

First & Last
**FRENCH
LESSON**

Few changes took place in the 20-year lifespan of the Citroën DS - a mark of its advanced, innovative design, writes Chris Rees



Imagine the reaction of the average Austin owner in 1955 when confronted by Citroën's brand-new DS. Its blissfully sculpted lines, its quirky details and its amazing hydraulic control systems must have made it look like an out-take from *Cloud Nine*. Even 20 years later, when the DS finally gave way to the CX, it remained one of the most extraordinary and modern of shapes.

Remarkably the Citroën DS changed little during a period in which car design leapt dramatically forward. That simply increases your appreciation of how advanced it was in 1955.

It's often said that original is best. The first 'Goddess' – in French, the initials DS sound like 'Déesse', or Goddess – had it all: hydropneumatic self-levelling suspension, power steering, hydraulically-assisted disc/drum brakes, hydraulically-operated semi-automatic transmission, front-wheel drive using the old Traction Avant engine and, of course, the fabulous Flaminio Bertoni-styled body.

A year after the launch of the DS came the poverty model, dubbed ID (which in French sounds like 'idée' – or 'idea'). This did without many of the hydraulics (retaining only the fluid suspension) and had stripped-out interior and trim. Citroën UK in Slough took up DS/ID production in 1958, with rather more up-market trim, and produced cars until 1966.

The earliest surviving example of a DS left on the road in Britain is a Slough-built car. Registered in 1961, 57 EKK was once Citroën's own car. It's a basic ID model with manual transmission, those famous 'pod' spotlamps (which were optional on the ID) and a minimum of brightwork. Devoid of any superfluous trim, it is the D at its most pure and simple.

Yet it is not quite as stark as French-built IDs. Citroën UK thought that the average British driver of the time (used to lashings of wood and leather even in quite ordinary saloon cars) would never stomach the plain materials specified by Paris. So there are leather-covered seats, leather trim on the doors and a special wooden dash with circular dials. Considering it's the austerity model, you get treated pretty well.

Step into the ID's ample seats and you're immediately aware that this isn't going to be a normal drive. Despite the less adventurous British dash design and conventional controls, you are still faced with numerous Citroën quirks. Like that revolutionary single-spoke steering wheel (a glorious piece of design), the 'fireplace' effect of the intruding engine hump (caused by the power unit being placed so far back in the chassis) and the extraordinary glasshouse.

The dash layout is a bit random; push-pull knobs are placed along its entire length with many out of the driver's reach. The handbrake, of the umbrella handle type, sits way down under the dash and the suspension height adjuster is rather awkwardly tucked away by the passenger's feet...

Ignition is by key – unlike the semi-automatic DS's gear-

stick start – and the 1911cc four-cylinder engine comes easily to life. It's hardly a refined unit but then it does derive from the pre-war Traction Avant. This ID benefits from the fitment of (non-standard) twin chokes, so it has a little more power than the 66bhp of the standard ID.

But it is not a quick car. Floor the accelerator and the extra choke cuts in with a barely-muffled growl but even then, progress is sedate and determined rather than brisk.

One thing which does date the ID is the steering. The position is upright and the feel is definitely out of the 1950s. Without hydraulic power assistance, the weight over the front wheels makes manoeuvring a killer. The thin-rimmed, wide-diameter steering wheel makes hauling the car round bends into a muscle-building exercise. Your hands grip ever tighter as your biceps do battle with major understeer. The ID rolls a lot, too, but it always gets you round the corner.

Then there's the ride. Bearing in mind this is a 1961 car, it's miraculous. Once it has risen on its cushion of air, nothing upsets the Goddess of the road's stately poise. That's one thing Citroën – and everyone else – never did improve on; I reckon the ID still delivers the best ride around.

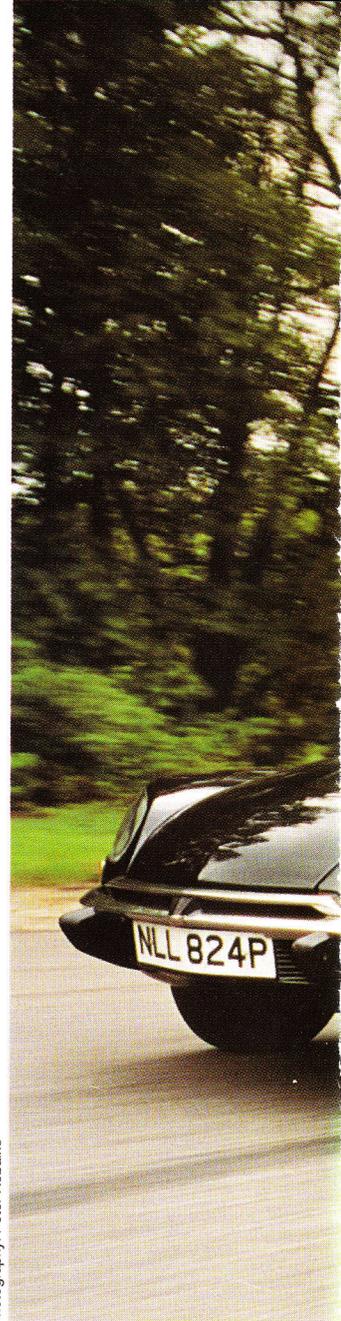
Unlike the DS, the ID has conventional pedals and a manual four-speed gearbox. The column-mounted lever works well enough, although DS fans are bound to be disappointed not to have the unique clutchless gearchange facility, a far more common sight on the D series. This '61 ID has been upgraded to DS-style hydropneumatic brakes – albeit operated from the same conventional pedal – so it shares the marvellously pin-sharp zero-travel feel which graces the DS.

In short, the early ID combines a smattering of 1950s nostalgia with an advanced specification which, even today, raises an eyebrow when you experience it. Without the full array of hydropneumatic controls you inevitably feel a bit short-changed. The biggest thing in the ID's favour is the charm of its pure, uncluttered shape.

NLL 824P is the very last DS to be registered in Britain (in 1976). Its chassis number (9168) is by far the highest listed by the Citroën Car Club. Interestingly, it is also higher than the final chassis number (8870) listed by *Glass's Car Check Book*. Perhaps this was a special-order DS?

It's a DS23 Pallas, the ultimate DS if you discount the fuel-injected version. It's amazing just how similar to the ID this car is. The shape is virtually unchanged and many detail items – such as rear bumpers, interior door handles and arm rests – are identical. Most importantly, little of the original DS charm has been eroded. Many of the differences between these individual cars come down to the fact that the Pallas is a high-spec model whereas the ID was an entry version.

The biggest difference is the treatment of the nose, which went through an evolution in 1967. Behind those elegantly



Photography: Peter Robarne



Above, Slough-built ID not as basic as French IDs; later DS Pallas (right) retains novel single-spoke wheel but has bigger instruments

1961 ID model – pure but basic

Two-piece chrome front bumper with separate number plate plinth, 'Citroën' script chrome bonnet badge, exposed headlamps, front wing 'lights

on' tell-tales, long-range spotlights in separate pods, small faired-in front indicators, 'flop-out' wipers, push-button door handles, switchable parking lamps at tops of B-posts, convex rear indicator lights in short housings, separate rear lights for brakes/night driving/reversing, separate triangular reflectors,

contrasting-colour roof.

Rear-view mirror on dash, wooden fascia (Slough spec) with small round dials (100mph speedo has transparent needle), large finned ventilation ducts with long adjustment arms, Bakelite knobs/switchgear, large hard white single-spoke wheel, suspension height regulator (passenger side), heating controls on bulkhead bulge, fabric-covered sills, no headlining (just cloth glued to roof), front seats recline by unscrewing/retightening twin chromed knobs on rear of backrests.





Above, Vive la difference? 'The Goddess' dropped jaws on its 1955 debut; last British-registered DS (left) shows only major change to range - a revised front end

contoured glass cowls lie one of the DS's celebrated party pieces: spotlamps which turn with the wheels.

And you can't deny that all those complex hydropneumatic systems are an almost indispensable ingredient of any D. Who could not be impressed by the little button which appropriates the job of brake pedal? One touch and you're

at an abrupt standstill. And the power steering, though it lacks the sensitivity of modern units, makes the DS23 so much more pleasurable to drive.

The semi-automatic gearbox is also part of the sphere-charged circuit. Its whole operation from start to finish is quirky. Igniting the engine involves turning the ignition key,

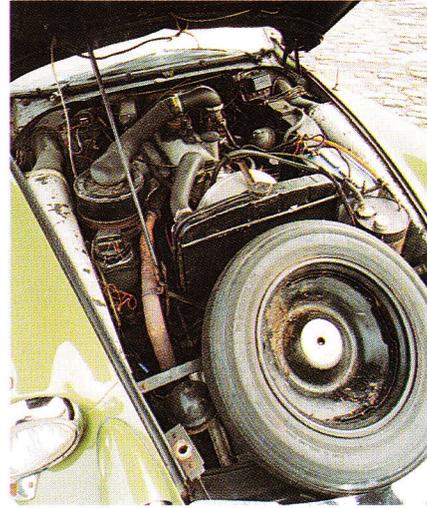
1976 DS23 Pallas - opulent cruiser

Single-piece stainless steel front/rear bumpers with rubber overriders both ends, different-shaped bonnet at leading edge, headlamps faired in behind glass cowls, spotlamps also cowled in (connected to steering to swivel with wheels), wipers working in parallel, flush stainless steel door handles, extra brightwork on body sides, door bottoms and around windows, brushed metal covering C-posts, shrouded flat rear indicators, rectangular rear lights with separate rectangular reflectors, body-coloured roof.

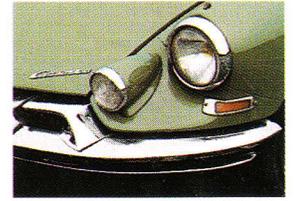
Black plastic and vinyl dashboard, windscreen-mounted rear-view mirror, triple instrument display (large 120mph speedo with stopping distances in feet, rev counter red-lined at 6000rpm, cluster of warning lights surrounding large 'stop' lamp), plastic button switches, smaller-diameter soft-feel black single-

spoke steering wheel, suspension control on driver's side, front seats adjustable for height by bolts, reclinable by conventional knob control.





Far left, muscle-building steering dates basic ID. Left, sluggish 1911cc engine derived from Traction Avant; this one benefits from non-standard twin-choke carburetors



Above, famous pod spotlamps were an ID option; in 1967, headlamps were covered in behind glass and spotlamps were ingeniously linked to the steering

making sure the dash-mounted gear selection lever is in neutral (not easy, as it's not marked), and pushing the lever over to the left; then the engine starts. Weird.

You have to avoid depressing what looks like the clutch; it's the handbrake. Confused? Just try fathoming out how to position the handbrake control knob below the steering column. You're supposed to use the knob locking pin; three controls to work the handbrake? It could only be a Citroën.

Okay, you've got the handbrake off. Now push the lever forward about a centimetre and you're in first, no clutch involved. Remember to take your foot off the accelerator as you pull back to engage second, then across to get third and fourth. After a little jerkiness as you get used to the way it works, changes can be made impressively smoothly.

The 2347cc engine of the DS23 is a direct development of the old Citroën four-cylinder engines. With 115bhp on tap, it naturally makes it a much better performer than the early 1.9-litre ID, although it's still not a true performance saloon.

The 23's power steering makes fast bends much easier to negotiate and, although there's still monumental roll and wallow, roadholding is very impressive. I could hardly think of a more comfortable and relaxing car for cruising the long leafy lanes of France. The only reservation concerns the high noise levels generated by the gruff four-pot engine.

Inside, the '76 DS is a little more sumptuous. The leather seats are softer, more compliant and much more adjustable to individual requirements. The dashboard may house more instruments (including a useful rev counter), but the finish is in rather disappointing flat black slabs.

The appeal of a DS lies in its individualism. The 1961 ID undoubtedly has it; but the 1976 DS23 has it no less. Even

in the mid-1970s, there was still nothing else like it. In truth, the later DS merely improved in detail on an already brilliant package. If we had compared the DS23 to a 1955 DS with its full complement of gas/fluid systems, there would be little difference on which to comment. The bland plastic dash of the late DS may lack the sci-fi appeal of the first French cars, but this is more than made up for by the better performance and sleeker appearance. It is a staggering tribute to the ID that there is so little to choose between the two.

CLASSIC CARS

Major modifications 1955-1975

- 1955** DS saloon launched: hydropneumatic suspension, power steering, power brakes.
- 1956** ID launched, without hydraulic controls.
- 1958** ID first produced in UK.
- 1959** Safari estate version introduced.
- 1961** Twin-choke Weber carbs (DS). Better brakes, new facia (ID). Convertible launched.
- 1962** Facelifted interior.
- 1964** ID trim made more basic and ID Super luxury model launched.
- 1965** 2175cc DS21 Pallas first produced in UK (imported from 1966).
- 1966** UK production ceases and ID19/DS19/DS21 now imported from France. DS19 Pallas luxury model launched, 1985cc ID20 model introduced.
- 1967** Revised front end with cowled-in headlamps and swivelling spotlamps.
- 1968** 1985cc DS20 replaces DS19. DS21 gains extra 6bhp and has redesigned facia.
- 1969** D Special, D Super replace ID models; new facias. Injected DS21 EFI available.
- 1971** Flush-fitting door handles.
- 1972** DS23 (2347cc) replaces DS21, also available with fuel injection. D Super 5 five-speed (2185cc) replaces D Super.
- 1973** Power steering finally standard for base D model.

Right, DS23's 2347cc four-cylinder engine delivered a healthier 115bhp; 130bhp given by injected version



Far right, the Goddess in all its glory - in DS, hydraulics controlled easy-riding suspension, power steering, brakes (operated by a 'button' on the floor) and semi-automatic gearbox

