

Building a Better Bug or Beetle

Whether you know it as a Beetle or a Bug, and whether your image of it is the classic version or the New Beetle introduced in the late 1990's, chances are that this is the car that you associate with the Volkswagen brand more than any other. Why shouldn't you? The cute, compact car is inexpensive, easy to maintain, and pretty versatile for such a small vehicle.

It is because of this combination of easy of maintenance and iconic styling that the classic VW Beetle has becoming one of the most popular cars to be customized. After all, it seems designed to accept personalizations, and everyone recognizes the basic lines of the car.

Most Beetle owners don't change much about the interior of the car. Some might add a sound system, generally a subwoofer and a few speakers, and after-market steering wheels are popular as well. In addition, racing enthusiasts, or race car drivers - Herbie isn't the only Bug ever to take a turn on a speedway, after all - go so far as to strip the interior and install bucket seats, race harnesses, and a roll cage.

The bulk of Beetle modifications, however, are cosmetic, and feature styles like the "Cal Look," a set of customizations that has existed for more than 30 years, albeit with some evolution over time. Generally, the first alteration is to lower the car's suspension and change the wheels. While period style EMPI 5- or 8-spoke rims are the most popular choices, other people favor Speedwell BRMs. Another change involves stripping the bumpers and trim, or replacing the bumpers with push bars, though sometimes the stock bumpers are retained and either polished, painted, or chromed.

Taking the "Cal Look" a bit farther, there is the "Resto Cal" look, which includes the addition of a roof rack, and possibly wing mirrors, stone guards, and mud flaps. Front indicator lenses, and tail lights are often changed as well. Even more personalized looks can be achieved by changing or removing door handles, or changing the hinging of the hood and trunk. While lowering the Beetle is a common modification, however, another equally common element of non-VW customizations, the use of tunneling (Frenching) head lights is not.

Aside from cosmetic changes, popular ways to modify a classic Beetle include engine mods. The standard engine is a flat-4, air-cooled engine in sizes from 1200-1600cc, but because most of the parts are merely bolted on, replacing them with larger or higher-performance pieces is relatively simple. The standard engine has been customized into configurations much larger than 2400 cc by adding piston/cylinder kits and turbochargers. Other enthusiasts have completely replaced the power plant, using a VW Type 4 2-liter flat-4 engine, a turbocharged Subaru flat 4, or even flat 6s as found in Chevy Corvairs or Porsche 911s. Other power upgrades include the use of dual carb systems, and stronger transmissions.

From cosmetic customizations to motor modifications, it's clear that even though the New Beetle is sporty, stylish, and popular, it's the classic Bug that is still in the hearts of auto enthusiasts everywhere.

About the Author

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