

25 Things You Didn't Know About The Corvair

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Depending on how you look at it, July 7, 1959, witnessed one of the most creative, or foolhardy, steps in by the U.S. auto industry: Production began on the Chevrolet Corvair.

A response to the VW Beetle, which had sold more than 100,000 copies in four years to 1958, Corvair remains America's only successful effort to build a rear-engine, 6-cylinder, air-cooled sedan, the most competitive compact segment, from scratch.

To mark this occasion, Corvair Preservation Foundation historian Dave Newell and technical adviser Larry Claypool came up with these "25 Things You Didn't Know About Corvairs" -- or which you will enjoy anyway even if you did:

1. The secret of the Corvair was leaked 18 months early, on April 11, 1958, when United Auto Workers official Dave Mann told the press that General Motors would build a small car at the Willow Run plant in Ypsilanti, Mich.
2. Motor Trend magazine's Car of the Year for 1960, Corvair had GM's first all-independent suspension. To use an existing manual transmission, the engine rotation had to be reversed so as not to have one low forward gear and four reverse.
3. Unibody construction with welded front fenders, a first for GM, meant that Fisher Body employees aligned the whole car.
4. Some 8,000 Corvairs were stockpiled at the GM's Milford, Mich., Proving Grounds in preparation for the October 1959 launch; 250 were "swimmers" (caught in a flood) but cleaned up, reupholstered and sold.
5. Oct. 2 was the official launch day and will be national Drive Your Corvair To Work Day this fall.
6. Initial Corvair models were 500 and 700 four-door sedans. The most basic 500 is known as the Caveman for its simplicity. Coupes followed in January 1960, then the Monza coupe with 4-speed on the floor in the spring.
7. Surviving early Corvairs are Nos. 375 and 428, both sporting original front fenders, which lasted only 500 cars into the production run.
8. Chevrolet dealers were dismayed by the initial price, which could climb to \$2,500 with Powerglide, heater and radio, only \$200 less than a full-size Biscayne.

9. Gas mileage could be as high at 26 m.p.g. highway, until the VW-style gasoline-powered heater was fired up at a loss of 6 to 8 m.p.g.
10. A boatload of 1960 Corvairs was sent to Cuba before the revolution. At last count, three survive; two reportedly running with front-mounted Russian motors.
11. Dick Doane Chevrolet in East Dundee and Chicago Tribune writers made two attempts to drive to Rio de Janeiro in three Corvairs, with a support truck and fuel truck. They got as far as Colombia in 1961, where one car remains in the jungle, according to a British Army photograph from 1972.
12. In 1961, the Corvan panel van, Greenbrier passenger van and Lakewood station wagon and Rampside pickup were introduced. Air conditioning was optional.
13. GM built several front-wheel-drive prototypes in 1961, based on Alfa Romeo 1900 and Renault Caravelle platforms; a four-wheel-drive Corvan was tested.
14. One of the rarest Corvairs is the 1962 Loadside pickup. Only 369 were made, with a well in the center of the floor that could not be swept out.
15. The Corvair was an enormously popular base for show cars: the 1961 Sebring Spyder and Pininfarina Speciale, 1962 Super Spyder and Bertone Testudo, 1963 Monza GT and SS, 1966 Fitch Phoenix, 1967 Astro 1 survive.
16. A radical 1965 redesign with Fisher Z body saw the rear suspension resemble Corvette's to address safety issues . And the heater and A/C were improved. But without the pop of the V-8 Ford Mustang, sales dwindled and opened the door to the Panther (Camaro).
17. Don Yenko extracted up to 240 h.p. from Yenko Stinger Corvairs, which were competitive Sports Car Club of America racers. He built 100 in one month in 1965, with a total of 185 from 1965-67.
18. In 1968, XP-892 was shown as a full-size model for the 3rd-generation Corvair, planned for 1970, but scrapped. However, the 1974 Holden Monaro HJ coupe borrowed some styling cues.
19. Corvair was down to two coupes and a convertible for 1968-69. A/C was discontinued because of the engine load added by an emissions air pump.
20. Modular Corvair engines were built to bolt together in 4-, 8- and 10-cylinder configurations. One, a 10-cylinder front-wheel-drive configuration, was used in the development of the Olds Toronado.
21. The rarest Corvair is the amphibious Corphibian Loadside pickup. One was built. The GM plant in Oshawa, Ontario, built 100 amphibious Corvair Dynatrack articulated vehicles for the U.S. and Canadian Armies. The Australian Army ordered 500 but didn't have the money upfront.
22. Apollo astronauts trained on a Corvair-based lunar rover in New Mexico.
23. The last Corvair was VIN:105379W106000, an Olympic G old 1969 coupe with black interior. It's reported to have been destroyed, but ...

24. In the 1970s, Viton finally made a rubber seal that resisted the heat around Corvair pushrods and cured the oil leaks that had plagued the cars since they were new .

25. By 1971, the National Highway Safety Transportation Board declared the Corvair no less safe than anything else on the road in the early 1960s. Take that, Ralph Nader (the consumer crusader who made his name in 1965 with "Unsafe at Any Speed," the book that targeted Corvair).

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Inside the Corvair

* Corvair was the brainchild of Chevrolet General Manager Ed Cole, said Corvair Preservation Foundation historian Dave Newell and technical adviser Larry Claypool.