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FULL STORY

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- » LR Freelander 2
- » Panamera Diesel
- » Rolls-Royce 20HP
- » Audi R8 V10 Plus
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FOUR-CAR TEST



Chevrolet Sail U-VA vs rivals
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FIRST DRIVE



New Range Rover
Is it India's ultimate SUV?

SILENT AS A GHOST

This 1924 Rolls-Royce 20HP Barker Tourer won a trophy at the prestigious Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance last year. **Shapur Kotwal** takes you up close and personal with one very, very special car.

PHOTOGRAPHY RAJEEV GAIKWAD

Bicycles run into handcarts and people crossing the road turn around and stop. The sight is so visually arresting there's even a pause in the chaos and hubbub of the Udaipur bazaar. Then cutting through all the carelessly parked two-wheelers and lazing cattle comes the reason: Udaipur's pristine 20HP Rolls-Royce, better known as GLK21. Now GLK isn't an early Gujarat number plate, no sir. It's the identification or chassis number given to this individual car by Rolls-Royce way back in 1924, when it was made. The license plate is actually Udaipur 2; talk about exclusive plates, and the owner, as you may have guessed, is Maharana Arvind Singh of Mewar (earlier the princely state of Udaipur).

We've come a long way out from the Udaipur palace today, onto the wide-open Mount Abu highway. And there's a reason for this. You can't truly get to know a car until you really open it up, and Arvind Singhji has been kind enough to indulge us. Our journey out from the busy centre of Udaipur, however, is nothing compared to the one the GLK21 has gone through. This car has had quite a chequered past. So let's go all the way back; and I promise to be brief.

It may seem strange, but the 20HP was Rolls-Royce's first 'everyday' car – one you could walk into a showroom and buy. It was the first to be sold off the shelf as a complete unit, with body, engine and chassis all assembled together (imagine that). The 'baby' Rolls, however, was also available as a 'naked' chassis. You could →



Short windscreen arranged in aerodynamic 'V'.



The entire headlight dips down for dipped beam.



A new engine was imported for the restoration.



Updraft carburettor a headache for 20HP owners.



This 20HP's lines drawn at coachbuilder Barker.



WHAT'S THE OLD GIRL LIKE TO DRIVE?



WE DIDN'T REALLY get to drive the Udaipur 20HP as we'd have liked to, so soon after we called Mumbai-based car collector Fali Dhondy to have a go in his car. A later model, his car has the gearlever back on the right (Rolls had moved it to the centre for earlier cars), it has four speeds instead of three and sports front brakes too. Start-up is similar. It's not via crank handle, but the process is unique all the same. You nudge both levers on the steering wheel simultaneously up (one for idle speed, the other for spark advance) and push the starter button with your left foot.

The straight-six flutters to life and soon settles into a near-vibration-free idle. There's a soft panting audible from under the bonnet and the smell of petrol and warm engine oil soon fills your nostrils. Think of an oversized, well-worn machine from the industrial age, spinning silently in its own oil bath, and you get some idea of what this engine sounds like.

Setting off in first needs more revs than I initially think, but the Rolls thankfully does not stall; this is a 3100cc engine, after all. It lugs along till revs rise and then I soon discover a smooth torquey bottom end. The road opens up and so I quickly double-clutch into second and then into third. Rolls is famous for having its cars pull cleanly forward from a rest even in top gear and this is soon borne out. The engine takes a while to respond, but once you get it going,

you can easily imagine cruising all day without a problem.

The suspension is surprisingly silent too. We drive over some really rough roads in Lonavala, where the car is parked, and the Rolls simply takes them in its stride. I'm soon quite comfortable behind the wheel and start driving more naturally. What's also surprising is that the steering feels unexpectedly light and the rear wheels cling to the road quite impressively; not what you expect from something that's only half-a-step up from a bouncy cart. And it rides well too. The brakes, however, need their own five-year plan, unless you hit them hard everytime.

All in all, I'm pretty stunned. Here's a car that drives and feels like it's 30 to 40 years younger than it is - no wonder Rolls-Royces were widely considered to be the best cars in the world.



← buy it and, in time-honoured fashion, get it clothed by a coachbuilder, as you would for any other Rolls of its age. And that's exactly what the original owner, the ruler of the neighbouring state of Jodhpur, did. An aviation enthusiast as well as a lover of fine cars, it is said he got coachbuilder Barker to design a sporty V-shaped dashboard and windscreen; some say it reminded him of the cockpit in an open aircraft. The car was later acquired by the state of Udaipur in 1936 for a sum of Rs 5,721, not to be used and driven around in, but to be consumed for parts. And that almost was the end. The engine was pulled out, and the car was parked in the Zenana Mahal. It lay there forgotten and neglected till 1999. You'd never believe that, looking at the car

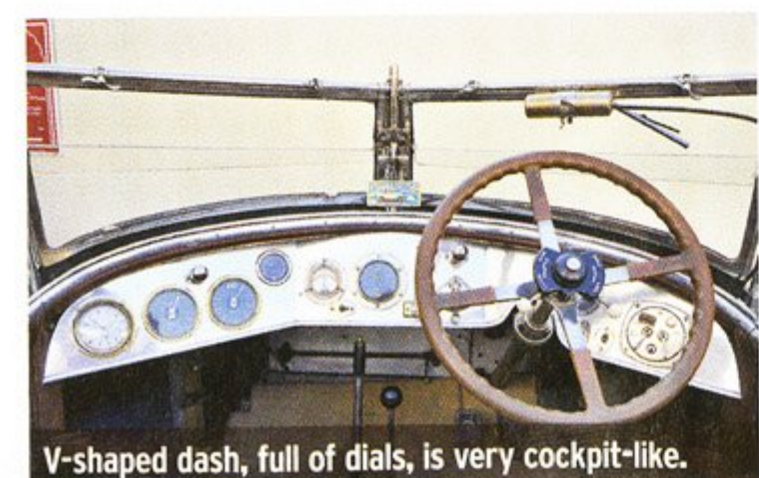
'There's a soft panting sound from under the bonnet and the smell of petrol and warm engine oil soon fills the air.'

today. Recently back from its jaunt at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in California, where it picked up the Lucius Beebe Trophy, GLK21 is in the pink of health. Its nickel-plated radiator, the aluminium bonnet and the gently curving blue body work all look resplendent. And there's a bit of a time warp happening here too, as the Rolls

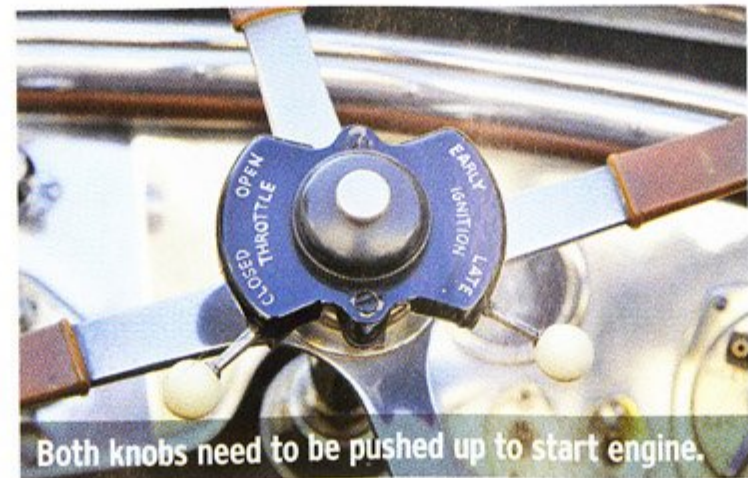
stands in the forecourt of the Udaipur city palace. The car has undergone a massive restoration carried out by some of the world's foremost experts on the subject, many of whom travelled down to India for the job. The car got a new engine and gearbox from the UK, the radiator was overhauled in England and new suspension

bits were ordered too. The rest of the work, a considerable amount, was undertaken in India by Udaipur's keeper of the Vintage and Classic Car Collection (a must-see museum), Anu Vikram Singh and his team.

But what makes a 1924 model Rolls tick and what was it that gave Rolls such a formidable reputation? To understand that, you first have to remember that this car was born only a couple of decades from the turn of the century, an age when steam power still ruled. Many of the things we take for granted on cars of today were simply unheard of at the time. Think I'm exaggerating? Let's start with something basic - this car has no front brakes! Suspension is by semi-elliptical leaf springs and the gearbox has →



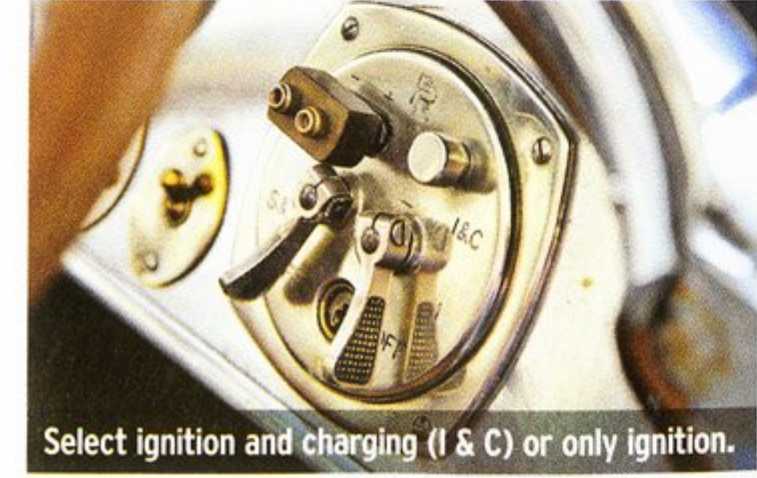
V-shaped dash, full of dials, is very cockpit-like.



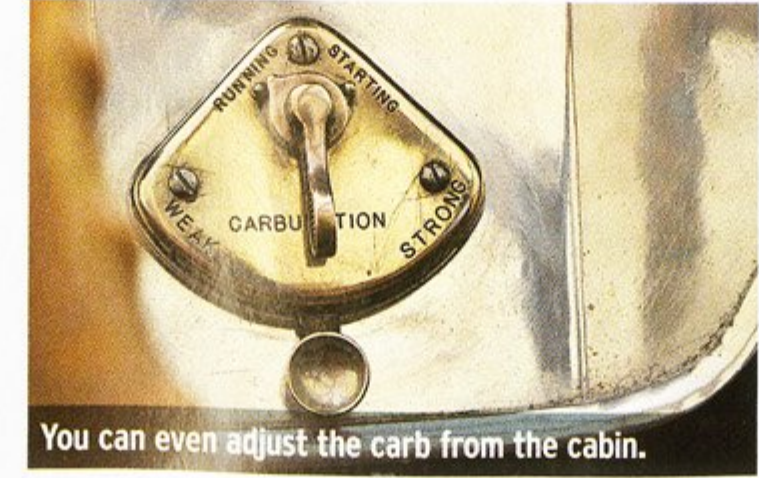
Both knobs need to be pushed up to start engine.



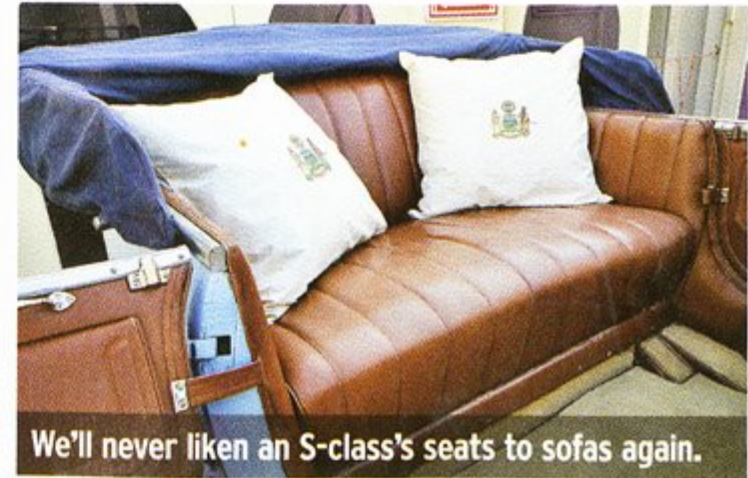
You can open and close the radiator flaps from here.



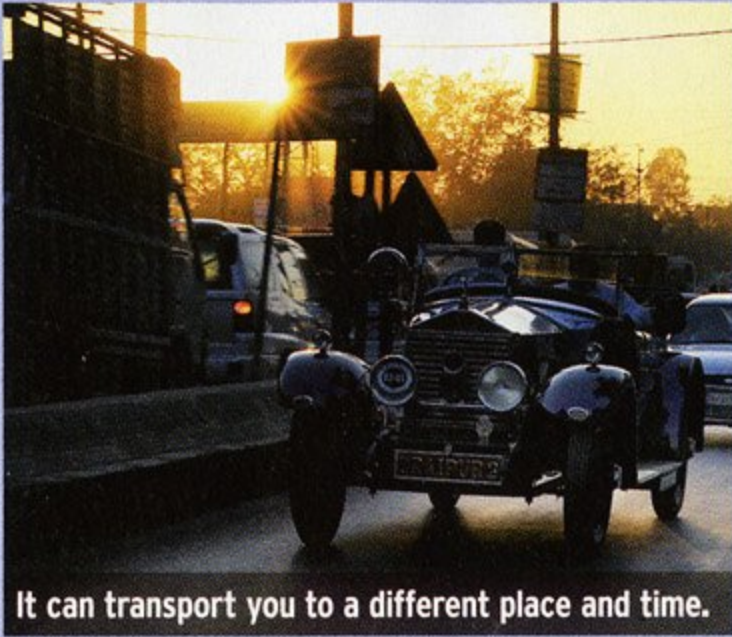
Select ignition and charging (I & C) or only ignition.



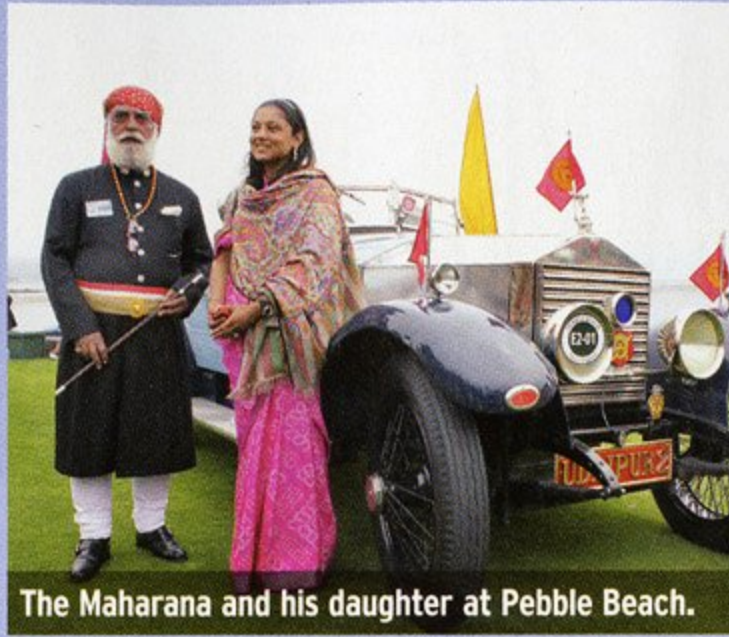
You can even adjust the carb from the cabin.



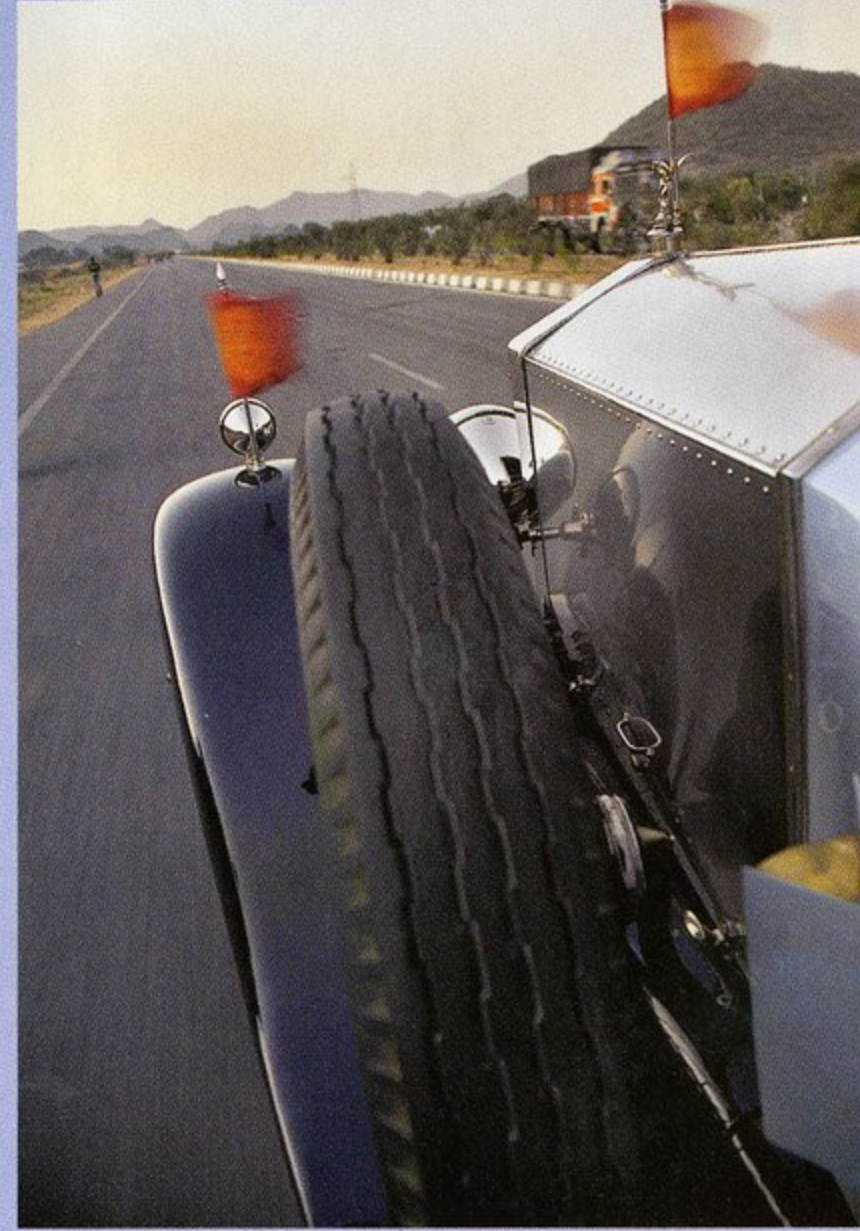
We'll never liken an S-class's seats to sofas again.



It can transport you to a different place and time.



The Maharana and his daughter at Pebble Beach.



← no synchromesh. The straight-six engine was one of the first from Rolls to have a detachable head. Although it's called a 20HP, power output is actually around 53bhp.

Rolls made its own carburetors at the time, which probably wasn't a good thing, and this 'updraft' carb (against the force of gravity) isn't among the best. To help the updraft carb, the car has a system known as Autovac, which works on pressure differentials. This system is a major headache for 20HP owners. It is extremely sensitive to conditions and is fiendishly difficult to get right. That apart, the Rolls-Royce motor is brilliant. Famous for its silent running engines

– it's why many of its cars are named after ghosts, phantoms and spirits – these cars have engines that are optimised to be noise-free. Rolls famously used only the finest tolerances and the best materials available. Also refinement was such a priority – this engine runs a compression ratio of only 4.6:1 and softer bangs equal less noise. Shaft-driven valves were preferred over overhead cams in the 20HP because they are more silent.

Wafting along in third gear with the wind in our hair and motor softly puffing along, the 20HP feels special even today. What it must have felt like, all those years ago, effortlessly doing 95 or a 100 kilometres an hour, is anybody's guess. **AI**

