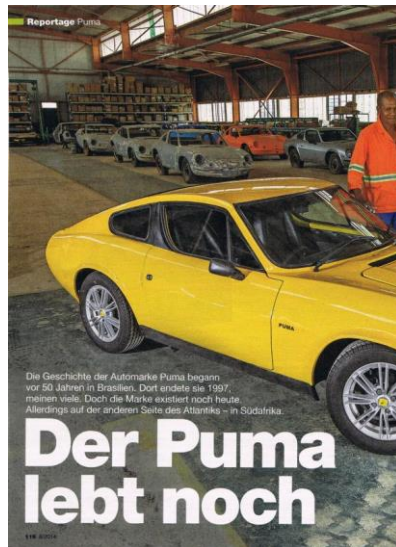




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# The Puma is still alive

## The history of the Puma car brand

The history of the Puma car brand began 50 years ago in Brazil. Many believe it ended there in 1997. But the brand still exists today, albeit on the other side of the Atlantic – in South Africa.



A VW Beetle-based sports car, fresh from the factory? It's hard to believe when you hear about the Puma. Sure, 40 years ago, the exotic car was at least familiar to car enthusiasts, but the brand is long gone, right?

Yes, the factory still exists, Jack Wijker assures us over the phone, but production is currently running at a reduced pace. The global financial crisis hasn't spared even a small-scale manufacturer in South Africa. The 82-year-old engineer is keeping Puma afloat to this day. From Babelegi – an industrial area about 60 kilometers north of Pretoria – he not only ensures the supply of spare parts for the global fan community. Of course, cars are still being built here, too. However, currently only to order.

### Puma is a mixture of Ferrari 275 GTB and Opel GT

When his foreman and caretaker, Andrew Matseke, opens the roller door to the currently deserted hall, it's like entering a ghost factory. Alongside three Pumas parked for restoration, one sees eight models in various stages of production on the right, and three chassis await their next use next to the parts warehouse on the left.

Connoisseurs will immediately notice that the floor pan comes from a VW Beetle. It has been shortened by 25 centimeters – a weld seam across the sheet metal testifies to this. A fiberglass body is mounted on top, all done by hand. "From the front, a Puma is reminiscent of a Ferrari 275 GTB, and from the rear, a bit of an Opel GT," explains Wijker. Icons of a time when Puma's history also began.



## Sports car from Brazil

That was in 1964, not in South Africa, but in Brazil. Racing driver Genaro Malzoni needed a sports car at the time. But high punitive tariffs closed off the market. So, he took what was built in the country itself – a DKW 3=6 – as a base and fabricated a suitable fiberglass body. The Brazilian sports car was complete.

When DKW ceased production in Brazil in 1968, Malzoni looked for another organ donor and turned to the VW Beetle. That's how it stayed for the time being. Only in the final phase of the brand would there be a Puma with GM technology, but that's another story.

## Puma production moves to South Africa

More crucially, in 1970 a South African businessman decided to bring the brand to the Cape region. Initially, they simply imported entire cars, but starting in 1973, they set up their own production facility. This was a venture with obstacles, as VW was less cooperative than in faraway Brazil, where a little pressure from the government also helped. In Africa, the Wolfsburg-based company refused to supply parts. Thus, an expensive Plan B was put into effect.

The company buys complete VW Beetles and dismantles them. Anything that can't be used in a Puma is sold off at a discount or scrapped – a complex production process. There are also quality issues. The biggest problem, however, is the boss and his obsession "for airplanes, women, and a big farm," according to Wijker. The company went bankrupt in 1974 – after 21 months and 357 completed cars.

## Wijker saves the puma

Now Jack Wijker's time has come. The Dutch-born engineer emigrated to South Africa with his wife in 1957 and worked at Ford and Chrysler, among others. At the time of Puma's collapse, he was managing the workshop at the country's largest Puma dealer, Lindsey Saker in Johannesburg.

Since his heart is set on the small sports car, he decides to act. He secures the bankruptcy estate and establishes Puma Marketing. Until 1986, he imports the rear-engined sports cars from Brazil again. When production there ceases, Wijker acquires the molds for the body parts. Three years later, he restarts production. Twenty-six more Pumas are built until 1991, followed by another forced break, this time for more personal reasons: "I was going through a divorce, and it took a few years until all the issues were resolved," grins the white-haired retiree.





It wasn't until 2006 that the company moved on, this time to Babelegi, the economic development area north of Pretoria, where the company's headquarters are still located today. At peak times, over 50 employees work here. Modeling the bodywork from fiberglass mats is primarily done by women, "they're simply more skilled at this work," says Wijker.

### Export almost impossible

But the economic crisis hit the company hard. Nobody ordered the small, exotic car. Today, only three people work at Wijker. The main problem for the Puma is the strict import regulations worldwide, which make export virtually impossible. With the technology of the VW Beetle, modern emissions standards have become an insurmountable obstacle. This leaves the South African market as the main market. The smallest version of the Puma, with its 41 hp 1.3-liter four-cylinder boxer engine, costs the equivalent of around 13,000 euros. There are also variants with 1.6 to 2.1 liters of displacement and up to 102 hp.

We were allowed to bring the 60 hp GT 1600 to life for a test drive. First, you have to squeeze into the car, which is only 1.16 meters low. You'll need a bit of flexibility to easily get behind the small sports steering wheel and into the command position on the classic sports seat.

### Familiar beetle sound in the Puma

You're instantly transported back to the 1970s. Round instruments in the cockpit, a long gearshift lever, and flat pedals: all of this is familiar from the organ-donor Beetle. As is the boxer engine sound from the rear, which evokes nostalgic feelings in people over 40.

The low, stretched-out seating position takes some getting used to, but after a few meters, you'll feel the itch. While 60 horsepower may seem ridiculously low today, given the 750 kilograms of curb weight, it's enough to hit 100 km/h (62 mph) in just eleven seconds. By comparison, a Porsche 914-4 takes about two seconds longer.

But ultimately, with the Puma, measurable performance is less important. What counts is the feeling. And that's exactly what the brand-new classic car conveys. It's still an eye-catcher today: Thumbs-up, whistles, and jeers accompany the flat-bottomed car from the side of the road. Probably also because outsiders consider it a classic. Its future is unclear. 82-year-old Wijker sometimes worries: "What will happen when I'm no longer around?" And adds with a grin: "But I don't have time to die."



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