

Smart – a History

by Ian Lynas

smart was the brainchild of Nicolas Hayek, the CEO of SMH, the company behind Swatch fashion watches.

He believed the low-cost style and personalisation ideas he had brought to the wrist-watch market could equally be applied to the world of urban cars.

Drawing from his vast experience as founder of Hayek Engineering, he began developing the car, initially dubbed ‘Swatchmobile’.

But rather than go it alone and incur substantial development costs, he sought a partner, and in 1994 found one in Daimler.

smart became a wholly owned division of Daimler in 1998, a year after the opening of the assembly plant at Hambach, France.



In October 1998 the smart city-coupé (forerunner of the smart fortwo) went on sale in nine European countries.

The original model, built as today around a robust tridion safety cell, offered a choice of rear-mounted, rear-drive 45 bhp and 54 bhp 0.6-litre three-cylinder turbocharged petrol engines and a 40 hp 0.8-litre common-rail turbo diesel, all featuring a six-speed robotised manual gearbox.

They were joined by the smart city-cabrio with a removable roof in 2000, the year that smart entered the UK. In 2002 smart added the Crossblade, a

fully-open model aimed at the beach set. The same year smart revealed the roadster and roadster-coupé, aiming to recapture the spirit and excitement of classic low-cost British sports cars of the 1950s and 1960s.

Based around the same layout and safety package as the city-coupé and city-cabrio, they were powered by a 0.7-litre turbo engine delivering 61 or 82 bhp. In 2003 the first smart BRABUS appeared, powered by a 75 bhp version of the 0.7-litre engine and featuring revised suspension and bodywork.

smart also ventured into four-seaters in 2004 with the launch of the forfour, the result of a collaboration agreement with Mitsubishi’s NedCar operation in Holland. Once again the car was built around the tridion safety cell, but with a conventional front-engined, front-drive layout.

It offered three petrol engines, a 1.1 delivering 75 bhp, a 1.3 with 95 bhp and a 1.5 with an output of 109 bhp, plus a 1.5-litre turbo diesel tuned to deliver either 68 or 95 bhp. The forfour was discontinued in 2006 when Daimler decided not to buy a share in the NedCar plant.

The second-generation smart fortwo coupé and cabrio, now appearing in substantially revised form, were launched in 2007. Power comes from a 1.0-litre three-cylinder petrol engine delivering 71 hp in normally aspirated form or 84 bhp with a

turbocharger. The turbo engine has been updated to 102 hp in the smart BRABUS. All have a five-speed robotised manual gearbox providing smoother shifts and easier parking.

Alternative power units are the 0.8-litre 54 bhp turbo diesel and, from early 2013, the smart fortwo electric drive, featuring a 55 kW (74 bhp) electric motor. The smart fortwo electric drive has been perfected during road trials in several cities, starting with London in 2007.