

Argentine Cars: History of Autoar and Cisitalia Argentina

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Sometimes cars have compelling origin stories, whether they suffered tortuous development, were the product of a sleepless night and passionate inspiration, or were a product of their time, where a series of fortuitous coincidences conspired to bring them into being. But in other cases the cars are simply cars, and the only thing they represent is to be historical milestones in the life of a brand, either because they were the first, the last or the best sellers of it.

Take the case of the **Cisitalia 750** (and its big brother **850**). In themselves, they were still customized versions of the **Fiat 750 Spider**, a small car with budget *roadster* ambitions that tried to offer even a minimal sports experience in the harsh days of post-war Europe. And although there was nothing exceptional about it, the greatest merit of the **Cisitalia 750** is that it turned out to be the swan song of **Cisitalia Argentina ICOSA**, an Argentine car factory with Italian roots (and a huge sporting tradition) whose history is curious. Because in the end the products are still the intellectual children of their creators and, in this case, of the particular personality of Piero Dusio, an entrepreneur who

founded three car factories located on two different continents and who even aspired to compete - *at a certain point* – in international Formula 1.

Dusio, the eternal enthusiast

Piero Dusio's story is nothing short of curious. Dusio had been an Italian soccer star in the 1920s until he suffered a serious injury that prevented him from playing. Resigned to being off the court, he began to try his hand at business, obtaining representation from a Swiss textile company and making a fortune in a short time. Suddenly finding himself in a comfortable position, Dusio began to live like a playboy and, among all the activities he devoted his free time to, he soon discovered an innate talent for motorsports. Having become one of the most outstanding drivers on the Italian circuits of the 1930s, Dusio began to seriously think about putting together his own team. *Compagnie Industrie Sportivo Italia*, or **Cisitalia** according to the acronym. It was the union of a series of businesses run by Piero Dusio, which consisted of a textile factory, a hotel chain, a sports equipment factory and a bank. Initially, Dusio would use **Cisitalia** as a sponsor for his sports activities... although over time it would end up becoming the financial support to create his first car factory.



the **Cisitalia 202** was so perfect in its finish that it ended up being nicknamed "*the rolling sculpture*".

Dusio might never have built his own vehicles had it not been for the immense fortune he amassed during World War II. His textile company supplied uniforms to the Italian army and, later, he began selling cloth to the Germans. Between his fortune and his recent friendship with the engineer Dante Giacosa (future father of the **Fiat Topolino** and **500**, among many other models of the Italian firm), Dusio was so enthusiastic that he set up a small industrial venture and began to build racing cars. Between 1944 and 1947 the **Cisitalia** led the Italian races and Dusio decided to bet on more, creating the exceptional **Cisitalia 202** .

There were many things that set the **202** apart: it had aluminum bodywork, it was extremely aerodynamic and handcrafted like a monocoque – *a huge block of aluminum hand-cast, leaving no edges or cracks, and integrating the headlights and grille, not as aesthetic details but as a visceral part of the car and intended to reduce the vehicle's wind resistance* -. On the other hand, it was a tremendously expensive car to build, something that would leave **Cisitalia** on the brink of ruin. The production numbers of **the Cisitalia 202** (and its variants) would not reach 300 units, which were produced between 1947 and 1952.

Foreseeing that the financial situation of the group would become difficult in Europe - *in view of the expenses incurred to pay for its expensive sports car* -, Dusio began to negotiate with the Argentine government of Juan Domingo Perón - *which was particularly interested in stimulating the birth of a national automobile industry* -, and reached an agreement at the end of the 40s. The first step was to set up **Autoar** - *considered the first Argentine manufacturer of serial vehicles, and which would assemble sedans and trucks based on the Fiat 1900* -, and later proceeded to the slow transfer of **Cisitalia** to these payments, launching it as an Argentine subsidiary. In 1950 **Autoar was born** and, in addition to producing road cars and utility vehicles, it would secretly be used to move Dusio's Formula 1 project to Argentina (and save it from the enraged creditors of Italian Cisitalia) .



a **Fiat 1900** – *the car on which the **Autoar sedan** was based* -; Although the bulk of **Autoar** cars produced between 1950 and 1953 used this **Fiat** body, the engines varied radically, even using **Willys Overland** engines from a batch of 3,000 disused **Jeeps**, obtained through an exchange for food with the North American government.

Dusio's car was actually a model that he had commissioned from Ferdinand Porsche in 1946. The fortune that Dusio had paid for the project would be used by Porsche's son to free his father from a French prison, where he was virtually kidnapped by part of the authorities. Using the payment as an advance on the project, the Porsches designed a truly innovative Formula One car... *and a wildly expensive one..* Dusio would later understand that, to assemble a competition team, he needed five more cars apart from the prototype... which had already consumed all the resources he planned to invest in the project. For a long time

Dusio would try to convince General Perón to invest in the venture, but the president would pass by and the car would end up returning to the hands of its designers, going on to be exhibited at the Porsche Museum in Stuttgart (plated as Porsche **360 Cisitalia**).

Birth of Cisitalia Argentina

In 1951 – *just one year after founding **Autoar*** – **Cisitalia Argentina** was born . While **Autoar** was dedicated to manufacturing standard and utility cars, the Argentine subsidiary of **Cisitalia** was dedicated to industrial and agricultural machinery... and, little by little, it was trying its luck with the assembly of sports cars, which was more in tune with the tastes of its owner. Certainly none of Dusio's Argentine ventures made original cars, but rather built slightly remodeled versions of **Fiat** cars . If **Autoar** assembled the **Fiat 1900** , **Cisitalia Argentina** would do the same with the **Fiat 750/ 850 Abarth** , authentic pocket sports that tried to generate a mildly exciting experience in the harsh times of post-war famine.

While all these movements gave the impression of being enterprises in constant growth - *even more knowing that **Autoar** was actively collaborating with **IAME** in the manufacture of the chassis of the **Rastrojero Diesel** , the longest-lived vehicle in the Argentine automotive industry* -, the truth is that the numbers production bordered on disappointing. For example, all the variants based on the **Fiat 1900** did not reach the 1,500 units produced between 1950 and 1953; a **Fiat** van (known as the **Micropanoramico** model) did not reach 1,000 units manufactured between 1958 and 1962; and as for **Cisitalia**, the numbers were even more modest: barely 170 sports cars developed between 1961 and 1962. Both companies would suffer a serious blow when Juan Domingo Perón was overthrown in 1955, subtracting one of the main sponsors of Dusio's project.



Cisitalia 750 Spyder – European version -; the Argentine model was identical except for changes in the bumpers and internal equipment, and it was a small coupe based on the **Fiat 850**

From then on, things would go from bad to worse. In 1962 the government would take away the license of **Cisitalia Argentina** in view of the little integration of national parts in the cars it built - *and, perhaps, as an undeclared retaliation for Dusio's closeness to the Peronist power* - and, only one year then **Autoar** – *which had been assembling German NSU cars since 1955 without much success* – would go bankrupt. Thus ended the Argentine dream of Piero Dusio.

On the other hand, things in Europe were not going well either. The original Italian house was in a tailspin and although Dusio wanted to revive it with some luxurious street models and some prototypes intended to seduce investors – *such as the 808 concept car, which he*

wanted to offer (unsuccessfully) to Henry Ford for a joint venture -, he would have to admit its failure and close its doors also in that fateful year of 1963.

Dusio would remain in Argentina until 1975, the year of his death. He would dedicate himself to the construction of houses and other commercial activities, but his automobile dream had perished ten years before, plunging him into bitterness and turning him into the shadow of what he once was, the daring entrepreneur who one day commissioned the construction of the most beautiful sports car. of the world.

(N.de R.: currently his heirs plan to relaunch the brand in 2014 as a craft venture and using tooling dating from the 40s and 50s, in addition to having presented a concept car at the 2012 Geneva Motor Show)



the **Cisitalia 808** dates from the days when **Ford** was trying to build its own sports car, and therefore formed a *joint venture* with Dusio; but things did not prosper and, three years later, the firm would take off with its own design: the **Thunderbird**

AUTOAR

*History of AutoAr and Cisitalia – we see the **Panoramic AutoAr** model (based on the **Fiat 1100 T**) in *History of disappeared Argentine cars (II)**

CISITALIA

*History of AutoAr and Cisitalia - in *Selection of Argentine cars of yesterday (III)* we talked about the **Cisitalia Bella Vista**, the Creole version of the **Fiat Multipla***

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