

SPECIAL REPORT: MOTORING

Marques showcase their wares

Exhibition is a must-see event for car industry and its devotees, writes William Wadsworth

The Frankfurt motor show began with a collection of eight cars in Berlin, in 1897.

Known as the Internationale Automobil-Ausstellung (IAA, International Automobile Exhibition), it became a symbol of German technological expertise and industrial might, and the must-see event for the car industry and its devotees.

After the second world war, the event resumed in Hanover and, in 1951, moved to Frankfurt, where it has developed into the world's biggest and probably the most important motor exhibition, which shows passenger cars and commercial vehicles in alternate years.

This year's 66th IAA could draw about 900,000 visitors and showcase the latest trends and technological highlights of the automotive year 2015, and will open to the press on September 15, and to the public, two days later, until September 27.

The event's organisers expect 1,000 exhibitors from 40 countries to display their innovations, including numerous world premieres of new cars, the best of which can be expected in Hong Kong next year.

The BMW group looks very strong at the 12-day, biennial event, as it is taking a 12,000-

square-metre, two-level stand – its biggest yet – to highlight several significant launches for its units BMW, MINI and Rolls-Royce.

The star of the event for Hong Kong's affluent car lovers could be BMW's 7-Series. Whatever improvements lie under its covers, the executive saloon will be a must-have in southern China. BMW's high-performance M brand launches the new M3 saloon, while the Mid-Levels staple, the 3-Series, celebrates its 40th anniversary with a new model.

The marque will show its sophisticated, new X1; the sleek, new 6 Series; and will reveal advances in its hybrid BMW eDrive engines. Other highlights include the carbon core and laser lighting in the desirable i8, and its latest bikes, from the Concept Path 22 scrambler, to the new BMW F 800, the BMW S 1000 RR, the BMW S 1000 XR and the BMW R nineT.

BMW's MINI unit is scheduled to show its latest definition of the British marque, the Oxford-built Clubman, which premiered in Berlin, this summer.

Sleeker, more refined, and with six doors, the Clubman seats five people and has a boot that extends from 360 litres to 1,250l with the rear seats folded flat. Rebranded, urbane and

neat, the Clubman has a new eight-speed Steptronic transmission, electric parking brake, full electric seat adjustment and optional MINI Yours interior styling. The two-litre, 192hp S versions and 1.6l, 136hp versions could convince many Hong Kong households to buy MINI instead of larger Japanese multipurpose vehicles.

The Bavarian marque's Rolls-Royce brand also world premieres the Dawn, whose details are under wraps, but fans might expect a soft-top Wraith renamed after 28 of the marque's dropheads launched in the early 1950s.

Mercedes-Benz has beefed its C-Class range with a new, sporty looking coupe that is roomier in the front and consumes 27 per cent less fuel than its predecessors.

Mercedes-AMG will world premiere the new C 63 Coupé, which has a 476hp or a 510hp AMG 4.0l V8 biturbo engine with AMG Ride Control suspension with electronically controlled shock absorbers; AMG Dynamic Select transmission modes; rear-axle limited-slip differential; and dynamic engine mounts.

Audi will reveal its electric e-tron quattro concept sport utility vehicle. The four rings says the four-seater will be bigger than the Q5, and with a lithium-ion battery range of over 496km.



The 66th Frankfurt motor show is expected to draw about 900,000 visitors to see numerous world premieres of new cars. Photo: IAA

Aerodynamically tested at 0.25cd, the plug-in has three electric motors: one on the front axle and two on the rear to create an "electrified quattro" that is due for production in 2018.

The marque will also reveal lightweight, energy efficient Organic Light Emitting Diode lights that could change the production and design of rear, side and indicator illumination.

Infiniti, which is headquartered in Hong Kong, poses a strong challenge to German marques with the world premiere of its stunning Q30 Premium Active Compact, which the marque describes as "a category-breaking vehicle concept developed for customers seeking urban individuality".

This model seems to have been designed for Hongkongers with the promise of sophisticated, responsive driving, and "crafted trims and expressive interiors" for style-conscious drivers.

Nissan will show the NP300 Navara pick-up; Suzuki unveils the one-litre all new Baleno; and Mazda will show its new Koeu, a bold crossover SUV

concept alongside its acclaimed new MX-5.

Ferrari is expected to show its exquisite 488 Spider, which was launched in July, and is the most powerful, mid-rear-engined V8 to feature the marque's retractable hard top that has been patented to save weight, improve cabin comfort and deploys in 14 seconds.

Lovely in the new Blu Corsa livery, the 488 Spider has the same 3.9l, 670hp turbo-charged block as the recently launched 488 GTB, and speeds to 100km/h in three seconds and 200km/h in 8.7 seconds.

The model accelerates out of corners 12 per cent faster, and response times are 9 per cent more rapid than the 458 Spider, the marque says.

Lamborghini is expected to present the Aventador LP 750-4 Superveloce Roadster, which it launched this month in Monterey, California, and is offering for HK\$8.48 million in Hong Kong. The 6.5l V12 produces 750hp at 8,400rpm and 690Nm of torque, and accelerates through Lamborghini's seven-speed ISR transmission to 100km/h in 2.9 seconds, topping at more than

350km/h. Alfa Romeo's elegant new Giulia could attract a devoted following in Hong Kong. Launched in June, the top-of-the-range Quadrifoglio version belts 510hp from a V6 turbo petrol engine and reaches 100km/h in less than four seconds.

Fitted with Alfalink suspension, the model has lots of suspension and steering electronics, brakes with aluminium callipers and carbon ceramic discs and "the best torsional rigidity in its class, which helps not only optimise handling but also ensures better quality over time and improved acoustic comfort", the marque says.

Peugeot leads a strong French contingent, with the premieres of the 308 GTI by Peugeot Sport and the 308 R Hybrid. Citroën launches its "upmarket" Aircross concept car; new features for the C4 Cactus and C1; and a new range of more economic engines and new connectivity options.

Bentley is expected to launch its keenly awaited Bentayga SUV, while Jaguar offers its F-Pace equivalent and the stylish new XF saloon. KIA is expected

to show its latest Sportage SUV, and Volvo has its award-winning XC90.

The latest pocket rockets could draw crowds. Lotus is expected to present its quickest production road car, the 3-Eleven, with a 3.5l V6 and a new lightweight composite body. Launched as a single seater at June's Goodwood Festival of Speed, it promises 450hp, "legendary" handling and a "blistering" 100km/h in less than three seconds. Its Road version tops at 280km/h and its 900kg race version is 10km/h faster.

Meanwhile, Volkswagen Motorsport has developed its first racing car based on the seventh-generation Golf. The 330ps two-litre turbo concept could race at the Macau Grand Prix, on November 21-22 "to help Volkswagen evaluate a potential customer racing programme from the 2016 season onwards", the marque says.

The model gets 18-inch racing tyres, a chassis that has been widened by about 40cm, "and a striking rear wing" to "give the Golf a ready-to-race look and first-class handling", Volkswagen adds.



Mercedes Benz's new C63 Coupé



BMW's new X1 SUV



Alfa Romeo's new Giulia

Chinese carmakers raise the bar for design and technology

Mark Andrews

Chinese producers are rapidly changing to a "more-for-less" strategy, similar to that used to great effect by Korean manufacturers. Much of this comes from onboard car technology, which means manufacturers offer features formerly limited to premium marques.

This is all for a price where the top-spec trim is around the base-model cost for an equivalent-sized joint venture (JV) produced car. This is in stark contrast to the days when low prices were usually coupled with lower safety, poor build quality, second-hand platforms and ancient engines.

In a stark indictment of how the JV model of development has failed in its original aims in the mainland market, it is private companies instead of large state-owned enterprises that are leading this change. One only needed to look around this year's Shanghai Auto Show to see how far BYD, Geely and Great Wall have come.

But have they reached parity

with international brands and, if not, where are they still lacking?

Chinese manufacturers have long had a reputation for copying international brands. Geely managed to end that practice early, but its copies were replaced with bland and uninspiring cars such as the Emgrand EC7. However, over the last few years there has been an influx of foreign design talent into Chinese brands. Peter Horbury went from Volvo to Geely, while Great Wall managed to poach Pierre Leclercq from BMW.

Geely's Horbury-designed Borui GC9 is an example of what can be expected as companies start to produce original cars that look desirable. BYD, however, seems to be struggling to get beyond this design barrier, and the Tang, which went on sale this year, is heavily influenced by the Lexus RX.

Where the Tang does score highly, however, is with its drivetrain. Just a few years ago, Chinese manufacturers were struggling with underpowered engines and poor gearboxes. Now, the Tang is the world's most powerful hybrid SUV



Mainland roads are now being filled with Chinese-made cars of a higher quality. Photo: Xinhua

thanks to BYD's 542 Dual Mode II technology.

Modern turbo petrol engines should have a power output of 100hp for every litre of displacement – something all three market leaders achieve with some of their latest engines. The 2.0T fitted to the Great Wall Haval H9 managed to produce a respectable 214hp.

But where engine technology still lags is with fuel economy and emissions. Few Chinese manufacturers offer any models with stop-start technology, which can help reduce fuel usage and emissions. And, while many state-owned companies are behind in the transmission stakes, the private companies have either developed the latest dual clutch automatic gearbox technology in-house or bought it off the shelf.

External finishes and the quality of materials used for the interior have improved markedly. The H9, GC9 and

Tang are full of plush leather and soft plastics. Questions still remain about how well they will wear, but these marques seem to have moved far past the days of nearly new cars with cubbyhole doors falling off.

All these improvements come at a cost, however. Five years ago, most Chinese manufacturers were selling cars that only topped the price range around 150,000 yuan (HK\$181,340), with many models below 100,000 yuan. Today, models are pushing the 250,000 yuan level, with some cars such as the Tang Ultimate Edition commanding 518,800 yuan.

I got behind the wheel of one of the new wave of Chinese cars – Geely's Borui GC9 – to see whether it really can deliver an internationally competitive product.

Take away the badges, and you could think you were driving a Volvo – the influence of

designer Horbury's old company is obvious. But this new design architecture that is already making its way into a new range of models is bold and modern, giving the Geely brand some panache.

In the new more-for-less model of selling Chinese cars, the GC9 is overflowing with features that are usually only found in much more expensive premium competitors. I drove the flagship model, which came with a head-up display to show speed and navigation, plus a 360-degree panoramic parking system, which not only shows what's behind you but all around the car when reversing.

The car is insistent about safety, continually beeping alerts on the road – it audibly warns you if a car is in your blind spot and you change lanes, if you drift out of your lane, or if you get too close to the car in front. Intelligent adaptive cruise

control matches your speed to the car in front and will brake accordingly. No crash-test results are available yet, but with all these safety systems and no less than eight airbags on the flagship model it should achieve a five-star rating.

The plastics on the upper dashboard are soft, and the switchgear are easily a match for those in a Hyundai i40. Below the chrome and fake wood stripes, harder plastics are used. Most storage spaces open and close smoothly, but one of the doors on the centre tunnel storage space opened stiffly. The opening side door pockets are a novel feature which makes access a cinch.

Rear occupants get their own air conditioning controls, but there is no USB charging point. The interior design allows the middle passenger to be seated comfortably. The seats do not fold down, but there is a ski hatch through the fold-down armrest. In the flagship model, the passenger on the rear right can move the front passenger seat and their own seat electrically – ideal for chauffeur-driven bosses.

Geely claims to have benchmarked the GC9 against cars by BMW and Mercedes. Driving up the hills in Moganshan, Zhejiang province, the GC9's road holding capability was impressive. While pushing the car along sharp, winding roads, there was no excessive body roll, and the GC9 gave a much more composed ride than the Hyundai i40, although it was not quite to the standards of the BMW 3 Series. The ride was also smooth, soaking up most bumps.

Available with a reworked older 2.4l, and new 1.8 turbo and 3.5 V6 engines, the 1.8T – used in the test car – is the engine of choice. It seems a bit underpowered on paper with only 160hp, but that does not show on the road. The transmission was developed by Geely's Australian DSI division, and while it doesn't produce changes as smooth as those from Volkswagen's DSG unit, it is more than acceptable.

At 176,800 yuan for the flagship 1.8T model, the Geely Borui GC9 can be considered a bargain considering the technology that comes with it.



BYD Song



Geely Borui GC9