chapter 1

smart move

With smart being such a well-known car brand these days, it's easy to forget just how young a company this really is. In fact, it wasn't until July 1998 that production of the two-seater smart city-coupé first began, paving the way for some impressive successes – and more than a few disasters – during the subsequent years. But how did it all begin?

At the start of the 1990s, it was an open secret that Mercedes-Benz was keen to expand its product line-up. The company certainly wasn't short of executive models, but the success of the 'small' 190 series (launched in 1983 and a major hit for the marque) showed that the expertise was there to open up the brand to a new, less affluent audience.

What the company needed was an even smaller model that could take the Mercedes brand into new territory. The company took a look at the success of the Volkswagen Golf, for example, and realised it wouldn't mind a slice of that particular action. And Mercedes-Benz did eventually join the Golf set, launching its revolutionary A-class to a shocked public at the end of 1997 before it went on sale throughout most of Europe in the spring of '98. And what a drastic change of direction this was.

Yet even while the A-class was just a glint in Mercedes' corporate eye, management at the company started thinking the almost unthinkable. The forthcoming A-class was going to be small; but was there potential for the firm to develop an even tinier model?

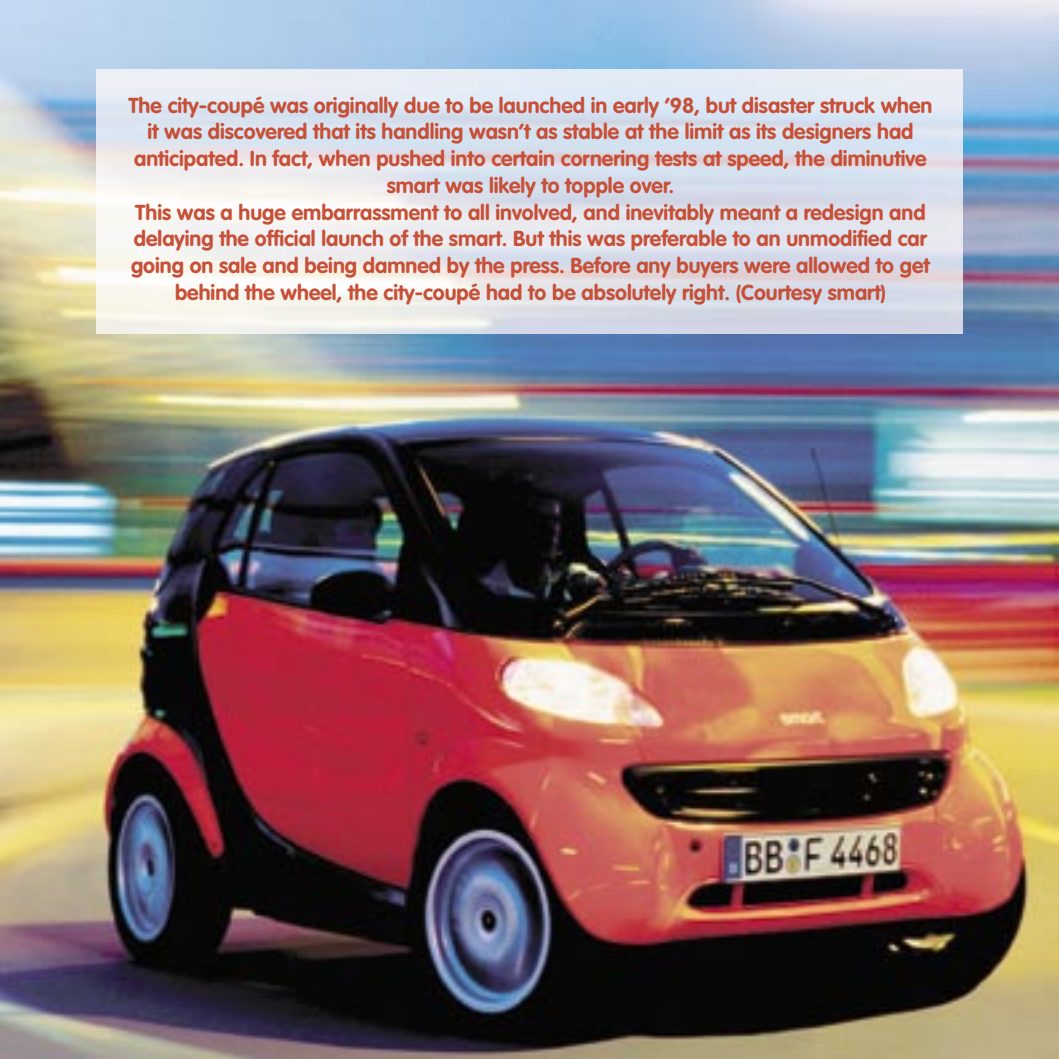
It was in January 1993 that Mercedes-Benz officially launched a feasibility study into the development of a city car. But what exactly was its thinking at that early stage? Quite simply, it wanted to revolutionise urban transport, and predicted that, by the end of the nineties, the market for small cars would be very different.

joint venture

The chance to create something almost

The city-coupé was originally due to be launched in early '98, but disaster struck when it was discovered that its handling wasn't as stable at the limit as its designers had anticipated. In fact, when pushed into certain cornering tests at speed, the diminutive smart was likely to topple over.

This was a huge embarrassment to all involved, and inevitably meant a redesign and delaying the official launch of the smart. But this was preferable to an unmodified car going on sale and being damned by the press. Before any buyers were allowed to get behind the wheel, the city-coupé had to be absolutely right. (Courtesy smart)



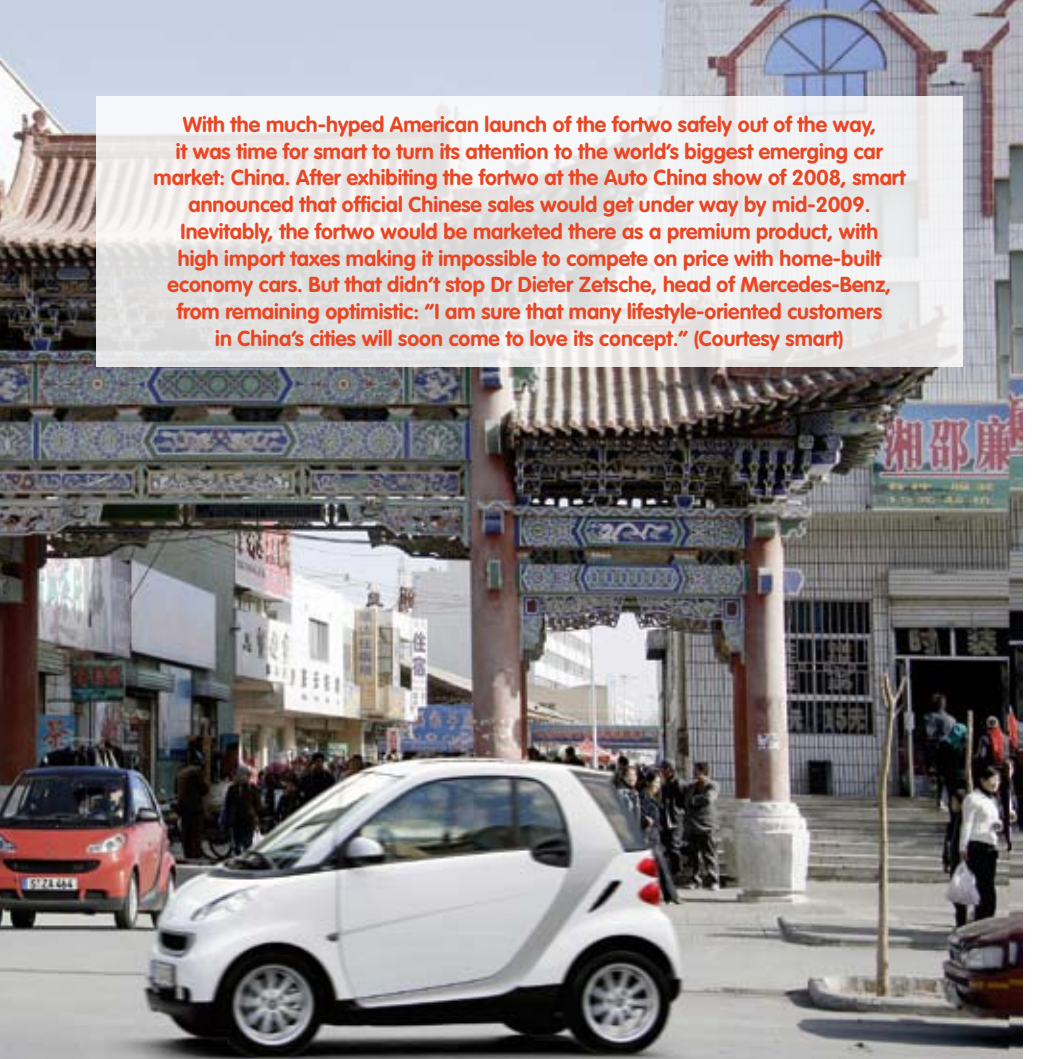
Thanks to the city-coupé's tridion safety cell, transforming it into a genuine soft-top was possibly the easiest cabriolet 'conversion' ever carried out by a major manufacturer. Having said that, smart took time and money to ensure the design was spot-on from day one. The hood had to glide effortlessly, as well as being completely watertight when shut; noise levels had to be roughly in line with those of the hardtop city-coupé; and the whole car had to retain the feeling of quality and robustness that the city-coupé had already been praised for. The end result? Impressive by any standards. (Courtesy smart)

The main difference between the roadster and the roadster-coupé was obviously the latter's all-glass fastback design – which meant the added bonus of a touch more luggage space. But which of these sporty smarts actually looked the best?

It was all down to personal preference. But you couldn't help admiring what smart had achieved with one basic design and a bit of creativity. There's an argument that the roadster looked more 'raw', more sporting even; but somehow the roadster-coupé's proportions were so perfect, it was this version many potential buyers ended up choosing. (Courtesy smart)

How cool is this? Back in 2006, Stefan Attart (Greek 4x4 Rally Champion) joined forces with Mercedes-Benz Greece to design and develop this amazing creation: a smart fortwo mounted on the chassis and running gear of the invincible Unimog 406-series truck. Known as the forfun², this incredible beast featured the Unimog's 5675cc six-cylinder diesel engine, capable of producing a seriously massive amount of torque. Not only that, the forfun² offered ground clearance of more than two feet, off-road tyres on 26-inch rims, and an overall height of an astonishing twelve feet. The world's most outrageous smart? Probably. (Courtesy smart)

The LCD display says 'ECO' – and that just about sums up the micro hybrid drive (mhd) feature of the 2009 fortwo models. The mhd system operated during engine idling phases (ideal for the urban driving of most smart owners), the engine stopping when the setup sensed that the smart's speed had dropped below 5mph and the driver was braking. When the driver released the brake pedal, the engine restarted automatically. The stop-start facility operated seamlessly, largely thanks to the powerful belt-driven starter generator that replaced both the conventional starter and alternator, and made no extra demands on the driver. (Courtesy smart)



With the much-hyped American launch of the fortwo safely out of the way, it was time for smart to turn its attention to the world's biggest emerging car market: China. After exhibiting the fortwo at the Auto China show of 2008, smart announced that official Chinese sales would get under way by mid-2009. Inevitably, the fortwo would be marketed there as a premium product, with high import taxes making it impossible to compete on price with home-built economy cars. But that didn't stop Dr Dieter Zetsche, head of Mercedes-Benz, from remaining optimistic: "I am sure that many lifestyle-oriented customers in China's cities will soon come to love its concept." (Courtesy smart)