



Best French classic of the 20th Century

# Citroën DS19

by Nairn Hindhaugh

**The DS19 caused a sensation when it was unveiled in 1955, described as 'the most interesting design to go into production anywhere in the world'**

**H**arking back to the mid-'50s, and reflecting on the offerings presented by most car manufacturers, we find very little in the way of imaginative thinking. FJ Holdens ruled the Australian roads, orthodox Chevrolets and Fords did so in the US, and the Morris Oxford and Austin Cambridge represented Britain's conservatism. It was the French who caused a sensation in 1955 at the Paris Motor Show or Salon.

Two brand new models were announced: the highly conventional Peugeot 403, and the highly unconventional Citroën DS19.

Perhaps these two cars highlight the French automotive scene during the mid-part of this century.

Peugeot was one of the earliest pioneers, having started bicycle

production in 1886, and producing their first experimental car in 1889. From then on, their cars were usually well-made, durable and generally stylish.

There were some unusually styled cars during the '30s, with headlights hidden behind waterfall grilles, and Peugeot can claim they built the first retractable hard-top convertible in 1936 – long before Ford's efforts in 1957.

*The sensation of the 1955 Paris Motor Show*



However, Peugeot were almost bastions of conservatism, as their post-war cars revealed. The 203, 403, 404 and 504 while extremely worthy, followed a safe path, with strong sales proving this point. While Australians during the '50s and '60s may have become used to a diet of Holden, Falcon and Vahants, Peugeot marched to a slightly different drum. Transverse front springs on the 203 and 403, and independent rear suspension in the 504, were features out of the ordinary but they were admirably suited for our conditions.

Renault, on the other hand, after years of making conventional vehicles, decided after the war to concentrate mainly on rear-engined cars, starting with the 4CV (or 750 as we knew it in Australia). With independent suspension on all four wheels, rack-and-pinion steering and unitary construction, it was a break from the past. Later Renaults followed suit, with the Dauphine, 8 and 10 in succession, taking the company into the early '70s. In 1961, however, Renault introduced the 4, a more sophisticated development of the Citroën 2CV theme. From then on, Renault followed the front-wheel-drive path which it does to this day.

### More French cleverness

Other French manufacturers of the 1950s and '60s included Simca, firstly making Fiats under licence before producing their conventional Aronde. They

flirted with rear engines during the '60s, before going front-wheel-drive. Panhard made extremely rapid flat twins during the '50s, but this innovative company was swallowed by Citroën and died during the '60s.

Citroën always enjoyed a reputation for being innovative. The brilliant 'garden shed on wheels', the 2CV, had already shown Citroën's capability of thinking outside the square, but the world really wasn't quite ready for the DS19's stunning departure from the norm.

Not only was the styling outrageous, but the car was radical in its construction, as well as using a high-pressure hydraulic system for the suspension, clutch, brakes, steering and gear change. The car was totally original in its conception, and with the possible exception of the Mini four years later, never before or since has a large manufacturer made such a courageous step to put so many advanced ideas into one car.

Andre Citroen formed his company in 1919, and while his early products were relatively orthodox, they paved the way for his first revolutionary car, the Traction Avant, released in 1934. It was the first successful front-wheel-drive car the world had seen; plenty had tried before, such as Cord, Ruxton and Alvis, but not with any measure of success.

### Monocoque, pneumatics ...

It was also novel in that it used a monocoque body and independent front suspension, but financial woes forced the company into bankruptcy, with the result that the Michelin Tyre company control. Citroën himself died in

*The DS19 was characterised by outrageous styling and innovation*



1935, but his creation lasted for 23 years and over 750,000 were produced with only minor changes and improvements.

The Traction's successor took some time to arrive, as the company had also been involved in the development of the 2CV. By 1954, the Traction was treated to a hydropneumatic rear suspension, giving a clue to what was round the corner.

Revealed on October 6th 1955, the Déesse took the world by storm. Giving nothing to marketing, here was an engineer's car which appealed to those technically minded, even if it may have been a bit too advanced for its time. Futuristic in looks with a wheel at each corner, the body was built around a skeleton welded to a pressed-steel hull. The body skin panels were bolted onto this structure which was simple to assemble, rather like the later P6 Rover of the '60s. Plastics were also used for the roof panel, and the bonnet was made of aluminium.

The new suspension was a system of oleopneumatic struts, now at both ends with gas compression replacing metal springs. Controlled by fluid pressure, it was pump-driven from the engine. It was also designed to be self-levelling. The brakes also worked from this system. Gear changing was linked to the hydraulically operated clutch, so there was no need for a clutch pedal.

The brakes (front discs were inboard) were worked by a small button on the floor, rather than a conventional pedal. Even the hydraulic suspension assisted in jacking the car up, as the height of the car could be adjusted. The column gear lever operated the starter.

*Smooth and aerodynamic lines were well ahead of the time*

Inside the car, a surprise was a single curved spoke steering wheel; the spoke was simply an extension of the steering column.

The dashboard itself was almost entirely of plastic, and the styling again was like nothing else. The floors were almost entirely flat, and the big glass area gave the car a decidedly airy feel.

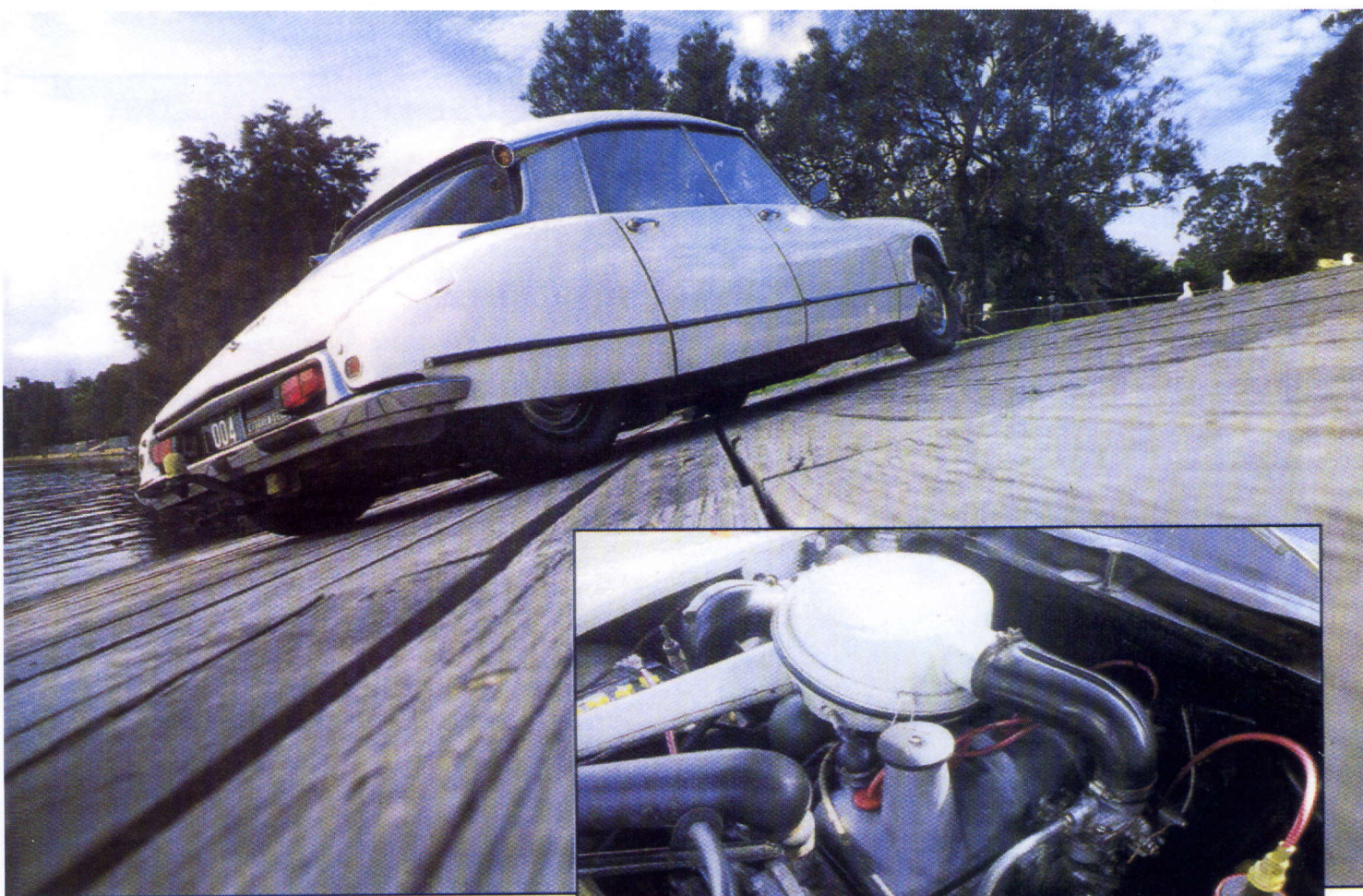
### **Most complicated, most comfortable**

According to contemporary road tests, the car was a revelation. The British *'Motor'*, in its usual understated mode, remarked that it "was perhaps the most interesting design to go into production anywhere in the world", and later, "the most complicated car made anywhere in Europe; the most comfortable car made in the world". Most journals found the car was exceptional for its time in comfort, roadholding and general all-round competence.

The only carry-over from the past was the rather agricultural 1911cc engine. The name 'DS' stems from the type of engine; 'D' being the series and 'S' for the special hemi-designed head. Thus 'De-esse' is a play on the way 'DS' sounds in French, 19 stands for the size of engine. 'Déesse' is also French for Goddess, which is why it was often referred to that both here and in the UK.

All was not happiness and light, however. The car was really too complicated for its own good; there were few people trained sufficiently in its early days to service it, and the car had not been adequately proved before being put into production. However, it was to be some time before the car was built in sufficiently large numbers, taking about six





months for the first 1000 units. The worst of the teething troubles were ironed out within a couple of years. Demand was certainly there – within an hour of the Salon being open, 700 were ordered, and by the end of the first day 12,000 orders were on the books – an astonishing achievement.

For those who were daunted by the DS's complexity, a simpler version, the ID, was announced a year later and although this shared basic principles with the DS, the hydraulics only worked the suspension.

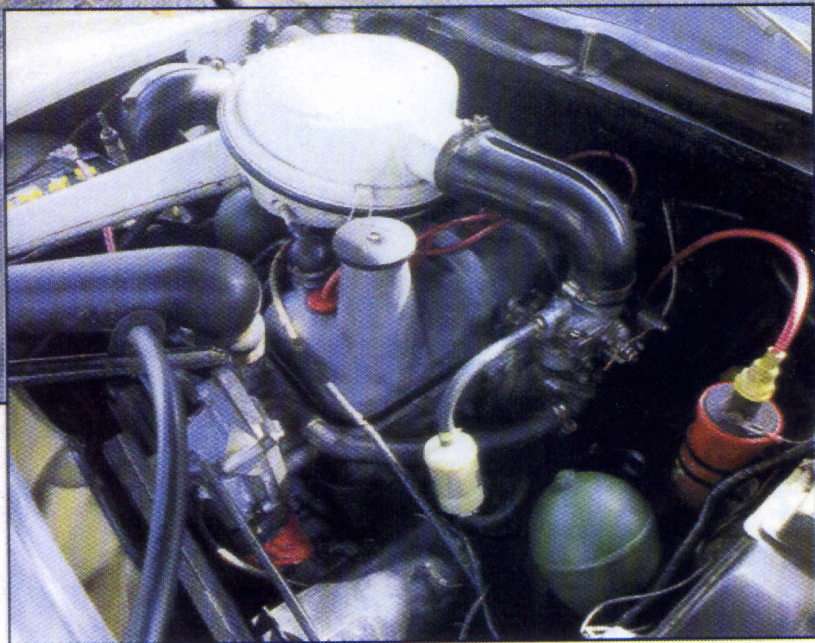
### High sales

Other specifications were not as generous, but the lower price reflected much higher sales. A wagon version, the Safari was added to the range in 1959, and a more luxurious saloon, the Pallas was announced in 1964. Catering to French government ministers, the DS Prestige was the top of the line. A new over-square engine of 1985cc was announced along with a new gearbox in 1965, along with the larger capacity 2175cc DS21.

Throughout the '60s, the car was subtly changed, but the biggest change came in 1967 when the front lights were streamlined into the wings.

Paired lights were mounted behind glass panels, giving a flush appearance. The inner lights were attached to the steering, so the way ahead was lit following the line of the road. Enthusiasts are divided as to which style looks better, but the post '67 cars looked as modern as the already twelve-year-old design was when new in 1955.

Sales of the DS had climbed steadily after the slow start, the million mark was passed in September 1969, and the best year was 1970, when over 103,000 rolled off the line. For the right-hand-drive markets, the car was assembled at Citroën's Slough factory in England. There were subtle differences in anglicised cars, and a total of 8867 DS and IDs



were produced. Australian assembly was also undertaken between 1961 and 1966, and about 1400 came off the West Heidelberg line in Melbourne. All in all, it is thought about 4500 ID and DS models were sold here.

### In competition

The DS and IDs were successful in rallying, perhaps the greatest victory being first in the 1974 World Cup Rally from London to Munich driven by an Australian team. But for an accident at the last stage of the 1968 London-Sydney Marathon, a DS would have taken first line honours here, too.

French coach-building companies were not slow in producing cabriolet versions, the most striking being that of Henri Chapron. Electronic fuel injection was offered as an option for the DS21 from 1969, giving the car a top speed of 117 mph. Towards the end of the car's life, the engine was enlarged to 2347cc, giving us the DS23, which replaced the DS21.

After nearly 20 years, production of the DS came to an end in June 1975 with a total of 1,330,755 made. Its worthy successor, the CX, ran for another 16 years, but it is the DS which was the most outstanding Citroën – and therefore French – car for its time.

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