



Minis of the World

SOUTH AMERICA

Bill Bell delves into the story of Venezuela's Mini Cord and traces back to the original Chilean GRP Mini of the 1960s.

Words Bill Bell Photography Miguel Plano (www.minipassionmini.com)

South America, a sub-region of Latin America, was by far the smallest global contributor to Mini production. It is, however, still a remarkably complicated story to tell. There is very limited information in existence about when, where and by whom some of these Minis were made, let alone the total production numbers.

The most widely known of the Minis made in South America is arguably the Venezuelan contribution, the Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP) Mini Cord that went into production in 1991.

During the 1970s, Venezuela was by far the wealthiest and most developed country in South America, thanks to the discovery and subsequent commercial oil drilling that commenced in 1917 and the oil boom that followed during the 1920s. Indeed even by 1928, Venezuela had become the world's leading oil exporter. The Venezuelan coffers were further boosted following the 1973 oil boom that generated an income that exceeded some European countries at that time. The oil reserves also meant that the country benefitted from

QUICK FACTS

- Venezuela produced the most Minis in South America with the GRP Mini Cord.
- Mini Cord production only lasted for four years, from 1991 to 1995, when financial woes forced the company to close its doors.
- GRP was used to build Mini shells in Chile, Venezuela and Uruguay due to lower costs, ease of production and rules on local-content usage.
- Peel, of the Isle of Man, was originally tasked with producing a fibreglass Mini for the South American market in 1966.

subsidised fuel costs and so, with little regard for fuel consumption, the country built plenty of large American-designed cars with big thirsty engines to satisfy the motoring population.

This 'Golden Age' ended for Venezuela during the 1980s, with the collapse in world oil prices in 1983

"The market required a new, small sporting car to add to the mix. What better than a Mini..."

resulting in a greatly-reduced income. It was further exacerbated by soaring interest rates that multiplied the national debt, leading to the need for drastic austerity measures. Venezuelans could no longer afford their large, inefficient vehicles and their increased demand for small cars was quickly met by locally-built Fiats, Toyotas, Renaults and Chevrolet-badged Suzukis. However, a group of Venezuelan businessmen concluded that the market required a new, small sporting car to add to the mix. What better than a Mini?

THE GRP MINI

The group formed FACORCA (Fábrica de Motores y Carrocerías Cordillera) and they were to build the Mini in Mariara, Venezuela. They negotiated a licensing agreement with Rover who agreed in April 1991 to provide the running gear and

electrical components for the vehicles. FACORCA took the responsibility for the GRP body, interior and various other small items to get the cars up and running. The decision to use glass fibre was twofold; firstly there were the excessive tooling costs to consider that are associated with any steel-bodied car. Secondly, the Venezuelan Government insisted that a specific percentage of the car be produced from locally-sourced materials. With such small-scale national steel production in Venezuela (hence the reliance on international steel

Mini Cord brochure looks to show a standard UK-produced steel Mini, with gutters on the roof and external seams, unlike the actual GRP-bodied car.



sources) and with Rover already supplying the other major components, FACORCA was left with very little choice.

And so it was in December 1991, following the evaluation of another GRP Mini from a different (and much earlier) South American run in Chile that was subsequently sent to Venezuela, that production began. It was initially envisaged that production volumes would lie somewhere between 3000 and 5000 units per year. During that first month, 113 Mini Cords were built with two different models. The top-of-the-range Mini Cord FA (a DeLuxe version) came with air conditioning, leather interior, rev counter, spotlights and Minilight-style wheels as standard. The cheaper model, the Mini Cord SB, had a cloth interior and steel wheels. Both specifications came with 998cc engines. Plans to fit the 1275 never materialised – with the end of 998cc production Minis in the UK, Rover had many parts in stock, so it made commercial sense to stick with the small-bore engine.

In 1992 a grand total of 768 Mini Cords were manufactured for the Venezuelan, Colombian and Antilles markets, an annual production number that would never be exceeded despite the optimistic forecasts. Difficult economic conditions continued to plague the country and affect the company, to the point where production figures



Mini Cords lined-up inside the FACORCA factory in Mariara, Venezuela.



The 1994 John Cooper Cord from the sales brochure. The car featured 13-inch Revolution alloys and a Cooper tuning kit, but sales failed to save the Mini Cord. Thanks to Miguel Plano for the images (www.minipassionmini.com).

MINIS OF THE WORLD

had dropped to 391 units in 1993. This, combined with discord between the partners of the group, almost ceased Mini Cord production completely. Only 62 of the 391 units found their way to Colombia, which in turn forced the closure of the Colombian importer, Mini City, run by Abisaad Hanna. Abisaad had invested heavily in the project but the factory could never deliver enough cars to fulfil his order. The dire economic situation of the region persisted into 1994, with FACORCA's sales suffering as a consequence. This ultimately led to the company being forced into the hands of administrators Abisaad,

availability of UK Mini Coopers with the 1275 SPi engine, although admittedly they were almost twice the price of a Mini Cord SB.

By 1995, Abisaad, Janna & Cia pulled the plug with only 15 cars being built that year. A total of 1309 Mini Cords were built as a variety of the Standard, DeLuxe, Cooper and Convertible versions.

BACK TO THE '60S

Although Venezuela produced the largest number of South American Minis, it was by no means the first country of the region to do so. In fact, 28 years earlier in 1963, production of a steel-bodied model

"Bizarrely, production restarted with two Beach Mini prototypes..."

Janna & Cia, although the FACORCA management did persuade the administrators to restart the temporarily-ceased production.

Bizarrely, production restarted with two Beach Mini prototypes, that had started being developed in 1993. They also introduced a Cooper performance kit for the existing 998cc engine, to fill the void of the 1275cc engine. The John Cooper model offered 13-inch Revolution wheels, a three-clock binnacle and metallic silver paint to complete the new look. Sadly, the facelift was not enough to save the floundering company and only 24 cars were built in 1994, the majority being exported to Colombia. Sales were not helped by the local Rover importer's

commenced in Chile, with hopes of around 2000 cars per year being built. Unfortunately these projected figures were never met, with only 300 cars made between 1964 and 1965. By 1966 the government had introduced a 45 per cent local content initiative (similar to the later initiative by the Venezuelan government), which almost ground production to a halt.

A very limited steel industry in Chile meant that the Chilean production plant had to consider an alternative material for the body to meet the quota, with thoughts turning to glass-reinforced plastic (GRP). GRP is a cheap material that is easy to use and therefore requires limited training in order to produce

bodyshells from it.

However, expertise in mould design is required, in addition to the expertise in setting up the initial production. In 1966, BMC turned to Peel from the Isle of Man for that proficiency, the company known for its P50, 'the smallest car in the world'. Peel was commissioned to build a prototype Mini saloon in GRP that could be used as the basis for the Chilean production car. A Mk1 Super DeLuxe was sent to them to use as the basis for the mould, hence all the Chilean GRP Minis have external hinges and look like Mk1s but with wind-up windows. Pressed Steel Fisher, a part of the BMC Empire, already had its own plastics experts and production facilities. PSF worked in collaboration with Peel to build a number of prototypes in England, thought to be six in total, between 1968 and 1969. At least one of the prototypes was shipped to Chile, along with the original moulds and jigs created by Peel.

Building of the production facility in Northern Chile was made very attractive thanks to Government grants. A small town near the Peruvian border called Erica was selected and the factory was built. It took until 1969 for the production of the GRP Mini to finally commence →



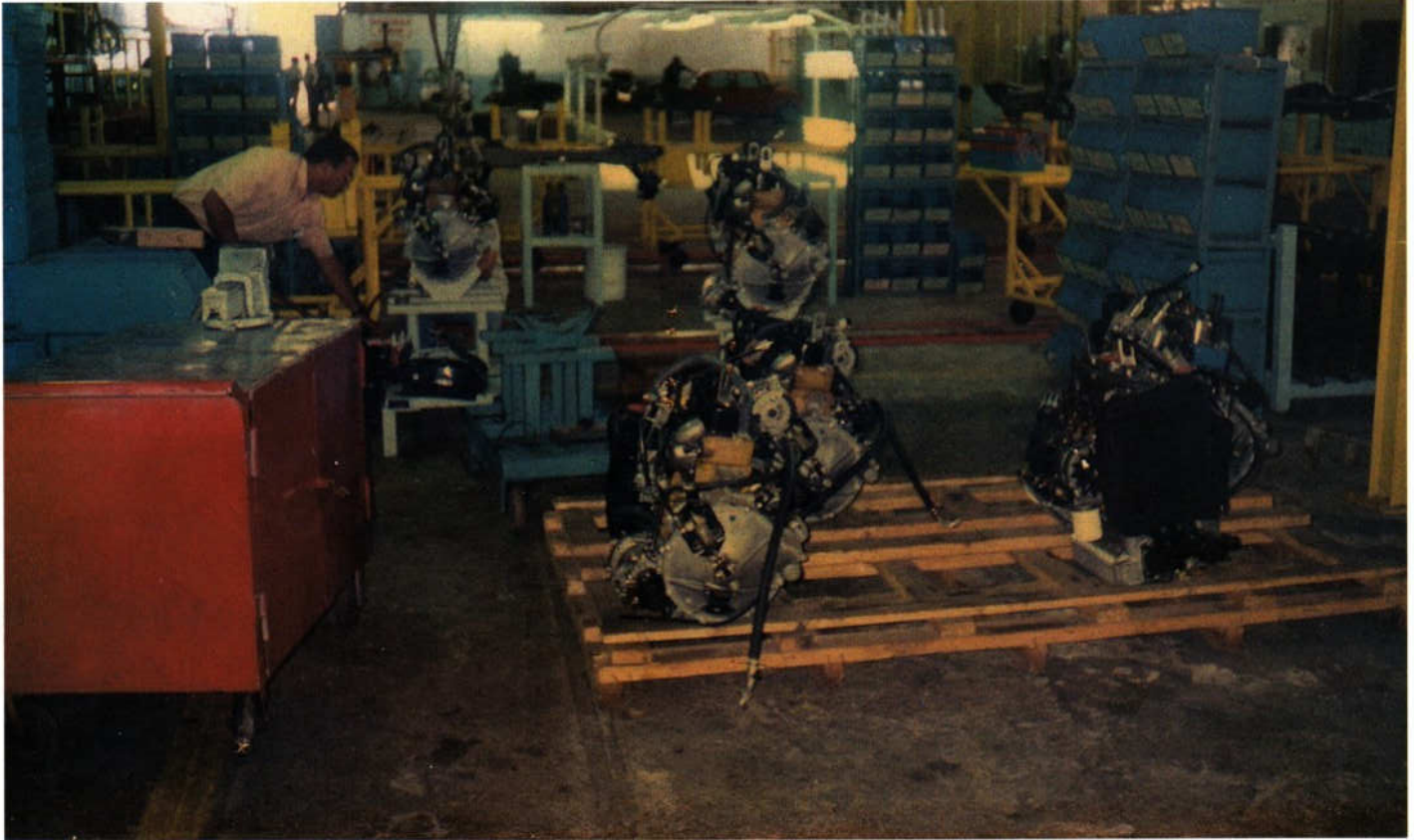
A Chilean-built GRP Mini, showing the wheel arch shape and the gutter moulding which was an aluminium strip riveted in place.



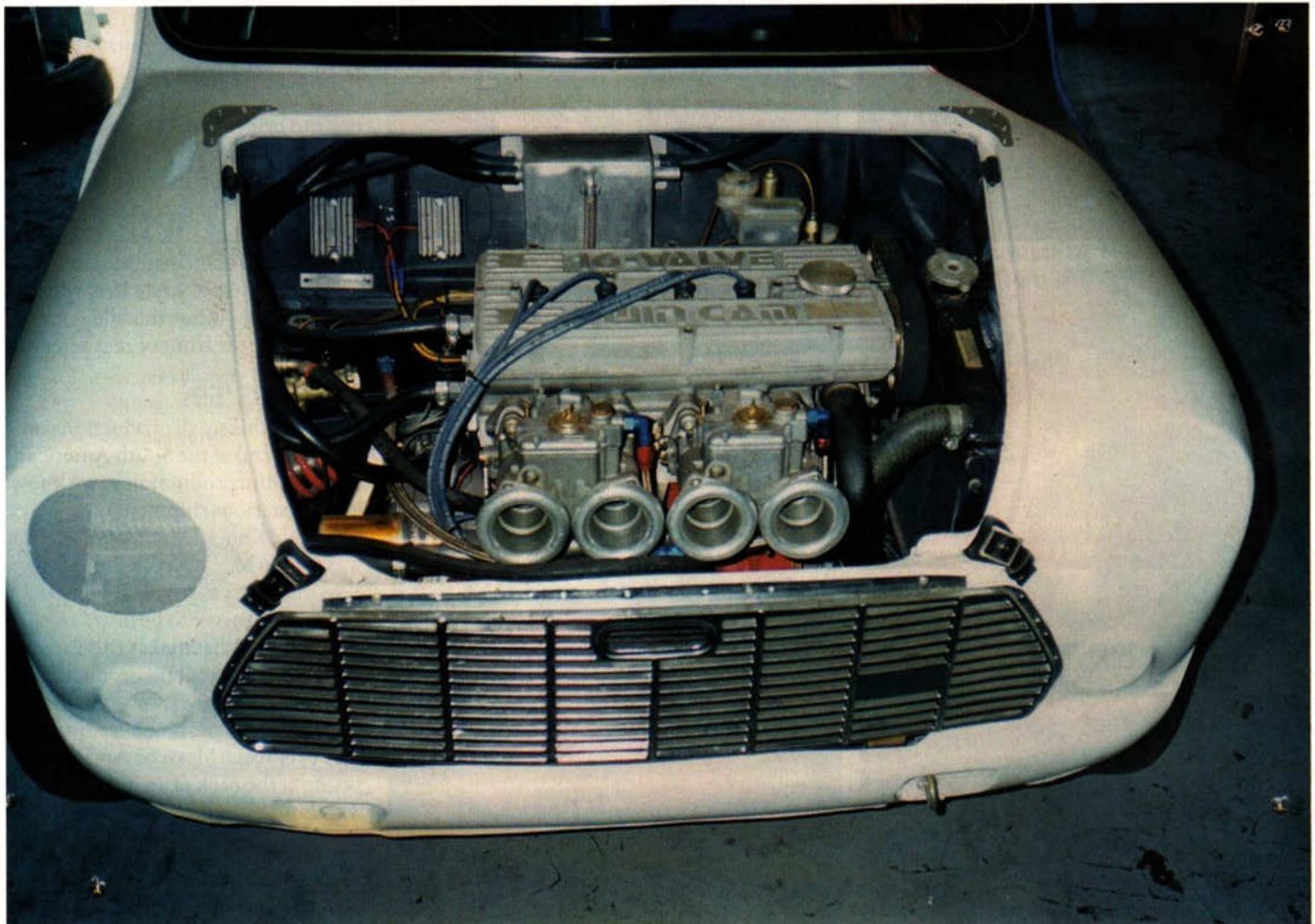
A steel shell being painted at the Chilean factory. Only 300 cars were built from 1964-65 before strict local content rules began.

FACORCA produced a special-order Cord Convertible with a John Cooper tuning kit for Abisaad Hanna, the Colombian importer, to gauge local interest in the model.



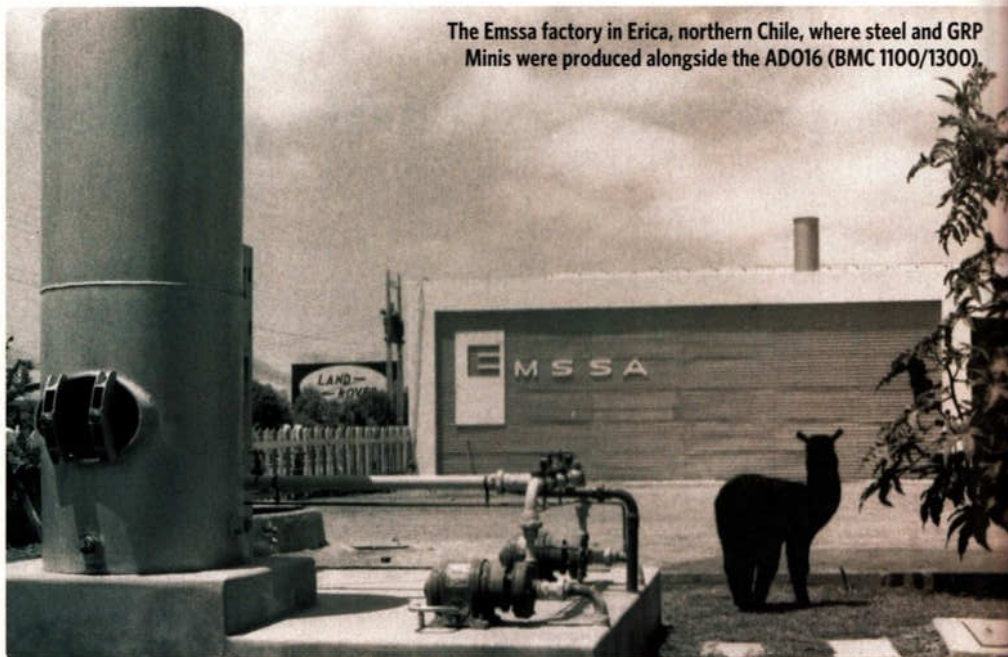


Above: Complete 998cc A-plus engines and gearboxes sit in the FACORCA factory, having been supplied by Rover in the 1990s, along with the entire running gear.
 Below: Two Mini Cord race cars were prepared for FACORCA with Jack Knight 16-valve twin-cam engines and straight-cut five-speed transmissions. Sadly, they never raced as they could never get the engines properly tuned and the drivers had many troubles with the straight-cut gears. Images by Miguel Plano.



MINIS OF THE WORLD

in Chile with British Leyland setting up a manufacturing arm called 'Emssa' that was later rebranded as 'British Leyland Automotores de Chile, S.A.'. The moulds used in the shell production process soon wore out, necessitating the need to produce new moulds locally to allow the GRP production to continue until 1974. Overall there had been a somewhat limited number of units manufactured – somewhere in the region of 2000 over the five-year lifespan of the plant. The vehicles were only ever offered with 998cc engines and they had some unique fittings that included locally-designed rear light clusters and wooden dashboards. A number of cars do still exist, with a significant proportion being restored by companies and enthusiasts alike.



The Emssa factory in Erica, northern Chile, where steel and GRP Minis were produced alongside the ADO16 (BMC 1100/1300).

URUGUAY 1275 GT

The smallest contribution to the South American saga comes from Uruguay, where a few hundred GRP 1275 GTs were built from 1973-1976

“A mysterious shipment of CKD kits was sent to Mexico in 1959...”



A 1970s Uruguay-built 1275 GT. The front grille is the same as an early UK 1275 GT.



by a company called Super S.A. Astonishingly, a large number of these cars survive and are in the hands of extremely enthusiastic owners in Uruguay. There is very little known of their history, but we hope to bring you more on the subject soon. At present, we only know for certain that they were not related to the Chilean or Venezuelan production runs. The 1275 GT-badged cars had no external seams, were fitted with Rostyle steel wheels and had roof gutters that did not extend over the front or rear screens.



A few hundred of these cars were built, and many still survive today.



The roof seams run up the A-pillar, over the door and down the C-pillar on these GRP shells.

MISSING '59s

However, this small production run is not the end of the South American story of Mini production as we know it. A mysterious shipment of Complete Knock Down kits (CKDs) was sent to Mexico from the UK in 1959, the first year of Mini production, never to be heard of or seen again! What makes this even more bizarre is that no production facility was ever even set up in that country. So where are they now? Did they ever reach Mexico? Are they sitting at the back of an import warehouse in wooden crates just waiting to be discovered? Now, who fancies an exploratory trip to Mexico to solve this mystery...? 

