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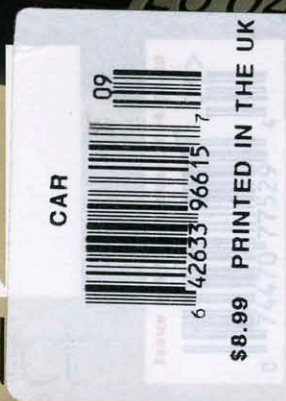


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IF GOD DRIVES A MOTOR CAR... THIS IS IT

Rolls-Royce doesn't go in for half measures when it builds a concept. It's really pushed the boat out this time

Story Angus MacKenzie
Photography Alex Howe



That the 100EX is the most revolutionary Rolls-Royce in history is really only a question of degree.

Well, about ten degrees. That's how far the most famous grille in the world has been tilted rearwards. For a marque whose calling card has stood proudly to attention for the best part of 100 years, this is a movement of tectonic significance.

In design terms Rolls-Royce motor cars have been largely defined by The Grille since the late 1960s. Without that glittery, upright, rigorously rectilinear Parthenon at their prows, the Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow, Spirit and Seraph are merely conventional saloons, writ

large. Even the gigantic new BMW-built Phantom, which convincingly recalls the imposing splendour and proportions of classic Rolls-Royce limousines, relies on a massive version of The Grille to make its point.

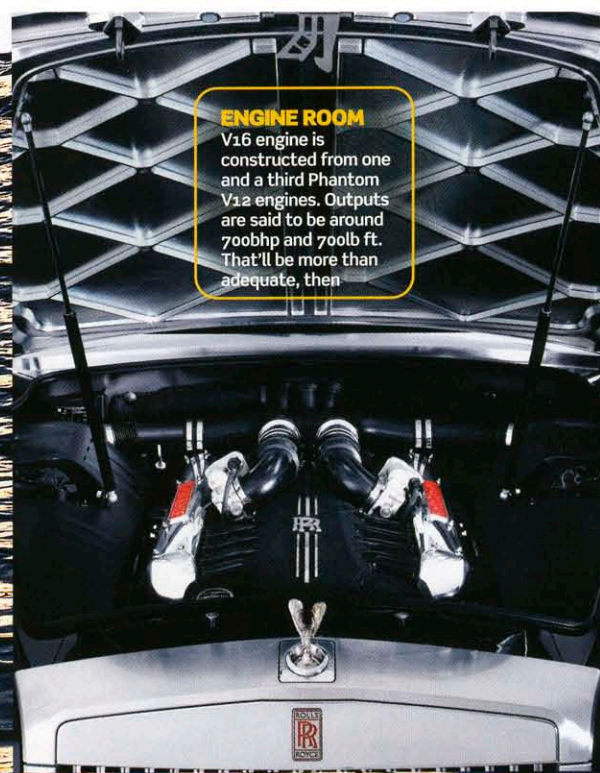
'We had re-established the marque with the Phantom,' says the 100EX's exterior designer Marek Djordjevic. 'This was an opportunity to move it on. The fact we were going to do an evolution was there from the very beginning.' The EX suffix denotes that this car, built to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the meeting between wealthy, entrepreneurial car lover Charles Rolls and perfectionist engineer Henry Royce, is an experimental model. But





IN THE HOLD

The 'countryman' boot opens up and down to provide easy access to a teak-floored load space and provide a perch for picnickers



ENGINE ROOM

V16 engine is constructed from one and a third Phantom V12 engines. Outputs are said to be around 700bhp and 700lb ft. That'll be more than adequate, then



unlike the previous EX Rolls-Royces built between 1919 and 1958, this car has been built to test styling rather than mechanicals.

So is the 100EX, tilted grille and all, a proper Rolls-Royce? Absolutely.

It was clear from the beginning it had to have an epic presence,' says Djordjevic. And it's epic, all right, in widescreen plasma 3D. Rarely has the Spirit of Ecstasy (solid silver, by the way, and riding seven feet ahead of the driver) seemed so at home.

At 5669mm stem to stern, this is a two-door, four-seat convertible longer than an S-class, with a wheelbase that would just about swallow a Mini Cabrio whole. The bonnet and windscreen surrounds are milled from solid billets of aluminium (the 18kg windscreen surround, which covers elements of the 100EX's aluminium spaceframe, started as a 2500kg block of metal) and took one man a

week to polish by hand. Underneath is a monstrous 9.0-litre V16 engine – basically one-and-a-third Phantom V12s welded together – that well-placed sources say is good for about 700bhp, with about 700lb ft of torque available at little more than tickover.

On the floor, on the soft-top cover and inside the boot there's bleached teak decking that evokes the glitter of bright sunshine, the gentle lap-lap of blue water, and the soft clinking of rigging in a warm breeze. 'We drew from the design of contemporary and classic yachts,' admits interior designer Charles Coldham, who, like Djordjevic, also worked on the Phantom. The tail-down stance and the tapered rear also contribute to the nautical theme. 'This is a social car to be enjoyed in the open elements, like a luxury yacht,' says Djordjevic.

Unlike the Phantom, which was styled in an

old bank building in London's ritzy West End so its designers could soak up the appropriate English ambience, the 100EX was done at BMW's Designworks studio in Los Angeles.

'The California climate, the quality of the light and the openness of the roads are very appropriate for this car,' insists Djordjevic. Most of the early design work was put on paper during 2002, while he was on the road showing the then still-secret Phantom to potential customers.

Although a full four-seater, 100EX looks almost like a roadster, its size artfully disguised by the superb stance and effortless proportions, and the giant wheels and tyres. The surfacing is taut yet elegant, and the detailing wonderful – check the line that sweeps up from the rocker panel behind the front wheel, echoing the lovely curved cutline of the rear-hinged doors. The tail-lights are deliberately small –

'The solid silver Spirit of Ecstasy rides seven feet ahead of the driver. Rarely has it seemed so at home'

STOWAWAY

Hood mechanism is designed to fold into a very compact space behind the rear seats. The hood is made of a high-tech fabric, lined with wool



AT THE HELM

Think boats again. The simplicity of the steering wheel and instruments evokes an idealised 1930s speed boat, albeit one with a more modern stereo

'the back of a Rolls-Royce is dominated by sheet metal and decoration is always kept to a minimum' – while the LED headlights are narrower – and better resolved – versions of the controversial rectangular main beam units of the Phantom.

The car – which is fully driveable – uses a large number of Phantom parts, from the front and rear suspension and brakes, to the complete dash structure and sub-systems. Although 165mm shorter and 71mm lower overall, it also uses the same aluminium spaceframe technology as the Phantom for its internal structure. You don't have to be an automotive engineer to figure out that the 100EX could be turned into a real car with metal panels in place of the carbonfibre ones and a regular Phantom V12 under the bonnet.



LIGHTHOUSE

The headlights are LEDs and are even narrower than the not universally admired rectangular slits found on the front of the Phantom

'There is nothing on the car that bars it from being produced,' confirms Djordjevic.

Ah, but will it be? Intriguingly, 100EX is precisely the sort of Rolls-Royce that VW chief Bernd Pischetsrieder reckons should have been built in the first place. 'I would not have launched the Phantom,' says the man who as BMW boss wrested the marque away from the clutches of the company he now runs. 'Yes, it's a genuine successor to the Phantom III, but it's not a position from which you can grow. I would have gone lower, or for a more niche product like a Corniche. It is always better to start with something you can grow from, rather than at the very top.'

Before his shock – and still unexplained – resignation at the end of May, Rolls-Royce chief executive Tony Gott stonewalled the

inevitable questions about the 100EX with the equally inevitable 'currently no plans to produce' answer. Although company insiders insist Phantom sales are performing to expectations – and outperforming Maybach – there's little doubt that in the medium term the Rolls franchise needs a second model, and a replacement for the Bentley Arnage-based Corniche convertible, now out of production, is a logical step. Watch this space. car

SPECIFICATIONS

ROLLS-ROYCE 100EX CONCEPT

Engine: 9.0-litre 64V V16, naturally aspirated

Transmission: 6-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive

Dimensions: Height 1561mm, width 1990mm, length 5669mm, wheelbase 3470mm

Tyres: 255/50 R21 front, 285/45 R21 rear

Steering: Rack and pinion, speed sensitive, variable-rate power assistance

SLIPWAY TO GO

A polished aluminium waist rail surrounds the passenger compartment. The gentle slope of the boot-lid forms a 'boat-tail' at the rear

* OFF THE SCALE

You want to supersize it?

It's only when you get up close to the 100EX that you realise just how big this open-top two-door four-seater really is.

From a distance, because it's in proportion with itself, you don't appreciate what a whopper it is.

But reach out to touch the Rolls concept and – if you're not pounced on by security guards – you'll grasp the sheer size of the thing. Take those

21-inch tyres, for instance. Or the handles on the suicide doors – they're more than a foot long.

Its size is more striking than the Phantom's, since it goes without saying that a Rolls limo will be big. In fact, the 100EX is 71mm lower than the Phantom and it's 165mm shorter, since it has less space for rear passengers. The Phantom's wheelbase is 100mm longer.



'The decking evokes the glitter of bright sunshine, the lap-lap of water and the clinking of rigging in a warm breeze'