

Honecker's hunting cars



When the Berlin Wall came crumbling down on November 9th, 1989, thousands of East-Germans poured across the border in small Trabant automobiles. Reflecting the creative survival spirit of their owners, the tail-finned "Trabi" with the lawn mower adapted engine looked like the spitting image of Donald Duck's car. However, for the people living under communist rule, the Trabi was a status symbol and an illusion of personal freedom. Erich Honecker, the former head of state never tired of praising the virtues of the small plastic car. But for himself, only a fleet of western limousines would do. Few people realised that he also was a big fan of the Land Rover marque.

By Stefan Thiele

HONECKER spent a good deal of time pursuing a passion for hunting in a state-owned forest north of Berlin. For this he was using four wheel-drive vehicles such as a number of Romanian built Aros, two Mercedes G-Wagons, a Lada Niva, and a 1976 Series III Land Rover 109 Stationwagon. A West-Berlin company, Karosserie Friedrich Rometsch, had rebuilt all these vehicles into convertible "Jagdwagen" or hunting-cars.

The Land Rover had been shortened by 80cm aft of the rear axle, making room for a collapsible metal grid to take on the shot animals. A canvas top and special seating for fellow hunters was also fitted. The cost for these and a host of other modifications came to roughly 150.000 German Marks or four times the original value of the car. It was delivered to Honecker in 1979. Currently, the Land Rover is undergoing a motor-revision as the new owner plans to sell the vehicle for a profit. Historically, this is a very interesting and unique Land Rover.

Bernd Brückner, personal bodyguard of Erich Honecker for 20 years and now owner of a security-company in Berlin remembers that Honecker preferred the Land Rover over all the other hunting-cars. Günter Mittag, second highest ranking member of the politburo and a close



Rometsch-converted 1976 Series III Land Rover 109



Only 13.000km on the second Range Rover



Trabi, the illusion of personal freedom for GDR.

friend of Honecker thought of ways to impress his boss. He concluded that a much bigger and statelier looking hunting-car was a good idea for a surprise present. So Mittag chose the Range Rover, undisputed king of all four wheel drive vehicles. In early 1985 a deal was struck with Rometsch for a special Range Rover the world had never seen before.

Karosserie Friedrich Rometsch had been founded in 1924 as a coach-building enterprise. In the 1950s a reputation for skillful conversion-work on Volkswagen Beetles had earned Rometsch widespread international acknowledgement and Hollywood-actors such as Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn were seen driving the "Beeskow", a specially designed sports cabriolet. The business flourished, but when the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, half of the specially trained workforce was literally fenced off from the western based company. Rometsch never recovered from this blow and lingered on, surviving on some rather

unglamorous accident repair work. It must have come as a sign from heaven then, when the GDR approached him with a plan for a Range Rover conversion as money would not be an issue.

Rometsch started with a brand new 1985 Range Rover 4-door. After unceremoniously cutting the body in half, the chassis was lengthened by 50cm and new body parts were manufactured to stretch the body. The rooftop and the C-pillars were discarded. A- and B-pillars were specially manufactured to accommodate a 5cm lift in the roofline to give the interior a more "airy" feel. With the so-called landaulet-conversion the front passengers would sit under a fixed roof while the back passengers would enjoy the open nature by means of a hydraulically operated rooftop. Manfred Quillfeld, senior coachbuilder at Rometsch for 40 years remembers: "The convertible rooftop was from a Rolls Royce Corniche and we had to completely rebuild its mechanics to adapt it to the Range Rover which in turn gave us



Dusted and forgotten. The second vehicle is now part of German Technical Museum, Berlin collection

many sleepless nights. All side-panels aft of the B-pillar and the rear doors of the Range Rover were handmade, as well as all window frames and the window-glass. However, the most remarkable detail is the variable gun-support that we accommodated into the rear doors. A windshield wiper motor from a Mazda drives a geared lifting mechanism, allowing the hunters to electrically vary the height of the cushioned support-bar. Outside, the strong front-guard with a powerful Warn electric winch and two Hella search-lights mounted on the A-pillar give the vehicle serious off-road competence. While we left the 3.5l V8 untouched, an extra battery, a high-output generator and Webasto heater were installed in the engine bay. The main driveshaft was custom made as was all of the electrical wiring."

These were the days of the Cold War, so fearful of a conspiracy, all work had been conducted in a sealed area to hinder intruders from secretly attaching any surveillance equip-



The modified Rolls-Royce convertible top is power-operated.



Deeply cushioned rear seats offer great protection against even the coldest of Siberian winters

ment to the Range Rover. It took Rometsch about a year to finish the conversion job. The GDR secret service paid 290.000 German Marks in cash, loaded the Jagdwagen on a truck and shipped it across the border to East Germany. Erich Honecker seemed to like what he saw and a second, identical looking Range Rover was ordered. As Bernd Brückner tells the story, this follow up had to be an exact replica of the first, the reason being that Günter Mittag had planned to puzzle Honecker on his birthday with an identical looking twin. They must have had a good time then and Mittag ordered a third Range Rover, now for his own purposes. He justified the need for a stretched Range Rover Jagdwagen, as he lost a limb to diabetes and he needed the extra leg-room to feel comfortable. Honecker would not object, so the third Range Rover Jagdwagen was paid for and delivered just few months before the Soviet empire had

started to tumble and East Germans publicly voiced their dissent over the totalitarian Honecker-regime.

After the demise of the GDR in 1990, the two Honecker Range Rover Jagdwagen ended up in the western part of Berlin. Today, the first converted Jagdwagen is owned by 66 years old Wenzel Nowak, who bought the Range Rover from a car-dealer in 1994. Last fall I had the opportunity to drive Mr. Nowak's prized possession. The first impression was that of a brand new car with immaculate paint and straight and undented body-panels. With only 8300 kilometers on the odometer, this is a car in "as new" condition. While the engine silently purrs without missing a beat, the gear lever is tight and precise. Parking this giant can be a real chore in Berlin, but the length of the Jagdwagen allows for a very smooth and controlled ride. Open the custom-made back doors and you find yourself in the comfort of lambswool covered



Original V8 engine had just over 8300km in the first Range Rover

seats. The opulent interior offers good protection against even the coldest of all Siberian winters. Bernd Brückner tells me that Honecker must have felt the same way as he ordered his driver to always leave the rooftop open even on the frostiest of days. And while I was getting into a slightly totalitarian mood myself, I couldn't help but press the hydraulics into submission, watching the majestic rooftop go up on the push of a button.

I was lucky enough to locate the second Range Rover Jagdwagen as well. Ulrich Kubisch, head of the department of motor vehicles in the "Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin" led me to a secret depot and lifted the covers on the second Honecker Range Rover. Dusted and forgotten, Honecker's second Range Rover Jagdwagen reads only 13.000 kilometres on the odometer. Lucky, I am again that Honecker, who died in 1994, would not be able to object my little frivolity.



Today Mr. Wenzel Nowak is the owner of the first Jagdwagen built by Rometsch.

GALERIE BERLIN



Parking this giant is a real challenge in Berlin.



Plush interior.



Extra legroom.

I did not give up, and my ongoing Honecker research finally revealed the current whereabouts of the missing third Range Rover. After publishing the Honecker Jagdwagen story in the Land Rover Enthusiast magazine I received a message from a reader who informed me that the missing fourth Range Rover is in Portugal. The vehicle is undergoing some work in a garage of Mr. Rui Melo. But why I am talking about No. 4, when I was searching for the third vehicle?

What I did not know was that my enquiries would uncover a completely new dimension to the story of these Range Rovers, and with that, a fourth and distinctively different vehicle! By mere chance I discovered a sales ad for a special Range Rover, and the text proudly proclaimed that this one was specially built for Erich Honecker. I was stunned, asking myself whether this car was fake? The car registration revealed that this was a 1982 Range

Rover, whereas the other Rometsch conversions dated from 1985 and later. Manfred Quillfeld, the retired senior coachbuilder at the former Rometsch works, who was responsible for all the body-conversion work on the known "Honeckers", was not particularly pleased to hear about my latest discovery. When I asked about the strikingly different execution of the doors and some other elements of the body, Mr. Quillfeld finally admitted that the vehicle I had found was the genuine first Jagdwagen of Erich Honecker, but he also admitted that Rometsch had not built it.

More light was shed on the story by Mr. Siegmund Kronenberger, who had been the chief executive in charge of Honecker's large motor pool. The conversion has done by a UK-based Morgan car company using a standard two door Lincoln Green Range Rover in a record time of twelve weeks, because there was no time to lose: the converted

Range Rover was supposed to be a birthday present for Honecker, who would turn 70 on August 25 1982. Morgan had stretched the chassis and body by 50cm and fitted a hydraulically-operated convertible top of Rolls-Royce origin. The rest of the conversion work was done in Lingen (small town near the Dutch border) by Wolfgang Walter. The cost was a quite substantial sum, 80.000 Euros. Mission accomplished, the Range Rover was registered for regular street use on July 1, 1982.

So while there's little doubt that the Rometsch conversions were much better than the original, it's this 1982 vehicle which was the prototype. Morgan's clever conversion made a big impact on Rometsch, forcing them to realise that the job could be done. It had served Mr. Quillfeld as a template from which he had taken measurements for the three Rometsch conversions we already knew about.