

A MINI ODYSSEY

The 1970s was a decade of looking forward and pondering the future. Space travel was all the rage and science fiction dominated our movie screens. Leyland Australia got into the act with the Moon Mini.

In 1969 Neil Armstrong took his “giant leap for mankind”, and just a year earlier Stanley Kubrick stunned everyone with the release of his futuristic masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Wheels magazine from May 1976 makes interesting reading. The big issue for the magazine was the soon to be introduced Australian Design Rule 27A, which was intended to clean up vehicle emissions, and what this meant for the future of the Australian motor industry.

According to the magazine, “more finicky starting, rougher idling and generally poorer performance will be the rule for many 27A models.” Look at how Leyland met the rules, with the infamous air-pump bolted above the alternator and, with the Mini at least, Wheels had pretty well hit the nail on the head.

But the magazine also got the crystal ball gazing wrong in a few places as well. Writer Tony Curtis quoted Ian Sykes, head of petrol distributor XL, saying “We are using petrol as though crude oil is going to last forever, but the reality is that Bass Straight supplies will drop to a dribble by 1982. Australians will be giving away the high-powered sixes and V8s sooner than they think.”

Certainly, the fuel crisis of 1973 brought about a resurgence of interest in small, economical cars. The Mini was still a popular choice, for a while at least, surviving Leyland’s self-destructive turmoil of the early seventies.

The Mini S was released in Australia in 1973, as a cosmetic lift to the standard model, and generally the future looked positive for the Mini Down Under. Within a couple of years though, sales were slowing and something was needed to boost interest in the Mini.

Back to Wheels, and their report of the 1976 Melbourne Motor Show. Motor shows are always as much about the future of the industry as the present, and Melbourne ’76 was no exception.

Leyland didn’t rate much of a mention though, other than “Leyland decided against showing the XJ-S and XJC because it felt the time between the show and getting the car into the showrooms – about six months – was too long. So we were left a superb Allan Puckett [sic] painted (and you can have one for \$1700) Mini and the Dolomites, 2500TCs and Rovers.”

That brief mention of the Mini pointed to the small photo of the Moon Mini on the Leyland stand, that accompanied the story. Finally it all came together: space, the future, a cheap, economical car – the Mini. “Mini – the car for today, and tomorrow”, the sign proclaimed. Sadly, two years later the Australian Mini was dead.

So, there it was – and here it is. The Moon Mini was, and still is, one of the finest examples of car-art ever done. Strongly influenced by Kubrick’s *2001*, every inch of the exterior is covered with scenes from space, with an up-beat and even humorous angle. But no, you couldn’t buy your own Moon Mini.

I caught up with Alan Puckett, now 82 years old, in Sydney recently to get the full story of the Moon Mini, but unfortunately, there’s not a great deal to tell about the car.

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