

Italian Flair



Words by Jeroen Booij and Craig Watson.

Photos by Jeroen Booij, Craig Watson and Leyland/Innocenti.

The Mini Cooper 1300 Export was Innocenti's top model. Export models were built from 1973 to 1975, with over 98,000 made.

Take a practical British design; mix in some Italian style; and the result is the Innocenti Mini.

While the Mini is considered as British as afternoon tea, it was of course built at various locations across the globe. At each plant, the Mini was infused with unique changes, brought about by local design regulations, import restrictions and the local culture.

Italians have always had a certain flair for design, and the Italian-built Mini benefited from a marriage of British functionality and Italian finesse. Built in the Innocenti factory in the Northern city of Milan, between 1965 and 1976, 450,000 saw the light of day, yet today they remain one of the least appreciated Minis.

Innocenti (pronounced Inno-chenti) began in 1931 as a manufacturer of steel tubing, with its very successful patented scaffolding system.

During the Second World War much of the factory was destroyed, but with government assistance the company was back on its feet

soon afterwards. The mainstay of the business became the famous Lambretta motor-scooter, named after the Lambrate district of Milan where the factory stood - which was put into production in 1946 and continued for more than two decades.

A logical step was to manufacture automotive parts, and Innocenti was soon making them for Italy's big three: Fiat (based in nearby Turin), Alfa Romeo and Lancia.

Ford and Volkswagen followed, and it wasn't too difficult to then get in touch with BMC.

In the 1950s, with England still not part of the European Union, importing of British cars to parts of Europe was very expensive. In Italy, British cars attracted a massive 31.2% import duty (at the peak), while cars from West Germany or France (both members of the European Union) attracted only 9%.

For BMC, a partnership in Italy would make their British cars more affordable, and more profitable, while giving their Italian partner the potential to export within the European Union without the stiff import duties.

By the time of the 1959 launch of the Mini, BMC had signed a deal with Ferdinando Innocenti, head of the Italian company.

However, for the next six years all Minis sold in Europe were still built in the UK.

The switch to full production of cars began with a version of the Farina-styled Austin A40, followed by a small open sports car based on the Austin-Healey Sprite (with a makeover by Ghia), and an Italian version of the Morris 1100: the Innocenti IM3.

The first Italian Mini was built in September 1965, and was simply called the Innocenti Mini Minor. It starred at the Turin Motorshow in October that year, and became an immediate star. Within a year, 50,000 had been sold.

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All Innocenti Minis were LHD.



Unusual heater cover - Italian labels.



Moulded dash most most distinctive feature.