



The DeTomaso Mangusta

An Italian exotic that happened by accident..

By Rick Feibusch

In the good old days, years before the implementation of emissions and safety laws, exotic high-performance automakers would just build a car, display it at a few key international auto shows and start taking orders. There wasn't even a legal requirement that the manufacturer road test a prototype before the first production models were delivered to the public! Italian automakers were particularly prone to using the public to test their cars - after delivery. The DeTomaso Mangusta was a particularly interesting example. The Mangusta was born out of the ambition of Argentinian race driver Alejandro De Tomaso who, like many other racers, yearned to build his own cars.

DeTomaso was born to a wealthy family in a small town near Buenos Aires. He left Argentina in 1955, just one step ahead of Juan Peron's goon squads, having offended the great dictator with political writings published in a local newspaper. Peron, like his idol Adolph Hitler, loved sports cars and heavily supported successful drivers like Juan Manuel Fangio because he believed that if drivers from his country won races, it showed a national superiority. Since DeTomaso wouldn't play ball, he was excluded from the gravy train.

DeTomaso left for Italy, the land of his grandparents with only \$126 in his racing jumpsuit. He met Isabelle Haskell, a rich American woman who owned and raced a Siata and a Maserati. In those days, women racers were a rare and unproven commodity, and Ms. Haskell found that by co-driving with this Argentine man, she could get accepted in more "regular" races than by continuing to race with women co-drivers and be relegated to "powder puff" or special women's race events. They became factory drivers for O.S.C.A. (a company formed by the Maserati brothers) in 1949 and were married in 1957. DeTomaso had made a fortunate match. With the backing of his wife's family, he was able to get his first car, the Vallelunga, into production in the late '60s.

Unfortunately, the market for a small four-cylinder, mid-engined sports coupe was small and saturated, so by the end, only 52 were produced. The little cars were handsome and ran great but there was too much competition at the lower end of the scale. DeTomaso understood that he would never get rich building small sportsters. He dreamed of moving up into the Ferrari/Maserati class.

By 1967 was able to convince the Haskell family to invest more money, and upgrade the Valletunga's spine frame to cradle a US built V8 engine and to clothe this with sensational body designed by Giorgetto Giugiaro.

Called the Mangusta, this project was actually an amalgamation of a pair of stillborn endeavors started by other manufacturers.

Giugiaro, a young man on his way up in Italian and international design circles, had designed the sleek sportster's body as a free lance project for the Italian firm, Iso of Bresso. By the time Giugiaro's work was completed, Iso was going through a serious financial crisis and the new model became such a low priority item that the company never was able to develop a chassis platform for the car.

DeTomaso, who had worked his way up to the top management position at Italian coachbuilders, Ghia Carrozzeria, decided to drop Giugiaro's striking body onto the chassis of a race car that had been under development for Carroll Shelby's racing organization, but not yet delivered.

A quick way to have an exciting show car to display at the Turin Motor Show to promote Ghia. The car was shown at the 1966 Turin show and was an instant success. DeTomaso didn't wait, he put the Mangusta into production without a single engineering test.

A race driver did drive the car around for an afternoon and reported what fell off. He also said that the car was "fairly lethal" under certain conditions. Due to its "limited production" status, it miraculously escaped from the new US safety regulations, laws that had just gone into effect when the car was first imported to the States in late 1968.





Originally fitted with Ford 289 cubic inch V8 engine, the Mangusta was introduced in the North American market with a mid-mounted 306 horsepower Ford 302 V8 engine driving through a 5-speed ZF transaxle. North American distribution was handled by Kjell Qvale's British Motor Car Distributors in San Francisco. Qvale's organization had been the western states wholesaler of most British marques since the late '40s and had moved into European exotics in the '60s. BMCD originally advertised the Mangusta for \$10,500 but most of the Americam powered, Euro-street-racers-to-die-for went out the door for about \$11,500. Various celebs including Pete Rose, Willie Mays and Mort Sahl bought them.

When it came to actual power output, the Mangusta had only 230 hp--a lot lower than one would expect in a car that looked so sexy. Though DeTomaso showed a prototype with four twin-choke Weber carburetors and made some wild claims about 400horsepower, the production car used an off-the-shelf Ford 302 cube V8 with a single four barrel carburetor.

The Mangusta is more like a squirmy snake than the mongoose it was named after due to tricky handling that comes from having 68% of its weight on the rear wheels. The car would go into what race drivers call "trailing throttle oversteer" (a wild, uncontrollable spin) if you were so imprudent as to lift your foot from the floor as you rounded a corner at speed. The clutch was also heavy, heavy, heavy and the ground clearance at the transaxle case was only 3 inches, or about two below the legal minimum which could mean disaster if you ever encountered a speed bump or pot hole at speed.

The most commonly quoted production figures say 402 Mangustas were built between 1968 and 1970 with a few "leftovers" made in 1971 at Ghia after the more civilized Pantera model had replaced the Mangusta at DeTomaso. The most valuable, by far, is the roadster that Giugiaro designed for the 1968 Turin Show. This car has been restored in Italy and recently appeared at the Pebble Beach Concours. The second most valuable Mangusta might be car no. 1, which was what designers call a "pushmobile" or an engineless styling prototype (see bottom of previous page).

More recently Santiago De Tomaso, the founder's son, decided to mount no. 1's prototype body on the chassis of a running car. While the interior is not the same as the original Giugiaro design, the show car is now able to make public appearances some 20 years after it had been dropped out of production.

The Mangustas didn't appreciate like Ferraris did in the last few decades so they have been spared the devaluation as well. With such beautiful bodywork and low production figures, these Euro-American exotics are finally being viewed as highly collectable.

DeTomaso Panteras are difficult to restore because many parts are not available - and that was a car imported by Lincoln-Mercury! You can imagine that Mangustas, imported by British Motor Cars, are even more difficult. Many chassis and body parts have to be custom fabricated as there were no factory spares and few wrecked parts cars.

