

# MAGNIFICENT MONTAGE!

**Billed as the finest kit car in the world, the UVA Montage is certainly a meaty chunk of pure glamour. Our discerning VW fanatic, Alexander Graham Pipe, has been to review the beast and is convinced he's found nirvana in the guise of the ultimate kit car.**

It's a damp and rather gloomy Monday morning as the Editorial staff ensconced deep within the bowels of Filpot Towers gather to discuss the forthcoming issue and its list of contents. As the hours drift by, the realisation that I am scheduled to test possibly the most beautiful kit car in the world sinks in and the lingering after-effects of an over-indulged weekend seem miraculously to disappear. The car in question, the UVA Montage, obviously reaches the parts that Alka Seltzer doesn't, but to those of you not familiar with this exotic beast looking to all intents and purposes like a race track refugee, then perhaps a history lesson is called for.

The Manta Montage as it's known in the States, is produced in Santa Ana by Manta Cars who have been in existence since the early seventies with their street-legal racer, the V8 powered Manta Mirage. This mid-engined street missile possessed the sleekest, curvaceous body to hit the kit car market at the time, and was selling well until the tragic death in a Formula Ford racing accident of the company's president, Brad LoVette. The day to day running of the company passed on to his brother Tim, who is still producing the amazing Mirage with its gull-winged Targa top and chopped-off rear end; but it was the mid-seventies oil crises that initiated such meteoric rises in fuel prices, that caused Tim to think about a new model. The Mirage was selling well but he realised that a more economical, smaller capacity

design was called for, complete with a two seater coupé body style similar to the highly successful Mirage.

Named after the French word Montage, whose literal translation means 'composite made from various elements', the car was designed around the VW Beetle chassis and the final body shape to emerge from the prototype workshops shared its predecessor's racing styling and bore a close resemblance to the McLaren M6GT; a car built here in Berkshire to compete with the all-conquering Works Porsches of its era and which itself had been derived from the open M6 racer. However, due to a great many problems with the racing authorities of the time, the M6GT was subsequently re-assessed with a view to marketing the car as a road-going exotic. Unfortunately, Bruce McLaren's tragic death put a halt to the development programme with a total of only three cars having been built. And the car would have sunk into the murky annals of history if it hadn't been for the reincarnation of its graceful lines by Tim LoVette at Manta Cars.

This side of the 'pond' however, it was only a matter of time before some enterprising soul realised the market potential of this most desirable of exotics and started to import kits, thereby opening a European outlet for Manta Cars. And this has now been achieved by one such entrepreneur; Alan Arnold of the Unique Vehicle & Accessory Company Ltd, who runs his operation from Newbury in Berkshire.

Coincidentally, that's where the M6GT was developed, so the story has now come full circle.

A marketing man with a great deal of experience behind him, Alan is a natural professional and it didn't take much for a person with his background to see that the Montage, if marketed correctly, would cause a sensation when unleashed on an unsuspecting public. And he hasn't been proved wrong, either. The Montage is one hell of a chunk of pure glamour and even looks fast when parked at the kerbside, so history lesson aside let's take a look at what you get for your money.

## NUTS AND BOLTS

The car is available in the States in three stages of build; the first is a basic kit comprising all body panels but totally unassembled and provides plenty of work for the true enthusiast. Stage Two supplies you with a fully assembled nose section and the remaining bits and pieces to complete the car such as wiring, lights, inner trims, etc; and finally the Stage Three Superkit, which incidentally is the type currently being imported by UVA, comes as a fully assembled body complete with all wiring, lights, instruments, inner trim, etc ready fitted and could theoretically be assembled in a weekend. Unfortunately, the price is a little on the high side for most but when you consider what you're getting and the amount of work and thought that goes into the Montage then you will realise just what a bargain you're really getting.

Of course, Alan could have imported the Stage One kits and let customers proceed from there, but as he says, when you're dealing with a car so aesthetically pleasing and practically designed, then you don't want people cobbling them together,





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*Above left to right: From rear it would be difficult to convince anyone this isn't a pure race-bred car! Between cockpit and engine, luggage space is surprisingly good. Interior is nicely trimmed, comfortable and surprisingly spacious.*

making a pig's breakfast and thereby putting a bad mobile advert onto the highways. So his policy of selling virtually ready to go kits that can be driveable within a few days ensures constant quality building and allows you to get on with the most important thing . . . driving. However, having shelled out for the kit, upon collection you will receive a fully trimmed front nose section, a pair of subframes to support the fore and aft bodywork, the front indicators, wiper blades, tail section and a small collection of bracketry to mount the rear body to its subframe.

The only parts required from the donor car apart from the chassis, of course, are the steering column, speedo cable and clip, brake fluid reservoir, fuel tank, heat exchanger connecting tubes, horn, interior light, battery and connecting cables. But before we actually get on to the build up procedure let's dwell a while on the options available.

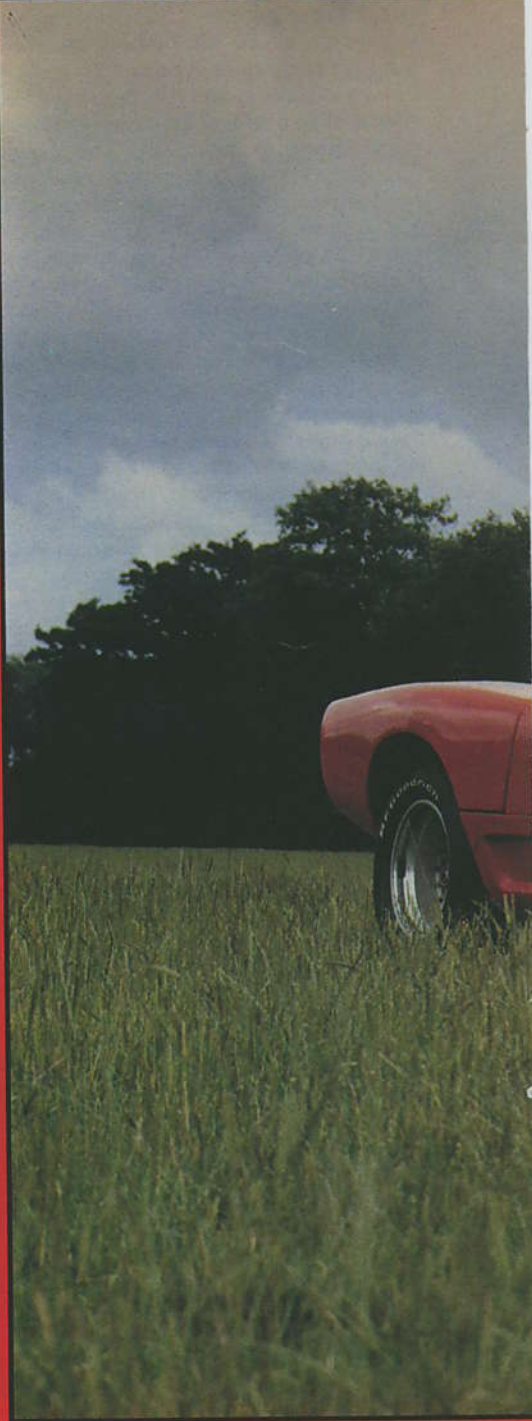
Chassis-wise the sky or rather your pocket's the limit. The Montage will sit happily on either a standard torsion bar front, swing axle rear or, wait for it, the MacPherson front, double jointed rear. That's right, you read correctly, the car will actually accommodate the chassis you all thought unsuitable for kit car use. But when we say it takes the MacPherson strut front end, this isn't strictly true because you have to modify the chassis and install one of UVA's 'S' front suspension conversion kits. This comprises a completely new front end that simply welds and bolts into place after the old framehead has been removed with a hacksaw; which while sounding rather complicated is not as imposing as it sounds. The kit converts the late IRS chassis to an inboard rocker arm system that utilises rising rate springs and urethane bushes throughout. And if you're thinking it's a rough old collection of metalwork thrown together in the hope of the system vaguely working, then think again. Alan is a professional, remember, and he doesn't

do things by halves. Oh no, he's employed a specialist to design a custom front end similar to those used on racing cars with everything carefully calculated and fully stressed to provide an excessive factor of safety for peace of mind. Not only has his tame engineer designed the thing but it's been punched into a computer programmed with every minutiae regarding the Beetle chassis and Montage bodyshell, and has proven beyond a doubt that this system is, and always will be, the business.

Another interesting point about this front end is that a rack replaces the steering box and the coil-over shock absorbers are adjustable Spax units so it's possible to really go to town on tuning your car's suspension. But we suspect the majority will opt for the standard torsion bar front suspension which in its own right is a good set-up capable of being tuned, whilst at the rear our choice between swing axle and driveshaft is purely academic and dictated by the chassis we actually buy.

Getting back to the building of the car, the first step is to mount the front subframe, followed by fitting the nose section to the floorpan. The steering column simply mounts to the dash with the two bolts provided but does require shortening by 1½" which is easily achieved by removing part of the collapsible portion and welding it back together again. The standard VW column grommet seals the firewall hole and short of fitting the indicators, interior mirror and courtesy light, about completes the front end. Easy, eh?

The tail section can be trial fitted and is possibly the most complex part of the build. To align the two body sections we have to use the rear wheel wells and cab contours but as the rear subframe carries the pivot points for the body and these have to be marked and drilled accordingly, this is really a two or three man job. Unless, that is, you obtain Alan's optional extra which is basically a Rose joint on a specially







designed bracket which not only allows for plenty of juggling around with its elongated holes when assembling, but also provides greater reliability around the pivot point as the old pivot pin can wear oval, while Rose joints go on for ever.

So with the back end secured in place the only other task is to add the stay that prevents the back tilting too far, connect the tail loom to the main body tub loom via the substantial multi pin connector (a nice touch which enables the back to be removed in a trice), and to couple up the engine wiring to the main loom. Of course, there's the number plate to be fitted and the enormous luggage area behind the cab to be trimmed in carpet, leather or what have you, which then just leaves the fuel tank. Here you have three choices: the standard Beetle tank nestles in the fibre-glass cradle, or you can purchase an alloy

tank from UVA or get the top of the tree fuel cell, which sells for a whopping £285 plus VAT. This is basically a spin-off from the racing world, incorporates a foam core and, so rumours have it, is capable of withstanding a rifle bullet passing through it!

So apart from fitting your stereo, alloy wheels and low profile tyres, that about concludes the building; although it may be a bit of a generalisation to say the car can be completed in a weekend, when you consider the amount already done for you then this can easily become a reality.

#### THE TEST CAR

The Unique Vehicle & Accessory Co Ltd can be found in the small village of Curridge which is the last place you'd expect to find a vehicle of this ilk. And as can be seen from the accompanying ►





photos it really does look superb. The immaculately moulded body is totally devoid of any surface ripples which is unsurprising really when we consider each one takes over 200 man hours to lay up from woven glass cloth rather than the more common chopped strand mat. As for the deep lustrous gel finish available in red, orange, yellow, white, black, wine burgundy and both dark and light blue, I have yet to see a GRP car that will surpass it. However, the red demonstrator's interior is resplendent in tan Naugahyde with a good selection of Jet Cockpit monitoring gauges and matching style speedo, and my initial doubts about the available headroom came to nothing as I eased myself into the driver's seat. This forms part of the inner moulding and is cushioned with nicely padded hide covers that support in all the vital areas and the comfort has to be experienced to be believed. You're not so much sitting as reclining with the instruments in direct line of vision and a small switch panel mounted on the inner shell's side which contains all the function switches including those for the electrically operated mirrors.

But it's really in the engine department that the car scores heavily. Alan has fitted one of the Bernie Bergman high performance Californian 2180cc engines that he imports, it sports a pair of twin 44 Webers with water injection and a hi-po extractor system, that when fully run in should be pumping out something in the region of 140bhp! The engine is a mass of chromed and polished alloy parts and also boasts an air conditioning unit with the secondary condenser mounted at the front of the car in the direct air stream through the small grille. In fact the car is a working showpiece for the majority of tuning and suspension goodies Alan's company stocks, with the rear riding on adjustable Spax shocks, every rubber bush replaced with urethane items, and a set of adjustable spring plates which mean the car's ride height can be altered at the turn of a nut.

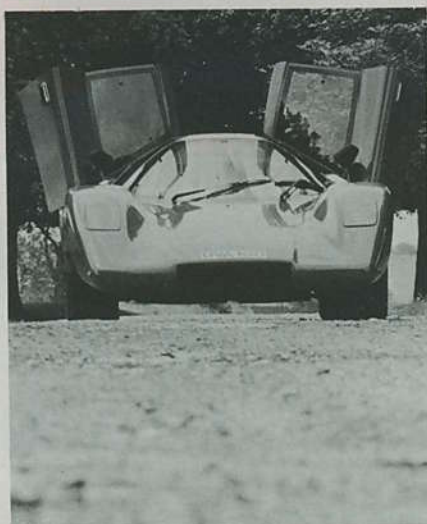
But if the rear suspension looks impressive then the front is totally mindblowing. That replacement suspension kit is so well designed and engineered it would take a hard man to fault it, but Alan's choice of wheels is a rather interesting point. Choosing Compomotive split rims he has shied away from the traditional slot mags which on a car as graceful as this, would look chunky and out of character. Wheel sizes, incidentally, are 8x10 front and 10x15 rear, although 7x14 and 8½x15 will fit quite happily with a little assistance from spacers to help fill out the cavernous wheel wells. Goodrich 50% profile tyres keep the show on the road and look very much the part with their raised white lettering and chunky block treads.

Another point worthy of note is the lower engine panel just beneath the number plate recess. This comes blank but has had several cooling slots cut in it which are backed with aluminium gauze, which sprayed black, lend a subtle effect to a rather bare area. In fact while on the

subject of the engine bay, Alan assures me a Ford straight four will fit although a small portion of the number plate recess will have to be cut away to clear the water pump pulley. Apparently it's all the rage in the States to fit V6 and V8 lumps in mid-engine configurations, which must provide exhilarating performance to say the least!

## DRIVING IMPRESSIONS

For a six footer such as myself, I found it remarkably comfortable sprawling in recumbent splendour in the Montage's interior, and the fact that the floorpans had



*Montage looks weird in this shot with those unusual doors open.*

been lowered and I could have worn a top hat and still had enough headroom, just goes to show what a practical car this really is. And as Alan states, it's not essential to lower the floor but is a luxury that will help sell the car to any further giants! We also liked the way the floorpans didn't protrude beyond the body's extremities with all the suspended bits being well hidden by those deep, deep sill panels.

Anyway, back in the cockpit the motor bumbles into life and sounds nothing like a VW. The water injection light glows dimly as the electronic metering device and management system does its stuff and the dials flicker into life. A sharp jab on the throttle pedal sends the tachometer spinning and the exhaust note develops into a throaty roar much akin to a Porsche on song. Selecting first with the alloy 'T' shifter sporting the reverse lockout button, we venture onto the roads and I'm instantly impressed by the absence of rattles, squeaks and the lack of engine noise. In fact we're holding a conversation and don't even notice the drone from the rear of the car as we pull onto the dual carriageway.

Progressive acceleration, and I think we're doing 50 until I glance at the speedo registering 110. It's really that quiet and civilised you don't appreciate the speed you're travelling, which is great until the moron in the green Citroen 2CV pulls out into the fast lane. Time to test the brakes,

and we find it stops as quickly as it goes without any panicky standing on the brake pedal and praying!

The only time I did get worried though, was when we were tanking around a corner at a speed that would have had most cars on their roofs or in the nearby ditch and Alan, eager to demonstrate Montage's ultimate handling (having just returned from a few laps around Brands Hatch), tugged at the wheel with suicidal verve. This violent manoeuvre sent the nose lurching towards the nearest tree but only required a slight movement to straighten the car's attitude and continue through the bend at around 80mph! I was impressed!

Narrow country lanes, motorways, snarling traffic jams, you name it, the Montage will take it in its stride. Handling is phenomenal and when that motor is fully run-in Alan's car should be capable of around 130-140. So with the 15 cubic feet of luggage space behind the cab, this car must make the ideal long distance GT tourer, is the sort that won't flinch at the prospect of a 1000 mile trip, and will leave its driver calm, collected and, thanks to the superb air conditioning, cool.

Entering the beast is a rather acquired art much akin to mounting a horse. The doors, a cross between conventional and gull wings, open and latch in place with their ready fitted stays, and you stand on the inner sill with your right foot, while swinging the left leg into the cockpit at the same time as lowering yourself under the steering wheel and into the seat. Easy when you know how but definitely an acquired technique!

That vast expanse of glass screen must be a pig in winter we thought, but the carefully positioned demister vents take care of that; and the rear screen doesn't mist as it's separate from the passenger compartment, and being above the engine, is kept warm and free from condensation. Forward vision is excellent and the view between those mountainous wings very conducive to long stints at the wheel, although it has to be admitted that a blind spot is caused by those shapely roof pillars between the doors and rear screen. But the mirrors more than compensate for this and rear three-quarter vision is by far the best we've seen on any GT kit car for a long while.

So basically the Montage represents an entirely fresh approach to the British kit car scene and with the range of accessories UVA are importing, opens up a whole new dimension for the VW-based alternative car. Its price may seem rather high at £5384 plus VAT when compared with say, a full kit Avante, but there again they aren't really in the same league and any comparisons made with the Montage should really be levelled at mass production exotics in the Porsche, Ferrari and Lamborghini moulds. UVA are taking a big gamble on this car and it is one that's sure to pay off, so for more information on this beauty, whizz a £1 note to **The UVA Company Ltd, Curridge Croft, Curridge, Berkshire RG16 9NA. Tel: 0635 201666.**