

Sunbeam Venezia

The handsome Rootes coupé designed in Milan, launched in Venice, and an overpriced failure everywhere else in Europe

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Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the German-born American architect, once said, 'God is in the details.' If true, then the Lord Almighty himself must be everywhere within the Sunbeam Venezia. A beautifully finished, exquisitely detailed car, it looks more like a Sixties Lamborghini or Lancia than a product of the Rootes Group. But there is a good reason for this.

The Venezia may wear the Sunbeam badge, but it was designed and built by Touring of Milan, primarily for the Italian and European markets, making it as British as long lunches and antipasto.

The idea of a handsome coupé that used existing parts was George Carless's, manager of the Rootes Group's Italian subsidiary, while design was handled by Carrozzeria Touring. This Milan-based studio already had links with Rootes after crafting several modifications for the Sunbeam Alpine. The car featured a wraparound screen and long rear wings, making it very similar to some of Touring's other creations, including the Lancia Flaminia.

Like all of the style house's designs (such as the Lamborghini 350GT and the Aston Martin DB4/5/6 family) the Venezia used the Superleggera (or superlight) construction, which means aluminium body panels fitted to a tubular steel frame. It would be based on the Humber Sceptre's chassis and powered by Rootes' 1592cc engine (both sent by the British manufacturer from the West Midlands to Milan), the latter ultimately having a hand in the car's fate.

Because despite a grand launch held at St Peter's Square in Venice on September 12, 1963 (which required a gondola to transport the car along the city's many canals) it soon failed to impress potential buyers. Its £1440 asking price was too expensive for a 1.6-litre when a larger-engined Jaguar or Lancia was the same money. Plus with the development of the Imp in full swing, a low-volume coupé was hardly a priority for Rootes. That meant it wasn't improved over time – there was no mid-life facelift and no power increase in the shape of the 1725cc engine that all Rootes' cars received in mid-1965.

There was talk of fitting a Ford V8 into the Venezia, as it had with the Alpine to turn it into the Tiger, but this came to nothing (although it's rumoured Brian Rootes owned such a car). Overshadowed by newer, faster coupés (such as the Alfa Romeo GTV and Fiat 124 Coupé) the end came

SUNBEAM VENEZIA

- PRODUCED: 1963-1968
- ENGINE: 1592cc/4cyl
- POWER: 88bhp@5800rpm
- TORQUE: 95lb ft@3500rpm
- MAX SPEED: 101mph
- 0-60MPH: 18.4sec
- DIMENSIONS: 14ft 9in (4.48m) x 5ft 1in (1.55m) x 4ft 6in (1.36m)
- WEIGHT: 2480lb (1125kg)



Humber Sceptre Mk I engine and parts.



Superleggera badge – it means 'lightweight'.



in late 1967. Fewer than 200 examples were built. Because of this rarity, the Venezia is now generally forgotten by all but the most ardent of Rootes aficionados, which is a shame because it's a truly handsome car.

Exquisitely proportioned, it's as far away from Rootes' typical design of the time as the Doge's Palace is from being aerodynamic. And there's nothing like Touring's beautiful Superleggera script on the bonnet to give a car an aura of Sixties Italian style.

There is, though, one area where Touring didn't get it right – the nose. The Sunbeam Rapier grille looks completely out of place on the graceful Venezia, the big expanse of chrome giving it an odd, toothy appearance.

Thankfully the interior is what you'd expect from an Italian coupé. The driving position is laid back and comfortable (helped by wide, squishy seats) while the dash consists of a series of classic white-on-black dials, a crackle-finish black dash and a beautiful steering wheel – squint and you could almost be in a Ferrari. Almost, because the fantasy dies as soon as you turn the key. It's not that the Rootes 1.6-litre sounds pathetic – it does have a rough, edgy, growl to it – it's just no V6.

Yet with 88bhp it does pull the little Venezia along eagerly enough, but feeling spirited rather than powerful. Change down a gear and it frees up an avalanche of torque – it seems to go on and on, never ending, never softening,



never weakening. The power is delivered crisply, cleanly and although it doesn't have earth-shattering acceleration (0 to 60mph in 18.4sec) it's enough to keep its sporting-saloon image intact.

This is helped by the excellent four-speed gearbox. Precise thanks to very little travel between each gear, it makes each change short and sharp and it doesn't mind being hurried when driving more briskly. It may be a standard Rootes transmission but it, like all the other standard parts that make up the Venezia, feels different.



It's not fast, but it likes long distances.

'Because of its rarity, the Venezia is now generally forgotten by all but the most ardent Rootes aficionados'

They're slicker, sharper, and more focused than when making up a Minx.

Thanks to its lightweight construction, it's light and lithe to drive and not truck-like as some of its steel-bodied and therefore heavier contemporaries can feel. Body roll is comfortably controlled and although the steering is a little light it's still quick and sharp. Line up the car to gently clip the apex of a corner and it'll hit it every time before the engine's grunt pulls you out cleanly the other side.



Although it offers impressive amounts of grip, understeer is difficult to provoke and the soft suspension doesn't give the impression it's a motor that enjoys being thrown around in proper front-wheel drive style.

Instead, it's more of a gentleman's express. With little road noise (which Touring put down to its method of construction with aluminium over steel) and a genuine ability to cruise for long distances at high speeds, it's a car that could be driven quickly on the autostrada between Rome and Milan with the driver arriving fresh.

So why didn't it work? Put quite simply, because Rootes got its maths wrong. If it had been cheaper, it might have stood a chance – who's going to buy an Anglo-Italian Rapier, no matter how good or pretty it is, when you could have a more powerful Lancia for the same money?

Which leads us to just one conclusion – God may have been in the car's details, but the details were obviously missing from Rootes' original business plan. ■

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