

Smoke-spewing Trabant poised for rebirth as electric car

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East German Trabant cars made in the Soviet era drive past at Sopronpuszta, nearby the former border crossing point of Austria and Hungary, near Fertorakos, some 220kms west of Budapest in June 2009. Once the much-mocked symbol of drab communist East Germany, Trabant cars are revving up for a dramatic rebirth as electric cars -- 20 years after they drove through the fallen Berlin Wall to freedom.

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A team of German firms is developing the "new Trabi" or Trabant NT, a revamped version of the famously unreliable and unattractive cars, and is aiming to unveil a prototype at the Frankfurt motor show in September.

And in contrast to the old model, whose noisy two-stroke engine sent a polluting cloud of burnt oil and petrol into the air as it chugged slowly through the streets behind the Iron Curtain, the new 21st century Trabi could hardly be greener.

"It will be an electric car with a solar panel roof, designed for the city and small trips," said Ronald Gerschewski, head of IndiKar, the East German auto firm that originally made the Trabant and is now plotting its return.

"Inside, there will be connections for a sat-nav, mobile phone and iPod," Gerschewski told the regional press in Saxony, where the company is based.

However, the company insists it is not looking to capitalise on so-called "Ostalgie", the German word meaning nostalgia for the artefacts of the communist era.

"It will not be a retro model," IndiKar said, but a "green and refreshing novelty."

Whatever the motives, there is no doubt the Trabant still commands a place in Germans' affections, two decades after the Berlin Wall was pulled down in a peaceful revolution.

When the proposal of relaunching the Trabant was first mooted in 2007 at the Frankfurt motor show, a snap poll of 11,500 people showed that 93 percent were in favour, with many saying they would be prepared to buy one, said IndiKar.

And the idea itself of a full-blown Trabant rebirth was sparked by the enormous success of miniature models made by IndiKar's partner Harpa, which has sold hundreds of thousands of tiny Trabis to nostalgics.

Meanwhile, enthusiasts hold Trabi rallies and tourists queue up for a chance to ride one around the old communist sights of East Berlin.

It is a far cry from the time when it was the East Germans who had to queue up to get a prized Trabi. The difference is that under communist rule behind the Iron Curtain, the waiting queue could last up to 15 years.

Having saved up a year's salary and counted down the years, the lucky East German could choose a Trabant in any colour he pleased -- as long as it was garish -- mustard yellow, pink and peppermint green were all possibilities.

The bodywork was made of plastic mixed with paper or cotton fibre to save on steel imports, the back windows did not open and its top speed was a laughable 120 kilometres (75 miles) per hour.

But that is not to say the East Germans were not proud of their motors. Considered as one of the family, the cars were often bestowed with pet names such as "Micha" or "Bert."

The last Trabant, a candy pink model, was produced in 1991, 34 years after the first of around three million rolled off the production line of the VEB Sachsenring Automobilwerke Zwickau in Saxony.

However, while the idea of Trabis put-putting around the streets of Berlin once again may appeal to many, it is by no means guaranteed.

IndiKar and Herpa are aiming to produce the Trabi commercially from 2012 but are on the hunt for investors.

They are counting on the Frankfurt show to unearth someone to help with finance to get the all new eco-friendly Trabis off the drawing board and once again gracing the streets of the former East [Germany](#).

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