

British Mini Motor goes Latin American

CARACAS, Venezuela (Reuter) — The Mini Minor, a squat little car with a revolutionary design that was the darling of Britain in the swinging '60s, is making a belated debut in Latin America.

A Venezuelan company, Facorca, has started producing a version of the car with a fibreglass body, mainly for sale in Latin America and the Caribbean. It hopes to be turning out 10,000 a year by 1994.

A company in Sao Paulo will also start assembling the two-door Mini for the Brazilian market later this year.

The Mini was one of a generation of small cars — along with the Volkswagen Beetle, Fiat's Cinquecento and Citroen's Deux Chevaux — which left an indelible stamp on Europe's post-war urban culture.

The spartan little cars were designed mainly for people who wanted a first car that was both rugged and cheap.

But the cars quickly shed their proletarian associations and became classless runabouts bought as often by middle class families needing a second car as by struggling students.

The Mini, designed by the late Hungarian-born inventor, Alec Issigonis, was the first car to have a transverse-mounted engine, making available more space for passengers. It won the famed Monte Carlo rally several times in the mid-1960s.

The Mini became part of the "swinging London" mythology of the '60s, when fashion designers and pop musicians — many of them driving brightly-colored Minis — made the city one of the youth capitals of the world.

Britain's Rover Group still produces about 40,000 Minis a year, mostly for the Japanese market where sales unexpectedly took off in the late 1980s.

Facorca's managing director, Orlando Lokpez, thinks the Mini will catch on in Latin America as a car tailor-made for hard times.

"This car is very easy to maintain. Nowadays in this part of the world people tend to think more of the practical side of things than of status when they buy a car."

Lokpez said he already has orders for the car, which sells for between \$5,500 and \$7,000 US, from countries as far apart as Panama and Peru.

Facorca has set up two subsidiaries — one to manufacture the plastic body shell and the other to assemble the car from imported components under the supervision of engineers from Rover.

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