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- Front Page
- Economy & Business
- National
- World
- Companies
- Markets
- Mining
- Sport
- Personal Finance

Opinion & Analysis

- Comment & Analysis
- The Bottom Line
- Management & Leadership

Classic Business Day

- Transcripts

Special Reports**Arts & Leisure**

- The Tourist

The Weekender**Specialist Sections**

- The Golfer
- Management Review
- Health News
- SA Exporter
- Real Business
- Motor News
- Homefront
- Property
- Technology @ Work
- Auctions

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- Search
- Contact Us
- Subscribe

> --DATELINE--<

Time to stop dumping outdated deathtraps on local car buyers

I READ the other day that Fiat has just released what it is calling the "new Uno". There is, however, absolutely nothing new about it. It's the same Uno that was produced in SA for years by Nissan under licence from Fiat. It's the same Uno that won the accolade of European Car of the Year — in 1984.



If the Uno doesn't take your fancy, you can always buy a car designed in the summer of love and released in 1974. It's called a CitiGolf, but actually it's just a continuation of the original Golf. Volkswagen (VW) considered it archaic enough to replace with the second-generation Golf in 1983. Except in SA, of course.

If you need a small pickup truck, you can buy a Nissan 1400 bakkie, which is actually a 1970 Datsun Sunny with a bakkie body lowered on to it.

Strangely, they don't mention this in the marketing bumf before fleecing you for R83000.

I don't know what Fiat thinks it's doing. Current Fiat models such as the Panda are brilliant, but the company clearly wants to be seen as a purveyor of archaic rubbish. They're mad — it's a horrible, unsafe little car and Fiat is dumping it on us because it believes we're stupid enough to buy it.

The problem is that Fiat's also right. It'll probably sell thousands of the blasted things. We South Africans have what's known as a bit of previous. We really like the CitiGolf. It's a great-looking car, designed in an era before computers by Giorgetto Giugiaro (Bill Gates was 14 when the Golf was designed). It's also a real hoot to drive. So, being South Africans, we ignore that it's made out of the kind of paper you get in public lavatories, has no airbags, anti-lock braking system or any such thing that has been in real cars for decades now, and we buy them by the hectare.


And we'll pay too much for it too, because the CitiGolf is manufactured here in SA, so no import duties on parts, the factory hasn't been retooled since PW Botha was in charge, and I'm sorry, but fitting round brake lights and a Skoda's dashboard doesn't count as R&D.

Ask a Brit if they'd pay £5000 for a 1970s Golf and they'd choke on their Earl Grey.

Only Toyota has seen sense. It discontinued the God-awful Tazz, a mid-1980s Toyota Corolla, and replaced it with the Yaris, which is a safe, modern car. Toyota is shifty when you ask why it got rid of the Tazz, because the Yaris is too expensive to have actually "replaced" it. I think it's because Toyota doesn't want its brand to be associated with automotive garbage.


What's not clear is why western brands think it is acceptable to flog outdated technology to Africa that they wouldn't dare put on sale at home. It is also unclear why they apparently believe African bodies do not need airbags and

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crumple zones to protect them. If a Fiat Uno or a CitiGolf were put through rigorous testing by the boffins at the European New Car Assessment Programme (EuroNCAP) the results would be disastrous.

We've seen what it looks like. The Rover 100, a rebadged 1980s Austin Metro and, to date, the least safe car EuroNCAP has ever tested, went so far as to have an airbag that smashed the crash- test dummy's head into the door pillar on impact. Sales plummeted after the test in 1998 and the car was discontinued. Still, the Rover 100 is probably a safer car than a CitiGolf or an Uno — at least it had an airbag.

And yet Fiat, Nissan, VW and Opel continue to sell dangerously outdated cars to Africans in the manner of unscrupulous drugs companies and arms dealers.

How do we get rid of these deathtraps? Firstly, the government needs to show leadership and take action that will ensure cheap modern cars are available in SA. Some are even built here. It should not be rocket science.

It should slash import taxes on cars costing less than \$10000. It's the government's fault there's no public transport in this country. It needs to accept that a cheap car is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Then the South African Bureau of Standards needs to set some standards not designed for ox wagons, and the manufacturers need to stop selling unsafe cars just because they can. They need to develop respect for their own brands and for their customers' lives.

Finally, we need to stop buying this dross. Let me make this very clear — do not ever buy a CitiGolf, an Uno, a Corsa Lite or a 1400 Bakkie. It's a decision that could kill you.

If you can't afford the R100000 needed for a half-decent entry-level car in SA, then go directly to www.autotrader.co.za and buy a pre-owned car.

Even if it's used, I assure you it's much, much newer than some of the rubbish in South African showrooms.

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