



1959 Facel Vega HK500

For the Few Who Own the Finest
By ERIC TEGLER on 3/02/2007

Print



Eric Tegler
Combining hand-built luxury with Mopar muscle, the Facel Vega truly was "for the few who owned the finest."

Advertising for the Facel Vega said it best: "For the Few Who Own the Finest." The few included Ava Gardner, Ringo Starr, Joan Fontaine, Tony Curtis and a raft of Saudi princes. Stirling Moss eschewed air travel in favor of driving his Vega from race to race. Albert Camus met his end as a passenger in one, doing 112 mph. Facel ownership implied that you were someone—someone with taste.

The Facel Vega was the brainchild of French industrialist Jean Daninos. Born to a prominent family and brother to noted novelist Pierre Daninos, he started a career in engineering with Citroën in 1930 before switching to the aviation industry. By 1938, he

had established an aircraft component factory in England. Shortly thereafter, he founded a metal-stamping firm near Paris with the name Forges et Ateliers de Construction l'Eure-et-Loir, or Facel S.A.

Daninos' French plant was overrun by the Nazis during World War II, and he fled to England. He next was asked to put his aluminum and steel stamping expertise to work aiding American industry. He returned to France after spending the war years in the United States and revived Facel, producing components for Simca, Panhard and Ford-France. Disappointed by the loss of grand French marques such as Delage and Hotchkiss to postwar austerity and government policy, Daninos was determined to build his own upmarket grand tourer.

In the late '40s, he commissioned Pinin Farina to build custom Bentleys (the Cresta I/II) to his own designs and sold a few. But in 1953, he directed Facel's chief engineer, Jacques Bresseur, to develop a prototype that he would style. Unable to find a suitable powerplant in France or England, Daninos leveraged his wartime American connections and struck a deal for Chrysler's new 276-cid Hemi V8. Brother Pierre suggested the name "Vega," and Daninos' car debuted at the 1954 Paris auto show.

Reaction to the luxurious GT was favorable, though its price, about \$7,500, took Continentals aback. The Vega first sold in America in 1955 and slowly caught on with the Hollywood crowd. It was no sports car, but American reviewers praised its looks, rigidity and high-speed stability. Through 1957, the Vega received ever more powerful versions of Chrysler's V8 and the company's three-speed Torqueflite transmission. By 1958, it had been restyled, equipped with the 361-cid "Wedge" V8, and designated the HK500.

The car featured here was acquired in 2006 by Arnaud Bouthenet, an executive with Volvo Powertrain North America.

He bought the HK500 from fellow French émigré and former Chrysler executive Francois Castaing. Bouthenet says he loves the Vega's simple shapes, stainless steel and Connolly leather.

In late 1959, Facel dropped in the 383-cid engine, but Bouthenet's 361 still puts 355 hp and nearly 400 lb-ft through the Torqueflite (a four-speed manual was also available) to narrow tires on 15-inch wheels. The power is controlled by a wishbone front/rear leaf-spring suspension. The HK500 was the first French car, and one of the first anywhere, to feature standard four-wheel disc (Dunlop) brakes. They came in handy if you needed to halt the Vega's nearly 4200 pounds from its 140-mph top speed.

The leather interior (including the headliner) matches the elegant exterior. Visibility through the wraparound windshield is excellent, as is the view of the aircraft-style dash. Though it looks and feels like wood, it's actually stainless steel, over which 14 layers of paint were laboriously applied. To the left of the steering column is push-button actuation for the transmission.

The Vega's haute ambience restrains your aggression on the road. But if you boot this runaway model, it'll take off in second gear. Braking requires muscle, while steering offers little on-center feel.

Only 540 Vegas were built. A combination of poor decisions and French chauvinism put the company out of business by 1964, ensuring that Facel ownership always would be for the few.

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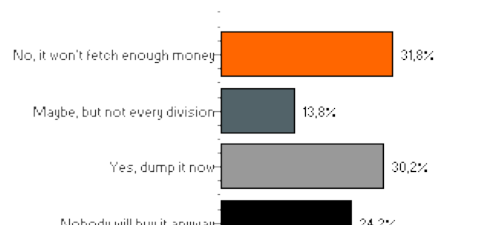
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