

The story of a waspish scooter

If you are a Vespist — a fan of the pert Vespa scooter — the Piaggio Museum in Pontedera, Tuscany is a must visit

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On a paver-block-laden road in Italy's Milano, a cheerful man is busy wiping water droplets off his black scooter. "Is it new?" a stranger asks him in Italian. "No. It's the rain," says the man, who seems quite accustomed to reflected glory. He quickly steps back and allows the stranger to take a picture of the waspish vehicle which, in fact, is the most enduring example of Italian design.

In a brightly-lit room only two hours away, the Vespa and its descendants attract attention in a more collective form. Here, at the Piaggio Museum in Tuscany's Pontedera, an array of loud red and fancy grey scooters stand, as if in awe, around a simple grey vehicle that has the handlebar of a bicycle and a bell. This was the first approved prototype of the Vespa designed by a bald, smiling man who as a kid had managed to lift himself up 15 metres off the ground using a hand glider made of bedsheets.

Corradino D'Ascanio had invented many things such as the first rudimentary punch-card computer to timed cigarette holders that

would limit his own smoking. But the thing that really propelled this aeronautics engineer to fame was not even the first successful hovering helicopter that he built in 1930 but the modest, earth-bound Vespa.

In an Italy driven to near-famine, unemployment and inflation after World War II, Armando Piaggio wanted to rebuild his aircraft, rail and ship-fitting engineering factory. His brother Enrico Piaggio, however, was on the lookout for a new business idea that would help get Italy back on its feet. He approached D'Ascanio with a simple proposal: to create a simple means of transport that would be cheap, consume very little petrol and could be used by women too.

D'Ascanio loved the challenge. He was not a fan of motorcycles and found them uncomfortable and tedious. Instead, D'Ascanio wanted the vehicle's frame to support the rider like a chair so he first sketched a person sitting upright and drew the vehicle under him. Also, his experience in aeronautics had taught him to use light but strong materials. When he presented the

prototype to Enrico Piaggio, the buzz of the engine, the ample legroom and the tapering rear made the latter exclaim in glee, "It looks like a wasp." And that's how the name Vespa — Italian for wasp — was born.

It was to offer a showcased slice of this rich past, which Piaggio chairman Roberto Colaninno feels "has successfully taken the fruit of Italian work and creativity to the four corners of the world", that the museum was launched in 2000. Built inside a tool workshop of the factory, this museum boasts not only the special race Vespas of 1947, which were conceived for participation in circuit races, but also three-and-four-wheelers manufactured by Piaggio such as the auto-rickshaw and Vespa 500, a two-stroke car built in two versions, which looks like a compressed Ambassador car. The upper floor displays Piaggio's range of motorcycles — the Gilera — one of which even has a sidecar.

For its sheer quirkiness, though, it is the section that displays various stylists' creative, personal takes on the Vespa which gets the

most smiles. Among these interpretations is one that looks elongated like a dachshund and another one that looks like it has been out in the rain too long. It has plants sprouting from its seats, handlebars and the rear. "That's an ecological version," explains Riccardo Costagliola, chairman, Piaggio Foundation, smiling.

The exhibits, says Costagliola, attract all kinds of fans who now go by the term Vespists. These not only include engineering students but fans who have travelled all over the world in a Vespa. It is here that they discover nuggets such as how the Vespa 50 added pedals to adapt to the French market in 1970 and also feast their eyes on the giant red Vespa Ferrari ET4 150 — Piaggio's homage to the Ferrari racing stable whose leather saddle is made of the same material used to upholster Ferrari cars. "Piaggio's designers and engineers routinely visit the museum to draw inspiration from the past," says Costagliola.

This becomes evident a tad dramatically, when at the design centre not very far away,



VEHICLE OF HISTORY: The vespa is one of Italian design's most enduring images

Marco Lambri, senior vice president, product development and strategies, pulls the veil off a shiny, metallic Vespa prototype. The colour is a shade between metallic grey and light purple — its grey and the design undoubtedly inspired by the classic Vespa. "Our effort is to combine elements of design from the past with technology and fashion trends," says Lambri, citing how the old Piaggio of the bitten apple too finds its way on modern leather seats.

For the Indian market, where the Vespa was launched in April, the wassp has adapted itself by lowering its seats, providing more fuel-efficiency and having tyres that are easy to change. Says Costagliola, who has lived in India for five years and whose heart belongs here, "The museum is even planning an India-themed exhibition soon where we will try to recreate the Indian atmosphere". Some of the wasps, in that case, would have to be real. ■