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Ahoy, Driver! An Amphibious Car Refuses to Sink Into Oblivion

A Flop in the 1960s, the Amphicar Is Prized Today; Rough on Land, Slow on Water



Meet the Amphicar, a German classic car from the 60's that leads a double life--as a boat. WSJ's Spencer Jakab reports.

"I brake for fish," says a sticker on the back of Tony Ortokales's car.

It's the sort of thing an avid angler might have on his bumper, but the license plate reading "H2O CAR" suggests something else. The propellers below the bumper tell the rest of the story.

Mr. Ortokales, a 54-year-old machinist from Laconia, N.H., is the proud owner of one of the 500-odd Amphicars remaining in the world. About 4,000 were built. The only mass-produced amphibious passenger car, the German import sold between 1962 and 1967. That's around the time many current owners, mainly middle-aged men, spotted the cars when they were still children and fell in love.

"I saw one coming out of a lake as a kid in South Dakota, and it was like something out of James Bond," says Jon Erdahl, a 53-year-old retired media executive from Loudon, N.H. He next saw one, with a "for sale" sign on it about a year ago and made an offer on the spot. "To me, it's a boyhood dream."

Jack Howland, a 56-year-old engineer from Georgetown, Mass., first saw an Amphicar when he was 12 on Lake Winnepesaukee, N.H., and knew he had to have one.

Mr. Ortokales smiles at the memory of his first encounter: "I saw this funny-looking car with propellers, and I didn't believe it was real."

Amphicars draw a crowd. During a "splash-in" this month organized by Mr. Ortokales and his wife, Denise, in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire, people rushed to snap pictures and gawk as the cars drove in and out of the water. Boaters did double-takes and pulled up close when they saw oncoming headlights. Sometimes, onlookers are more alarmed than amused.

"The first time I drove mine into the Connecticut River, someone called 911," says Mr. Howland. "My buddy called to ask if I had taken my car out, and he said they were looking for me."



Spencer Jakab/The Wall Street Journal

An Amphicar in the driveway of Tony Ortokales of Laconia, N.H.

Larry DePasquale, a 58-year-old Air Force employee from Celina, Ohio, owns three Amphicars and loves to surprise bystanders. "I've had people shout: 'No, don't do it!' They think you're committing suicide."

In the 1960s, visitors to President Lyndon Johnson's Texas ranch got the shock of their lives when, according to an aide, he offered them a ride in his Amphicar and then said the brakes had failed as he let it roll down a hill into a lake.

Sometimes they can be too exciting. During the second day of the "splash-in," the Ortokales family's Amphicar started to billow smoke and take on water in the middle of a lake because of a short circuit in its bilge pump.

Safely back in the driveway of their house that evening, they managed to laugh it off as fellow-enthusiasts assisted with repairs. One attendee, 57-year-old real-estate investor Mike Lacroix from West Chesterfield, Mass., was asked why his wife hadn't joined the rest of the party on the lake. He told the story of when they took their Amphicar out on a Florida river at night to visit a wildlife preserve not accessible to regular vehicles. But because he had forgotten to turn on the bilge pump, his car began to sink in the alligator-infested waters and barely made it back to shore. "Since then, she hasn't been very amphibious," he says.

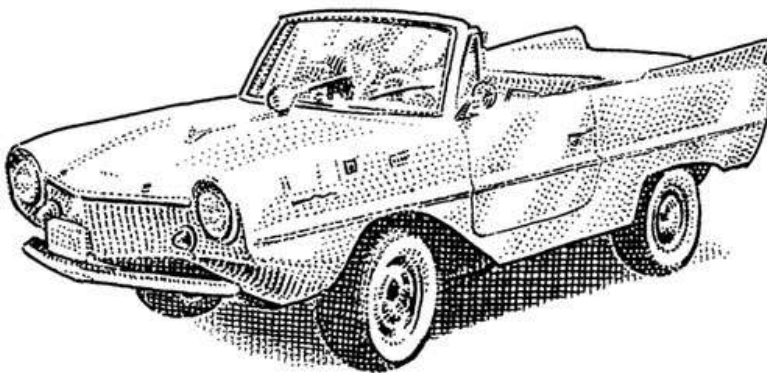
The Amphicar was the brainchild of Hans Trippel, a German auto designer who is better known for the gullwing doors of Mercedes-Benz sports cars. Trippel experimented with amphibious

cars in the 1930s and later built several hundred military ones for the Wehrmacht during World War II. A competing military design from Volkswagen called the Schwimmwagen was more successful.

After the war, Mr. Trippel returned to his dream of building a commercially viable amphibious car. But after designing a prototype of the Amphicar, he had no further involvement with its Berlin manufacturer.

It was all for the best. After making a splash at the 1961 New York Auto Show, the company thought it could sell tens of thousands a year to Americans. Those estimates turned out to be way too optimistic. Between 1962 and 1967 fewer than 3,800 were sold in North America plus a few hundred more in Europe. Many were given away in lieu of severance pay to employees.

A publicity stunt that involved a successful crossing of the English Channel got headlines. Another in the Strait of Gibraltar was less auspicious, since it involved the first-ever collision of a ship and an automobile. More stringent U.S. safety requirements in 1968 finally sank Amphicar Corp. itself.



Amphicar Model 770

There have been other attempts at passenger cars that float, fly or even can submerge, but none approaching Amphicar's brief heyday.

"While people tend to be terribly fascinated with them, they tend not to buy them," explains Doug Hilton, who runs the fledgling Land, Air, and Sea Museum near his home outside London. He has an Amphicar in his collection of 25 dual-purpose vehicles.

Price was an issue as well. Back in 1965, Amphicars cost upwards of \$3,200 or nearly twice as much as a Volkswagen Beetle, a more practical German import.

Today though, an owner of a mint-condition Amphicar can get \$50,000 or more for it. Mr. Erdahl says he probably could have put a kid through college for what it cost to restore his. Even so, the seller "had tears in his eyes as we drove away."

Owners admit that, even by 1960s standards, they weren't exactly dreamboats mechanically. Capable of up to a bone-juddering 70 miles per hour on land and only seven on water—hence the "Model 770" moniker—both their maritime and road handling leave much to be desired.

"What they say is true—it's a boat on land and a car in the water," says Nick Ortokales, a 25-year-old computer programmer from Seattle who flew home to be with his parents for the splash-in. "But it's just so much fun."