. 'The oil eats away at the suspension's natural rubber seals so it tends to leak a little,

but heck, it's only 43p a litre.' With genuine LHS (Liquide Hydraulique Synthétique) fluid costing upwards of £10 a bottle, you can appreciate why Dircks is happy to entertain the odd leak, although given his mileage he's probably smeared umpteen gallons of oil across Australia, not to mention Europe.

Ah yes, Europe. You see Dircks is such a fan of the DS that he shipped his over for the model's 50th anniversary celebrations in Paris in 2005. But the massive week-long event involving 3000 DSs was only one stop on a three-month European camping tour that saw Dircks spending nights at some unusual spots. 'I found a quiet place to camp late one night off a country lane near Perth,' says Dircks. 'The next morning I woke to find I'd pitched my tent on the eighth fairway at Gleneagles. I thought the grass was a bit smooth.'

Dircks' car is one of 150 Slough-built DS19s exported new to Australia. Just 12 of them are believed to exist today and this is the only one still on the road, which is appropriate given its history. 'It was a prize in a charity lottery,' says Dircks.

This Citroën DS has done half a million miles; partly thanks to the health-giving benefits of chip oil





Dircks takes brand loyalty to a new level

1957 CITROËN DS19

Engine 1911cc, in-line four-cylinder, ohv, twin-choke carburettor **Power and torque** 75bhp @ 4500rpm; 102lbft @ 3000rpm **Transmission** Four-speed semi-automatic, front-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion, power-assisted **Suspension** Front: independent, twin leading arms, self-levelling hydropneumatic spring/damper units. Rear: independent, trailing arms, self-levelling hydropneumatic spring/damper units **Brakes** Discs front and rear, power-assisted **Weight** 1225kg (2695lb) **Performance** Top speed: 88mph; 0-60mph: 23.2sec **Fuel economy** 22-26mpg **Cost new** £1403 **Value now** £6000

Although the DS proved too avant garde for the winner, the second owner hung on to it for 30 years. Dircks bought it in 1998, when it had around 380,000 miles on the clock. He's added 120,000 through a combination of daily use, trips for work (he often travels 1000 miles in a couple of days) and taking the family around Australia for the annual Association of Citroën Clubs meets.

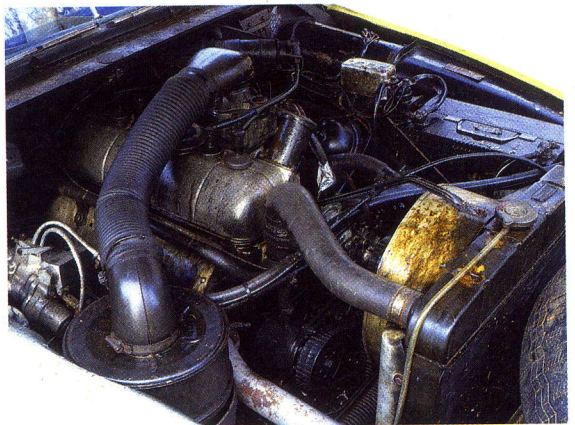
In preparation for the European trip, Dircks resprayed the body, re-upholstered its seats and rebuilt the engine, but his was no open cheque book job. 'I used parts from three different cars to rebuild the engine,' says Dircks. 'I think it cost £30, tops.'

The visit to Paris rapidly turned into a European tour as word about the mad Aussie and his plans spread through the DS community. After flying to the UK, Dircks was joined by his family for a trip around England to trace some family history before taking the ferry to France. It was on the way to Paris that the suspension collapsed after the main hydraulic pressure pump failed: the epic trip's only mishap. 'An O-ring let go and I lost the hydraulics suddenly.' No doubt the canola oil had a hand in it all and it wasn't long before French motorway police pulled over to establish the source of the impressive oil slick. 'It's the only time in my motoring life that I've had to be towed after a breakdown.'

Once it was up (literally) and running again, the DS was a highlight of the four-day 50th celebrations in Paris, which included a parade by 1600 DSs from the Arc de Triomphe to the Eiffel Tower. 'Loads of people wanted photos of me and the car with the Aussie flag.' And his 'roo bar was a real talking point. It was originally offered as an accessory for the Australian market, but Dircks fabricated his own after



Leftfield interior reflects an unconventional car, from semi-automatic shifting gears to hydraulic suspension



Dircks' DS may be the oldest still on the road. And it's on a lot of roads



seeing one in a Fifties sales brochure.

Luxembourg, Holland and Germany were ticked off the map before Dircks made a solo camping trip around Scotland and Ireland. Then it was down to business with a return to Paris for an appointment with Citroën's *Conservatoire* collection. 'The staff wanted my help in dating some of the early DSs in their collection,' he explains.

After that Dircks and his brother toured Germany and Switzerland. 'It felt strange taking a car I'm so familiar with to such unfamiliar places.' By the time they rolled back onto the ship at Southampton, the DS had clocked up 10,000 more miles without a scratch, even though some of Dircks' mates reckoned he'd risk losing the car on such a long trip. 'I could've been wiped out ten times on my travels but it's not worth having a car like this if you can't drive it,' he says.

And driving is what the DS is all about. It's an unforgettable experience that begins by starting the engine with the gear selector. This wand-like lever operates the starter motor and looks too delicate to

AROUND THE WORLD IN 62 DAYS!

Day 1

Buttercup arrives at the docks in Southampton after 70 days on the high seas and with a flat spare tyre, which Dircks plans to fix.

Days 2-7

Dircks, his three daughters and his mum tour England and Scotland. En

route they drive past Buttercup Way in Bradford.

Day 8

Boards the ferry to France but a burst O-ring soon results in some roadside humiliation as Buttercup is recovered with a flatbed truck. 'I've never had to call a tow truck

in 30 years of driving!'

Days 9-13

Buttercup wows enthusiasts at the DS's 50th celebrations so much, it's put on display in a special area. 'It was an inner display area reserved for the 20 most special and rare DS examples,' says Dircks. Quite an accolade considering around 3000 cars turned up.

Day 14

Buttercup stars in a parade of 1600 other DS cars through the heart of Paris, 50 years after the model was launched. 'Everyone wants a photo of me with Buttercup!'



DS returns to its homeland

Days 15-19

If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium... Buttercup takes the Dircks family on a tour of Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium and Holland in just four days.

Days 20-23

Back over the channel for more DS 50th celebrations at the Citroën factory in Slough where Dircks meets Ken Smith. 'He was the factory manager when Buttercup was built.'



The whole family joined in



Made for each other



Strange tow truck device and DS



French bank robbers soon realized they'd be better off with a Peugeot

change gears – but then it's really just a switch that controls the flow of hydraulic fluid to operate the semi-automatic gearbox. The shift pattern is also unconventional, with first gear away from you, second towards you and third and top sequentially to the right. The other-worldliness doesn't end there. Fire up the engine and you have to sit tight while the suspension rises, first at the rear, then the front, which means ditching any thoughts of blasting off as soon the car's running, unless you're happy to take chunks of tarmac with you. 'It's not a getaway car,' says Dircks. 'I think French bank robbers soon realized they'd be better off grabbing a Peugeot if they wanted to stay in business.'

To pull away, you select first and give it some gas. There's no clutch pedal so, to change gear, you just lift off the accelerator slightly and move the gear lever. That's all. Before you know it, you're gliding along and enjoying the DS's magic carpet ride. Hit a speed bump and you'll think your eyes have deceived you. Apart from a slight, effortless rise at the front, the car crosses over almost undisturbed – as if someone had

quickly removed the bump before the rear wheels got to it. The only blot on the whole experience is the asthmatic sound of the DS's four-cylinder pushrod engine, a hangover from the outgoing Traction-Avant. But then that unit wasn't supposed to be used. 'The DS was meant to have an air-cooled flat-six engine, but Citroën ran into development problems,' explains Dircks. A DS with a Porsche 911 growl? Perhaps that's something for this individual and inventive Aussie to experiment with in the future. In the meantime he reckons Buttercup, which turns 50 this month, will hit the magic million-mile mark in the next five to six years and he has every intention of taking it to the DS's 75th anniversary in 2030.

Of course he wouldn't be doing all this if he weren't as smitten with the DS's comfort as he is with its clever engineering. 'The back seat of a DS is the most comfortable place in the world,' says the man who's surely qualified to say so. After all he's seen most of the world from the inside of his DS.

Now this Citroën has flown the Aussie flag and celebrated its 50th anniversary, it's looking forward to many more years of highway hilarity

Days 24-26

Scotland for the brave: Dircks' family flies back to Oz while he and Buttercup head for a solo lap of Scotland and a night at the world's smoothest campsite: 'On the eighth fairway of Gleneagles golf course as it turns out,' says Dircks, who had to outrun the greenkeeper when he woke.

Days 27-28

Blasts up to John O'Groats while DS online community posts a map to report sightings of Buttercup Bob. 'It was a version of *Where's Wally?*'

muses Dircks.

Day 29

Overnights in Stranraer with some cosmopolitan DS enthusiasts. 'He's German, his wife's Irish and they drive an Australian-built DS!'

Days 30-39

Dircks takes the ferry to Ireland for a tour of the country and a stop at a Citroën Club technical weekend. 'Two days of technical Citroën babble,' says Dircks. 'And plenty of drinking of course.'

Days 40-42

Showtime! Back in England,

Buttercup is a highlight at the National Classic Motor Show at Birmingham's NEC. 'Those were the only days on the trip the car sat still,' says Dircks. 'I borrowed a bicycle to get to the show each day.'

Days 43-49

History lesson: Back to Paris to visit Citroën's *Conservatoire* and teach the French a few things about the DS model.

Days 50-55

Dircks' brother Andrew joins him for a jaunt around Switzerland and Germany, where they relive



I'm sure this isn't a golf course

their student days by camping illegally in the Black Forest before heading back to England via Holland and Belgium.

Days 56-61

Time for some sight-seeing in London, where Dircks takes

advantage of his Australian registration to give Mayor Ken Livingstone's parking attendants the finger. 'I'm used to parking where I like at home, although I usually pop the bonnet to fake a breakdown,' he says.

Day 62

Buttercup is loaded back on to a ship bound for Sydney – 10,000 miles, ten countries, 39 tanks of petrol, 12 litres of canola oil and one O-ring later. And all with a flat spare tyre. 'I never did get round to sorting it!'