

Builder of dreams

Transparent, hydrofoil and crystal-encrusted ... cars? Yes, cars. Swiss concept vehicle company Rinspeed is gearing up for the Geneva Motor Show, starting on March 5. Founder and CEO Frank Rinderknecht drops a few hints about what he will unveil this year.

By Matthew Beattie | There comes a point when one realises it takes considerably more than a 'really cool pair of boots' to play professional football; that becoming an astronaut requires an understanding of physics and residency in a country where the space programme is more than making cup-holders for the shuttle's dashboard. As we grow up, we accept reality and temper our fantasies accordingly. We become accountants, computer programmers or middle managers and take up our positions in the world of PowerPoint presentations and compromises.

But imagine. What if the infinite possibilities and dreams of youth could

coexist with the 'real world', and get harnessed to become the driving force of a successful, world-renowned company?

Just fanciful thinking? Frank Rinderknecht, the 54-year-old founder and chief executive officer of Rinspeed AG, would say no. He is the imagination behind the company, located close to Zurich in the town of Zumikon, that's produced some of the most unique concept vehicles ever to grace the floor of the Geneva Motor Show.

"The Swiss have a saying: *das geht doch nicht* [it is not possible]. I have heard this all my life, but I cannot accept such a statement without proving it for myself," Rinderknecht tells *Swiss News*.

Endless possibilities

At last year's Geneva Motor Show, Rinspeed unveiled the sQuba, the world's first-ever submarine car; an all-electric vehicle that 'flies' underwater. Some of the company's previous vehicular accomplishments include a record-breaking hydrofoil car and an electrically extending city car that is able to transform from a two-seater to a four-seater at the push of a button.

The list is long – Rinspeed and its network of partners have been pushing the



boundaries of automotive engineering for 30 years.

Unfortunately for anyone hoping to buy an sQuba in which to potter around Lake Zurich, Rinspeed doesn't put its concept vehicles into production. Rather, the company's main business is in the design consultancy and customisation services it provides to the motor industry, as well as through sales of its innovative, patented pick-up truck loading system, the X-Tra-Lift, which was first featured on the Rinspeed X-Trem in 1999.

The concept vehicles are a means to showcase new technology, plus the considerable expertise of Rinspeed and its partners. Nevertheless, the significance of these concept vehicles shouldn't be underestimated. It's no coincidence that many Rinspeed concept innovations have found their way into mainstream, mass-produced vehicles. For example, Rinspeed's steering wheel-mounted controls for entertainment systems are now a common feature in most new cars.

Driven by passion

With only 10 employees, three of whom are part-time, Rinspeed is tiny compared to global players like General Motors or BMW. Despite this, it consistently astonishes the motoring world with its innovative concepts.

During my recent interview with Rinderknecht, I asked him what the secret behind his company's success is. What is it, exactly, that allows Rinspeed to create such innovative vehicles?

"It's called gut feeling and passion," he says, adding, "you don't just see a vision; you feel it in your guts."

He also cites Rinspeed's lack of restrictions as a reason for its success. While big car manufacturers may indeed be capable of such innovative concepts, they are restricted by what they can roll off the production line in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

"If somebody working for a manufacturer has such a vision, they must make a business case to management and seek approval before it goes anywhere and the idea gets diluted. When we have a vision, our advantage is that we can follow it; we don't need PowerPoint presentations to proceed," Rinderknecht explains.

"We also use a number of external partners. There are plenty of good people outside the company. By outsourcing to partners, we need fewer staff in house and the production and technology costs can be shared."

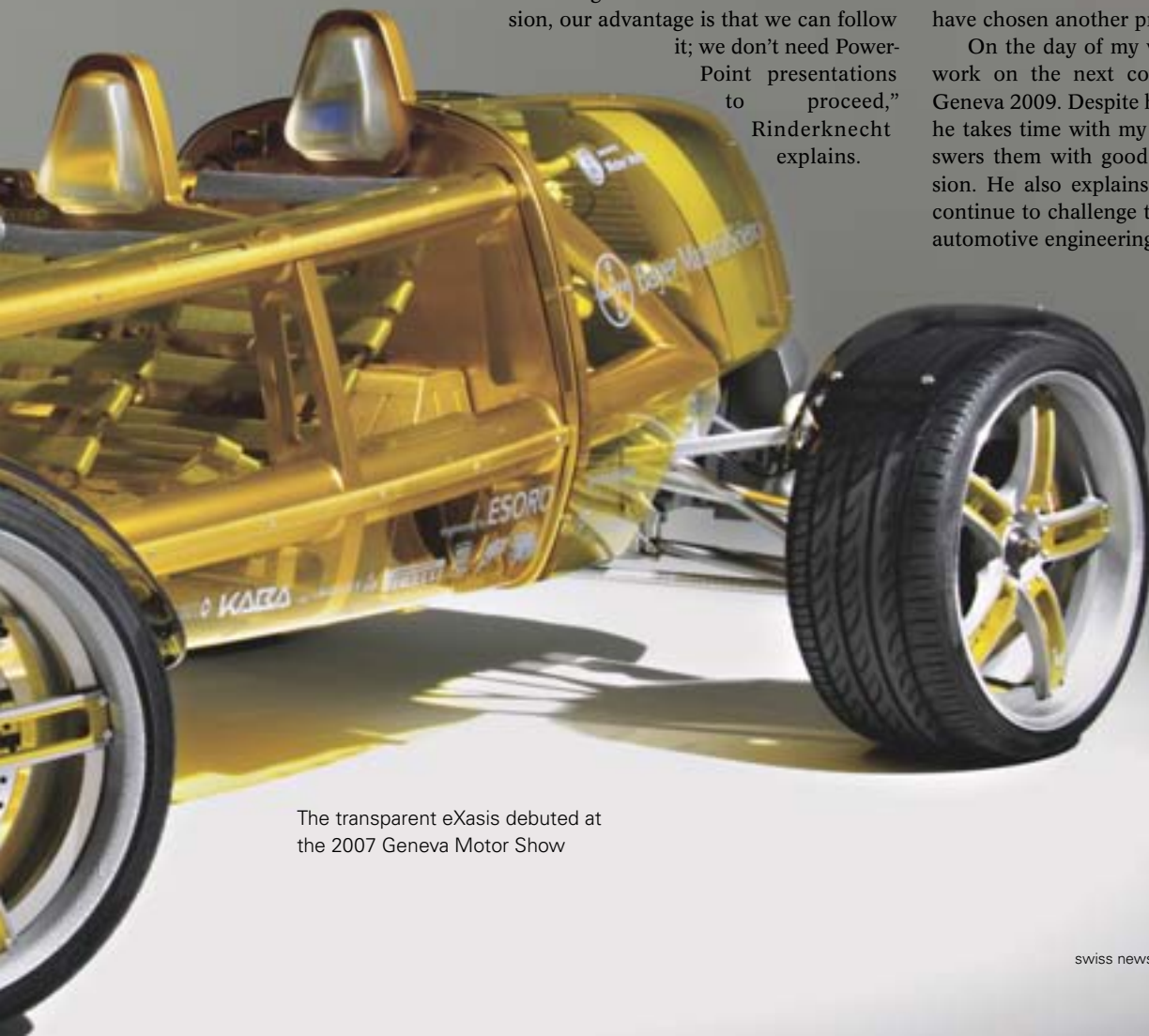
And the list of partners seems to grow with each new concept. Over the years, Rinspeed has collaborated with companies such as Ricaro, Pirelli, Bayer Material Science AG and Germany's renowned prototype builders, EDAG Engineering and Design AG in Fulda, to name just a few.

Breaking with convention

The business began its life as Rinspeed Garage in 1977, importing sunroofs from the United States and adapting vehicles for the disabled, before becoming Rinspeed AG two years later. I ask Rinderknecht if he ever imagined Rinspeed would become what it is today, back when he started out.

"No," he laughs. "And I'm glad I didn't. If I'd known about all the headaches it would bring back then, I'd have chosen another profession!"

On the day of my visit, he is hard at work on the next concept vehicle for Geneva 2009. Despite his huge workload, he takes time with my questions and answers them with good humour and passion. He also explains what makes him continue to challenge the conventions of automotive engineering.



The transparent eXaxis debuted at the 2007 Geneva Motor Show

DANIEL DREIFUSS PRESENTS:



MAURICE DE MAURIAC

MANUFACTURED IN ZURICH

WWW.MAURICEDEMAURIAC.CH

“I could cynically say my stupidity,” he jokes. “Why do I say that? The concept cars are more than a hobby and there’s a lot more behind them than just passion; however, it’s passion that drives us. Unfortunately, as the specifications grow, so do the cost and technology challenges. This means more work. A lot more. Despite this, we manage to have fun and can look back with pride on what we’ve achieved.”

Rinspeed’s first concept vehicle was a VW Golf Turbo in 1979. Since then, it has produced a concept vehicle for every subsequent Geneva Motor Show. Some of the more recent creations include the Rinspeed zaZen, a Porsche-based concept trimmed with Swarovski crystals, and the Rinspeed eXaxis, a fully transparent car.

In 2006, Rinderknecht broke the Guinness World Record for crossing the English Channel in a hydrofoil car. It was called the Rinspeed Splash, a concept car that had originally been created for the 2004 Geneva Motor Show.

Breaking the record, says Rinderknecht, was a childhood dream come true.

“Now [that] I’ve done it, it’s not so much the record itself I’m proud of. It’s more that despite the obstacles, the drawbacks, the headaches and the pains, I didn’t give up. For me, not giving up is a major drive in life. Many people set themselves a goal, only to fall at the first obstacle. The Channel crossing experience was a life lesson in never giving up.”

I ask Rinderknecht if he has a favourite among his stable of vehicles.

“Imagine you have three children,” he replies. “Which would you love the most? They’re all different and they each have different strengths and weaknesses. Of course you love them all. It’s the same here. I don’t say I’d build a car the same way I did 10 years ago; however, such change is evolution. Evolution is not about love or likes; it’s just development of knowledge and technology.”

A shift in focus

In recent years, Rinspeed has experimented extensively with alternative fuels in its concept vehicles. Biofuel, natural gas and most



CEO Frank Rinderknecht with the sQuba

© Rinspeed Inc.



Matthew Beattie in Rinspeed’s showroom

© Matthew Beattie



1999’s X-Trem featuring the X-Tra-Lift for pick-up trucks



2008’s sQuba is the world’s first underwater car



Rinderknecht crossed the English Channel in Splash in 2006



2006’s zaZen displaying Swarovski sparkle

© Rinspeed Inc.

recently, the all-electric sQuba are examples of vehicles the company and its partners are developing for sustainable motoring.

Rinspeed also just announced it would depart from its Porsche-tuning business. The decision is an example of Rinderknecht's dedication and commitment to sustainability, and he gave two reasons for selling the tuning division:

"The first being that we have been pioneering sustainable motoring for many years. We started at a time when nobody else took it seriously. Since then, the need for sustainability has become all too apparent. Tuning, on the other hand, is concerned with [internal combustion] engines and increasing their power. My feeling today and more so for the future is that tuning has a negative image. By drawing a line under the tuning operation and starting afresh, we have the opportunity to pioneer a new form of customisation for the 21st century: one without the negative connotations of tuning and within the remit of sustainability.

"My second reason is that it makes no sense on the one hand to produce highly tuned vehicles delivering 700 horsepower, and on the other to produce sustainable vehicles. It must be one or the other."

Rinderknecht's lack of hypocrisy is ad-

mirable. However, to some, his decision could be seen as risky. After all, Rinspeed abandoned a profitable business division.

Rinderknecht's decisions are never made blindly, though. He has developed a keen understanding of the industry and marketplace over the years. His creativity is rivalled only by his ability to predict future trends.

An electrifying challenge

I ask Rinderknecht if he sees electric vehicles as the way forward.

"Future mobility will be electric. It won't be happening with gas, hydrogen or ethanol," he says. "The infrastructure just isn't in place for hydrogen, so why would you buy a car that runs on it? People are reluctant to accept CNG or natural gas, because they are afraid of the explosion risk – even if this notion is misguided. In the case of electricity, people accept it and the infrastructure can be built easily. There's still the battery issue, which is currently unacceptable, but this can be solved."

Rinderknecht is not alone in his thinking. A new American electric car company, Tesla Motors, recently launched an electric roadster with performance to rival many petrol-powered vehicles. Despite

such technological leaps, many people still see electric vehicles as lame ducks.

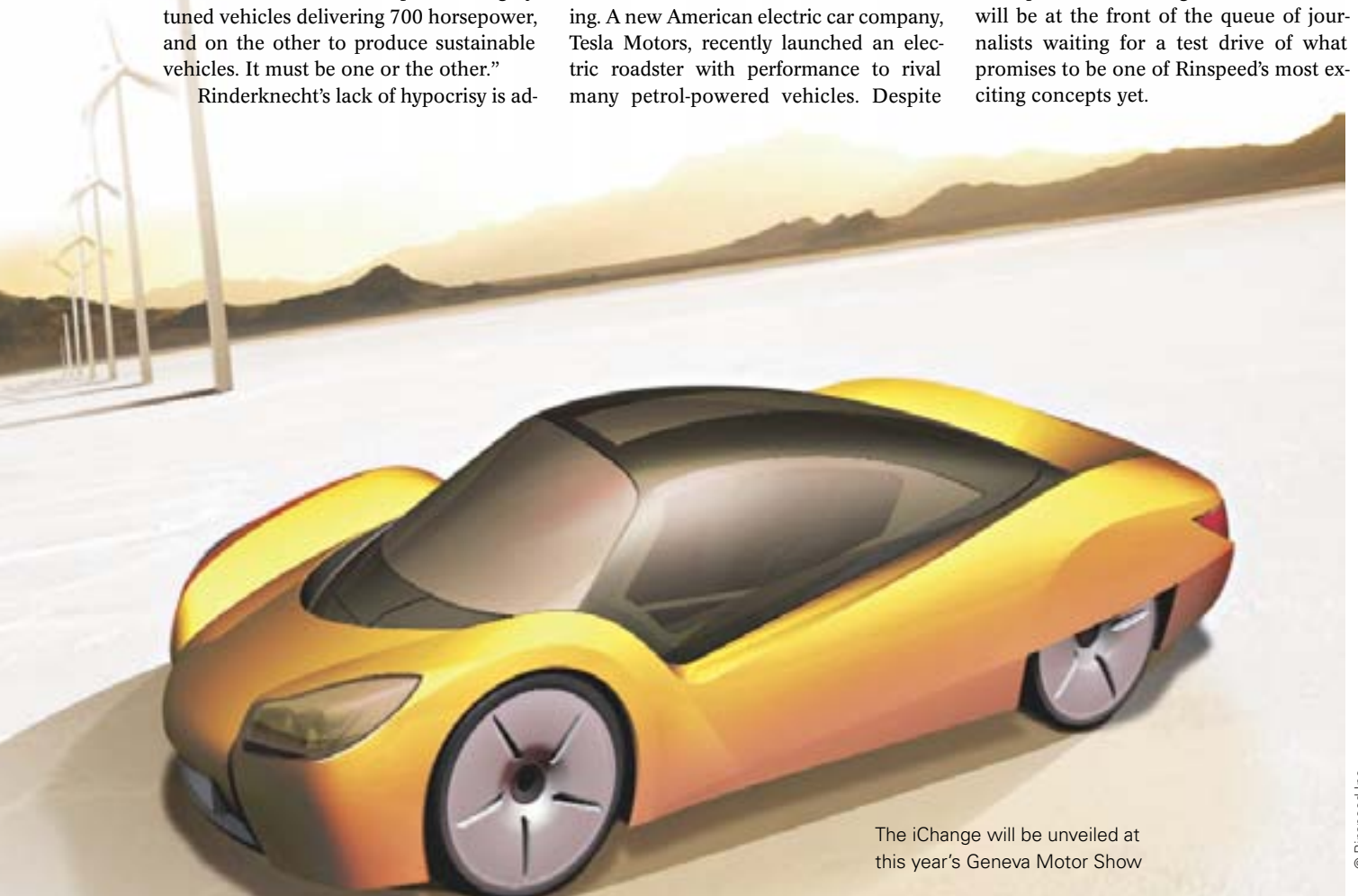
"To sceptics, I say 'drive an electric car'. It doesn't even have to be a Tesla Roadster," Rinderknecht challenges.

His conviction is as persuasive as it is passionate. "I guarantee you'll come back to me smiling and saying you'll buy it. Electric is different for sure, but the cars are fun and quick. There's a difference in the top-end speed, but who needs to go 240 kilometres per hour, when the Swiss motorway speed limit is 120? The fun comes in the acceleration and performance."

With his promise of such an exciting future for electric vehicles, I cannot resist asking about Rinspeed's new concept vehicle for the 2009 Geneva Motor Show, the iChange. As with any automotive development project, it's shrouded in secrecy. Nevertheless, Rinderknecht grins as he gives me a hint:

"Electric. Zero to 60 miles per hour [zero to 100 kilometres per hour] in four seconds. That's all I can tell you."

It is enough to leave me itching with anticipation. One thing is for certain – I will be at the front of the queue of journalists waiting for a test drive of what promises to be one of Rinspeed's most exciting concepts yet.



The iChange will be unveiled at this year's Geneva Motor Show