

The Mini Cord of Venezuela.



At the time that BMC and British Leyland were building cars in Chile, Venezuela was, by far, the most developed country in South America. It possessed an income level higher than all the other Latin American countries, and even some European, such as Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland. This wealthy economic situation was based largely on the revenue generated by oil production and export, and as a result, in the early 1970s, there was a point in time when the country was called "Venezuela Saudita".

It was a time of great economic boom, when the bread - *ordinary bread* - was imported from Miami every morning. In this context, it is not surprising to learn that the American brands ruled the car market in a huge way, leaving little space for the European or Japanese competition. Most of these American cars were assembled in Venezuela, as a result of the government's protectionist policy towards industry.

Sadly for Venezuela, the economic bonanza ended in the early 1980s. The legacy of this was an excellent road network and a huge foreign debt. The price of petrol, previously subsidized generously by the government, went up from US\$0.01 to US\$0.04 in the space of a few short years, creating demand for more economical cars. Local assemblers abandoned American car production and turned their attention to the assembly of Fiats, Toyotas, Renaults and Chevrolet-badged Suzuki and Isuzus.

Wanting to exploit this new found demand for small cars, a group of Venezuelan entrepreneurs led by Víctor Vargas, concluded that what Venezuela needed was a new small sporting car; and the car that fit the bill perfectly was the Mini.

The consortium formed a new company, FACORCA (FÁbrica CORDillera de CARrocerías), and negotiated a licence agreement with Rover to produce CKD Minis locally. The two parties concluded their deal in April 1990, and the arrangement was for a planned production between 3000 to 5000 Minis per year. Rover provided the engines, gearboxes and the instrument panel, and FACORCA produced the Mini bodies in glass fibre.

Why glass fibre? FACORCA concluded that the Mini's shells should be fabricated this way, for the very same reasons that BMC did in Chile some 20 years earlier: the tooling for steel construction was too expensive for the company. Glass Reinforced Plastic or Glass Reinforced Polyester (GRP) bodied Mini prototypes had been made by Pressed Steel Fisher of Swindon (now the BMW Plant Swindon) back in 1968, and one of these went to Venezuela in 1991 for evaluation.

The government insisted on local assembly of bodyshells in order to keep up local content, and this stipulation forced FACORCA into glass fibre bodyshells.

Production started in December 1991, with 113 units produced in the first year. Facorca wanted to export some of its output, and found importers in Colombia and the Antillian islands, which were keen to take on their Mini. A small dealer network was also set-up in Venezuela, and offered a product range that comprised of two models available, wboth sharing the standard 998cc engine: a standard version and the luxury model, known as the Mini Cord DB. The Mini Cord DB offered air-conditioning, full leather trim, chrome bumpers, spotlights and central console with tachometer.

1992 was the best year for the company, with 768 units produced, whilst 1993 was worst, with 391 units. This was a far cry from the "minimum level of 3000 per year" that had talked of at the start of the deal. Production suffered at the hands of the continuing economic crisis (which remains today), but also, buyers found the original 41bhp engine too weak for the sporty ambitions of the car.

FACORCA then approached John Cooper Works, who provided them kits to raise the engine power to 60hhp (the 1300 engine was planned for from the beginning but was never produced) and also offered an original cabriolet version in order to entice potential customers.

The Mini always was always warmly regarded in Venzuela, but buyers failed to materialize and production volumes dwindled away (24 units in 1994). Many of FACORCA's original partners left the company, but a Colombian importer convinced the remaining partners to keep the faith and keep the Mini in production. Sadly, these final efforts failed, and after a further 15 cars were produced, FACORCA was closed and dismantled.

Total production was 1309 units between 1991 and 1995.

The GRP shell is substantially the same shape as the normal Mini, even to the extent of having fake seams, but there are a few detail differences such as the rounded corners of the bonnet.

An example of one of the first cars imported into Great Britain can be seen at the Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon.



check out this website for more info and photos: <http://www.minipassionmini.50megs.com/default.htm>