

LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

# Robb Report



THE BESPOKE ISSUE

It's all in the detail



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# THE BIG REVEAL



In Italy's Motor Valley, Dany Bahar and his custom car factory Ares believes today's supercars still need a little help...

**BY BEN OLIVER**

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●●● Ares Design—  
in Italy's Motor  
Valley—is ready  
to reveal its  
latest supercar  
sensations.





# “We’re fighting a battle against mediocrity,”

says Dany Bahar, cofounder of Ares Design. “Ferrari, Lamborghini, Rolls-Royce—they’re fantastic brands. Fantastic. But some of our clients have 600 of their cars. They’re the very best clients for those brands, but when they want to commission a car that is really different, really special, they still come up against the rules and limits of a big manufacturer—even if the CEO knows you by name. So Ferrari and the others can sometimes seem mediocre by their standards. We start where that mediocrity ends.”

Bahar is, as usual, being provocative. We’re talking in his vast, minimalist office at the Ares production facility in Modena, Italy. We are in the heart of Italy’s Motor Valley. Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati, and Pagani are all a short drive away—even shorter in one of the kinetic masterpieces they’ve made around here for a century.

All of those companies take their names from their famous founders, but the supercar industry has also long attracted agitators: big characters, often precociously

young, who love the cars but have sought to shake up the industry’s hit-and-miss engineering and management. The Austro-Canadian oil millionaire and F1 team owner Walter Wolf was a serial Lamborghini customer. While still in his thirties, he funded the development of better-handling one-off cars that Lamborghini later adopted as production models, probably keeping it alive. Patrick Mimran then bought the still-ailing Lamborghini in the early 1980s when he was only in his twenties. He saved it and sold it to Chrysler in 1987, later becoming an artist.

Bahar is their successor: Motor Valley’s modern-day disruptor. His latest mission is to make cars with unique, bespoke, coachbuilt bodies not only possible but also affordable by the region’s standards. Coachbuilding was the norm before World War II and remained relatively common for high-end sports cars into the 1960s. Playboys and princes would no more buy an off-the-peg car than an off-the-peg suit, and the extraordinary shapes they commissioned from

●●● One of Ares Design’s most widely known projects to date, the X-Raid is a new-bodied beauty based on the Mercedes-AMG G63.





coachbuilders like Saoutchik, Frua, Figoni et Falaschi, and the rest still grace the lawns at the world's finest concours. The practice declined with the advent of monocoque construction—in which the body and chassis are united, making the panels harder to change—and with the industrialization of supercar manufacturing, which makes a one-off an expensive interruption.

It is still possible, however, if your pockets are deep enough. The Sultan of Brunei's special builds famously kept Bentley and Aston Martin afloat through the dark days of the 1990s, and most of the super-premium brands still make a tiny handful of unique-bodied cars each year for their best customers. "But you pay \$4.1 million, wait two years or more, and you still don't get what you want," says Bahar. "Yes, some of our clients have whole museums for their cars. But it's not just them. Coachbuilding shouldn't just be for the lucky five. Our clients aren't just billionaires but lawyers and senior managers, too. Our strategy is to make coachbuilding more accessible."

How accessible? A limited-run Ares-bodied supercar starts from roughly \$600,000, excluding the donor car. For a one-off, roughly \$880,000 is typical. The turnaround time is usually eight to 12 months. Can we really make an argument that a bespoke supercar costing \$880,000 represents good value for money? Certain recent limited-run models from Porsche and Mercedes have tripled in value and now cost a similar sum . . . so maybe we can.





## Playboys and princes would no more buy an off-the-peg car than an off-the-peg suit.

●●● Already refined rides, including a custom motorcycle, being further reimagined by Dany Bahar (top left) and his talented team.

Bahar has long been a polarizing character. Born in Turkey and a Swiss national, he met the Austrian Red Bull billionaire Dietrich Mateschitz while working for a Lichtenstein wealth-management firm. Mateschitz hired Bahar and tasked him with setting up Red Bull's two Formula 1 teams and buying football clubs in New York, Austria, and Ghana. In 2007, Bahar was poached by Ferrari to shake up its global sales and marketing operations, and two years later, he was made CEO of Lotus at the age of just 38. The British sports-car maker had long flirted with financial disaster and desperately needed to gain scale to survive. Within a year, Bahar had developed a plan to grow Lotus's volume fivefold with five new cars, which were unveiled simultaneously at the Paris Motor Show in 2010.

Automakers usually reveal one new car at a time. Nobody present at the Paris exhibition, including me, could believe what they were seeing. The wave of excitement was followed by a backwash of cynicism. Industry insiders

questioned Bahar's experience and doubted whether he could grow Lotus so quickly. We didn't get to find out. By 2012, he'd had a litigious falling-out with the Malaysian owners, and since then we've heard little from him.

Ares is Bahar's next act and draws inspiration from his experiences at Ferrari. There, he anticipated the current boom in personalization, and not just of cars. He was part of Ferrari's Atelier bespoke program, which saw customers' average spend on personalized paint and trim spike from 10 percent of list price to more than 40 percent. It's still a huge source of profit for Ferrari.

"We had customers at Ferrari who wanted to go further, go beyond the price lists and options, and create unique cars with bespoke bodies," Bahar says. "But despite the demand, in my time at Ferrari we made only four or five of these, because for a big manufacturer they're a catastrophe. They don't like the distraction. But that demand is growing. So I saw an opportunity."



DISCOVERER

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## “Coachbuilding shouldn’t just be for the lucky five.”

—DANY BAHAR, COFOUNDER OF ARES DESIGN

●●● Ares’s take on the Land Rover Defender demonstrates bespoke bodywork and enhancements on another level from the latter marque.

Bahar officially launched Ares in 2014 and has grown the business uncharacteristically gently. The company’s best-known products so far have been two limited-run SUVs—one based on the Land Rover Defender and the other on the Mercedes-Benz G-Wagen. The Defender was comprehensively reengineered, and the G-Wagen was given an entirely new body. The brand has also made a handful of restomods—classic cars with modern engineering—and cars personalized beyond what their makers could provide.

And now, having built its team and refined its processes, Ares is starting to do what Bahar always intended: offer supercars with bespoke bodies, either one-offs or in very limited runs, to the same clients whose frustration he witnessed at Ferrari. “The supercar manufacturers all have a car configurator online,” he says. “We just have a blank piece of paper. You can have one wheel or seven.”

Well, not quite. All Ares cars are based on a donor supercar. By leaving its mechanical and electrical systems alone,

the original warranties and the certification required to road-register it remain valid. Ares is unlikely to improve on complex systems, which have been very expensively developed by the global car groups. “We’re like plastic surgeons,” says Bahar. “We don’t touch the organs.”

But Ares can improve on a car’s body, delivering something that clients simply can’t get from the major marques. There’s often antipathy for anyone who dares to alter a Ferrari or a Porsche; for some it’s almost sacrilegious. But the first bespoke projects from Ares show taste and discernment and, in some cases, are the kinds of cars the manufacturers would develop themselves, had they the time. Clients might want a unique body, but they might also want functionality or a combination of body type and engine, which a carmaker doesn’t offer.

For example, Ares is reworking 911 Targas with the signature polished aluminum rollover hoop and folding hardtop, uprated to the specifications of the racecar-derived





●●● A lineup of automotive makeovers at the Ares production facility in Modena.



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GT3. It's not a combination Porsche offers, but it is one that any Porsche aficionado would approve. There will also be two limited-run versions of a reimagined Tesla Model S: a shooting brake and a convertible. Both are hugely appealing concepts and perfectly suited to the car's insane performance and silent, emissions-free running. They're cars Musk himself would most likely build, were he not a little preoccupied. And priced at around \$235,000, they'll also be more affordable than other Ares offerings.

The first two coachbuilt supercars that Ares revealed have real left-field, car-connoisseur appeal. The Ares Panther, built over the chassis of a Lamborghini Huracán, is an homage to the De Tomaso Pantera, the charismatic 1970s supercar beloved of car enthusiasts but which was never much good to own or drive. "I owned one for three months," Bahar laughs. "I loved it, but it never worked." The second, Project Pony, is a modern interpretation of the Ferrari 412, the previously unloved, angular four-seat coupe

from the late 1970s that is currently enjoying a critical reassessment. Project Pony will most likely be based on the chassis of Ferrari's modern four-seater, the GTC4Lusso.

The first Panther prototype is now complete, and the first Pony will be ready early in 2019. Both look sensational in the sketches. The Panther is way better-looking than the original Pantera. It has the same classic supercar waistline, gently rising and falling over the wheel arches. But with its high, pointed nose and kicked-up rear, it also has huge visual energy and looks as if it is bursting forward, even at a standstill. The Pony is very different, but it also improves on its inspiration. It is a gentleman's express of the type industrialists would use in the 1960s to whisk them over the Alps to meetings in Milan, Geneva, and Nice. It has a formal, three-box profile and bodywork as sharp and tailored as an Italian suit, with elegant, narrow pillars.

Both are instantly covetable, and both will be built in limited runs: 21 examples for the Panther, 14 for the Pony.

●●● After cutting away the exterior and stripping the interior of a donor car, 24 designers and engineers begin its time-consuming transformation.



●●● The client and designers decide on the cabin's colors, fascia, and trim, and then upholstery artists make it a masterpiece.

According to Bahar, the ideas for these limited-run cars will always come from customers, and they'll only be built in a small series—rather than as one-offs—if the customers give their consent. “Our clients love this. It’s better than keeping a good idea to themselves. They feel like they’re the inventor of the car, like they’ve given birth to it. You don’t get that at Ferrari.”

A car usually starts with an e-mail. One bespoke project started with a three-line message from a client who’d seen three angles he loved on three cars from different manufacturers, and he wondered if they could be combined in a single design. “Project Pony started with an e-mail from a major Ferrari collector—really one of their biggest clients,” says Bahar. “He told us to take what he thought was the ugliest Ferrari—the 412—and come back with something interesting. He loved the first sketches.”

Bahar’s team of 24 designers and engineers then work the sketches into virtual 3-D models. If the client can’t

come to Modena, they will be sent a VR headset so that they can take a virtual walk around the car with the designers, viewing it from every angle and distance. They can also get eighth-scale, 3-D printed models of the car painted in the right color so they can see how sunlight falls across the vehicle. It’s a similar process that the CEO of a carmaker enjoys when approving a new model.

And once the design has been signed off, it has to be built. A brand-new, perfect, and complete Ferrari or Lamborghini donor car is sourced and delivered to the Ares facility, where often its interior is stripped and its bodywork cut away, precisely but brutally, in a shower of sparks.

The donor cars are driven onto the spacious, light-filled, and spotlessly clean production line to be stripped down. The cabin is removed here before the car is taken to the body and paint area to have its exterior removed.

Although the tech behind the dashboard is maintained, cabin color and trim are up to the client, and whatever they and the designers have decided on is executed by a team of upholsterers. “There’s an incredible pool of talent around Modena with the skills you need to build supercars or bespoke cars,” says Bahar. “We actually choose to recruit from the fashion industry.” Besides supercars, cheese, ceramics, and balsamic vinegar, the Emilia-Romagna region is famed for the artisan skills that can make whatever the fashion designers of Milan can conceive. Luxury leather-goods firm Furla is based nearby, and the same hands that stitched one of its bags may now stitch the cabin of your Ares. “The fashion leatherworkers are incredible,” says Bahar. “They have an attention to detail beyond the automotive. For them, even the stitching on the leather lining of a handbag must be perfect, even though you’ll never see it. That’s still not true in automotive. I think that manufacturing quality in cars has gone down, even at the highest level.”

To those traditional Emilian craft skills, we can now add carbon-fiber fabrication. Since the 1980s, this region has built up a pool of skilled fabricators who work with the material and who move between Formula 1 teams, car-makers, and other enterprises that need their skills. Ares bodywork is made mostly in carbon fiber, and in a dedicated workshop. Unlike some of the carbon construction techniques used elsewhere, hands alone form the curves a client defines with a designer, just as coachbuilt panels would have been “rolled” by hand from sheet metal in years past.

The new carbon panels are then attached to the chassis of the donor car and painted before the rebodied car is returned to the production area to have the interior refitted. And as a client, you can come and observe the entire process, from the first hand sketches to the final check and polish before delivery.

“The car is maybe only half of our client’s motivation for doing this,” says Bahar. “It’s a very special car, but it’s still a car, right? It might go into a collection with a lot of other very special cars. But at least half of the appeal is the experience of creating something and accompanying it as it’s made. You’ll know the designer. You’ll know the guys on the production line. People who really know cars want to be part of this.”

There’s also the appeal to the rest of us of catching a glimpse of a bespoke car on the road and trying to figure out what it is, or seeing it on the lawn at Pebble Beach, or reading the story of the car and the person who commissioned it in a Sotheby’s auction catalog years hence. In an era of increasingly commoditized transport, it’s pleasing that people still want to commission a unique, beautiful car the way they commission art and architecture, and leave it for us all to enjoy. In an Uber world, drive a Picasso.