



Kiwi gold

Glenn Dwight reflects on the greatest (only) vehicle to be designed and mass produced in New Zealand.

There is an old saying in the automotive community: "Behind every great vehicle is a Skoda Octavia". Okay, that quote might not be correct, but when it comes to the Trekka, New Zealand's answer to the Aston Martin, it is spot on.

It was the greatest vehicle to be designed and mass produced in New Zealand, mainly because it was the *only* vehicle to be designed and mass produced in New Zealand.

So how did something that looked like a Land Rover drawn from memory with two doors and less than 50 horsepower even have a market here in the land of the long white ute?

It's hard to imagine just how hard it was to buy a vehicle back in the 1960s. The waiting list for new vehicles was so long that people who did eventually get a new car imported could immediately sell them on for a huge profit.

The reason was that successive New Zealand governments had looked to boost local manufacturing in the automotive industry by making new imported vehicles expensive and giving concessions to cars assembled in New Zealand.

Phil Andrews' Motor Lines, importers of then-communist Czechoslovakian Skodas, decided there might be an idea there and explored the idea of creating a New Zealand-designed and manufactured vehicle. The idea was then picked up by Noel Turner, who was the managing director of local independent car assembler Motor Holdings – and the Trekka was born in Otahuhu.

Simple beauty

The idea was simple. Take a Skoda chassis and engine, bolt on some Kiwi beauty, with a locally produced steel body and canvas or fibreglass canopy. The boxy look of a Land Rover merged perfectly with the performance of a two-wheel-drive 1.2-litre Skoda motor.



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And the resulting Trekka was beautiful. A butterfly emerging from a caterpillar. Or maybe a huhu beetle emerging from a grub. It was even exported to Australia, Fiji and Indonesia. Yup, the Trekka was an export product; imagine, it could have been bigger than beef! It even saw service in Vietnam. Apparently, it was good to have around because nobody wanted to steal it. Local thieves preferred the American Jeep.

It was popular with tradies who needed a decent-sized vehicle with storage. It wasn't so good on rural roads until a slip diff was developed.

But like the butterfly, the Trekka's lifespan was short. Less than 3000 were ever produced and in the 1970s import tariffs were eased and cheaper vehicles from Japan swamped the local market.

It was ahead of its time in a lot of ways. Take a look at the SUV market today and there are plenty of boxy 2WDs. If you squint hard enough, a Skoda Yeti almost resembles a Trekka.

Showcased to the world

The Trekka remains the only motor vehicle to be designed and mass-produced in New Zealand, making it an integral part of 'Kiwiana'.

It even featured at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, showcasing New Zealand to the world.

So it might be time to move the Cortina, shift the Torana, park the Commodore and watch out for the boat, because if there's a Trekka in that shed, you could be sitting on a piece of Kiwi gold. ■

Glenn Dwight is a creative director at NZME in Wellington.

All photos supplied by Todd Niall www.trekka.co.nz