BAJA 1000 DESERT DINGO

report & photos Robb Pritchard

In this great wide world of ours, as well as in the pages of this magazine, there is a full and vibrant spectrum of VW Bug owners. On one side there are those dedicated to preserving the originality and integrity of their venerable machines, polishing the hub caps and going out for a leisurely Sunday drive, if the weather is nice. But on the other end of the scale there are those that like to rip the glass and interior out and go racing in some of the world's toughest off-road competitions like the Baja 1000!

The interior looks like a race car of course so as to be fully compliant with modern safety standards. There is a full rollcage, race seats, 5-point harnesses and a fuel cell. Also indicating that this is actually quite a serious race car are the GPS units and the new, state of the art Iridium Go! communication systems which is so new that even the top Trophy Truck teams don't have yet.

For the full story, VWMA caught up with Jim Graham, the man behind one of the top teams, Desert Dingo, to find out where this project started and what it takes to get a Bug ready for an insane event like the Baja 1000.

"*I've loved Bugs since I was a kid, but never imagined racing one. That was until I saw the film Dust and Glory, a sort of documentary of the 2003 Baja 1000 and I knew that I just had to find a way to do it. The Trophy Trucks are worth about a million dollars each so of course that was out of the question, but I thought that a Class 11 Bug would be a great and cheap car to go racing in… I was wrong. 'Cheap' is relative because everything about racing is expensive and it's certainly not just picking up an old runner and painting some numbers on the side.*

If you think about it, a car is designed to operate on streets, and to operate for a normal life span. Fifteen years of normal road use would equate to about 50 miles on the Baja course, so basically we strip the car down to bare metal and rebuild it from there, reinforcing everything as we go. This entails re-welding seams, incorporating the roll cage, and reinforcing the shock mounts. We can do a little suspension modification as obviously there is no way that the original shocks and springs could cope with the terrain. Special racing shocks are allowed, although you have to keep the 2 inch barrel. Because they take such a pounding and heat up so much you can have ones with remote reservoirs, but there's a limit on the travel you can get out of them because of the mounting points. People get pretty creative with that one. That and strengthening the shock towers is key as they have a tendency to break, so we re-weld them, add gussets and pray. We've done pretty much everything to ours. We are constantly experimenting within the bounds of the rules.

We also run with bigger tyres and we've experimented a lot with different ones over the years, for example with vintage military Jeep tyres. They have rounded shoulders on them, so when you're driving through deeply rutted tracks, they make it easier to steer. If you take a normal off road tyre, with a square shoulder, the edges try to climb up the ruts and the driver is constantly fighting the steering. We're running General Tire 7.00 x 15s right now. Actually, if we added a windscreen and indicator signals the car would be road legal, but because they are not necessary for racing, it's not. Some people in our class drive to the races and sometimes drive home again, but we trailer ours to events.

No matter how good your car is the most important part of being successful in the Baja is logistics support. Logistics doesn't sound sexy, but in this type of racing, it's absolutely crucial because if you don't have the right assistance in the right place at the right time you're not going to finish the 1000 miles.

At first glance, you would be forgiven for thinking that these are purpose built space-frame racers, but actually this is an almost standard 1969 1600 Bug with only a few modifications, and most of them are for safety...