

French Passion

Renault says the world premium sports coupe and roadster segment currently accounts for 200,000 vehicles a year and it's likely to hike by 50% by 2020. The French auto maker's forecast came at the resurrection of its Alpine sports sub-brand after 21 years. "Forecasts suggest this market has the potential to expand by around 50% by 2020, firstly because it is a supply driven market that is sensitive to change and new arrivals—even in the most mature markets—and secondly because demand is set to increase in the majority of emerging markets," Renault says in its press material supporting the Alpine announcement. "For the past 10 years or so, demand has led each marque to a more and more precise market position." A swag of new sports cars are in various stages of development by a who's who of manufacturers, including Lexus, Mercedes-Benz, Honda, Fiat and c. Many of those cars will target the new middle class car buyers in developing markets such as the Middle East, analysts say. Alpine has just revealed the mid-engined two-seater that will become the spearhead for a Renault renaissance in performance cars. It should also provide a halo car for the auto maker. It's likely that up to 80% of the car's features will make it into production next year. Renault fans will be delighted as the brand hasn't been a roaring success in the Middle East. It was initially guilty of bringing unsuitable vehicles to the region which just didn't resonate. Air conditioning, for example, was a major issue for a long time.

Renault, however, was resilient about boosting its standing in the Middle East. I once asked CEO Carlos Ghosn what could be done to make Renault a major regional player. "When you realise you have a problem you are half way towards solving it."

Well, Renault is certainly solving the problem. With new products launched in 2015 such as the Symbol sedan, Renault continues to gain market share in the Middle East, Africa and India region. Sales last year increased nearly 17% and in North Africa in particular the Renault group has more than one-third market share. Egypt is the company's second-largest market in Africa and its sales alone rose by 73.8% and market share reached 7.5%. In India, thanks to the release of the new Kwid model, Renault leads the way among all European brands with sales up by over 20% year on year.

Meantime, at the moment the biggest market for global premium sports coupe and convertible sales is North America, which takes about 40% of all high-end sports car volume, while Europe gets 35%. In Europe, the dominant markets are Germany and the U.K., each with about 30% of the European tally. Renault's idea of premium sports car does not seem to span American muscle cars—Ford Mustang, Chevrolet Camaro and Dodge Challenger—as those three managed combined sales of more than 260,000 in the U.S. alone in 2015. But it does appear to incorporate the Porsche 911, which achieved 32,000 sales for the year, making it one of the bigger players in the segment. Models coming on stream include the new-generation Honda NSX, Lexus LC500, Mercedes-Benz SLC and C-Class Cabriolet, Aston Martin DB11, Infiniti Q60 and many others.

China, the world's biggest car market, remains a magnet despite slowing sales growth,

with demand remaining enticing and most manufacturers still intending to ramp up production for the country. Alpine's first new-generation sports car—a lightweight two-door mid-engined coupe based on its Vision concept car—will be revealed in its production guise before the end of this year and launched in the first half of 2017 in Europe. Other models, including an SUV, are expected to follow.

The car has a sleek profile, leading with a rounded bonnet with twin round headlamps. There's a lot of emphasis on the rear wing. The Alpine offering is powered by a turbocharged four-cylinder engine that can launch it to 100km/h in less than 4.5 seconds. The cabin combines luxury and performance materials, from extruded aluminium to top-grade leather for the seats. The driver can customize the displays on its touchscreen.

Production of the Alpine will be at the Dieppe factory already used by Renault Sport. Rally driver Jean Redele established Alpine in 1955 following extraordinary motorsport successes in events including the Mille Miglia road race in Italy and the Le Mans 24-hours in France. The garage owner from the French town of Dieppe chose the Alpine name because of his wins in the Coupe des Alpes rally and used Renault mechanicals because of his familiarity with the brand.

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