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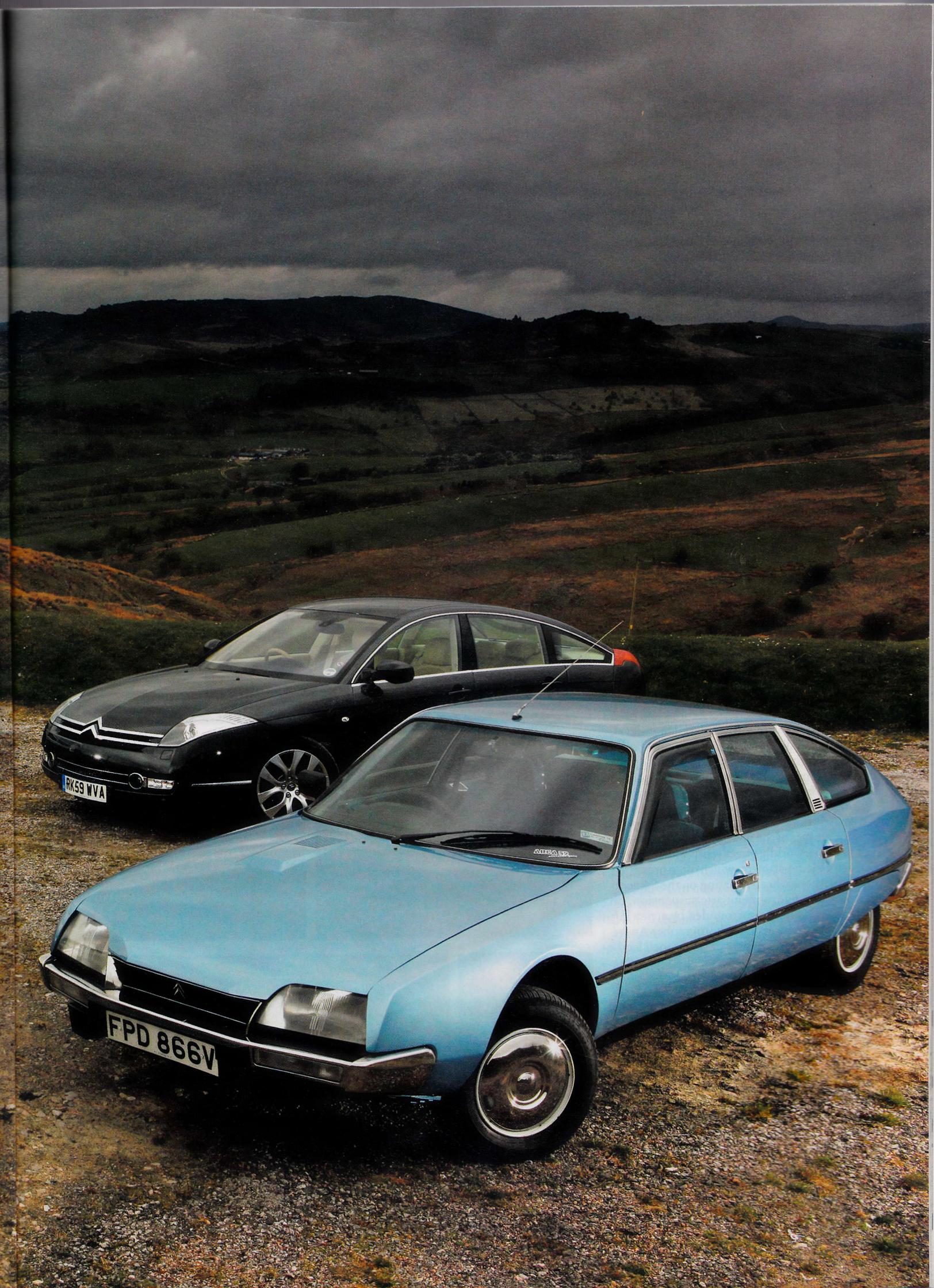


They came from outer space

Sam Dawson has a close encounter with four generations of Citroën's outlandish big saloons: the ID/DS, CX, XM and C6

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**





Imagine that it's 1955 and you're looking for a new saloon car for between £1000 and £1500. You're probably about to trade in a facelifted pre-war design, something such as a Daimler Conquest or an Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire. Most likely, it had a separate chassis, rear drive, a huge 1930s-style radiator grille – complete with bonnet mascot – and either a vague suggestion of separate wings or half-hearted American-style tail-fins.

You could go for something sporty: maybe an Alfa Giulietta or a Jaguar Mk1. You could try to impress the neighbours with a Mercedes-Benz 180 'Ponton' or a Lancia Aurelia. Or you could recall a favourable comment a friend once made about Citroën's Traction Avant. You find yourself, perhaps an hour later, in a dealership, staring gobsmacked at a machine that you're not even sure is a car, but a form of transportation from the future that may well fly, float and take you into space as well. You're admiring a Citroën DS: artform, technical *tour de force*, cultural icon, philosopher's muse, and yours for £1400 at the time. Since that moment, the only cars whose appearance have caused comparable astonishment have worn the charging bull of Sant'Agata.

Flaminio Bertoni – Italian modernist sculptor, artist and designer – moulded the shape. Although he draughted the stylish if somewhat conventional-looking Traction Avant beforehand, you get the impression that the *Déesse* started life as a commissioned work to reflect the idiosyncratic beauty of Paris, rather than a car.

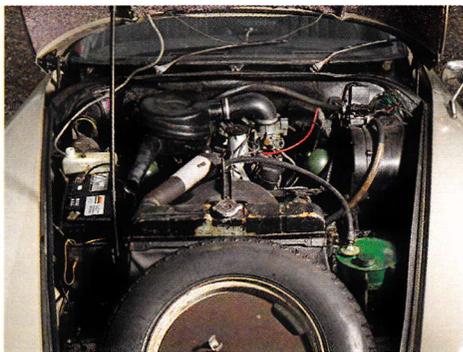
The doors, for example, are the shape of shopping bags from some swish Latin *couturier* in St-Germain-des-Prés. The swinging line they follow through the body suggests the jubilant walk of a Parisienne who's found a bargain. Then there's the elegant roofline, its spindly framework recalling Art Nouveau Metro stations and even the Eiffel Tower, with the wonderful high-level, cone-shaped indicators hanging over the bootlid like streetlights. At its launch, philosopher Roland Barthes decreed that the Citroën should be considered as a piece of art in the same light as a Gothic cathedral. I can't imagine nowadays, say, Alan de Botton being similarly moved by the interior plastics of the new Audi A6.

This otherworldly effect was played upon by Citroën's PR department, which often presented the car without wheels, floating on the Seine to illustrate the hydropneumatic suspension, or poised vertically and surrounded by a viewing gallery, like a rocketship. Photographer André Martin portrayed it as part of the French landscape, even with its wheels attached. It's tempting to think that Robert Opron took the same approach when he restyled the front end for '67. He produced the shape you see here, with the feline squint of the headlights echoing Toulouse-Lautrec's *Le Chat Noir* or SEV Marchal's logo. The famous steering inner lamps were optional on the ID, which began as a cheaper, simpler DS but gradually gained most of its equipment.

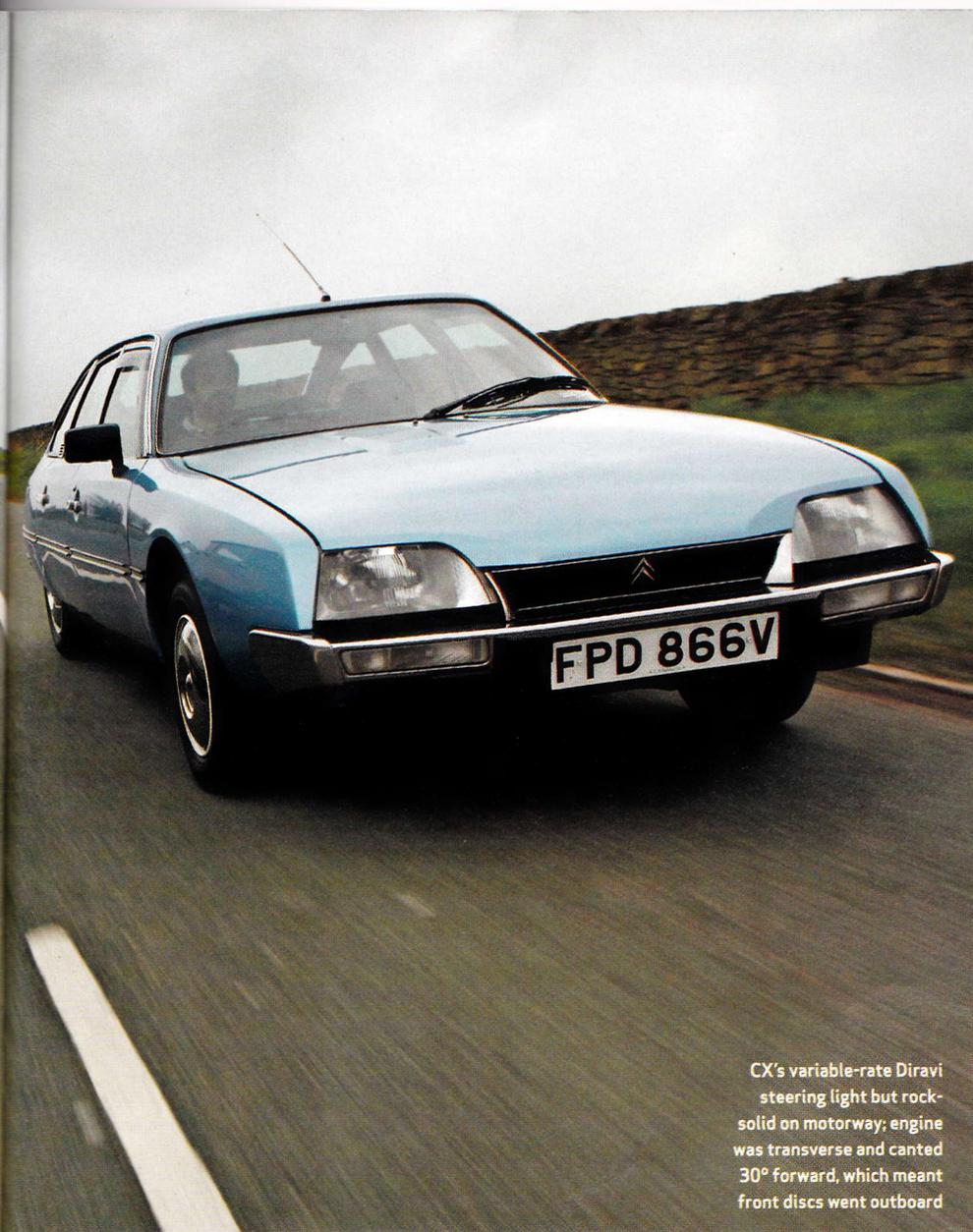
Once aboard this '69 ID20, the aeronautical sense is heightened. The glassfibre roof and curving, frameless glass are reminiscent of a glider, as are the easily removable body panels and supporting subframe. The notion is reinforced by a single-spoke wheel, similar to an aircraft's control column, and a clasp-fitting seat-belt. 1955-man might have found the firm action to operate the clutch, four-speed column change



'Cat's eyes' came in for '67, white roof an ID constant; steering light but precise; grip strong. Flat-six wasn't sorted for launch so DS used Traction 'four'



ID stands for *Idée*, or idea; signature *cornet de frites* indicator; ID has a brake pedal, instead of the DS' famed 'mushroom' button; small hubcaps on most IDs



CX's variable-rate Diravi steering light but rock-solid on motorway; engine was transverse and canted 30° forward, which meant front discs went outboard

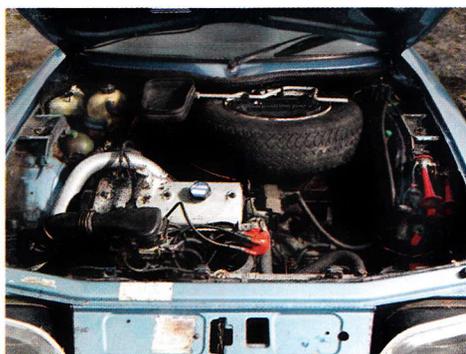
and the 'umbrella' handbrake familiar (the DS has a foot lever), but the rest of the driving experience would have been well and truly alien.

First, there's the suspension, raising the car with an almost imperceptible hiss as the engine fires up, readying it for take-off. Then there's the brake pedal, which is powered via the hydraulics and slams on the anchors with little effort. The steering works via the same system. It's solid and heavy when stationary, dissipating into creamy-smooth precision when moving, but still has enough weight to avoid the car feeling remote.

Once under way, with passengers perched on plump sofas that create support by allowing their occupants to sink into them rather than firmly bolstering them in, the car appears to be floating a foot or two above the road. Even the most severe of last winter's potholes fail to cause a shudder through the bodywork, merely creating a slightly bouncy ride. It almost feels as if you are piloting a low-flying aircraft over the countryside as you gently guide the single-spoke wheel – created so that the instruments would not be obscured while steering – and occasionally brush the brake pedal. Unfortunately, the illusion is tarnished – if not shattered – by the under-powered engine, derived from the '30s Traction Avant, roaring and clattering away up front.

If the engine is a car's heart, then the DS also has lungs, LHS or LHM blood coursing through a network of veins and arteries, as well as muscles to control its suspension. The car also has a

'IT DIDN'T JUST DEVELOP THE STRENGTHS OF THE DS: THE CX ELIMINATED ITS DRAWBACKS, TOO'



brain, manifested in a forceful character that snaps drivers out of their stubborn ways into a more intellectual method of driving. An air-cooled flat-six was mooted from the start but never developed, though the aged four-pots were at least offered with Bosch electronic fuel injection from 1970. Yet even this was never enough for a car that looked and felt as though it should probably run on compressed air.

Despite Citroën selling nearly 1½ million DSs, rival manufacturers remained sceptical of its radical technology, sticking to tradition in the form of rear drive, cliff-face aerodynamics and heavy mechanical controls. A few bravely ventured into its territory, most notably NSU, whose semi-automatic Ro80 cost significantly more and the unreliability of its rotary engine bankrupted the firm. Audi's 100LS and Lancia's Flavia were similarly refined, albeit otherwise conventional, takes on the front-drive saloon. Saab had always made much of its aviation links, and squared up to the DS from its makeover year with the quirky, slant-four-engined 99.

Closest to the DS recipe was BMC's 'Land-crab', combining Alex Moulton's Hydrolastic suspension for a similar ride with clever Issigonis packaging. Its looks never rivalled the Citroën, though, until the arrival of the 'wedge' Princess in 1975, but build quality had nosedived by then and the car that had looked so promising on paper turned out to be an embarrassment.

Against all of this – plus the oil embargo,



Super-stylish doorhandle; crosswise engine gives bigger cabin; moon-disc-style hubcaps; wacky, rotating-drum gauges with magnifying lenses

which affected sales of all cars – Citroën could have ditched the costly if successful DS. The cheaper but similarly stylish GS was coming on stream, proving that the technology could work in a mass market. And few rivals threatened Citroën's mastery of ride quality; even Rolls-Royce had adopted André Lefèbvre's suspension design for the Silver Shadow by the late '60s.

But no. Citroën, crippled by the purchase of Maserati and the development of the SM – with its management well aware of impending doom and a potential Peugeot takeover in the offing – pressed ahead with 'Projet L'. This later evolved into the 'CX' because Robert Opron's sleek and beautiful styling of the ultimate prototype boasted a drag coefficient ('CdX') of just 0.36. This car was intended to not only better the DS, but also to save Citroën as an independent entity. Failure was not an option, and no drawbacks in the design could possibly allow criticism other than from a few Philistines who didn't understand the French avant-garde.

The result is a four-wheeled Pompidou Centre. Relentlessly, unashamedly modernist, leftfield and Gallic, the CX didn't just develop the strengths of the DS, it eliminated its drawbacks. The driving position is snug and sporty, visibility is virtually uninterrupted through 360°, the 'Douvrin' engines – offered five years after the car's '74 launch – are smooth and fairly quiet, and wind noise is practically non-existent. The all-alloy 2-litre overhead-cam unit puts out just

'RATHER THAN FALLING FOR RETRO, THE C6 IS AS BOLD AS BIG CITROËNS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN'

106bhp, but makes the most of the long-legged gears – there's a standard five-speed 'box on this UK-market Athena, the plusher base model.

The CX looks bigger than the DS, yet it's 8in shorter and feels more compact. Its lower seating position affords the driver the confidence to treat the CX like a hot hatch until the narrow-set rear tyres start to squeal. When the car reaches a sharp bend, the loping nose bounces wildly into understeer. Dabbing the brakes to bring it back into line isn't advised while you're still adapting to their switch-like operation, so a carefully metered throttle lift is the way to do it. Once this is understood, the CX becomes a pleasure to drive, especially in mastering the long-throw gearbox. The clutch action is firm and its pedal travel excessive, but slotting the lever between ratios is like satisfyingly shoving an airliner's hand-throttle to 'maximum'.

There's more pleasure to be had in the CX's detailing, too. The seats, in electric-blue Jersey nylon – contrasting subtly with the dashboard and bodywork – are bold and daring. The dash-top ashtray looks like a miniature Aarnio 'Globe' chair and the jewel-like warning lights have you mischievously wondering what abuse you might have to inflict just to see their vibrantly coloured lenses illuminate. Best of all, though, is the sheer ergonomic pleasure. Controls for everything are clearly labelled and just a touch away. The speedo and rev-counter are vivid yellow revolving drums spinning behind stationary markers. They're not



Stunning C6 marked a massive return to form, with cleverly reworked suspension so that the car handles as well as it rides; a Sport mode – *mon Dieu!*



Cabin lacks eccentricity of the DS and CX, but it's beautifully detailed and loaded; 245/45s on 18in Atlantic alloys help with new-found agile handling



XM is a little gawky in this company yet it's hugely capable and almost as chuckable as a C6 – now a bargain, too; complexity tarnished its reputation

only fun to look at, but also extend the cerebral approach begun by the DS – prompting the driver to think about the numbers involved in acceleration, cruising and gearchanges, rather than a needle soaring towards a redline.

The CX eventually lost those dials in a facelift in which the chrome bumpers also went in favour of plastic ones. It was all part of the inevitable Peugeot cost-cutting and ensuing rationalisation that had followed the Maserati sale to Alejandro de Tomaso and the failure of a plan to joint-build a big saloon with Lancia. Still, Peugeot had no reasons to kill off the extraordinary CX and, like many charismatic mid-'70s designs (Ferrari 400i, Lamborghini Countach, Porsche 928), it stayed in production until the early '90s, and didn't look old even when it was retired.

In fact, you could say that the CX is one of the most influential car designs of all time. Look at the slashing curve of its window-line, the triangular light clusters front and rear and the way that they bisect the trapezoidal grille. These are all hallmarks of Ford's industry-changing 'edge' design, in particular the original five-door Focus, a car the world and his labrador attempted to copy. Today, it helps the CX to look both original and modern, even in chromed early form.

Replacing the CX was a daunting task, and one that the new Peugeot Société Anonyme (PSA) Group would not take lightly. The CX had been plagued with niggling build-quality issues and, in the '80s, a new 'executive' class of buyer had sprung up, one who was maybe more interested in the badge on the front than the substance under the skin. They would typically only keep a car for a year, too, ditching it for a new model as soon as possible, so 'residual values' – something Citroën buyers of old weren't bothered about – shot to the top of their wish-lists. These people invariably bought German, but many had been tempted by the blindingly rapid 168bhp CX GTi Turbo, which rekindled memories of the SM.

If Citroën was to be successful in this new, arguably slightly blinkered era, this was the kind of car that could do it. It would also bring a 3-litre V6 engine back to the range after 14 years. And Citroën would call it the XM.

After several consultations, styling was entrusted to American Art Blakeslee of Bertone, who concocted what must be the world's most subtle retro-design. Sure, there's the obligatory '90s 'floating' roof and straight waistline indentation, but look at the flat, thin nose and the upward kink towards the rear – they're all hallmarks of Opron's 1970 SM. Even the shape of the smoked glass of the rear reversing and indicator-light clusters pay homage to the SM's chromed rump. Behind the wheel, the black cabin seems slightly dour, but there are playful touches, too, such as the black strip of smoked plastic behind the wheel, from which warning lights emerge and vanish. A green digital glow in the middle of the rev-counter reminds you which gear you're in. It's all charmingly reminiscent of early kids' hand-held digital computer games.

Drive the XM and you'll find a confidence not always present in its ancestors. There's little understeer, the brakes are more conventionally controlled and the 2.1-litre turbodiesel unit has ample torque for cannoning the XM from bend to bend. The bump-eliminating suspension, by then called Hydractive, still features – you'll barely notice cattlegrids – but with it comes a firmness more orientated towards the sporting



Neat reversing lights in SM-style rear; sober cabin perhaps a reflection of PSA parent; single-spoke wheel was replaced with airbag-equipped version



C6 offers a nod to the past, with 'self-cleaning' concave rear screen like the CX, plus wonderful flowing light clusters. XM takes its cues from SM; script-type badges also featured on the Xantia



Athena and Reflex were first CXs with 'Douvrin' motors. Turning main beams optional on ID; lines aren't heating elements, but just a styling flourish



driver, accompanied by the usual clicking and hissing as sensors make calculations about the pressure exacted on the spheres and adjust load accordingly. With a V6, it would make for a brilliant four-door GT, and it's currently a two-grand bargain for anyone harbouring SM fantasies. No wonder the XM featured in the most notable movie car-chase since *Bullitt*, pursued through Marseilles by an Audi S8 in *Ronin*.

Sadly, executive buyers spurned the XM, which expired in 1999. PSA descended into dullness, with Citroëns offering little flair and Peugeot's piling on the pounds while losing their frisky handling. But after pressure from Renault, revitalised under Patrick le Quément, Citroën threw caution to the wind and started exploring its roots once more. First up was the C4 in 2004, with its 'reinvention of the steering wheel' packing a fixed central boss with fingertip controls and clothing it all in strikingly French style. Sébastien Loeb took four of his seven WRC titles in C4s. Then came the C6 in '06.

This is, without doubt, the most accomplished luxury car Citroën has ever made, and thankfully shows deep understanding of the marque at PSA. The classic short tail is still there but, rather than falling into retro clichés (the CX window lines have been duplicated for visibility), it's as bold and original as big Citroëns have always been. Its rear lights drape delightfully over the wings like Dalí's clocks. On the inside, the driver wants for nothing on this Exclusive – with even a head-up

display on the 'screen so you don't have to take your eyes off the road. It's a sea of leather and slabs of Mukonto wood as far as the eye can see. What's most interesting, though, is how it drives. With the exception of the 240bhp from the brilliant joint PSA-Ford-JLR HDi V6 providing acceleration that would represent supercar performance to a DS buyer, the ride, handling and steering are familiar, across all these cars and all these years. What's new is a Sport button that switches from CX lope to XM corner-attack.

Yet what's most satisfying about this quartet of Citroën saloons is their intellectual appeal, their demand that you get to know the car's unique engineering ethos before you learn to drive them most smoothly. Too many luxury cars are either try-hards – of the genuine opinion that you live in fear of Mr Jones from next door coming round with a tape measure to compare 'shutlines' – or like a simpering Jeeves, scurrying around desperate to cater for your every whim.

A big Citroën, on the other hand, is like sinking into a favourite armchair for a deep and meaningful conversation with a philosophically inclined friend. They are places to think, and to contemplate the answer to the question that they all pose: just what is luxury, exactly? 

Thanks to Stephen Clements Gray for his ID, Sean Padden for his CX, Paul King of Paris Autos (0161 477 6030; www.paris-autos.co.uk) for his XM and Citroën UK for the loan of its C6

CITROËN ID20

Sold/number built 1955-'75/1,455,746 (all ID/DSs) **Construction** steel monocoque punt, with steel outer panels, glassfibre roof
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, ohv 1985cc in-line 'four', with single Solex or Weber carb; 103bhp @ 5500rpm; 101lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, driving front wheels **Suspension** independent, at front by twin leading arms rear trailing arms; self-levelling hydropneumatic spheres, anti-roll bars f/r **Steering** powered rack and pinion **Brakes** powered discs f (inboard), drums r **Length** 15ft 10½in (4839mm) **Width** 5ft 10½in (1791mm) **Height** 4ft 10in (1473mm) **Wheelbase** 10ft 3in (3124mm) **Mpg** 21 **Weight** 2811lb (1275kg) **0-60mph** 15 secs **Top speed** 95mph **Price new** £1399 (DSpécial, 1970) **Price now** £5-£10,000 (ID/DSuper)

CITROËN CX 2000 ATHENA

Sold/number built 1975-'91/1,042,300 (all CXs) **Construction** steel monocoque **Engine** all-alloy, sohc 1985cc in-line 'four', with Weber twin-choke carb; 106bhp @ 5500rpm; 122lb ft @ 3250rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, driving front wheels **Suspension** (where different to DS) front upper and lower arms; interconnected front-rear **Steering** powered rack and pinion **Brakes** powered discs **Length** 15ft 2½in (4636mm) **Width** 5ft 8in (1727mm) **Height** 4ft 5½in (1359mm) **Weight** 2722lb (1234kg) **Wheelbase** 9ft 4in (2845mm) **0-60mph** 11.8 secs **Top speed** 104mph **Mpg** 24 **Price new** £3195 **Price now** £1500-£6000

CITROËN XM 2.1 TDSX

Sold/number built 1989-'99/329,388 (all XMs) **Construction** steel monocoque, with glassfibre bonnet and hatchback **Engine** iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 2088cc diesel 'four', with three valves per cylinder, mechanical injection and Mitsubishi turbo; 110bhp @ 4300rpm; 183lb ft @ 2000rpm
Transmission four-speed auto **Suspension** Hydractive (hydropneumatic, with extra sensors and controlling electronics) front MacPherson struts **Steering** powered rack and pinion **Brakes** powered discs **Length** 15ft 5½in (4705mm) **Width** 5ft 10½in (1791mm) **Height** 4ft 6½in (1384mm) **Wheelbase** 9ft 4½in (2851mm) **Weight** 3205lb (1455kg) **0-60mph** 9.6 secs **Top speed** 121mph **Mpg** 43 **Price new** £18,449 **Price now** £875-£3000

CITROËN C6 3.0 HDI EXCLUSIVE

Sold/number built 2006-date/722 (UK) **Construction** steel and aluminium monocoque **Engine** all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 2992cc diesel V6, high-pressure direct injection, twin turbos; 240bhp @ 4000rpm; 332lb ft @ 1600rpm
Transmission six-speed auto, driving front wheels, with ESP and traction control **Suspension** Hydractive 3+ (with switchable modes) front double wishbones rear multi-link **Steering** speed-sensitive, power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** discs, with servo, ABS, EBD and EBA **Length** 16ft 1¼in (4908mm) **Width** 5ft 6in (1860mm) **Height** 4ft 9½in (1464mm) **Wheelbase** 9ft 6½in (2900mm) **Weight** 4130lb (1873kg) **0-60mph** 8.9 secs **Top speed** 149mph **Mpg** 38 **Price new** £37,895 **Now** from £12,000 s/h