

The BMW Isetta

Strange little Bubble Cars take to the streets

By BILL VANCE

Strange little vehicles that became known as Bubble Cars came onto the European auto scene in the 1950s. They were created in response to high gasoline prices, and the need for low cost weather-proof, personal transportation. They would bear names like Messerschmitt, Heinkel and Isetta, and these tiny, usually three wheeled cars were powered by air cooled engines. They were small and basic, but at least were a step up from a motorcycle and sidecar, which was all that many people could afford for family transportation.

They owed their start to a refrigerator manufacturer named Renzo Rivolta, of Milan, Italy, who decided in 1952 to branch out into the car business making tiny, basic cars. Since his fridges carried the Iso brand name, he called his little vehicle the Isetta, literally "small Iso."

The Isetta, introduced in 1953, set the whole Bubble Car trend in motion. The most striking feature

of this egg-shaped, two passenger vehicle was the method of entry and exit. Perhaps Rivolta was influenced by his refrigerators when he designed it because the entire front of the car, including the windshield, was a side-hinged door that swung out, bringing the universal-jointed steering column with it.

Occupants stepped aboard, turned around and sat down, and the driver pulled the steering wheel back to close the door. In the event of a frontal crash, passengers escaped through the sunroof.

The 1,194 mm (47 in.) front track was about normal for a small car of that era, but the mere 508 mm (20 in.) between the rear wheels was decidedly unusual. It did, however, eliminate the need for a differential; a chain transmitted the power from the engine to a large sprocket attached to the drive axle in the rear housing.

The Isetta was powered by a 236 cc two-stroke, two-cylinder, air-cooled engine mounted just ahead of the right rear wheel, the location chosen to counterbalance the driver's weight. The four-speed transmission was shifted by a lever with an "upside-down H" pattern, located to the left of the driver.

Rivolta built the Isetta until 1955, when he decided to stop. He would return to car building in 1962 with vehicles at the other end of the spectrum: high powered sports cars called Iso Rivoltas.

As Rivolta was abandoning car building, the German auto and motorcycle manufacturer, BMW, was undergoing financial difficulties. Its luxurious, expensive six- and eight-cylinder cars were beautiful machines, but they were expensive, and weren't selling well. Motorcycle sales were also soft. Faced with possible bankruptcy BMW had to do something, so to get into the affordable bottom end of the car market it bought the rights to Renzo Rivolta's Isetta.

BMW replaced the Isetta's two-stroke engine with a modified version out of one of its motorcycles. It was an air cooled 247 cc, 12 horsepower single-cylinder, four-stroke. A 295 cc 13 horsepower engine would be added in 1956 for the export models, named the Isetta 300. BMW also fitted a more conven-

drive

CLASSIC AN



The 1957 BMW Isetta 300

tional trailing arm and coil spring front suspension in place of the horizontal coils used by Rivolta.

The Isetta sold well enough that BMW could afford to expand the line with a four passenger version in 1957. Called the 600, it had a flat, 585 cc, 19.5 horsepower two cylinder motorcycle engine.

The 600 retained the front opening door, and added a right rear side door for access to the surprisingly roomy back seat. Transmission shifting was through a conventional four-on-the-floor lever.

Isettas were also built under licence in France, Brazil and England. Total production between 1955 and 1962 was almost 162,000 in four versions: bubble window, sliding window, and convertible, plus a rare pickup truck.

The performance of the Isetta was definitely not freeway friendly. When Road & Track magazine (2/58) tested a 300 they recorded a top speed of approximately 50 mph (80 km/h) and a zero to 40 mph (64 km/h) acceleration time of 20 seconds. Fuel economy was tremendous, however, being in the 60 to 75 mpg range.

The Isetta engine was started by a combination generator-starter unit called a "Dynastart." Visibility was excellent, akin to a fishbowl, and this turned out to be an important feature. Large potholes would easily swallow the Isetta's tiny 10-inch wheels. Parking, of course, was a breeze; simply nose into the curb and step out onto the sidewalk.

Isetta drivers could not be shy or retiring because the car attracted attention everywhere it went. The most often heard enquiry was: Is this really a BMW? Many people apparently missed this short chapter in BMW history.

The two passenger Isetta and the 600 helped BMW pull back from the brink of bankruptcy. It introduced a 700 model in 1960, a more conventional appearing car, although still powered by a rear-mounted air-cooled twin. The big break for BMW came in 1962 with the launching of the conventional 1500 sedan, forerunner of the very successful 2002 model.

SEE AND BE SEEN



are Proud Sponsors of ...

NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY WEEK OCT 17-23

FREE Arm Bands & Colouring Booklets Available at J&D Tire

Milton's Favourite Tire Store 2004

STOP in for FREE
Front End & Brake Inspection
No Charge Tire Rotation



MICHELIN

Because so much is riding on your tires.



Michelin
Latitude
X-ICE®

Tire Sales
& Auto Service

555 Main St. E., Milton
 Mon-Fri 8-6 Sat 8-3

905-876-4788

Open Sundays 10am - 3pm Nov. & Dec.

