



Chatter ball

If you spent your working life stuck on an oil rig, you'd want a toy to have fun with when you came home. And they don't come much more fun than this!

Words: Mike Pye
Photos: Matt Richardson

People are generally into motorbikes or they're not – and by into them, I mean actually own and ride them. In my experience, in the VW scene at least, it's pretty rare to find people who are into both cars and bikes, particularly if their motorcycle interest stretches to superbikes. You see, there's nothing on earth like riding a superbike – no adrenaline rush, no sense of control and danger that even comes close to the feeling of acceleration this offers, or of being open to the elements at the same time. Sure, you can throw yourself out of a plane or down a mountain wrapped in an inflatable ball, but until you reach the bottom, you're pretty much out of control, which is an entirely different kind of excitement altogether.

Ian Channell, the owner of this magnificent Buggy, got into sports bikes at the age of 18 and has ridden a wide variety of rapid two-wheelers ever since, from Honda Fireblades to Aprilia Millie Rs and lairy Supermotos. "I liked bikes before cars," he explains, "especially fast bikes. But as you get older, you get a little slower and, after having a couple of near misses with cars pulling out on me, I decided I had to stop, had to sell my bike." And at 45, with his girlfriend Michelle and two step children, Amy and Annalee,

to think of, this probably wasn't a bad idea. Trouble was, he then had a wad of cash burning a hole in his pocket and nothing on which to go out and have fun.

On the prowl

"I have always fancied an old skool Buggy," he informs us, "so I was surfing the net looking for information and pictures of them and came across the Southern Dune Buggy Club Picnic (see www.sdbc.co.uk). I asked the missus if she fancied going down to have a look. She said no first of all, then maybe, and eventually yes, so we went. There were over 50 Buggies there, but the one that really caught my eye was a lime green Prowler which Mark [Dryden] at Flatlands Engineering had on display. I fell in love with that model, so had a chat with him and the next week went down to see him at his workshop in Tilney All Saints [near King's Lynn]."

For those who don't know, the Prowler Buggy is very similar in style to the ever-popular US-built Meyers Manx, but with a wheelbase the same as that of the British Mk1 GP (ie, one inch shorter than a Manx) and wider and more rounded front and rear arches to better accommodate big wheels and tyres. With a more open engine area, this could in some ways be seen as a modern development of the original Manx

“A modern development of the original Manx”

► Ian spends half his time in the Middle East working as an offshore oil rig engineer so is used to the sun and the sand. You don't get pretty beach huts in Qatar, though

▼ Wheels are polished four-stud Center Line Auto Drags with Cooper Cobra tyres all round: 195/60/15s and 275/60/15s. Prowler body sits on a '68 Beetle 'pan, shortened 15.5 inches to fit



▲ Current engine is a dyno-proven 100bhp 1776, but Ian already has plans to up this to a 2110, as he misses the kick in his pants of his old superbikes. Serpentine pulley system is a popular choice



▲ The Grant deep-dish steering wheel is a Buggy favourite – here a 10-inch to make getting in and out easier. VDO gauges have been used throughout, including that small, neat under-dash rev counter



▼ Because Ian wanted to use his Buggy on the beach, he's gone with no carpets and just a simple heel mat to stop his foot from slipping. Now he simply tips it upside down and shakes the sand out, just like you used to do with your old Matchbox Buggy!



▼ Cobra buckets and matching harnesses may not have been used 'back in the day' but do provide superior comfort and safety and mean that Ian can safely take his wife out with him without risking tipping her over the side when he gets the back end out!



package, especially when fitted with the more modern-looking curved windscreen that is an option with the kit. But where many Buggy variants lost the pretty looks of the original Manx in their desire to be different, the Prowler uses all the correct styling cues and is just a great-looking Buggy. It can also be ordered with either a specific Prowler or a Manx-style bonnet, the latter of which, in our opinion at least, certainly helps its visual appeal (see www.eastcoastbuggies.co.uk for more information on this body style).

Once Ian had decided upon Metalflake as the colour, the next step was for him to order a body and place a deposit with Mark at Flatlands Engineering (see www.flatlandsengineering.co.uk) for the build. Although some may scoff at paying to have a car built in this way, Ian had two reasons for entrusting the entire build to Mark. First, Ian is an offshore oil rig engineer and spends much of his time in the crucifigingly hot climate of Qatar in the Middle East, so has very little time back here in the UK to get out in the garage. Second, he knew the quality of work he'd

“I've had it up to 90mph and there's still more to go...”

get from Mark: “I would say he's the best [Buggy] builder out there. I have seen a lot of his work and I can't fault it.” And let's face it, if you're going to entrust the complete build of a car in which you're going to be taking your family out to someone else, you want to be sure the job is being done right. It's as simple as that.

But before he picked up a finished car, there were a few elements he was adamant had to be incorporated into the car: items such as colour-coded sidepods, the Grant 10-inch deep-dish steering wheel and the Flatlands rollbar and front nudge bar. In other areas, he left Mark free to use what he knows fits and works properly: parts like the Hella modular rear light units and 5.75-inch halogen headlights, the VDO gauges, push-button starter and Gaz front shock absorbers.

“I wanted Center Line wheels on the Buggy, as I think they look the dog's and,

after speaking to a lot of people with Buggies, I decided I wanted a 1776cc engine, too,” Ian recalls. “Almost everyone I spoke to told me to have it built by Dan Simpson, and that he is very good. So I did. But I also added some parts myself, like the BAS exhaust.” And here's where Ian's love of superbikes came in useful. “I didn't like the long cans the BAS exhaust came with, so as I knew the bike race cans would fit, and I knew they'd sound nice too, that's what the Buggy got.”

Right little flier

Combined with a rebuilt and strengthened Rancho Performance gearbox, obtained through VW Speedshop in Manchester, the Buggy is a right little flier. “The gear



ratios are just right for the engine and tyres," Ian explains. "I use second and third around town and then fourth for the motorway. It'll go all day at 85mph at just over 3,000rpm, though I've had it up to 90mph and there's still more to go..."

As the Buggy was destined to spend a lot of time in the garage when Ian is out of the country for work, the ignition was upgraded with a Pertronix billet distributor with Ignitor 2 ignition module and high-output Flamethrower coil and leads. He reports that this combination works a treat, the Buggy firing up first time, every time, even after several weeks sitting idle. But when he is back in the country, it gets used as much as possible and, given where he lives, a lot of the time it's off-road. "I use it as a daily driver when I'm back here and I go to the beach in it as much as possible. After all, it's a Beach Buggy – it's made to go on the beach!"

And that's precisely why we chose a beach location for this photoshoot – to show that although this Buggy is more than capable of holding its own on a show field alongside any other Buggy in the UK (and has the Best Baja/Buggy trophy from the VW Whitenoise event to prove it), it's also used, and used hard. "I was over the moon with the trophy," Ian tells us, "but I'm not a show queen. I do use it, as you can see from when we did these photos. The sun was out and there was no one on the beach, so I was doing doughnuts and racing up the beach with Matt [the

"It's a Beach Buggy – it's made to go on the beach!"

▼ It may be a show winner, but Ian's not afraid to use his Buggy for the purpose for which it was built: blatting about the beaches of Norfolk pretending to be Steve McQueen!

photographer] hanging off the back. I had to buy the teas, though, as he was still shaking at the end of it all! That was a good day," he laughs.

Get a Whiff of this!

With that in mind, the other thing Ian has added since the car was built is the soft-top hood because, unlike where he works in the Middle East, there's always the possibility of getting caught out in the rain here in the UK. And although the car has no carpets and just a shiny black floorpan under foot, it does have a pair of Cobra bucket seats and one of Mark's own rear seats, trimmed to match in black.

It's not just to ward off rain, though: having a roof on a Buggy also affords some protection from the sun and the wind when you're out on the road – something every Buggy owner will tell you is a definite bonus if you drive long distances in one. "I decided to go with a hood from Whiff's Trimming, as he has made a good few of them now and I liked the look of them," Ian explains. The 180-mile drive across country to Surrey was the perfect opportunity to give his freshly built Buggy a good blast. He then left it with Graham Smith to make the hood while he flew back out to Doha for work. "He made a top job of it, I'm over the moon with it," Ian reports.

And that phrase just about sums up his experience with both

the people involved in creating his dream Buggy and the fun he's had in it since it was completed. Perhaps you'd prefer the idea of building a Buggy like this yourself, and there's no doubt there's a great deal of satisfaction to be gained from doing just that, but if your work keeps you away from home and your family as Ian's does, then we reckon he made the right decision to do it his own way. The only problem is that he spends more than half the year either in the middle of the Persian Gulf or in temperatures of over 40°C surrounded by vast sand dunes, yet his Buggy is over 3,000 miles away. Oh well, guess you can't have everything you want in life, eh?

Thanks: "Mark at Flatlands Engineering (01553 828868/07775 903535) for the build, Dan Simpson (01304 812741) for the engine, to you boys at *VolksWorld* for the weekend at *The VolksWorld Show* when my Buggy was on display, and most of all to my girlfriend Michelle, who puts up with a lot from me, as I do spend a lot of time cleaning and polishing my baby – the Buggy, that is!" **VW**



▲ High-quality BAS exhaust has been modified with dual superbike cans. Note the discreet reflectors to keep things legal



▲ Flush-mounted aero-style filler cap goes well with the Center Line wheels. With more Sixties wheels, you'd want a flip-top cap



▲ Basic hood from Whiff's Trimming won't afford a lot of protection in a flash flood but keeps the sun off and makes the Buggy more suitable for long journeys