

In Brazil, Buggies Never Go Out of Style

Contributed by Alexandre Rocha
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The buggies, those little hoodless cars with fiberglass bodies and large back wheels, have been part of the scenery of the seaside cities in Brazil for decades. What many people don't know is that today they can also be seen in the Saharan sands.

In September this year, Fibravan, factory based in Fortaleza, city in the northeastern state of Ceará, exported eight cars to Morocco as part of a deal which may reach, in the near future, 52 units.

The buyer, according to the Fibravan proprietor, Vanildo Marcelo, was a tourism operator in the Arab country interested in setting up a buggy fleet to promote tourist excursions. This kind of car has already been used in this manner for some time in the Brazilian Northeast coast.

"They got in touch with us and then came over to Fortaleza to see the product," said Marcelo.

The model sold to Morocco was Fibravan Luxo (deluxe), which has fiber body, own making tubular chassis and air-cooled 1.6 liter Volkswagen engine.

But Fibravan is not the only Brazilian buggy manufacturer that has exported to the Arabs. Bugre, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, also sold eight cars to Qatar, in April. In fact, the company's first export, at the end of the 1980s, was of two units to the United Arab Emirates.

The sales to Qatar, according to Paulo Cavalcante, partner and manager at Bugre, was made through a Brazilian who is married to a businessman, owner of a trading company in the Arab country.

"She brought her husband to visit our factory and he ordered the cars to sell them there," he said.

"Our first sales (to the Emirates) was intermediated by an Arab, owner of a Volkswagen retail in Barra da Tijuca (a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro)," he added.

The cars sold to Qatar were of the model Bugre IV, with fiber body; own making chassis and air-cooled 1.6 litre Volkswagen engine with electronic fuel injection.

The two companies are examples of small companies which manufacture special vehicles, and managed to open the doors to the international market.

And not only to the Arab countries. Fibravan has closed deals with clients in Senegal, Cape Verde and is now negotiating a larger contract with importers in Belgium, which may result, according to Marcelo, in the sales of "many cars".

Bugre, on the other hand, has already exported to Aruba and Portugal and recently received the visit of a Saudi entrepreneur interested in doing business.

Production

Fibravan was founded in 1983, employs 20 people and manufactures an average of 20 cars per month, of which six are exported. Marcelo however bets on a market growth for this kind of vehicle and says his company has a production capacity for a lot more. In 2005 he hopes to reach monthly production of 40 units and sell 16 to the foreign market.

The company, according to him, counts on a second factory, which is currently deactivated, but up until the beginning of the 1990s - before the Brazilian market was opened to imported cars and when special vehicle companies flourished -, manufactured an average of 250 buggies per month.

Marcelo is also preparing to launch new models, one with a water-cooled 1.8 liter Volkswagen engine, a buggy with 4x4 traction and a jeep. Currently the company manufactures the Fibravan Luxo and the two-door Fibravan. The "Luxo" costs US\$ 9,961 in the internal market.

Bugre employs 18 people, manufactures an average of 12 cars per month and exports 15% to 18% of the total, although the shipments are eventual. In December production should reach 18 units.

The company was founded in the beginning of the 1970s, manufacturing and preparing race cars, but started manufacturing buggies when the little cars came in style in Brazil, mania brought from the United States.

The company manufactures three models: the Bugre IV, with a traditional design; Bugre V, which is an evolution of the IV; and a utilitarian called FC 15. The first two models cost, in Brazil, US\$ 5,285 and US\$ 5,468 respectively.

Although the Brazilian market for these vehicles is not so big anymore, the manufacturers are not discouraged. "The idea of the buggy is similar to the jeans. It never goes out of fashion," says Paulo Cavalcante.

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