

Argentine cars: the history of Alcre Argentina (and Champion microcars)

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It is hard to admit but it is a reality: ***the Argentine automobile industry never produced original cars*** . It is possible that there have been a handful of manufacturers endowed with vision and capable of designing a car from scratch – *as in the case of the Creole [Zunder](#) , or the [Dinarg](#) -*, but they are cases counted on the fingers of one hand. In its vast majority, the enormous number of ventures that emerged under the industrial promotion regime - *existing between the late 50s and early 60s*– opted to copy European models, negotiate the import of their parts for national assembly or, in the least of cases, obtain the tooling for the manufacture of an entirely Argentine version. Let's review: the [Siam Di Tella](#) was an English **Riley** assembled in Argentina; the second generation of [Rastrojero Diesel](#) used chassis from **Fiat 1800** ; the [IKA Bergantin](#) was nothing more than an **Alfa Romeo 1900** ; the [Bambi](#) , [Mitzi](#) , [Isettas](#) and [Isard T300](#) were nothing more than national armadas of European microcars; and even a hero of the national industry such as the [Torino](#) was still a [Rambler](#) recycled and modified by **Pininfarina** . While the bulk of these cars has become extinct - *the passage of time*

and corrosion have devoured the few surviving specimens, or reduced them to remain captive in collectors' warehouses -, the advent of the Internet has given us the chance to rediscover our lost cars... which still exist in Europe through exhibitions, museums and tours by fans and specialists. That is to say, the original European models – *that here we try to copy or assemble without success*– survive as cult objects in the old continent, and allows us to have a full color vision (and live) of those prototypes assembled by a handful of Argentine enthusiasts, who dreamed more than 50 years ago with the illusion of becoming real car makers.

In Argentina, a large number of rare and bizarre car models proliferated, always produced in small quantities, and almost always flawed due to the poor survival of their builders. And it is that many of them could have been good technicians or excellent engineers, but the majority lacked the necessary commercial sense for the business to end up taking flight, either by creating dealer chains or by devising efficient sales plans. Regardless of whether the car was good or bad, few knew how to sell it properly, which is why they ended up strangled between poor sales, the rise in import costs of the different parts for their corresponding assembly, and government pressure to that they become authentic builders that gave rise to a thriving national industry.

The case that concerns us remains in the memory since, after an immense advertising campaign, the promoted cars never finished leaving the "*prototype*" phase ... although in reality they were the Creole versions of some unknown and problematic European cars, which existed since 1949 and which at that time – *the 60s* – were presented in a handful of dealerships as the next marvel of the Argentine automotive industry.

This, gentlemen, is the story of the German **Champion** microcars and how they came to be transformed into the Argentine **Alcre** ,... which could never leave the factory.



a 1952 **Champion 400** ; the original design dated from 1950 and had obvious influences from **Porsche** and the **Volkswagen Beetle** ; unfortunately it had serious termination problems, which would undermine the chances of success of the model

The motorcycle builder who was forced to build cars

Europe, the 1950s. It's hard to lead a civilized life when the entire continent is scarred by the scars of World War II and the reconstruction is not over yet. It is a time of sacrifices and rationing and people, to survive, must get used to the economy. Cars are a luxury, and not only because of their price but also because of the cost of filling the tank with the very expensive fuel that was sold at that time in the old continent.

People need to mobilize... but they also need a palliative for the hard times they are experiencing. Beyond using public transport services, people want to recover the status and independence they had before the war... or, at least, a kind of placebo that allows them to be pleased until better times arrive. The existing alternatives were motorcycles or cars of

old design - *from the pre-war*— which were still manufactured since carrying out engineering studies, plans and new tooling for a new car required investing a fortune and would imply manufacturers embarking on a project with doubtful possibilities of cost recovery. While the old cars were still robust, they were otherwise endowed with large, inefficient old engines, compulsive guzzlers of expensive fuel. So *what was the solution?*

The alternative came from the side of the *microcars* , flimsy vehicles equipped with small motors from motorcycles, and which were used to transport 2 (in the best of cases, 4) people without getting wet on a rainy day – as I would say *André Citroen himself on his 2CV* : “*they were umbrellas with wheels*” -; because these little cars lacked speed and safety, and hardly had the aesthetics of a traditional car, making them more of a palliative than a real utility vehicle. However, people began to get used to them and even, in some cases, began to treat them as objects of worship.

Maico was involved in this crossroads , which was a respectable German motorcycle manufacturer that had been established since 1926. Although they never diverted their attention from the world of two wheels, the truth is that the company fell into crisis in the mid-1990s. 50 to see that the sales of street motorcycles were shrinking considerably - *partly due to the growing competition and appearance of other brands, and partly also because the Germans were addressing the incipient market of microcars* -. Determined to participate in it to rebuild his finances, **Maico** faced the construction of a small car, easy to assemble and maintain, and capable of being sold at a competitive price.

While **Maico** understood motorcycle engines, he lacked experience in matters such as chassis or car bodies, which is why he set about investigating the possibilities of acquiring existing tooling or, alternatively, teaming up with an independent bodybuilder to expand his current production line. This is how he ended up getting involved with the **Champion** line of cars , which seemed to fulfill his expectations.

What **Maico** was unaware of is that the **Champions** had serious design problems, which is why the brand had been floundering for years.

Originally designed by the racing driver Hermann Holbein in 1949 - *as part of a small venture that he ran* -, Holbein soon realized that the numbers were not enough to manufacture it alone and decided to seek a partner in the figure of Benteler **International AG** , a huge steel company that was eager to expand its investment portfolio. Holbein and **Benteler** founded **Champion-Automobilbau in 1950 and began building the Champion 250** coupes and **250 S** , and the **Champion 400 microcar** ... which - *10 years later, and more than 11,000 kilometers away* - would end up becoming the nationally produced **Alcre Susana** .

While **Champion** 's intentions were noble, their mechanical unreliability and dismal business circuit torpedoed the project, to the point that the company was forced to close in 1952, just two years after it was founded. However, that would not be the end of the problematic **Champion** , since that same year the tooling and the rights of the brand would pass to other owners – *the people of Rheinische, Hennenhöfer & Co . from Ludwigshafen, and who had offered the original cars as dealers* -.

It is curious to see how the same circus would be repeated over and over again, with a lot of people putting up large amounts of money and insisting on building a failed car every way you look at it. **Rheinische, Hennenhofer & Co.** it would end up melted due to millionaire debt - *especially, when facing the project of putting a reliable Heinkel engine in the Champion 400* -. In 1954 the **Champion** would pass into the hands of the people of **Rheinische Automobil-Fabrik, Henning Thorndal**... which would also go bankrupt in 1955, but this time not because of the small and defective car but because Thorndal disappeared from the map with 6 million marks as a result of a bank loan granted to the company, which is why he would enter bankruptcy and settlement in the middle of said year. **That's when the people from Maico** enter this soap opera , who – *out of desperation or naivety* – decided to pay 300,000 German marks to get the rights to the brand, the dies and remaining stocks of the late **Rheinische** .

Trying to revive a dead person.

Maico faced the construction of a line made up of five models: the **MC 400/4** – *direct successor to the **Champion 400*** -, which did not convince anyone and ended up being withdrawn after just 21 units produced; a clone with a more powerful engine, the **MC 500/4** – *equipped with a 452 cc two-stroke **Heinkel** engine* -, of which 6,301 units were sold; the **MC 400/H**, which sold 1,374 units between 1955 and 1956; and the sports models **MC 500 G** and **MC 500 Sport** , of which only 4 units were made.



The **Maico 500** was a 4-seat version of the **Champion 400** and had a larger 452cc engine; It was distinguished from the older versions by its larger size and its rectangular roof, and it would be the model on which the **Alcre Susana** would be based.

Although the **Maico MC 400** had corrected some construction problems dating back to the **Champion** days , there was a fatal flaw that would spell the fate of the car: the structural weaknesses of the axles, which tended to split in the middle at times when the car was picking up speed.

As early as 1957, **Maico** was facing a large number of lawsuits because its cars were considered death traps – *even dealers preferred to deliver cars to customers' doors, so that accidents would not occur at the exit of the sales rooms (!)* - which spoke volumes about the tremendous engineering problems that cheap strollers suffered from. Decades before the **Corvair**, the Germans also had their own car riddled with deadly flaws.

Overwhelmed by the trials and by the pressure of the German government - *and with the owners and a large part of the top management in prison* -, **Maico** decided to close its line of automobiles in 1958. It would continue manufacturing motorcycles until 1985 - *obtaining some success with race bikes and motocross bikes* - but that year it would go bankrupt and end up disappearing. For their part, the lethal **Champions** would still have a survival time... when they were resurrected, 3 years later, in the form of an Argentine industrial venture.

Alcre Susana and Alcre Luis: the Argentine Champions

Alberto Credidio was the founder of **Alcre SACIFI** , a venture dedicated to the manufacture of electric and combustion motors. Credidio was also a fan of cars - *he had run a few races in the late 50's* -, which is why his interest in cars was more than evident. Taking advantage of the promotion regime for the automotive industry implemented by the presidency of Arturo Frondizi, Credidio presented a plan in 1959 to produce a line of vehicles, which was approved shortly and took two years to be implemented.

The data that follows is confusing. Credidio managed to interest two German firms – **Heinkel** and the **Bellino** bodybuilder – so that they each contribute US\$1,200,000 to the undertaking, managing to build a 100,000 m² industrial facility in Paraná, Entre Ríos. Once this was done, he managed to get the manufacturers to sell him the parts of the **Maico Champion 400 and the 500 Sport** prototype , which he ended up renaming **Alcre Susana** and **Alcre Luis** – *in honor of his children's name* . He assembled some models, put them on display through the **Falcrea dealer chain**, and tried to seduce potential customers by offering generous discounts (of the order of 14% on the first 1,000 units)

due to the launch of the car. What is most striking is that the advertisements in print media – *printed between 1961 and 1962* – spoke of 470 “reserved” units. ***Was it a publicity stunt or were there really people who paid the \$50,000 at the time to sign it off?*** . And if so, ***what happened to these buyers? Did they actually receive the vehicles, or did the entire venture fall apart before even taking flight with the first unit?***. The common answer is that the car did not generate expectations and that is why it never went into production... but the other possible explanation is that the Argentine manufacturers ended up realizing the tremendous construction defects and decided to cancel things before moving on to the next stage. . It's all very strange, especially considering that Credidio's German partners – ***Heinkel and Bellino*** – couldn't ignore the scandal unleashed by the ***Maico Champions*** in their native Germany.

The photos remain, the notices remain, the testimonies remain... *the cars are missing* . Today we remember the ***Alcres*** through their German ancestors, involved in a black fate that marked their entire existence until the end of their days. Today they are museum pieces, rarities that are exhibited in specialized circuits and are admired as historical objects due to the rarity of their design... actually ignoring the dark legend that hides their bizarre appearance.



the **Maico 500 Sport** – *in a prototype version that never went into production, due to the closure of the company's car division -;* It is curious that said car, with a 700 cc engine, was offered in our pampas (with the name of **Alcre Luis**) as a ready-to-use and duly tested model.

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