

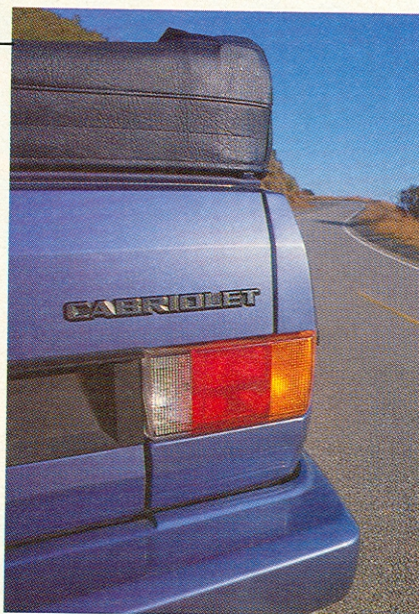


The Volkswagen Convertible

By David M. MacFarlane

The irony of the Volkswagen Convertible is almost too delicious to be true. That this car, more famous than any other for its frivolous fun and nonconformist's nature, could have gelled in the moth-eaten brain of history's most notorious house painter, has to be the single most improbable turn of events in automotive history. Top five at the outside.

But let's not give Hitler more credit than he deserves; after all, talk about a public relations nightmare! It was the estimable Ferdinand Porsche, as any student of Volkswagen history can tell you, who deserves the big-dog's share of the credit, he having contemplated the idea of a "people's car" long before the Fuhrer started barking for one. There were others, even prior to Porsche, who dreamed of a chariot for



PHOTOS BY LES BIDRAWN AND VW OF AMERICA

the masses, and the tear-drop shaped car. Hans Ledwinka, Edmund Rumpler and Josef Ganz among them—far-seeing, practical men whom History reduces to the status of "idea men," prior influences, asterisks. Anyway, sneers History, the Fuhrer named Porsche *Reichskonstrukteur* and not them, so there.

Consistent with every other aspect of his life, Hitler was car-crazy. He never drove, but he measured a country's greatness by, among other things, the number of freeways that crisscrossed it. While cooling his heels in Landsberg prison in 1923, he spent much of his time studying a biography of Henry Ford (no slouch of an anti-Semite himself), and thinking about ways to bring Ford's revolutionary mass-production style to the *Vaterland*. In Dr.

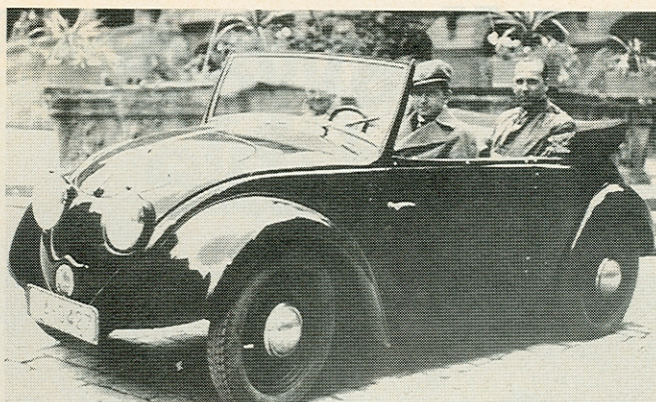
40 Years of Fun. Well . . . almost.

Porsche, Hitler found a fellow admirer of Ford's and the perfect designer-manager to propel Germany to numero uno in the worldwide automobile sweepstakes.

Producing that first convertible in economy-ravaged, post-WWI Germany was no mean feat; however, by 1938 Dr. Porsche had done it. Naturally, the Fuhrer got first dibs on it when it came out. We've all seen the pictures of a beaming Hitler waving from the back seat on its maiden appearance. It was called the Kdf-Wagen (Kdf short for *Kraft durch Freude*, or Strength through Joy—more irony), and it boasted a four-cylinder engine with a displacement of 985cc, a whopping 23.5 hp and top speed of 65 mph. It was nearly identical to the Volkswagen Beetle Convertible you see on the streets today.

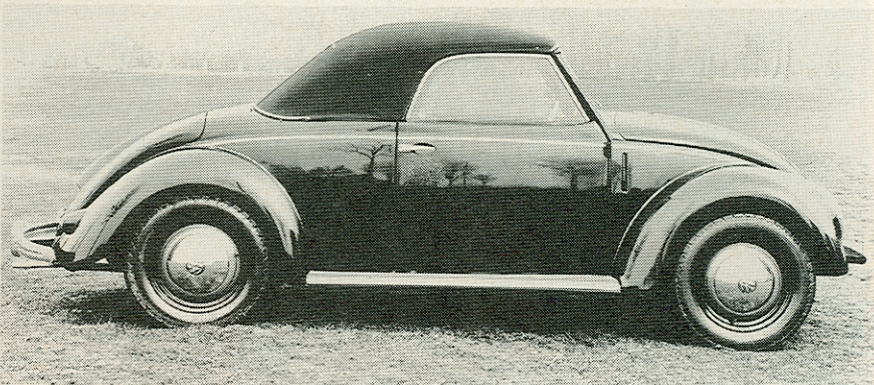
A neat idea notwithstanding, Germany had bigger things on its mind than Strength through Joy-riding, and after only 90 Cabrios were built the Kdf factory was converted into a military line producing *Kubelwagens* ("bucket wagons") for Rommel's Afrika Corps. Today, we know the *Kubelwagen* better as—that's right—The Thing. Will the irony ever stop?

Beneath the rubble that was once the Kdf plant, the British Army made a prophetic discovery: A Volkswagen convertible, identical to the one Hitler had ridden in, had survived the bombing. Keen to a fault, the British knew a good thing when they saw it—and weren't about to let it go unexploited. Two interesting one-offs were produced, one in particular for the military governor of the district, Major Ivan Radcliffe, who, in 1948, would hire



Can you identify this 1935 prototype? Hint: it went on to become a fairly respectable seller for VW.

Hebmuller's bitter-sweet two-seater. Its future perished in a fire that consumed Hebmuller's factory in 1949.



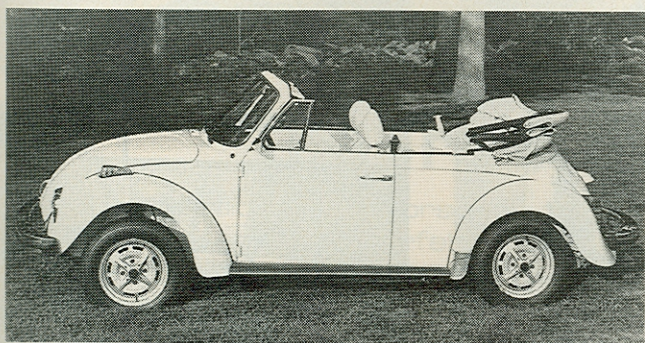
Heinz Nordhoff as Volkswagen's first chief executive and secure VW's place in the automotive hierarchy.

The paint had barely dried on the walls of Nordhoff's new Wolfsburg office when he commissioned two coachbuilders, Josef Hebmuller of Wulfrath and Wilhelm Karmann of Osnabruck, to design a convertible. Hebmuller would be in charge of the two-seater, Karmann the four-seater.

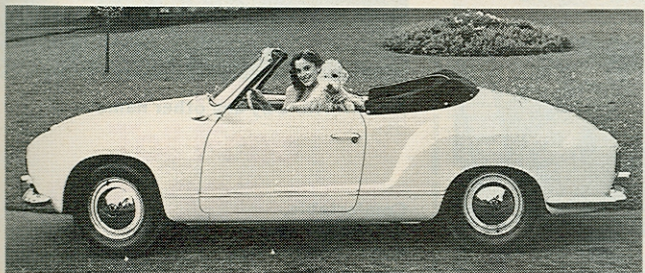
Posing the greatest concern to the

two coachbuilders was the loss of structural rigidity once the top had been sheared off. This was solved by adding reinforced sections longitudinally along each side of the floorpan and reinforcing the door sills. Another, smaller problem, was deriving a good seal along the top of the arched front windshield. The no-nonsense solution was to make the oval windshield flat along the top. In July 1949, the Karmann Kabriolett went on sale. It was the Volkswagen Convertible's first great moment.

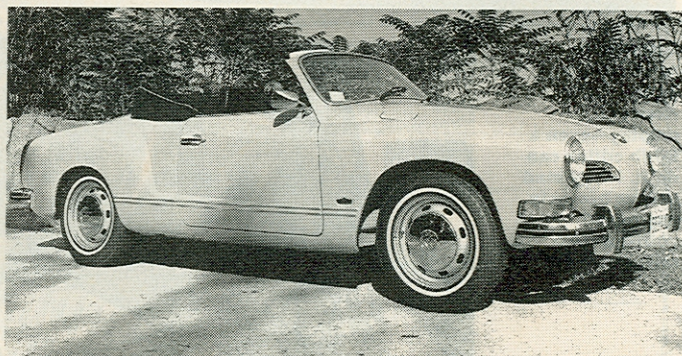
Boasting a drag coefficient of 0.49 (top up) and 0.60 (top and windows down), the convertible was a streamlined marvel (for its time). The engine displacement was a lean, mean 1131cc, eeking out 25 hp. The transmission was a 4-speed manual gearbox, helical gears on third and fourth, and no synchromesh. For a front suspension, the convertible used dual trailing links per wheel (upper and lower), with transverse laminated torsion bars and



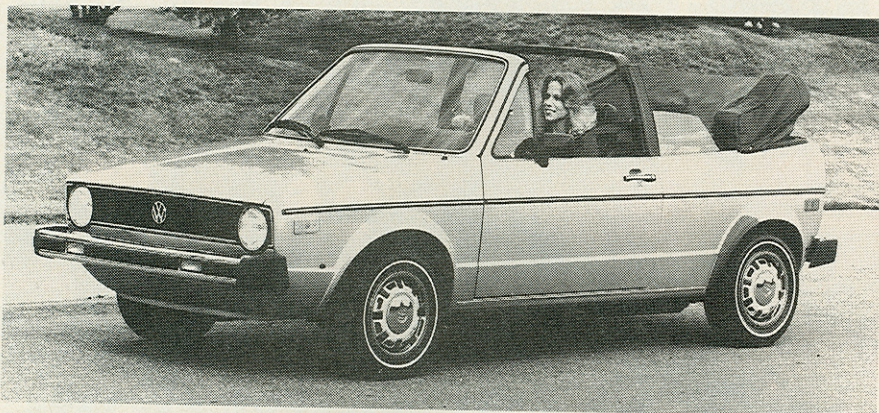
The style remains the same. Unfortunately, so did the essential performance characteristics. Like those before it, the 1976 Beetle wallowed in turns, labored in the slow lane, but revelled in its uncompromising, light-spirited attitude.



From 1957 to 1974, the Karmann Ghia was a styling benchmark for VW. It was Volkswagen's pampered princess—the two-seater they had always hoped for. It was chic and fun, but performance could only be described as Beetlesque.



The Volkswagen Convertible

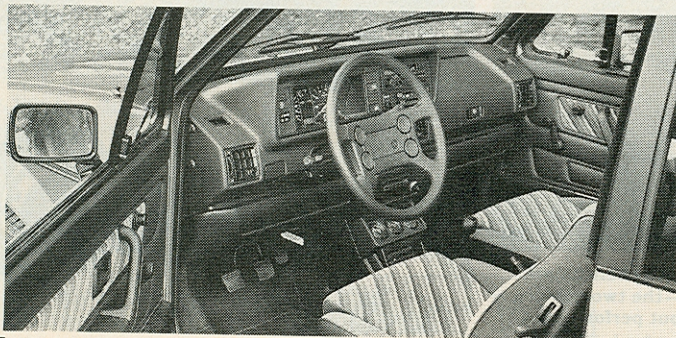


The 1981 Rabbit Convertible sported numerous important upgrades from the previous year's debut model: an increased 1.7-liter, fuel-injected engine and a revised 5-speed transmission promised ever more fun in the sun.

Ain't we got fun. Cabriolet suspension and 185x60HR tires provide sporty response.



Buffy quits aerobics. Top couldn't be easier to employ—even a 90-lb editor can do it. Integrated rollbar protects expensive coiffures in a rollover.



double-acting telescopic shock absorbers. Suspending the rear were pendulum-type swing axles with trailing arms, transverse circular-section torsion bars and double-acting telescopic shocks. It was a set-up that would see the Beetle through the next 30 years virtually unchanged.

It sold for DM7500, half again what buyers were paying for the standard split-window Beetle. Sales were encouraging. Karmann's four-seat version had been launched and people were cheering. Karmann and Nordhoff had produced what would be the most successful convertible of all-time.

At Hebmüller's plant in Wulfrath, the only thing that would be produced was heartbreak. Given the working parameters of a Beetle convertible, Hebmüller's two-seater was, by all accounts, exquisite. In his book, *Classic Volkswagens*, Colin Burnham describes it thusly: "... a truly classy-looking two-plus-two roadster. This car (Type 14A) was basically a late-1940s Beetle, but with a bonnet-like deck lid that gave it a beautifully balanced look."

Production of the car began in June 1949. Four weeks later, the factory had burned to the ground. The company would never recover. Only 696 of Hebmüller's convertibles were delivered (of them, only 90 are reputed to still exist).

Dr. Nordhoff's dream of a two-seat convertible would have to wait.

By 1955 there were one million Beetles on the road. VW had filled the

Continued on page 120



A convertible by any other name . . .

Comfortable, supportive seats and beefy wheel lend sportive air. Gauges haven't changed in years, looking a little tired.

THE VW CONVERTIBLE

low end of the market like a symphony of double basses. It was time to ascend the scale, attempt a little virtuosity. Dr. Nordhoff spied a niche between the Beetle and the Porsche 356, and once again commissioned the House of Karmann—and this time, the House of Ghia, in Turin—to fill it.

The handbuilt Karmann-Ghia Cabriolet, like the coupe, was an immediate world-wide success. It was a cheap, stylish two-seater built on the same pokey platform as the Beetle, and in no time all sorts of rich, stylish people were seen driving them. Brigitte Bardot owned one. As did Pierre Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent. In America, there was a two- to three-year waiting list. VW of America marketed the car with the slogan, "For people who can't stand the sight of a Volkswagen!" It struck a chord; fortunately for Volkswagen, a lot of Americans hated their car.

Enthusiasts were not won over, however. The motoring press met the arrival of the Ghia convertible with a resounding "Huh?" Why on earth would anyone put so sexy a body on such a slug of a chassis, they whined? Jan P. Norbye answers that question in his book, *VW Treasures By Karmann*, the following way: "It was quite deliberate on Volkswagen's part that the Karmann-Ghia did not possess more power and performance. Neither Nordhoff nor Feuereisen (V.P. of Volkswagen) wanted to risk seeing their pretty doll made to look ridiculous on the racetrack." The consensus of opinion among journalists was that it drove like a Beetle. VW, it seemed, was still a long way from producing a convertible with as much stomach as style.

While begrudgingly adding taken-for-granted items like a fuel gauge or a synchromesh transmission over the years, Dr. Nordhoff and Volkswagen did steadily increase the output of its air-cooled engines. In 1966, displacement was increased to 1300cc, in '67, 1500cc and in 1970, 1600cc. Suspension improvements were made. Brakes beefed up. Luxury items like gauges were installed. Here a fudge, there a fudge, everywhere a fudge-fudge. Still, the ugly truth could not be ignored: The air-cooled VWs were an anachronism. A clean break from the past was needed. The next generation convertible demanded modernity and, above all else, *power*.

In the mid-seventies, frugal, prototypical-minded VW was at work building a convertible capable of sharing many of the Scirocco's parts. It was called the Golf (Type 17), and like the Scirocco, was shaped by Itai Design and the noted Giorgetto Giugiaro. Giugiaro's

first submission was a stylish, angular two-seater called the Cheetah, a car Volkswagen promptly rejected and one we now know—with slight changes—as the Bertone-styled Fiat X1/9.

The body style VW accepted was a boxy, front-engine, front-wheel-drive sedan. Smart-looking or just Thing-looking (opinions varied widely), the convertible was so often referred to as the "long-awaited" VW that it could have been part of its name. It was four years following the Golf sedan, but that's a fact easily dismissed by anyone who's not a shareholder. As for new owners of the Golf Cabriolet (in America, the Rabbit), yesterday's delays were yesterday's news—Volkswagen had scored in overtime. It was time to drive.

Here in the U.S., the first Rabbit Convertible was equipped with a 1588cc engine, a four-speed manual gearbox, front disc brakes, MacPherson front suspension, a pressed-steel axle beam rear suspension, with an integral stabilizer bar mounted on the trailing arms, and 5x13-in. wheels with 175/70-SR13 tires.

The four-cylinder, transverse-mounted engine claimed 76 hp and 83 lb-ft of torque. It pulled from 0-60 in 10.8 sec, and topped out at 93 mph, performance that might not have set the highway on fire but could singe the ancestral air-suckers, just the same. Quantum leaps had been made in the character of Volkswagen handling. Hard—even moderate—cornering in the under-steering Beetle and Karmann Ghia was a dicey adventure. Owners of Type 17s were ecstatic to discover that *they* were in command of the road and not the other way around.

In 1983, the Wolfsburg Edition Rabbit Convertible arrived and brought with it increased engine power in the form of a 1.7-liter engine. It also sounded the Rabbit's swan song. Cabriolet would now be the word pursued on the lips of Americans looking for convertible fun. The renamed Rabbit would not possess the Golf's new 97.3-in.-wheelbase chassis, however. It would remain stapled to the A1's 94.5-in. platform. On the positive side, however, it was heavier, more stout in appearance, and—heh, heh—more powerful, still.

As for interior styling in these new

Volkswagens, it was not just shockingly modern, it was downright cutting edge! Not only were we talking comfortable, sporty seats, excellent ergonomics and room for four and a half, we had gauges! And not just your average gauges, either; in addition to tach, speedometer and fuel, there was an oil pressure gauge, a voltage gauge, and even a temperature gauge in ultra-modern Celsius. Enthusiasts were in heaven.

But more often than not, it wasn't young Mario at the wheel of that passing Cabriolet, but young Buffy. The Rabbit Convertible/Cabriolet had become. . . the "bunny-mobile." Somehow, I don't think the salesman used that Celsius temperature gauge as the closer for his sale; yet, I couldn't help imagining this conversation between young Buffy and a friend. "Like omigod, Buf, better like keep an eye on your Celsius temperature gauge; you're getting a little hot—don't want to overheat and damage a hose or your radiator core. That could lead to future internal engine damage." "Really, Dee Dee, I'm so sure! Like I don't know that 110 degrees Celsius converts to exactly 230 degrees Fahrenheit, 383 degrees Kelvin? Maybe you've like forgotten that I'm running Synthoil?"

Probably more like this, though: "Dee Dee, you're like totally dripping Brie all over my little clock thing!" "Buffy, you are such an incredible air head; that's not a clock thing, that's an odometer!" (*This has been a gross characterization of female drivers, and is in no way representative of the views of VW & Porsche toward women or women drivers.*)

Since 1984, the changing of its name to Cabriolet has been the most significant alteration the car has undertaken. Recently, a handsome new all-around spoiler system was added; the front bumper was integrated into the front spoiler, and an extra pair of lights was added to the front grill. Tires were increased to 185/60HR14. Sporty 6x14-in. alloy wheels were offered. By providing darker color schemes and an alternative to the white softtop, VW has also succeeded in de-feminizing the car to a great extent. To any man who persists in believing that it is still unmanly to drive a Cabriolet, *Interview* magazine informs us that Baryshnikov drives one. That's right, Baryshnikov. And it's black.

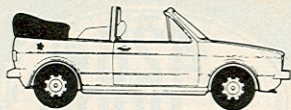
The 1989½ Wolfsburg-Edition Cabriolet returns to us like much-welcome spring: not greatly changed, but always bringing with it a few refreshing variations. It remains a steady, spirited performer that doesn't know its own limi-

Golf Card

For those of you keeping score at home, that was. . .

Name	Place	Date
Golf Cabriolet	Europe	1978
Rabbit Conv.	U.S.	1980
Cabriolet	U.S./Europe	1984

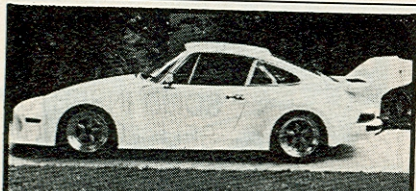
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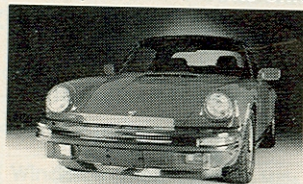
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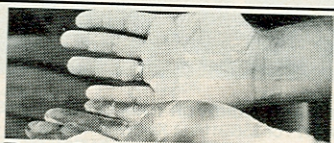
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THE VW CONVERTIBLE

tations. It's a kick boxer dressed in a monk's robe, a straight-A student, a cool breeze.

Driving with the top down, at high speeds (60 mph-plus), the front and rear-seat passengers will, however, have two decidedly different experiences. Front-seat passengers will, by and large, be comfortably craddled away from sound and fury. Passengers riding behind the roll bar will literally have their breath stolen from their lips. Best to ride in the front.

With the top up, one forgets the car is a convertible at all. Visibility is outstanding. The seal is tight, and without a hint of whistle or rattle. Speaking of the top, it is profoundly simple to operate, and can be installed before the second drop of rain strikes the car. A boot secures the folded roof nicely.

For some, the Cabriolet is not wrapped tightly enough. Wallows some in a hard turn. Doesn't have enough rubber on the road. That, I would respond, is what the GTI is for. As for engine power, its status-quo 90 hp at 5500 rpm and 100 lb-ft of torque feel lively and well balanced for its suspension. The air conditioning does exact a toll, however—why not just keep the top down? There was one moment in my travels, a high-speed pass, air conditioning blasting, when I stepped on it... nothing there. Clicked the a/c off. Down-shifted into fourth, tried it again. Car took off like Ben Johnson after a visit to the pharmacist.

Looking beyond its over-achieving attitude, this convertible also provides ample storage capacity. Six and a half cubic feet of trunk space might seem sparse, but it's a perfect rectangle, every inch useable. If you do spill over, there's 34.8 cu. ft. worth of back seat that folds down to sponge up the excess. Plenty of space for an extended trip. Try that in a Miata.

It's not easy to describe the experience of driving a convertible. One could use all sorts of Whitmanesque phrases, swing wildly and pretentiously at the feeling of oneness between man, convertible and Nature. But in the end the essence of its convertible-ness would remain aloof. It is, quite simply, a driving experience; and judging by the timeless popularity of it, one that never diminishes.

Volkswagen Convertible history reflects the history of the convertible at large. Quirky, prestigious, long, and essentially unchanging. But, there aren't many car stories that encompass so many different elements of the human drama. It is a car for the common man with anything but a commonplace history.

