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Sporting cars



TVR
*Britain's
Best
Soft-top*

Plus!
driving the
MG Maestro
Full bore in
Mazda's RX7 turbo
Rolls-Royce on trial
Reliant's rally disaster
Bill Boddy on Bentley Drives
Secrets of a works Mini Cooper
Tally-Ho! We fly the Morgan of the Skies



THERE are newspaper clippings all over the noticeboard in the tiny reception room just by the front door at TVR — they refer not to Blackpool's independent sportscar manufacturer but the rival concern at Norfolk. The cuttings all talk of the grim times at Lotus, with American Express calling in their loan of millions. They were not put there in any sense of gloating glee, but they do serve to point out that TVR are seeing through the recession with a buoyant atmosphere.

TVR know all about hard times for it is quite remarkable that this firm has survived at all. It too knows what a cash crisis feels like, has been plucked out of the hands of the Receiver on at least one occasion, and what is more, has experienced a catastrophic fire — everything that was keeping TVR alive went up in smoke. But still it rose, up from the ashes, phoenix-like, and today stands far removed from its early struggles with hard and uncomfortable kit-cars. It has shaken off that image well and now pitches its highly individualistic sportscars at the products from Lotus.

The move up-market has been a success — TVRs have won a reputation for being well made with a high standard of finish. But hardly a day passes without the factory receiving an enquiry for the old-shaped M-Series TVR, and the factory are now looking long and hard at bringing back their classic.

TVR have just recruited Noel Palmer from Rolls-Royce, to act as full time Press and Public-relations manager. We did not detect that he was speaking tongue in cheek when he let it slip that the old car could make a comeback.

"It has a lot to do with what *Sporting Cars* had to say about the plans of Lotus to revive the concept of the Elan . . . you were right, that is a concept ripe for revival, and we could step into a slot in the marketplace very quickly by bringing back the M-Series TVR and running them alongside the present Tasmin, which has now established itself very well and has done wonders for the image of the factory. We would put a much smaller engine in the M-Series and go for the gap left wide open in the marketplace by the demise of the MGB and Triumph. That slot would require a car with lots of character — we've got just the car," says Noel Palmer. "What we can not do is give it the sophisticated ride comforts of the present Tasmin, but then we would hardly need to. It would be accepted for what it is, not a 'replica' of Sixties thinking, but the real thing."

Latest TVR bristles with excellent design features. Hood is terrific, with hard lift-off centre panel. Ride-quality is in the Porsche class, and Rover V8 power is now on its way.



RED





RUM

TVR are enjoying new-found levels of success with their Tasmin and now plan to drop in 190bhp Rover V8 power for more performance — and revive their classic M-Series with a smaller engine to fill the gap left by MG-Triumph demise. The Editor trekked to Blackpool to investigate.





The present TVR is light-years away from the old M-Series. Gone is the bump-steer, the dead-feeling steering, the hard-sprung chassis of short-wheelbase that provides 'entertainment' on a very twisty road. The present car is beautifully made, bristling with some excellent design features. The hood fitting, for example, is terrific. It is a first-class piece of design and is so simple. The centre section is a hard removable panel, covered in the same canvas as the rest of the hood. Unclip it and put it in the boot, the rear then just falls down. It is uncannily draught free, and makes topless driving possible for commendably long distances without fatigue.

The convertible TVR is arguably not such a pleasing shape as its better-proportioned Coupe brother, which has a rakish lift-back tail. It's another flying wedge shape, very angular, but it is a shape that we found can 'grow on you'. Power comes from either the 2.8 Ford Cologne V6, or the Ford two-litre-four.

In both cases the engine sits very well back in the chassis. The trouble with these engines is that the TVR now has such a fine chassis that it is crying out for more power. It's an area TVR are struggling to improve — at the Motor Show they unveiled a turbo revision of the 2.8, with aggressive, flared arches. But the project is likely to be stillborn with only half-a-dozen ever being built. The reason is that TVR have acquired engineering staff from Rover, and TVR have found that they could, if they pushed hard, acquire the lightweight Rover V8 mill, with injection and 190bhp, from BL. Up to now, only Morgan have been allowed to use the V8, something that was agreed way back when GM decided to let Rover build their unwanted engine under licence. Peter Morgan got in first, and succeeded to get an exclusive contract for a few engines a week. Things have changed — BL would love to sell more engines, now there is no question of a Triumph V8.

At present, the factory are experimenting with a Rover powered Tasmin for the Middle East. We saw the engine being fitted when we toured the factory — it dropped in fairly easily, only two chassis tubes which run forward alongside the engine required 'casing' for the slightly wider unit. Weight is similar and even though this was a basic SU-carb Rover, power and torque are expected to offer a healthy improvement. It further enhances the 'up market' image of TVR, the main drawback of the present range of TVRs is that the performance is no better than can be found in a Ford production car. Individuality is therefore the main attraction of a TVR, with a hand-built car. Rover power is going to be a boost for the TVR image, making it more distinguished. Besides, Triumph themselves were wanting to market the

TR8 with the same engine ... now this gap in the market place can be filled by TVR, in coupe or convertible form.

The Rover engine came about when, at the last motor-show, a group of customers from the Middle East said that they would place a large order but were held back by the fact that Arab countries cannot import Ford engines, due to the Ford links with Israel. TVR have no time for the ways of world politics, so they quickly decided to look around for an alternative power source. Make no mistake, if this car is a success, the British market will get it. And the beauty of the TVR factory set-up is that it is highly flexible and able to display swift footwork in adapting and changing to market needs.

Chassis jigs and moulds still exist for very old TVRs: you could, if you had the right sized cheque book, persuade them to knock out a few Grantura MGA-powered sportscars ... the bits are still lying around the factory. "We take pride in our spares ability", says Noel Palmer, "we are rather glad to be able to help a TVR enthusiast keep his car on the road. But who would want a new Grantura?"

SCOOP!

'We are giving careful thought to ideas to revive our classic'

— TVR

Reviving the old model Taimar, particularly the convertible version, with a much smaller engine, say the Ford 1600cc unit now in use by Morgan and Panther, capable of offering almost 100bhp, could be a shrewd move. TVR are aware that while they had to move up market, things have changed since that decision was made and the demise of the market leaders from the BL sportscar range has left a gap that is crying out to be filled. "We are looking very hard at the thought", says Noel Palmer, "now the present Tasmin has established itself you can hardly blame us for looking long and hard at the slot in the market which we really do know, and understand very well. Just say that is an intriguing idea, and it's under review."

The red open 2.8 Tasmin had arrived while we were touring the factory, having completed a 600-mile non-stop journey and there was virtually no time to check it over before we were due to depart for another 600 miles, non-stop from Blackpool to Sussex. It was snowing hard. The radio was reporting that roads across the Pennines were being closed, and outside, inches of snow were turning into brown slush. Before leaving Blackpool we had the chance to jump into a bronze

convertible two-litre. Its handling and quick, light steering were a joy in such atrocious weather, the kind of slippery going which Philip Llewellyn calls Rent-a-Husky conditions. The two-litre was a car we took to straight away. It's no tarmac burner, but a trip to Janspeed in Salisbury for one of his excellent manifolds, a polished-up head and better carb, can produce a strong 135bhp and tractable enough running for normal reliable road use. The engine, after all, can churn out 180bhp in rally-car guise, with a cam still capable of pulling through mud, so given the choice between the two-litre and the 2.8, we know which we would plump for. Especially if it was us who had to find the few grand difference in price.

By the time we came to depart in the 2.8, the two-litre had already won us over. The ride was the most striking thing of all, it really was an excellent ride, without a squeak or a rattle.

Into the 2.8. The steering right away was noticeable in calling for a good deal more effort. This is the muscle version. Our car had the latest five-speed Ford Capri box. It was slightly notchy, and being a bigger box it called for more effort, and lacked the splendid precision of the smaller brother, but we had no complaints as we settled down for the long run south.

The big, single wiper blade flicked across the steeply raked screen and coped with the falling snow. Out onto the motorway and up into fifth ... that gearbox is miles better than the old Taimar, with its change so far back you had to crook your arm over and backwards to move it forward across that high and wide transmission tunnel. The present car is a vast improvement with a much narrower tunnel. The TVR is a comfortable car, and mindful of the way the Goodyear NCTs would be forced to track in the hard frozen ruts of ice-crusty snow in the fast lane, we clipped along at a prudent pace, the rev counter showing a mere 2,300rpm at 60mph.

Brakes are discs all round, something the old car didn't have, even on the incredibly fearsome turbo convertible. Braking is first-class, quite a firm pressure is called for but stopping power is terrific.

Handling is of a high order, it's a very chuckable car, but grip and roadholding are not in the Porsche league. TVR addicts will doubtless argue that it's more "fun". The 2.8 version has different handling to the lighter two-litre. The back can be encouraged to let go, but there is lots of feel, it usually happens on the exit to tight corners when applying the power too early. You can do it in something like a Morgan with its Salisbury limited slip diff ... but pour on the coal too soon while in a turn and the TVR can waggle a warning. It usually happens on

a damp road, the first time we provoked it into a slide saw almost immediate correction as soon as a shade of opposite lock was applied, and as soon as the right foot was lifted off ... it was only a 30mph turn we know well, and a Porsche 924 or 944 would have romped it. Tyres could have something to do with it, and TVR have also experienced problems with a petrol overflow emptying on a rear tyre. Our test car was shod with Goodyear 205x14 and several testers commented that they would like to try the car with Pirelli P6s. The tyre section seems rather wide for the weight of the car, and perhaps a narrower section Pirelli would improve grip and traction. After all, Porsche manage with a 185-section conventional 70 series Pirelli.

The car is a few hundredweights lighter than a Capri 2.8 injection, but the take-off is very similar. A 0 to 60mph time of 8.2 seconds is respectable enough, and fifth can take the car up to 130mph, try really hard and 100mph can be reached from a standstill in 23 seconds, and using those commendable brakes, standstill reached again inside the 30 second mark. That's the kind of standstill-to-100mph-to-a-standstill-again yardstick once reserved for the likes of Aston Martin DBs, so the TVR is not slow. It's just that it is not quite as rapid in the mid range as the old lusty three-litre Ford engine of old, and TVR admit that they find the quoted 160bhp of the 2.8 to "vary a lot".

The rear diff is straight from Jaguar — well, what can you expect from managing director Stuart Halstead, who used to work for Jaguar. Hefty inboard rear discs with TVR's own suspension design makes up the rear end, with radius arms running far forward, almost to the middle of the floor, with near vertical springs. The front end is quite amazing for such a successful suspension that feels so good on the road ... who would have thought that it is nothing more than a clever raid of the Ford parts bin. Steering is plain rack and pinion of the Cortina, unaltered. The springs are Cortina, but made to a poundage rate specially for TVR, dampers are also Cortina, again, adjusted to TVR's own requirements, and front uprights, hubs and brake discs are Granada, mated to Cortina wishbones.

The suspension works well. TVR have built up a reputation for reliability and quality, with owners putting in some very high mileages. The rear suspension is very expensive to make, the front end less so, but it is a system that must enhance reliability and ease of servicing. Ford Cortina dampers are a cheap and easy replacement, for example.

Weight distribution is near on 50/50 as makes no difference and the



The 2.8 Turbo project — the V6 Ford has been difficult to tune to Lotus-Turbo eating power — TVR engineers are now looking long and hard at possibilities of a Rover V8 powered flagship.

wheelbase is longer than the old car, up from 90in to 94in with the driver sitting almost in front of the rear axle, which does a lot for seat-of-the-pants sportscar feel.

The bodywork is impressive and we were glad of a chance to see bodies being made at the factory. They are heavy affairs with the glassfibre impressively thick in places, with extensive use of marine ply for reinforcement. The chassis is massive, and is filled with oil and sealed, then painted, and finally covered in a plastic coating which is so good TVR now offer a 12-year guarantee on the car against rust. It serves as an example of TVR's confidence in the long lasting build-qualities of their product, and the rust-proof guarantee is one in the eye for the Japanese manufacturer who claims in expensive advertisements to have the longest rust-proofing guarantee of any car company in the world.

The trouble with soft-tops is that in truly high speed blasts on long-distance runs across country, *Grand Turismo* qualities are usually ruined by the drumming of the hood, if it's up, and the backlash gales of wind down the back of your neck if the hood is down. TVR's solution is very neat and deserves a gong from the Design Council.

The centre panel is covered in the same canvas as the rest of the hood, but it quickly comes adrift and stows away in the boot. In the lip that contains the centre panel are drainage channels that make it storm proof. Running down from Blackpool we chickened out of sampling winter top-down motoring. We

put in the run to Sussex non-stop and getting out of the car was rather surprising ... there was no drumming in the ears, the backache, the long stretch to revive tired muscles. Here is a truly comfortable sportscar.

However, it has required missionary zeal on the part of Stuart Halstead's gang to make a success of the car, for when it was announced everyone just rolled their eyes and said: Oh, TVR have gone for Lotus, and that was it ... sales plummeted, the tiny company had spent a fortune developing the car. They had got their act together far quicker than AC with their 3000ME and TVR spent rather less than the AC's development costs of one million pounds (TVR's development budget is understood to be nearer half that sum). TVR sold 308 cars in 1979. In 1980, when the Tasmin was announced, they sold 144. Yet at motor shows all over Europe everyone was talking about TVR and what a good car they had turned out.

Small companies like TVR have to be radical and that means upsetting the faithful now and again ... lovers of the old car who saw it as an all-British, somewhat hairy-chested, civilised, latter-day Healey-cum-Tiger were not exactly falling over themselves to buy another Wedge, in the same way sportscar enthusiasts were failing to get worked up about TR7s.

Time, and hard driving by Halstead, changed it all and now TVR must be regarded as a success. The shape has become more acceptable as it has become more familiar, and at the end of last year the company changed hands

when Martin Lilley decided he no longer wanted to be boss of a car company but hand over the steering wheel to someone new. In stepped Peter Wheeler from a chemicals firm, and Halstead and Wheeler went globetrotting for export orders. Pack your bags and go out and sell was the order of the day. The result was 100 cars to Singapore, another 80 to Canada, Taiwan wanted 60, then, two months ago, the 2.8 Ford engine was given its seal of approval for export to America.

TVR were once more back on the "up" section of the progress graph.

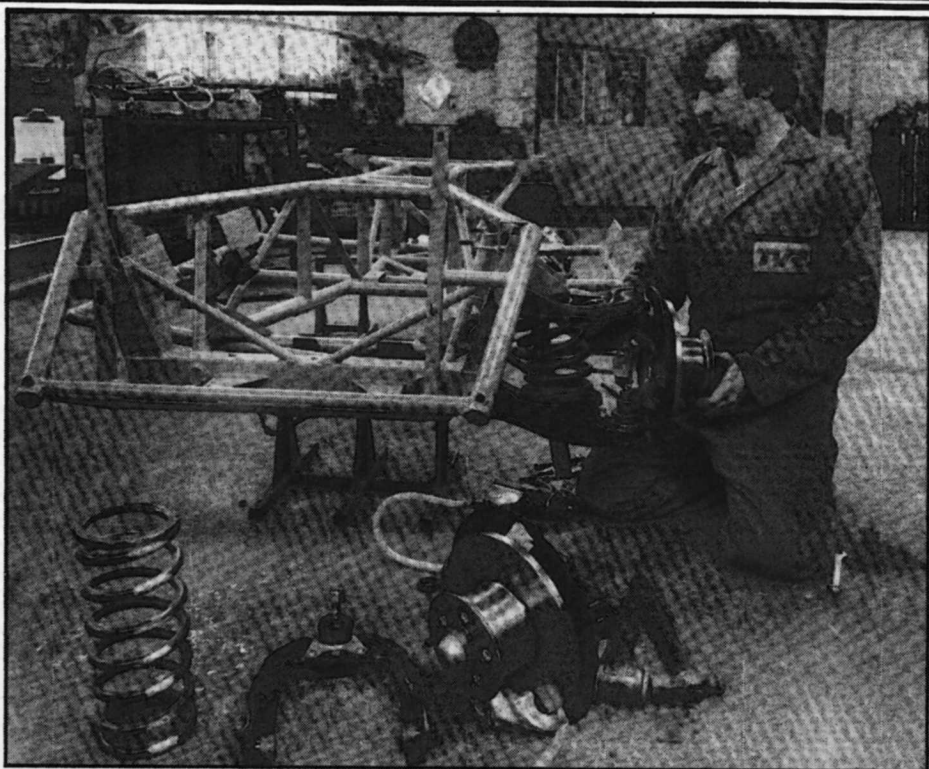
The aim is to produce 500 cars a year and TVR have no ambitions to be any bigger than that. "Small is Beautiful" is the watchword that will ensure survival. The whole of 1983 production has almost now been sold.

An example of TVR's flexible approach was that after a year of production, the Tasmin underwent some notable improvements. The rear of the Coupe was too abruptly cut off, giving an exaggerated look to the length of the bonnet, only a few inches in extra emphasis to the hind quarters changed it all and produced a car with styling that is now more harmonious and better proportioned. At the same time, the wheel arches were given a slight flaring and the sills acquired skirts.

The two-litre Tasmin came in at the Earls Court Motorfair of 1981 and this model has done a lot to widen the appeal of the marque, with soft-top and two-plus-two versions now sold at under £10,000, while the 2.8-litre starts at £13,824 for the soft-top. The Turbo fixed-head is expected to fetch £16,800, but as we have said, there is a possibility that TVR may now change their minds ... for uppermost in their thoughts is the fact that to make a selling success of the car at this price it will have to offer all the performance that can be found in the highly acclaimed Turbo from Lotus. The trouble has been that the Turbo has made for an excitingly quick car, but not a Lotus beater. Engineering energies have also been taken up with the demands for the Rover V8 project, and clearly this has better prospects for an all-out high-performance flagship: it offers more tuning potential than the poor-breathing Ford.

The new five-speed box is a most welcome improvement for the 2.8 range; it called for a higher geared top, and now high speed cruising can be surprisingly restful. It has made for a more economical car. The two-litre comes on narrower 185-section 14-inch Goodyear NCTs, and TVR claim that its 101bhp is good enough to propel it to 60mph in nine seconds and top out at 115mph.

This year all the TVR models were given a revised single fuel-filler with



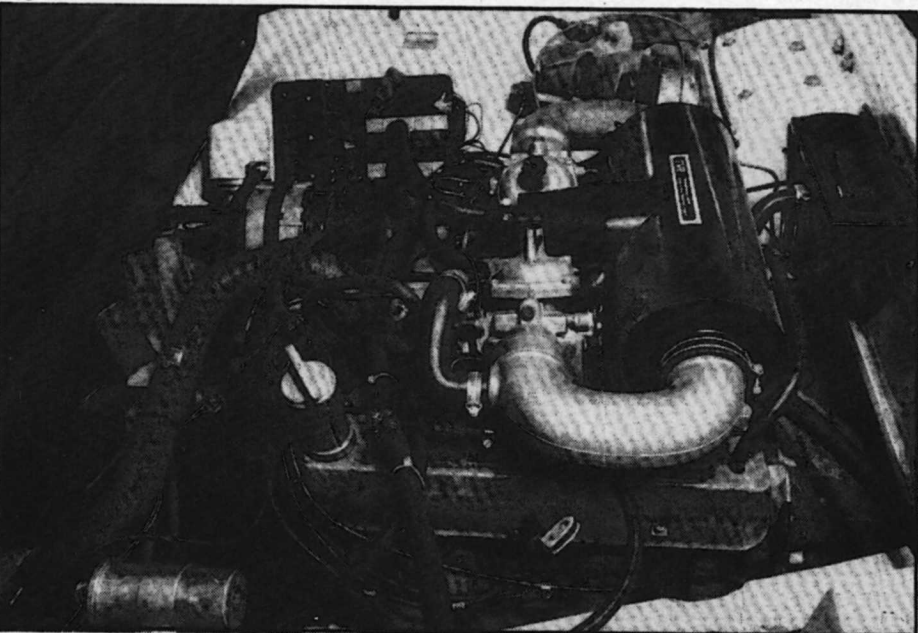
Suspension is a highly-successful raid of Ford parts bin, gives superb ride in Porsche league.

flap, a better pedal box giving more room for the driver's left foot, very effective Cibie lights, 7" wheels on the 2.8, and larger faced Smiths instruments in the now familiar wooden dash that has so much gloss it looks as if it is something Noel Palmer has forced upon TVR from his days at Rolls-Royce.

There is a surprisingly buoyant mood at TVR. When you consider that old rivals such as Turner and Gilbern are long gone and market leaders like Triumph and MG have been killed and

buried, it is remarkable that TVR has survived the times, and continues to flourish. For it is a marque with virtually no motor-sport pedigree, and until the Rover engines come on top the TVR performance is not all that better than equivalent Fords. But in a world of tin shoeboxes, the TVR breed of highly individual sportscars deserves its slot in the market-place, for a British sportscar that is as well built as this and can turn heads in any High Street ought to be encouraged.

Scoop picture! The first photograph of the prototype Rover-engined car undergoing trials for the Middle-East market — note the standard SU carbs — enough to propel the soft-top to a new top speed of 142mph, with still more to come if BL agree to release the Petrol-Injection Vitesse version of 190bhp. The engine proved to be 60 kilos lighter than the Ford V6. TVR engineers found steering response improved.



NICE CAR, SHAME ABOUT THE WEDGE!

Sportscar enthusiast DON SMITH has run open sportscars for more than 20 years, with a devotion to MG — he recently acquired a TVR 3000S and compared his car with the latest TVR convertible

BEFORE I attempt to make a comparison between the TVR 3000S and its current counterpart, the Tasmin convertible, it may be helpful to outline why I was attracted to the marque in the first place. Having owned solely sportscars since 1960, I have always been aware of what was available, even if only to know what one was up against on the open road. The TVR marque, whilst appreciated, was never a contender for purchase as apart from all else it was not possible to take the roof off. Added to this, in the '60s it didn't have a very long pedigree and therefore lacked the aura of more famous names. Also, to be totally honest, I had a strong dislike of fibreglass bodies, associating them with Ford Specials and regarding the material as "here today, gone tomorrow", cheap and nasty.

So what has changed to make the 3000S acceptable? First and foremost of course it is a convertible in the best tradition, complete with detachable side screens. Second, I've always been attracted to the curved style of bodywork and the unique door line and rear end treatment combined with the traditional bonnet to give the vehicle the right look, even if it is dated by present day styling. Third, after 20 years I'm tiring of rebuilding rusty motor cars, it gets a bit like the Forth Bridge, you never finish! Fourth, I think it is fair to say that, both in terms of finish and technical specification, big strides have been made by TVR since their early days. Finally, I wanted a car which had reasonable performance at a price I could afford without being in the

exotica class and with readily available spares. So after a year and a half's hesitation the 3000S joined the stable. Over a year and 5,000 miles later I have no regrets, although it lacks punch above about 85mph and hits the deck rather too often, even with new springs and Konis. The car has a recorded mileage of 25,000.

Now to the key question: would I change the 3000S for the Tasmin Convertible? Answer: not on your life! I have little doubt that in overall terms the Tasmin is the better car judged by current motoring standards. This is borne out by those members of the TVR Car Club who I know have changed from M series cars to one of the current models — better handling and performance is the verdict. In my brief acquaintance I found the ride smoother, the power range better, especially towards the top end, and the cornering ability greater. As to the turning circle, this is almost akin to a taxi! Overall, there is a feeling of greater sophistication and plushness. Having made the foregoing remarks, if it's not the car at fault then it must be the driver. It's really a case of what turns you on. I'm just not into wedge-shaped vehicles, be they TR7s, X19s, TVRs or whatever. Yes, the bonnet profile is striking, the finish excellent, but once I get past the windscreen any chance I had of liking the shape is blown. Add to that the fact that the screen is so raked it nearly acts as a roof and with high doors and electric windows I don't feel I'm in a traditional British open sportscar. The rear vision when reversing with the top folded down left something to be desired. The Tasmin struck me like so many modern vehicles, that driver involvement and road feedback has been reduced by advances in automotive engineering. The net result as far as I'm concerned is that the car lacks an individual character and is therefore rather bland, especially when compared with possible alternatives like the Morgan +8.

Personally, I didn't like the vertical format boot which has to house part of the hood. TVR have improved the petrol-intake ability, the old 3000S is diabolical for surge-back once the tank is over half full. Another significant difference is the change from the traditional complete forward hinging front section of the 3000S to merely an engine bay panel. Having made this point, the actual accessibility of the Tasmin looked better, and less crowded.

Although the 5-speed box is easy to use in that one can find a gear the car will perform in, at times I wasn't quite certain when I was in 3rd, 4th or 5th, lack of familiarity I guess. An enjoyable experience, but I'm in no way tempted to change, assuming cash was no object and it must be remembered one is talking about considerable price differences.



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TVR TASMIN

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