

## The Dune Buggy Phenomenon



Cover shot of *Car and Driver* magazine in April 1967 was one of many to inspire a generation of fun car builders to do their own thing. As the magazine commented: '... the Manx's only limitation is your own imagination'.

Another promotional shot of the Manx as it is about to go 'over the top'. Despite claims by competitors, the buggy actually made this leap, without any damage to car or driver. (Courtesy Ludvigsen Library)

wanted one. You could hardly escape the exuberance of those who owned buggies, as they took to the dunes, and then the streets around the world. During the myriad of extreme beatnik fashions of the 60s and 70s, such as mini-skirts, flared trousers, platform shoes and hippie psychedelia, the buggy was the ultimate fashion accessory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the heady youthquake that revolutionised the world during this period sounded idyllic, and for once, the expression that a car could give 'more smiles per hour' had true meaning.



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VW specialist Roger Smith built up a multi-tube steel frame for his angular dune buggy, and covered it with sheet aluminium. Unsurprisingly, the car was nicknamed 'Rivets', and it inspired the high fender look of the Meyers Manx buggy.



This all-wood dune buggy was created by boat-builder Ted Mangels in just 30 days, and was powered and suspended by VW parts, like the monocoque-designed Manx. The buggy was appropriately named 'Splinters'.

the Beetle in either shortened or standard form to accept the metal kit in two or four-seat design, respectively.



The simplest dune buggies were stripped and shortened Volkswagen Beetle chassis, with a few tube braces for rigidity, plus a roll-over hoop for safety.

Other variations followed hard on the heels of these commercially successful innovators, though it would take a couple more one-off buggies to fully direct the ultimate development of the dune buggy. The first, built by Roger Smith, a VW mechanic at Peppertree Automotive in California, was an angular VW-based off-roader fitted with aluminium panels. The slab-sided look of the buggy, with its high wheelarches, was reminiscent of the wartime German Kubelwagen - itself developed from the early Beetle. Named 'Rivets', due to its construction, the buggy was to prove not only extremely competitive on the sand, but immediately grabbed the attention of many onlookers on the Californian dunes.

At around the same time, a wooden-bodied buggy arrived on the scene. Built by Ted Mangels in just 30-days, it had a monocoque design around a metal frame, and used VW running gear. The high-sided vehicle resembled a German military Schwimmwagen, with a short-wheelbase, rounded front nose (to act as a skid-plate and plough out of sand dunes), and stand-

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Meyers' buggy - the Meyers Manx - was a masterstroke of 'form-through-function' design, and immediately gained press attention. A further 11 buggies were made, but high-price soon led to the design being re-worked to mount it onto a shortened VW chassis.

The availability of the Sportster, and its impact on motoring media in the early 1960s was soon to inspire others. As the variety of home-built dune buggies appearing on Californian dunes began to grow, they quickly caught the eye of sharp-minded and energetic 'beach bum', Bruce Meyers. A graduate of the Los Angeles Art Centre School, Meyers had become an expert in designing and making moulds and tooling for glassfibre boat production in Newport Beach, California. Wanting



Inspired by other dune buggies, Bruce Meyers worked on the first design for a lightweight monocoque glassfibre buggy in his garage during 1963. The first buggy pulled from the moulds in 1964 was christened 'Old Red', and was to become the catalyst for the buggy boom of the 1960s.



The monocoque Manx kit consisted of the glassfibre body, steel support tubes laminated in place, engine support brace, plywood under-plate, folding windshield, and special castings to mount the foot-pedal assembly, handbrake and petrol tank filler.

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A young Darrell Vittone air-tests a later version of the EMPI Imp circa 1968. Note the camera mounted on the bonnet to film the event. (Courtesy Glenn Miller)

to create their own fun cars, and the prices of wrecked VWs soared in breaker's yards. Not all buggies were registered for the road, but estimates of the day put the number of completed vehicles at between 10,000 and 20,000 in the US. Fuelled by appearances of buggies on TV in shows such as *Groovy*, *Bewitched*, and *Cowboy in Africa*, the growing demand for buggy kits meant that a whole culture grew up around the buggy concept:

August 1969 *Car and Driver* front cover shot shows Marx, EMPI and Deserter buggies together, highlighting the fact that buggies had moved out of the dunes and were now increasingly being used as fun street cars.





With San Francisco in the background, buggies gather together on Twin Peaks - a plateau high above the Pacific Ocean. This spread from *California Living* in 1968 shows one of the many buggy safaris held around the country.

(Courtesy John Gorman/Ludvigsen Library)

clubs came into existence to cater for buggy enthusiasts; vehicle building and paint shops switched to meeting the demands of the buggy trend; magazines and books catered for those interested in the whole scene, and

advertising and marketing men embraced the whole culture, using buggies as an additional way to promote their wares.

The Manx had also set a new speed record for the