

Rolls-Royce cars pushes the pedal on customisation, *The Economist*, January 9th 2025

A visit to Rolls-Royce's factory in Goodwood reminds you that Rolls is a carmaker like no other. Set amid the lovely West Sussex countryside, it resembles a fancy hotel, amid wildflower meadows, reed-fringed ponds and lime trees, with foliage trimmed into perfect cubes. The reaction of the maker of the world's swankiest cars to a dip in sales is also untypical. The firm revealed on January 8th that in 2024 it sold 5,712 cars, 320 fewer than in 2023. But is Chris Brownridge, the boss since late 2023, concerned? "Absolutely not!" he declares, noting that "we don't see ourselves as a car company."

Success for Rolls, which instead regards itself as a luxury-goods firm, is measured on "bespoke content", says Mr Brownridge. These are the personal touches that customers can request to be added to their vehicles, from a coachline along the bodywork to hand-painted silk panels. Last year the firm increased the value of such highly profitable features by an average of 10% per car, the most yet. That pushed the average price paid for a Roller to around £500,000 (\$615,000).

The rest of the car industry is catching up with Rolls. Even proletarian brands now differentiate themselves through the in-car "experience", from mood lighting to elaborate infotainment systems, rather than the horsepower of an internal combustion engine, which is increasingly disappearing in favour of an electric motor. Where Rolls used to disdain performance figures as unspeakably vulgar (it would merely describe its cars' capabilities as "adequate"), it now emphasises craftsmanship while others boast about digitalisation.

To that end Rolls has a long list of options available through its dealers: within the rear armrests, they may offer you a mini-fridge and a pair of champagne flutes; a lesser company will try to flog plastic cupholders. But the firm also encourages customers to visit Goodwood or four "private offices", in New York (America is its biggest market), Dubai, Seoul and Shanghai. There customisation can be taken to a new, even pricier, level in consultation with the firm's army of designers.

Rolls will say merely that "hundreds" of customers have done so. The ultra-rich may not be feeling the pinch quite as hard as buyers of lowlier luxuries, and British craftsmanship still has an appeal. Indeed Rolls is the only carmaker with a head of embroidery, who will stitch intricate designs into interiors—such as the wildflower one customer took a liking to when out for a hike. The firm is especially proud of a Phantom saloon modelled as a homage to the one driven by the villain in "Goldfinger", an early James Bond film.

Mr Brownridge says he is more interested in increasing bespoke offerings than in lifting sales. An investment of £300m to expand the factory next year will help this side of the business grow even faster, as well as provide more space to make yet more exclusive one-off cars that might fetch \$30m apiece. Ever discreet, Rolls does not reveal how much all this effort makes for BMW, its German owner, but for a "jewel in the crown", it is a "meaningful contribution", says Mr Brownridge. And if you want a bejewelled crown added to your car, Rolls will surely oblige.