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A Greek myth comes to life

Abdul Razak Chik

WHEN an assortment of entrepreneurs began blowing a lot of hot air promising to roll out Malaysia's first sports car, a group of car enthusiasts who had already made a name for themselves in their various fields of endeavour began putting their nose to the grindstone, seriously getting down to actually doing it. Now, the fruits of their labour is revealed in the shape of the pulse-racing, heart-thumping, ultra-high performance Malaysian-made TVR Chimaera.

So good and pretty is the fiery open-top sports two-seater that all the hype surrounding its local debut could in all likelihood breathe life to the lion-headed mythological monster from which the car got its name. A word of caution: an encounter with the fire-breathing beast from which legend is spun could signal an undying love affair that will test not only your patience (there's a long queue of buyers) but also your financial means, for at RM238,000, the car will be hard on your wallet (for some that is).

The Chimaera is 50% Malaysian. Its powerful four-litre V8 engine of course comes from TVR Engineering Ltd of the United Kingdom. TVR is one of the top-selling sports car in the UK and TVR Engineering Ltd, established in 1947, is the largest independent car maker there.

Designed and first built in Blackpool, England, in 1947, the TVR marque has evolved into the definitive supercar of the 90s. Based on the award-winning Griffith, the Chimaera went into production in February 1993 and was slotted into TVR's model line-up between the V8s and the Griffith. The Chimaera comes with the Rover V8 engine, available in varying stages of tune and capacity from the ordinary 190bhp 3.9 litre up to the big valve 4.5 litre with around 300bhp.

A powerful product of British styling, TVRs have proven their prowess on the road. The Chimaera is TVR's middle-of-the-range car. It was introduced at the 1992 Birmingham Motor Show and was instantly hailed a success. It was TVR's best-selling model last year and has reinforced TVR's position as Britain's largest sports car manufacturer.

TVR UK owns 10% of TVR Sports (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd which was founded by Tan Sri Basir Ismail, Thomas Chua, Ti Teow Yong and Datuk Yong Poh Kon. This company was exclusively appointed by TVR UK in 1995 to become its first overseas manufacturer to produce TVR's sports cars (the Chimaera in this instance) and market it in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Chimaera's lightweight, stronger-than-steel fibreglass body (the hallmark of all TVRs), chassis, seats and interior trims are manufactured in-house and that means in TVR Malaysia's base of operations in Port Klang.

The RM20 million TVR factory began operations in January 1996. Production began in April (each car takes three months from assembly to rollout) and the first exports began in August. By the time its Malaysian launch took place on April 26 this year, 25 Made-In-Malaysia Chimaeras have been exported.

TVR Malaysia's Chairman Datuk Razali Abdul Rahman has this to say about the company's operations: '..This is not about importing massive equipment, completely-knocked-down units, assembly and then calling the results Malaysian-made. This is about a car made by Malaysian hands.' TVR Malaysia intends to increase the local content to 70% by 1999.

Located on a two-acre site in Port Klang and with an initial staff of

about 120, TVR Malaysia is targeting a production capacity of 1,000 units a year with 80% of the cars ear-marked for export.

This being an ultra-expensive sports car, TVRM decided to let the public get a taste of the Chimaera following its launch at the Shah Alam Motorsports Paradise racing circuit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently. For the occasion, two of Malaysia's foremost Formula One aspirants, Alexander Yoong and Adam Lokman, were flown home from their racing base in the United Kingdom to do the driving. It was to be a test ride, not a test drive. But, all was not lost - your motoring correspondent is nothing if not resourceful. Somehow, we wangled a deal that gave us six rides round the 3.5km circuit, twice with Alex (as the young lad is more popularly known by his track friends and rivals alike) at the wheel, twice with yours truly in the pilot's seat and twice with Alex and our photographer.

The first thing that strikes home when one puts one's foot down on the 'gas' is the unbelievable '..oomph' coming from the Chimaera's lusty innards - at least when Alex was behind the wheel, pulling out of the pits and gunning the frisky beast up the home straight. With yours truly gripping the edge of the all-leather padded seats trying to look unconcerned, the needle climbed up the rev counter in a flash, pushing the Chimaera to 160km/hr apparently without effort.

This was only the TVR Chimaera 400 with a 4.0-litre engine. The other model, the 5.0-litre TVR Chimaera 500 (in bright royal yellow which Dr Mahathir took round the circuit twice with Alex co-piloting) is even faster. It does 0 to 100km per hour in 4.4 seconds. Rich man's toy that it is, it should not matter that one is bound to be stopped at least 10 times on the Kuala Lumpur-Seremban highway by the police for attempting to break the sound barrier.

Its looks? The TVR Chimaera scores, as it should for a car with such a fancy price tag.

For the privileged few (either owning the beauty or like the rest of us, being invited to the SAMP for the launch), it can be quite fun figuring out how to actually open the door to get in.

There is no sign of the usual handle hold. Instead there is this shiny metal knob sunk in a circular housing where one would expect the handle to be. Push it with your thumb and hey presto! out pops the door. Getting out? None of that run-of-the-mill doorside internal pull-back handle stuff. Instead, look at the centre divider arm rest for a round, ball-headed knob at the end of a concealed short stem. Twist it to your side and the passenger door swings open, for the driver, twist in the other direction.

Neat and rather naughty but all very necessary as these features guarantee the door does not fling open accidentally when the car is in full flight. On the bonnet are two grooved air vents resembling the gills of a menacing shark. This fearsome look is emphasised by the twin sidelight nacelle under the headlights and twin air-vents dug snugly in the front skirts.

So there you have it. The TVR Chimaera is indeed a sporty package with a pedigree to match. That just leaves one thing, how to say its name out loud without making a fool of oneself. If you desire one but do not have the pocket large enough for it, then be a name-dropper and say: She-may ra.