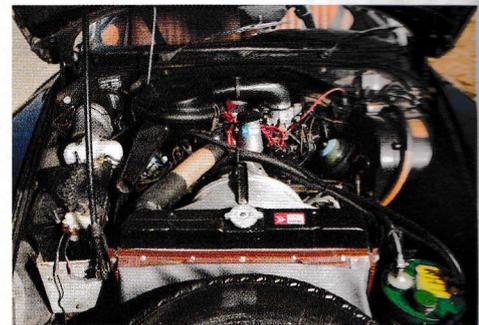




Clockwise, DS prefers cruising to being hustled, but grips keenly; leather trim for this example; 'four' is well back within its bay; super-stylish 'chip-cone' indicators



Citroën DS

The French beauty is a true great, says **Martin Buckley**

The Citroën DS is one of the most audaciously conceived products of the 20th century. I use the word 'product' advisedly, too, because it seems beneath its dignity to narrow any comparison to other 'mere' cars of its 1955-'75 lifespan. Car of the century? Possibly, although few of its breakthrough features were adopted by other manufacturers. But certainly no single automobile has ever introduced so much technical novelty in one giant push; it almost seemed as if Citroën had attempted to re-invent the motor car from first principles.

Here was a spacious five-seater saloon that floated – and self levelled – on hydropneumatic spheres (when most others still creaked on the leaf springs of the horse and carriage age) and harnessed engine-driven hydraulic power for brakes, steering and clutch/gearchange.

Its mono-shell base unit was clothed in unstressed panels of such arresting grace that the crowds at its Paris show launch stood 10 deep to marvel at it. It had frameless door windows, a single-spoke steering wheel and a mushroom-like button with which to operate the first disc brakes on a production car. In its adventurous use of interior plastics, the DS looked, felt and even smelt like nothing anyone had encountered before. It never got the engine it deserved, perhaps (it was conceived around a light-alloy flat-six) but those who drove it realised that a new benchmark for comfort had been set.

Sold to the tune of 1.3 million examples, there were cavernous Safari estates, super-chic two-door cabriolets and de-specified ID versions for those willing to forego the benefits of powered

steering and gearchange. This isn't the place to get bogged down in a production history that is as complex as the car itself, but what we can say is that the DS/ID achieved maturity in the 1960s. The dates to remember are 1965 – the introduction of the more refined short-stroke engine, initially for the DS only – and '66, when a new type of green mineral-based fluid called LHM cured the problems associated with the original hygroscopic 'red' hydraulic fluid.

This 1968 DS20, helpfully furnished by Paul Harris of Pallas Auto (www.pallasauto.co.uk), represents the outer limit of what your £20,000 budget will buy you today.

"The DS21s with green fluid will be more borderline in terms of condition at this price," says Harris. "You can find plenty of good 1960s ID19s and 20s for under £20,000 if you're not bothered about semi-auto or Pallas trim."

The injected versions lead you into the 1970s, but this carburettor 2-litre is in many ways an ideal combination of refinement and relative simplicity, but with all the charm of the Pallas interior and outer details.

Harris concedes that the bigger 2.1- and 2.3-litre engines are not so refined; certainly this one is quiet and gentle and very much in tune with the character of a car that can get along briskly but cannot be rushed. For those who get the hang of it (and not everybody does), a DS is still a superbly comfortable means of transport.

It is a car that you could easily get cynical about, but much of the legend surrounding the DS is true – and I think it's a car that everyone should try at least once. A work of genius and much deep thought, it is probably the most romantic of all post-war saloons.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR...

- You need to inspect very carefully for rust. On a ramp, check the sills and the box sections beneath the rear suspension, peel back the 'screen rubbers and look at the inner-wing tops inside the boot.
- Be wary of cars that have been off the road for a long time because the DS is a particularly costly car to recommission. If possible, buy a running, MoT'd example.
- Surprisingly, as long as you go for a green-fluid car, the hydraulics are not a huge problem. Any reliability problems with a DS are more commonly related to the electrical system.

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1955-'75/1,330,755 (all DS variants)

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, overhead-valve 1985cc 'four' with twin-choke Weber or Zenith carburettor; 103bhp @ 6000rpm; 106lb ft @ 4000rpm

Transmission four-speed semi-automatic, driving front wheels

Suspension independent, by hydropneumatic units, plus leading and trailing arms

Steering powered rack and pinion

Brakes powered front discs rear drums

Weight 2800lb (1270kg)

0-60mph 14.5 secs

Top speed 105mph

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