

PROGRESS REPORT

DS ancienne et nouvelle

AUTOMOBILES FOR THE FREE THINKERS OF THE WORLD

WORDS: DAN READ / PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON THOMPSON

Have you ever seen a list of the world's greatest cars that doesn't include a Citroen DS? It's a reliable chart-topper, famous as much for its looks as its technical unorthodoxy. In a mid-Fifties world of shocks and springs, the DS instead used hydropneumatic suspension with little spheres of pressurised oil and nitrogen for each wheel, meaning the car always remained level. That wasn't the only innovation, but it's the one that made its name. A name that, as any pub-quizmaster will tell you, is a play on *déesse*, the French for goddess.

And there's nothing more French than a strange Citroen. Although in this case, it's not in a cheeky, *joie de vivre* sort of way; more of a philosophical, *je ne sais quoi* sort of way. If the 2CV was the vineyard workhorse, the DS was for the artistic elite, and statesmen. President de Gaulle was in a DS when his motorcade came under machine-gun fire. Despite punctures, the clever suspension

kept the car steady, allowing a full-speed escape. De Gaulle later credited the car with saving his life.

Life with a DS isn't usually so dramatic. Sink into the squishy driver's armchair and you might half-expect to find a cupholder large enough for a bottle of Burgundy, and although there are none, there are individual ashtrays for all passengers. You can imagine it gliding through Montmartre, four-up, Gauloises smoke curling through the cabin before being sucked through a sliver of open window.

The DS was so ahead of its time, it's easy to forget how old it actually is. When it was first shown in 1955, Churchill had only just left Downing Street, Stirling Moss had only just won his first Grand Prix, and Birds Eye was about to sell its first pack of fish fingers in Britain. And yet here was a car that looked, as one writer put it, "like it had fallen from the sky". Not because it was in a heap, but because it represented all the optimism of the post-war, baby-boomy, space-racey Fifties.

We tend to associate that era with *Jetsons*-style Americana, but it seems the fantasy was being played out on both sides of the Atlantic, even in Parisian design studios: look at the DS with its wraparound glass, tapered rear end, polished chrome and afterburner tail lights. The Americanisms don't stop there. With suspension in fully-dropped "lounge mode" it's basically a low rider. The twin armchairs up front feel more like a bench seat. And you sit reclined, elbow on padded armrest, palm on the steering wheel's single spoke, which – when the wheels are straight – points to 5 o'clock for this very reason.

That leaves your left hand free to operate the gearlever. The original DS has a semi-automatic transmission, but the one we have here is actually a 1961 ID19 – a sort of simpler, entry-level model – with a manual 'box. The gearlever sprouts from the



Oh for the days when the glovebox was close enough for you to reach your gloves



Same name, but with an utterly unrecognisable interior

2016 DS5 HYBRID4 200
 Engine: 1997cc, 4cyl diesel & 27KW electric motor, 197bhp total, 236lb ft total
 Performance: 0–62mph in 9.3secs, 131mph
 Transmission: 6spd automated manual, 4WD
 Economy: 72.4mpg, 103g/km CO₂
 Weight: 1856kg
 L x W: 4530mm x 1871mm

1961 CITROEN DS ID 19
 Engine: 1911cc, 4cyl petrol, 66bhp, 103lb ft
 Performance: 0–62mph in 22.1secs, 87mph
 Transmission: 4spd manual, FWD
 Economy: 24.2mpg, n/a CO₂
 Weight: 1237kg
 L x W: 4826mm x 1791mm

steering column in the style of an indicator stalk. To find first you pull it towards you and downwards. Second is towards you and up. Third? Down and away. Repeat until totally confused and barrelling through a roundabout in fourth. But no matter, because it rides with an elegance that even some modern cars can't match. Not bad for a car knocking on 60 years old, eh?

You'd think in the six decades since, that the DS would have been nurtured, improved and perfected. But although Citroen persisted with self-levelling suspension and odd styling, it arguably never repeated the intellectual and technical highs of the 1955 original. In more recent times the DS name has been resurrected as a brand – one that stands alone from Citroen itself. And it does good things.

Just look at the DS5 – an exec hatchback with a touch of the spaceships. Whether you like the looks is your call, but it certainly shares some creative freethinking with the original DS. Grey isn't its strongest colour, but who cares when you're inside, cocooned in one of the most interesting cabins of any car on sale. There's even a Batmobile-style control panel in the roof, and individual overhead windows.

This is the recently facelifted car, the diesel hybrid version. To the designers of the original DS, this would seem like far-fetched technology. But actually there are much better hybrid systems out there, so the DS5 can't claim to be a tech pioneer. And the struts-and-springs suspension actually feels quite heavy-footed after the serenity of the original DS, which just floats along the road.

Actually you can have a regular, non-hybrid diesel with slightly softer suspension, and of all the cars in the modern DS showroom, that's the one that can trace most of its DNA to the original. We can't claim it's better to drive than a BMW, or as posh as a Mercedes, but it's reassuringly weird, and that's what a DS is all about.

FANCY ONE IN YOUR GARAGE?



1966 **DS21 PALLAS**, €38,500

In the mid-Sixties Citroen added a Pallas model to the DS range, with extra luxuries and nicer upholstery. This one's immaculate, even with 100,000km on the clock. classiccarsforsale.co.uk



1959 **ID19**, £17,500

A fine-looking example like the one we drove, recently imported from South Africa (hot climates equal less rust). It's RHD, with red leather and red carpet. carandclassic.co.uk



1973 **DS21**, £12,750

This one started life in Italy but has been with its British owner for 29 years. Only 58k under its belt, and it's being re-trimmed with a mushroom interior. carandclassic.co.uk



Where would it be crazy to put the buttons? On the ceiling? Do it...



The local church just called and asked who took its organ stops...

