

VIVA LAS VEGA

After achieving brief rock-star status in the late 1950s, Facel Vega cars fell into relative obscurity. Today, however, these extremely rare vehicles have once again become highly sought after...



The understated advertising slogan used to promote the effortlessly elegant cars produced by the now long-defunct French manufacturer Facel will probably resonate with readers of this magazine. “For the few who own the finest,” it proclaimed.

The appealing – and what has now become strangely evocative – name that was chosen by the marque’s creator, the French industrialist Jean Daninos, is actually an acronym that is derived from the clumsier and somewhat long-winded title of the metal stamping company from which it was originally born.

Forges et Ateliers de Construction d’Eure-et-Loir was founded in 1939 and made parts for the aviation industry before Daninos decided to diversify into car production, partly in a patriotic bid to re-ignite his country’s once thriving luxury automobile industry, which had been all but decimated by punitive post-war taxation.

So, in an admirable act of nose thumbing, the wraps were pulled off the Facel Vega FV at the Paris Salon in 1954. Named after the brightest star in the constellation of Lyra, it wowed visitors to the show with its quadruple stacked lamps, swooping coupé

bodywork, and greenhouse-like quantities of glass (a feature that was subsequently accentuated by the signature “wraparound” windscreen introduced with the FVS model of 1956).

And, with a 4.5-liter 180 bhp Chrysler V8 engine that could be mated to the choice of either a push-button automatic gearbox or a more sporting four-speed “stick shift,” the Facel had all of the performance components that were required to match its eye-catching appearance, despite the fact that it was what many would classify as overweight, at almost four thousand pounds.

Hand built in Paris, Facels were hugely expensive and, essentially, bespoke (they were made to order, meaning that customers were able to specify certain features). These facts added to their already exotic appeal and brought them to the attention of those members of the international jet set who were on the lookout for a statement-making automobile that was a little less obvious than the perhaps more pedestrian Ferrari or Maserati.

As a result, everyone from royal car enthusiasts to Hollywood A-listers signed up for Facel ownership, especially when even more

powerful versions were launched in the form of the HK500 of 1958 and the ultimate model, the Facel II of 1962. Fitted first with a 5.9-liter engine, then a continent-devouring 6.3-liter, and, next, the aptly named 6.7-liter “Typhoon” units that pumped out close to four hundred horsepower, the later cars proved to be the most superior drag racers on the street when tested by *Motor* magazine, with the HK500 completing the time-honored quarter-mile dash in 16.3 seconds and topping out at 145 mph.

The legitimate claim to being “the world’s fastest four-seater,” combined with those looks and the important cachet of exclusivity (annual Facel Vega production peaked at 118 cars in 1957) proved as irresistible to the king of Morocco, the shah of Iran, and Saudi Arabia’s Prince Mashoor as it did to Beatle Ringo Starr, Rat Pack singers Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra, and writer Jackie Collins. Facels were also supplied as diplomatic cars to French embassies around the world, and the marque found its fair share of fans among Hollywood’s elite, with actors such as Debbie Reynolds, Ava Gardner, Tony Curtis, and Joan Fontaine all purchasing models from the exclusive range.

But perhaps the marque’s greatest celebrity endorsement came from the British racing car driver Sir Stirling Moss who, at the peak of his career, served as a Facel “ambassador” and chose to travel to the race circuits of Europe behind the wheel of an HK500 rather than by airplane. “It was a lovely car,” he recalls. “A high-speed gentleman’s express – very quiet, very comfortable, very fast... I don’t remember anything bad about it.”

Some less positive PR befell Facel in January 1960, however, when the French Nobel Prize-winning author and philosopher Albert Camus was killed in an HK500 after accepting a lift to Paris from his home in Lourmarin, near Marseille, with his friend Michel Gallimard, the nephew of his publisher Gaston Gallimard.

Camus disliked long car journeys and had already purchased a train ticket, but he nevertheless accepted the offer. The HK500 skidded off a damp road near



Sens and hit two trees, throwing the writer through the rear window to his death and leaving Gallimard with fatal head injuries.

It was in the same year, coincidentally, that Facel’s star began a relatively fast journey of descent, following the decision a year earlier to enter the more mainstream market with a smaller model called the Facellia, which was made available as a cabriolet, coupé, and four-seater. Undeniably appealing with its “baby Vega” looks and sleek, flush-fit door handles, it might have been a success but for the Achilles heel of a hopelessly fragile and unreliable engine.

Indeed, so disastrous was the Facellia’s performance that Daninos was forced to resign in response to the company’s mounting financial problems, and, despite the new boss offering to replace every faulty unit free of charge, the damage was already done. In 1964 the factory ceased car production. For several decades Facels faded into obscurity, and by the early 1990s reasonably well-preserved examples could be bought for as little as US\$16,500.

But the remarkable classic car boom of the past decade or so has seen a renewed appreciation build for the still exotic-looking Facel. Restored Facel IIs and HK500s now routinely sell for up to US\$200,000, and the most paid for one to date is a record-setting £337,500 (US\$529,000), which is what the aforementioned Ringo Starr car sold for at a Bonhams auction in London in December 2013.

In typical rock-star style, the Beatles drummer bought his Facel II off the stand at the 1964 Earl’s Court motor show in London for £5,570 (US\$15,500) – double the price of the contemporary Jaguar E-Type and about the same as a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud. It was the last of just 26 right-hand-drive models produced and the only one of five examples fitted with the 6.7-liter “Typhoon” engine that had a manual gearbox.

Can it be pure coincidence that the band released *Drive My Car* a year later? Facel fans would probably like to think otherwise. ♦

For more on this subject see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at patek.com/owners



The HK500, left, introduced in 1958, was a more powerful version of earlier Facels and attracted many famous owners. Ava Gardner, pictured above, was a fan of the marque and owned several models. The Facel II coupé (pages 68, 69 and 71) was a luxury GT advertised as “the fastest four-seater in the world,” with its 6.7-liter engine. The high-quality leather interior and wood-grained dashboard added to the car’s appeal

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