



## Think of it as a Timex movement inside a Rolex case.

This isn't an actual 1960's vintage Volkswagen ad—but it easily could be. All the correct ingredients are present. We have the minimalist image of the car, shot against a stark white background, sitting above a humorously self-deprecating cutline, set in boldface type.

Then, there is this, a few paragraphs of body copy—a further riff on the 'joke'—written in a breezy style, never too technical or overblown.

Here, you will find no references to golf, yacht clubs or how gorgeous women adorned in mink will suddenly find you irresistible as you cruise by in your "Ponti-Oldsmo-Imperi-adillac."

Like most acts of genius, the formula for these paradigm shattering ads is incredibly simple... show the product without silly embellishment, tell the truth and, while you're at it, poke a little fun at yourself.

By **WALT TOMSIC**

Managing Editor, *OpenRoad*  
Photos by **Michael Craft**

Volkswagen Karmann Ghia





**1962 Volkswagen Karmann Ghia**  
LeMay Museum Collection

It's easy to understand why no one other than VW's ad agency had thought of the marketing approach replicated in our mock print ad. After all, "common practice" is like a ten-ton ball of granite rolling down hill. It tends to want to go in a straight line and squish anything that gets in the way... including fresh ideas.

Creative advertising aside, the concept behind the "KG" wasn't nearly as groundbreaking as the ad campaign. The idea of sheathing a production chassis in custom coachwork is almost as old as the automobile itself. The previous subject of "AutoBiography," our 1930 Duesenberg Model J is a perfect example of the practice. What distinguishes the Karmann Ghia is the plebian pedigree of the donor chassis—the lowly Beetle—the ubiquitous VW "Bug."

My own association with the Karmann Ghia goes back to my high school days in Orange County. The car was a kind of 'chariot of the cheerleaders.' Hordes of pastel hued Ghias infested Southern California. Most of them were drop-tops. It was the perfect car for

the mythical "California girl"—fuel-sipping, Germanic mechanicals draped in Italian designer panache. And did I mention it was slow? No need to worry that little Peggy Sue was out drag racing Cobras after the big game. In fact, one print ad showed the car adorned with racing stripes and the simple admonition... "You'd lose!" Truth in advertising if ever there was such a thing—the 1956 Karmann Ghia posted a blister healing 0-60 time of 32.4 seconds.

As the name suggests, the "Volkswagen Karmann Ghia" represents the combined work of three distinct entities: floorpan and running gear by VW, body crafting by German coach-builder Karmann and styling by Italian design house Carrozzeria Ghia. As with most collaborative efforts, the precise details of the car's inception are up for debate.

Some sources insist that the Ghia design was simply a scaled down version of American stylist Virgil Exner's 1953 Chrysler d'Elegance design study. If you lop off the snout and concentrate on the roofline and rear quarter panels, you can see why. Most writers on the subject downplay the Exner angle and cite either Ghia's Mario Boano or Luigi "Gigi" Segre as the guiding hand behind the car.

**IT WAS THE PERFECT CAR  
FOR THE MYTHICAL  
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ITALIAN DESIGNER PANACHE**

Regardless of who actually penned the KG's seductive shape, it worked! Walter Dorwin Teague, an acknowledged authority on all things industrial, placed the Karmann Ghia on his list of the world's most beautifully designed products. One journalist's revue (*Autosport*, February, 1957) enthused that the car possessed a, "...purity of line and perfection of proportion that almost takes one's breath away." Volkswagen executives were equally smitten and the car was approved for production.

Type 14 - #1 rolled off the assembly line in Osnabrück, Germany in August 1955. It would be the first minting of 485,983 KGs produced over a twenty-year period. Over 10,000 were sold in the first year, exceeding even the most optimistic projections.

The combination of the Beetle's core virtues (simplicity, quality, frugality), Ghia's head turning looks and yes, that spot-on ad campaign, proved irresistible and virtually guaranteed the car's success.



The greatness of the design was underscored by how little it changed over its twenty-year life span. Alterations were incremental and evolutionary. In contrast to the typical American car's 'transformer-like' reinvention year-to-year, the revisions made to the Karmann Ghia were subtle to the point of near-invisibility: 1956 - door hinges get multi position check straps; 1959 - the steering wheel is dished; 1963 - the semi-circular horn ring is dropped; 1964 - sun visors swivel sideways... oh yeah, and the interior light is... *reshaped!* Our little aqua blue '62 KG sported smaller Ghia script and a "Volkswagen" badge was added to the rear deck lid.


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Obviously, there were more impactful (I know, it's not a real word... yet!) changes, chief among them engine displacement and output. The initial anemic 40-HP – 1200cc engine did get a new carburetor and automatic electric choke in 1960. By 1965, it had grown to 1300cc. 1966 saw installation of the venerable 1500cc power plant. Engine size topped out in 1969 when a 1600cc single-port engine was fitted. The 1600cc unit was given dual-ports in 1970. With it, that initial sundial recorded 0-60 time of 32.4 seconds had dropped to a 'blistering' 18.5 seconds.

Speed—or lack of it—aside, the Karmann Ghia's strong suit, in addition to its oh so continental looks, was quality of assembly. For \$2,395 (U.S. price, hardtop—1956) you could slip behind the wheel of a custom, coach-built and largely handcrafted automobile. The car's seamless shape was hand-caressed for blemishes before being submerged in a bath of zinc phosphate primer. Following wet sanding, the first of four coats of paint were applied (hand sanded natürlich). The result was a flawless finish with none of that faux wood/vinyl landau roof/imitation wire wheel hubcap nonsense that 60's boomer-rebels despised.

In 1957, a soft-top version of the KG was introduced at the Frankfurt International Auto Show. Extensive reinforcing was incorporated to maintain chassis stiffness resulting in a slight weight gain. U.S. deliveries of the convertible began in 1958. The price for open-air motoring was \$2,725. By 1962, and due to pressure to increase output, Karmann instituted production methods that lessened the need for hands-on assembly. The move had one upside—the price of both versions of the car dropped, \$100 for the coupe and \$230 for the convertible.

At the end of its twenty-year production cycle, a 1955 Karmann Ghia could be parked next to a 1974 model and, apart from bits of trim here and there, the two cars might well be mistaken for one-another. So then, what replaced the KG as Volkswagen's halo, performance machine... the first V-dub with an obscure name derived from some sort of North African wind... or something—the "Scirocco." 

**Michael Craft**, a professional photographer working out of Seattle, generously donated his time and talent to take these striking photos. See more of his work at [www.michaelcraftphotography.com](http://www.michaelcraftphotography.com).

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## SPECIFICATIONS

### 1962 Volkswagen Karmann Ghia

<b>Production Run</b>	485,983*
<b>Price (U.S.)</b>	Coupe – \$2,395 (1956) Cabriolet – \$2,725 (1958) Coupe – \$3,475 (1974) Cabriolet – \$3,935 (1974)
<b>Top Speed</b>	76mph (1955) 94mph (1971)
<b>Engine</b>	1200cc (40hp), 1300cc, 1500cc, 1600cc (60hp), Air-cooled, OHV, flat 4 Compression ratio – 7.7:1 (1500cc) 7.3:1 (1600cc)
<b>Transmission</b>	Fully synchronized, 4-speed manual
<b>Dimensions</b>	Wheelbase – 94.5" Track – 51.4" F, 50.7" R Length – 163" Width – 64.3" Height 52.4" Weight – 1,808 lbs. Fuel capacity – 10.6 US Gal

\* Specification data can, and often does, vary. When discrepancies occur, we use the more often cited data.



## THE CREATIVE SPARK FOR VW'S REVOLUTIONARY AD CAMPAIGN WAS HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT.


It was, as one rather famous tone-deaf bard put it, "Blowin' in the Wind"—the very decade itself... "The 60s"—every anti-establishment, status quo loathing minute of it.

The ads were the product of Doyle Dane Bernbach, an agency hired by Volkswagen in 1960. DDB's task was a formidable one. The Beetle was, as one agency staffer put it, "...an ugly little Nazi car." And remember, WWII had ended a scant fifteen years prior—five years fewer than our first incursion into Iraq. The creative team realized standard pitches would not work. They were also among the first in their industry to grasp how much youth culture was changing. Rather than emulating the status quo, DDB did a 'one-eighty.' The ads jettisoned the usual overblown and self-congratulatory rhetoric and instead, went for the funny bone. Perfectly positioned for the youth market, it was a home run! In one memorable TV spot ad, a Karmann Ghia is shown racing toward a huge, paper banner. Rather than ripping through, football team style, the KG simply bounces off.



Citing the campaign's astounding success at boosting sales and creating brand loyalty, *Advertising Age* named it the greatest ad campaign of all time. With headlines such as "Live Below Your Means," "Think Small" and "Lemon," the ads helped turn the Beetle into an object of cult worship. It became, along with tie dye and love beads, a hip and hippie fashion accessory—as well as a socio-political statement.

The entire VW line benefited from DDB's approach including the iconic Microbus and our LeMay Collection Karmann Ghia.

Here's a really obscure bit of KG trivia for you... rent the movie "The Producers," not that cheesy remake, the original starring Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder. Buried in this hilarious Mel Brooks masterpiece is a reference to the Karmann Ghia that will make you blow soda pop through your nose... provided of course you have a nose and a penchant for slightly bent humor. 



One glance at the roof radius and rear quarter panel character line, and it's easy to see why some historians believe Virgil Exner's Chrysler d'Elegance design study was the KG's real 'daddy.'



Several magazines, in initial reviews of the car, mistakenly dubbed it the "Ghia Karmann."

Curved, frameless side-window glass was rare in production cars of the early '50s.

The KG dropped its top in 1957. Luminaries the like of Brigitte Bardot and Pierre Cardin were among the first to buy.



The Karmann Ghia's seamless body required a lot of hand labor, less so when more mechanized production methods came on line in 1962.

The KG really was a Beetle in designer duds. The car shared much with its more plebian sibling including transmissions, engines and a slightly modified floorpan.

Changes to the KG were subtle at best, usually confined to such things as badges, bumpers, tail lights, interior trim and engine displacement.