

Safety in classic cars - what drivers need to watch

Demand for classic cars from all eras has soared, but what many owners fail to realise is that safety systems cannot be compared to those in modern cars and that driving has to be adapted accordingly.

'Driving a very old vehicle is a special responsibility,' says Josef Ernst, the spokesman for DaimlerChrysler's Classic vehicle division in Stuttgart.

Classic cars stand out when it comes to their exterior design but it is an illusion to think that their road behaviour can be compared to a modern car.

'For one thing, the brakes in a classic car are much weaker and especially the older the vehicle gets,' Ernst warns, pointing out that in the 1920s and 1930s there was much less traffic on the road so that car makers didn't give the brakes huge priority.

Younger generation classic cars from the 1970s and early 1980s have especially fuelled the boom on the market because they somehow look familiar. But as far as safety systems are concerned the biggest technological advances have in fact been made during the last three decades, helping to contribute to a significant fall in road deaths in many countries.

'In the 1960s and 1970s different standards applied especially in crash tests,' says Hermann Schenk, from the traffic testing authority in Stuttgart (GTU).

Crumple zones, that absorb the impact in a head-on collision, were introduced in the early 1960s, but where a dent might result in a modern car the consequences could be quite different in an old car.

Even the first safety systems like steering wheel padding, seat belts and head rests by far offer only little protection compared to modern systems.

'The first seat belts can at best be described as human-fastening systems,' says Helmut Bluemer, a spokesman of Germany's central vehicle authority (ZDK) in Bonn.

There are thus limits to making a classic car safer. Many classic cars don't even have notches for installing the belts properly. Even modernizing the braking system has technical and financial limitations.

One relatively cheap way of making your classic car a lot safer is by having a close look at the tyres.

'Replacing the old tyres with modern ones already makes a big difference', according to Schenk especially when it comes to braking power and roadholding.

On the other hand safety concerns should not force you to keep your classic car parked in the garage all year round.

'A classic car requires especially careful driving,' according to Schenk and should not be used as a daily runner.

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