



Felix on one of his three floors of Lancia parts at Lancia Auto SA's Woodstock premises.

Gearbox for a Flaminia? Check. Door card for a Thema? Check. Windscreen for an Aurelia? Check. Workshop manual for a Lambda? Check... just some of the items that Lancia Auto SA's proprietor Felix Furtak can tick off in a stock take. Assuming of course he's got the time to do one with a near 13 000-strong stock list of parts for Lancias of just about every pre-'96 model piled high to the rafters in his Cape Town workshop.

"My father wanted to impress my mother and so he came home with the Beta. It was one year old and shiny and it was red. Anyone would've been impressed"

Based in a sleepy backstreet in the city's up-and-coming Woodstock, the business is a veritable treasure trove of parts and literature that's regarded as a Mecca for Lancia enthusiasts around the globe in need of parts or advice. "We have sold around half that listing – many several times over – since we began trading," adds Felix, a qualified electrical engineer who's been involved as a restorer, parts supplier and – above all – an enthusiast of the Italian marque in Cape Town since 1995.

A lot of that business comes thanks to his custodianship of thousands of parts from former Lancia, Fiat and Ferrari agents TAK Motors as well as a hoard of bits he bought and took off scrap Lancias more than 30 years ago, while scraping a living together as

an engineering student. That was in the mid '80s in the UK, before Felix ran his own Lancia repair and restoration workshop in his native Germany and later emigrated to Cape Town.

But to understand how this charismatic 54-year-old came to embark on a life-long passion for a sports car marque from a rival country, before re-settling on the other side of the globe, one has to rewind 40 years. That's when the then-one-year-old Lancia Beta pictured appeared on the family driveway back in the sleepy village of Stegen in Germany's Black Forest, much to the excitement of then 13-year-old Felix.

"My father wanted to impress my mother and so he came home with the Beta. It was one year old and shiny and it was red. Anyone would've been impressed," recalls Felix whose mother wasn't actually that enamoured with the car. "She found



Felix with his wife Khungeka and their son Litha and daughter Lisakhanya.

THE ULTIMATE BETA TEST

An Italian sports car bought to impress a woman, a trip over the Alps to haul back raw wool from Africa before a bar room bet to cross the Sahara. . . not to mention a shipping container of car parts hidden in the Black Forest in the dead of night. . . it may sound like a motoring-based thriller but it's actually the back story to the country's leading Lancia expert says **Graeme Hurst**.

it terribly impractical as she only used it to go shopping. We lived 500 metres from the shops but it would never start." But despite her protests, the Beta remained although it was subsequently sold to fund Felix's engineering studies.

That was in 1980 and Felix, who was now smitten with the Italian coupé, protested: "I really wanted that car but my father said it was, 'no car for a student,'" adds Felix, who evidently didn't let go: "I dropped out of my studies as I was having a wild life as you do at that age. I got a part time job and managed to save up 1000DM and hitchhiked to where the car was and said to the owner 'I want your car. Here's the money.' He didn't want to sell but I worked on his nerves and after a few hours he sold it to me." His parents were less than thrilled: "Felix you are supposed to become an engineer not buy yourself an Italian sports car!"

His father was adamant that he would not be able to afford to run it. And he was right: "I went through all sorts of disasters with it and messed it up totally at times." Short of cash Felix hatched a plan to raise funds after a friend heard about cheap wool in Tunisia. "We drove to Genoa in Italy and took the ferry over to Africa and came back with 300kg of wool which we loaded into the Beta. But we had no money and I didn't know much about cars. The oil was on minimum and I thought, 'yes it will be ok'. Then it went 'clonk' and stopped. It was the middle of winter and I found an Italian Lancia mechanic who taught me the meaning of *motore fuso* (an expletive, Ed). Suddenly the wool trip was very expensive."

Back home after installing a scrap engine, a lack of cash meant Felix was learning to work on the car out of necessity and his dislike for the only local Lancia dealer, who was less than helpful and pricey: "Whenever I needed a part he would say, 'There's the part, take it out yourself and there I was with a spanner in the snow!'" Felix would ultimately end up working for him but did so reluctantly before later branching out on his own: "My desire to have my own Lancia

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Felix showing a new gearbox part, one of nearly 13 000 items in stock.



Lancia Auto SA has a large stock of period Lancia literature.



Original Lancia microfiche system still in use for 1980-88 Lancia models.

workshop grew out of my hatred for the man that was milking me!"

Around this time the young Lancia enthusiast's parents put pressure on him to study again and he sold the Beta to a friend. Not to appease them, but to fund the purchase of another example of the marque: a Fulvia! "It was rotten but it was driving and I liked it because it was a real Lancia, not one by Fiat." Felix enjoyed the car until it was written off after a police car ploughed into him. "In Germany that's a good thing as we have compulsory insurance. So what do you do? You go to a good lawyer, get

yourself a hire car and sit back and wait for the money. I was paid out 3000DM. For a student it was a lot!" That enabled him to buy a Fulvia Zagato – a car he still owns – but it was rough.

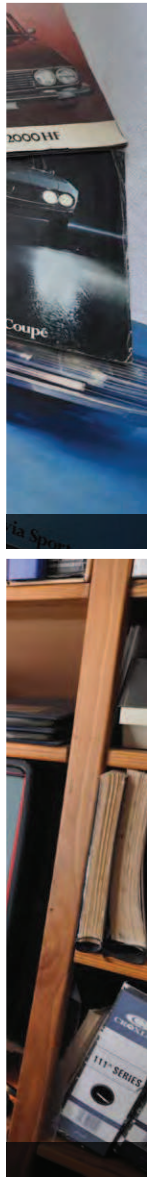
"I never could afford a roadworthy so I drove it on trade plates. I went through Italy, France and Switzerland like that – I even have a photo of it on the top of the Gotthard Pass." The Zagato would later drop a valve while Felix was *en route* to enrol in an engineering degree at the University of Salford in the UK. Being Lancia-less left him depressed but a rumour about a Zagato on offer locally led to him borrowing a bicycle to get from Manchester to Huddersfield to track down the car. It was a rare 1600 but the seller only bought it for the engine.

"I said, 'okay, put a 1300 engine in and I'll take it.' I paid him £300 with five post-dated cheques – all I could manage

as a student," recalls Felix who drove it back to Karlsruhe, complete with three spare engines he'd scrounged in the boot and feeling chuffed: "Suddenly I had two Lancias in my permanent repertoire." Sanity ruled and he opted to transfer the unique-to-1600 items on to his 1300 Zagato and sell the remains of the new purchase. The profits enabled him to buy the Beta back.

On return to his studies in the UK, the collecting bug had bitten: "I heard a rumour of a rare Lancia in a totally dilapidated state on a farm." It turned out to be a 2000HF, which Felix snapped up for £150. "That was just for the wheels as the car was really scrap. All the wiring had been cut off and it had no licence. It was a total stress," adds Felix who towed it home (and still owns the car today!). His electrical training meant he re-wired the car with ease and he learnt how to weld while fixing up the bodywork. "In the end it was a most reliable car," muses Felix. That enabled him to trade in parts even more. "The English have a lot of passion for

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Felix and a fellow traveller next to the Beta in the Congo on the trans Africa trip in 1991.



The Beta under water after a local river burst its banks.



Lancia loaded into container.

Lancias and I was able to find parts and take them backwards and forwards between the UK and Germany." Some of those bits are rare factory panels that now hang in the rafters in Woodstock, which brings us to the next phase in Felix's life... but first there was that bar room bet that involved the Beta and a brush with a scrap yard...

"The car was in summer storage near Cardiff while I was in Germany and I needed to take it back to Manchester on a trailer," recalls Felix. Unfortunately the trailer wasn't up to the job and at some point it overtook the tow car with catastrophic consequences for the Italian coupe, which ended up on its roof and was only fit for the scrap yard. But Felix – against advice from his mates – was hell bent on fixing it and tracked down replacement panels. However, when a new roof panel couldn't be found, he wielded the cutting torch to create the convertible pictured here but this was no hack job: "It has special strengthening pieces underneath and I used a DOS-

based programme to design the structure so I could get it to pass roadworthy," adds Felix who still has the plotter drawings in the car's history file. But back to that epic trip...

"In October 1991 I was in a bar with some friends and they took a bet for 500DM that the Lancia couldn't make it through the Sahara before Christmas," recalls Felix. The dare was like a red flag to a bull for this Lancia aficionado who set off in mid-winter in the now open car for Genoa before taking a ferry to Tunisia. From there he headed for Algeria and the Trans Sahara Highway to Tamanrasset where he won the bet, except the goal posts had moved. "They said, 'okay you made it through the Sahara but you'll never make it through the jungle!'" recalls Felix who was then even more determined. "The cars that came up from Congo were all beaten up and here I was in this little Italian thingie with no equipment." But he wasn't

deterred: "I spoke to one guy who did it and he said, 'In principle where there is a will there is a way.'" Three months later – after some epic bouts of retrieving the car out of potholes and pools of mud – he made it single-handedly to the Cape before shipping the Beta home.

Back in Germany in the early '90s, Felix was running his own Lancia repair and restoration business in the town of Feldrennach (near Karlsruhe). Life went smoothly until a local river burst its banks in May 1995 and flooded his workshop and cars. "It was the first time it had happened in 100 years and on my birthday. In hindsight

The English have a lot of passion for Lancias and I was able to find parts and take them backwards and forwards between the UK and Germany



Felix still owns the Fulvia Zagato he bought with an insurance payout, although it's since been damaged in an accident.

it was a bad omen," recalls Felix who, just weeks later, faced eviction after a fall out over the use of an industrial oil heater with his landlady – who also happened to be his girlfriend's mother. A planned move to new premises derailed when it transpired the new venue didn't have workshop rights. "It all blew up and I had the sheriff of the court kicking me out of the old place while I was trying to run Lancia Auto SA from a phone booth. It was another total stress."

A notice of his landlady's intention to attach his stock and cars galvanised him into action and so he gambled some rubber cheques (in the knowledge they would only likely be cashed when his account was flush) to buy a container to store his parts. But he still needed to get them out of the sheriff's reach. "I had a client who was in the

transport business and he had a truck. He came at 2am in the morning in the snow. He loaded the container and hid it in the Black Forest. All 25 tonnes of stuff and my three Lancias gone overnight."

With no funds and nowhere to go, Felix had to think about how to start over and that's when he set his sights on the Mother City. "When I made it to Cape Town after the trans Africa trip I was surprised that there was such an active Lancia community so when I had to leave I had a place to go where I knew people and could work." That was late 1995 and Felix arrived with R2 400 to his name: "It was not much to start a new life." He took a job at a local classic panel beater but got frustrated with the poor standards of work at the time: "I had to witness how reasonably original cars were wrecked with

poor re-sprays and so on and I thought, 'I can't be part and parcel to the destruction of old cars when my life is dedicated to the resurrection of them!'"

Felix's despondency fuelled his desire to go on his own again and, after mulling it over one night in a Bree Street café, he placed a call to Germany to

get the container (which included the Beta, Zagato, HF and the oil heater that caused the eviction) onto the high seas. It was the Beta's second trip to the tip of Africa. The only problem was that Felix couldn't afford the transport fees for the container unless he unloaded it first. "The shipping company said, 'first the money then the container,' and I said, 'no, first the container then the money.'" Naturally they wouldn't relent and, desperate, Felix admits to... err... offering harbour security guards bottles of wine in exchange for nightly access to his container so he could raid his parts stash and raise the money for the shipping bill. "My first sale was a spare Gamma engine to Vigliettis for R5 000!"

It was the Viglietti brothers and other Lancia enthusiasts, such as Johan du Toit and Peter Immelman who helped him to get established locally, something he is very grateful for. "I started work in Mr du Toit's garage at his home before setting up in the late Russell Wolpe's workshop". That was next door to his current Plein Street premises where Felix has repaired and restored Lancias from all over South Africa for several years before his next phase in his Lancia activities: the closure of TAK Motors in 1997.

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TAK Motors stock included factory diagnostic equipment.



Lancia Auto SA uses original Lancia factory tools.



Straight out of the 1980s: IBM 400 tapes contain Lancia parts data.

“Right-hand drive Lancia production stopped and TAK closed after the owner’s son passed away,” explains Felix. Viglietti Motors bought up the Ferrari and Lancia stock but they slowly reduced their involvement with the latter as, technically, Fausto Carello (a member of the Carello headlight family) had secured the rights to Lancia at the time, and so the parts were eventually offered to Felix. It’s this stock – which came complete with a set of official Lancia IBM 400 tapes containing all the parts data – along with what’s left of the 25 tonnes out of the container, that has formed the basis of his worldwide parts supply operation.

It’s a supply that extends to copies of sales brochures and drawings of factory tools. And it’s all accessible across a range of technologies: “Before 1980 it is in parts catalogues, from 1980 until ’88 I have a complete microfiche catalogue while from ’88 its on CD which was very new at the time.” All of that assists Felix – and his wife Khungeka, who works in the business – in providing an online service, with a customer base stretching from Mexico to Japan and dozens of countries in between.

Unsurprisingly, Felix has seen many of the country’s Lancias come through

his workshop, often in different hands. And often in amusing if tragic (for the car) circumstances... such as a Gamma that a local owner tried to sell to Vigliettis. “They offered him R5 000 but he was so insulted that he instead gave it to a Catholic priest who married his daughter the next weekend. The priest ended up bringing it to me for work. Each time he paid with a cheque from the Catholic church and after R65 000 the car was okay but then he said, ‘they’ve been asking questions and I need to sell to get the church’s money back’. I said, ‘you’ve got yourself into a cul-de-sac as you can spend money on a Lancia but you will never get it back!’”

That car wound up at a dealer and was sold to a Khayelitsha resident who pulled it to bits before it was left rotting in a driveway for ten years. Sadly – despite all the previous expenditure under Felix’s care – it was only fit for scrap while another Gamma came to a near fiery end after a disgruntled customer set fire to Felix’s workshop (but without realising that his car was parked behind the door inside!).

One of Felix’s frustrations is that a lot of local owners don’t want to spend money on their cars or spend money in the

wrong areas... such as a local architect who lavished cash on a leather interior for his Fulvia but refused to entertain any suggestion to invest in the car’s brakes. “He told me, ‘Felix new brakes aren’t necessary as the car is only for my wife,’” chuckles Felix. “Then a few weeks go by and I get a call from a panel beater saying he needs front beadings and headlights for a Fulvia...”

But not all of Lancia Auto SA’s customer experiences are so fraught, mind. Take a look at the company’s website and you’ll see photos of plenty of cars Felix has worked on. Lancias that are in the hands of enthusiasts who admire the cars’ fine engineering and appreciate Felix’s skills in keeping them alive. And Felix is proud that those Lancia enthusiasts form a board church... such as the Monte Carlo owner from Orania. A highly-strung 1980s Italian sports car being enjoyed in South Africa’s last whites-only outpost? It’s about as farcical as some of the antics this Lancia fanatic has experienced in his life-long passion for the marque... 🇿🇦

Thanks to Lancia Auto SA.
(www.lancia.co.za; 021 4478350)