

ONE TO WATCH - RENAULT AVANTIME

Possibly the largest white elephant of recent times, rampant depreciation means that this amazing machine is affordable. It's also worthy of classic attention, reckons **IAN SEABROOK**

INTRODUCTION

On paper, the Avantime (pronounced Avun and Time with alternating French then English accents) should just be forgotten. Most have V6 engines and terrifying running costs, less than 9000 were built and ultimately its failure killed off the brilliant Matra company. Expensive when new, values have plummeted and many people have had their fingers burnt.

But, much of the above applies to Citroën's SM, a car now seen as brilliant and desirable. Ok, so the Citroën didn't kill off a cult manufacturer of some standing, but it marries amazing, one-off looks to a meaty V6 engine and offers cruising ability that's simply staggering.

The Avantime is the same. The looks are dramatic and totally unique. Who else has launched a sexy coupe based on a people carrier? For the Avantime shares its underpinnings with the Renault Espace.

To cover the history, the Renault Espace was a pioneering design and arguably the first proper people carrier for Europe. It was ingenious too, with Matra building the plastic people carrier at their own factory. However, Renault wanted to bring Espace production in-house. Understandably, Matra were a bit reluctant to hand over this cash-cow but Renault placated them with the Avantime concept.

Sadly, it took a long time to get the Avantime into production, with much delay due to the double-hinged door mechanism, and by the time it did reach production in 2001, Renault had rather unfairly launched their own new luxury car - the Vel Satis. Furthermore, they encouraged dealers to sell hard on the Vel Satis, at the cost of Avantime sales. Poor Matra ended up as a casualty and with only 8450 Avantimes built during a ten month production run, Matra closed its doors for good in 2003.

British buyers generally stayed away in droves and while 800 cars were rumoured to have been brought to the UK, it's thought as few as 400 were actually sold here. The Avantime is certainly a rare sight today and can only become more so as time marches on.

The Avantime remains popular on the Continent and indeed, with prices low in the UK, many right-hand drive examples have hopped across The Channel.

WHAT WE LOVE

It may have been the biggest automotive disaster of recent times, but the Avantime certainly holds a place in our hearts. There's just something wonderful about a car that sticks two fingers up to convention in such a striking manner. That rear styling, so odd back

in 2001, paved the way for the smaller Megane, and a whole raft of derriere-based advertising. The doors themselves are magical, with clever two-stage hinges that mean that despite their huge bulk, you can still open them in tight spaces.

A hit of the 'fresh air' button drops the glass and opens the enormous sunroof, so you can have wind-in-the-hair motoring without having to struggle with a canvas top when the heavens undoubtedly open.

As a way of covering ground, they're hard to beat with a wuffling V6 engine in the best ones and a commanding view of the road. As a statement, it's like shouting your disdain about the blandness of modern cars using a Motorhead PA system. From behind the wheel, it genuinely feels like you've taken to the road in a concept car. You want attention? You'll certainly garner it from here, and you have a commanding view of your surroundings.

WHAT WE DISLIKE

Well, the two-litre turbo is still quite pokey but really, it has to be the V6. Four cylinders just don't seem to be enough. Then there's the running costs. Both engines have to work hard to shift this much bulk - almost two tonnes - and when allied to automatic transmission, you can expect many trips to the pumps. Renaults of this era have a reputation for being a little fragile too, so servicing and maintenance bills can also get a bit weighty, and you may encounter some frustrating repeat-issues.

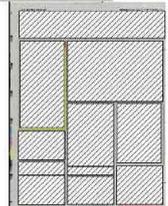
WHICH ONE?

Go for maximum spec. Dynamique models are not exactly poverty spec - with climate control (very necessary with all that glass) and lots of electric goodies but the Privilege adds in parking sensors, heated seats, cruise control and a meatier stereo. You'll want a V6 auto and that's fine - they're by far the most numerous. Very few manual V6s were sold in the UK so the only other choice is a four-pot - with manual or auto.

There is a small choice of colours too, including a rather toned down grey, but we'd opt for the blue or green metallic shades, which really set off the distinctive lines.

THE BIG ISSUES

As with any French car, you can expect electrical glitches here and there and given how loaded with equipment these cars were when new, it could take a while to check that everything works. Windows can jam or refuse to rise when the door has been shut and the sunroof can rattle a bit - it is said to be the largest sunroof ever fitted to a production car.



Cambelt changes can cost up to £2000 at a **Renault** main dealer on the V6, as the engine is removed. Specialists may charge much less as it can just about be done in situ, but a bill of £750 can still easily be amassed. The belt should be replaced every 72,000 miles.

SO, IS IT WORTH A LOOK?

If you're after something different but with a modern feel, you can safely call your search to a halt! There's simply nothing like the Avantime but already, there's a very enthusiastic following for the breed, with a gathering being held at the Heritage Motor Centre this very weekend (Sept 12) where 25 to 30 Avantimes are expected.

You needn't pay the earth either. Sure, you may have to work a bit to track one down but we don't expect you'd have to pay more than £5000 for the privilege of owning one and four-cylinder or shabby versions might well be a bit less. Prices have rebounded a little after the planned road tax hike for post-2001 big-engined cars were relaxed – and a really nice, low mileage one may cost you £6000.

Many thanks to Roger Ames and Avantime Owners UK for their help with this feature.
www.avantime-owners.com

QUICK BUYING TIPS

MECHANICAL

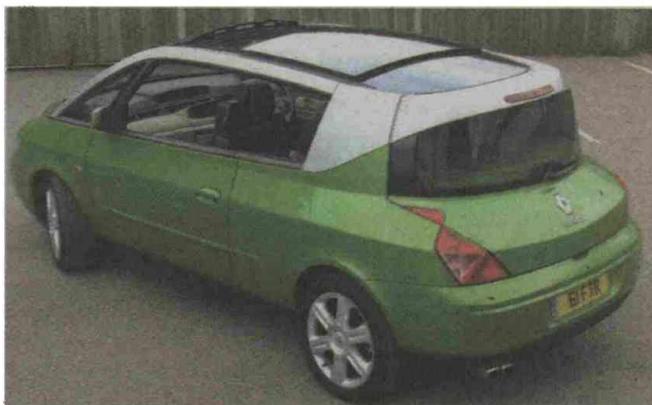
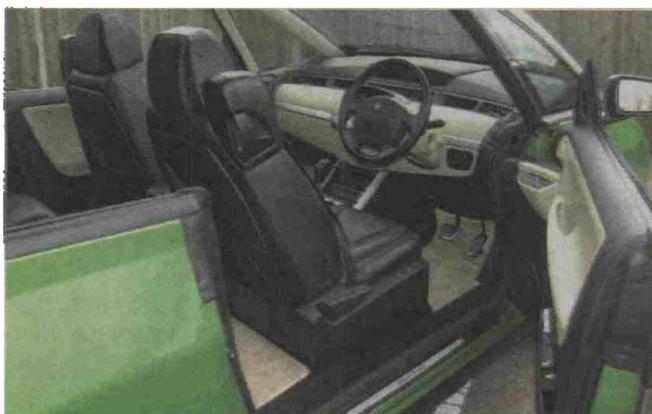
- Full history preferred, with evidence of cambelt changes
- Exhausts can fail. Aftermarket ones are cheaper
- Make sure autos change smoothly and don't jolt when put into Drive
- Autos may lose drive, often a reprogramming issue, but don't count on it!
- Rear wheel bearings – check for noise
- CV gaiters often come free

BODY

- Windscreen costs £2000. Make sure it's okay, and make sure it's insured!
- Lights are also expensive. Check for cracks
- Windows can go out of alignment and squeak or struggle when lowered
- Sunroof runners need silicone grease. Normal grease is bad news
- Aluminium roof rails and alloy wheels can corrode

INSIDE

- Front seat recline handles can break
- Glovebox and cubby box lids are fragile
- Interior door handles prone to damage
- Driver's seat squab can deteriorate
- CD player is unreliable



Source: Classic Car Weekly {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Thursday 10, September 2009
Page: 41
Area: 920 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 24468 Weekly
BRAD info: page rate £900.00, scc rate £4.00
Phone: 01733 347559
Keyword: Renault

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