

CLASSIC DRIVER

[A last visit to the Citroën Conservatory before it closes its doors](#)

Lead

23 years after its opening in Aulnay-sous-Bois near Paris, the Citroën Conservatory has closed its doors forever. We had the privilege of wandering through the aisles of the old industrial building, so closely linked to the history of the brand, for one last time.



If you had known the [Citroën](#) factory in Aulnay-sous-Bois before it closed down in 2021, you would not recognize it today. The whole site has been transformed into a logistics and service platform and only one building - once part of the giant factory - has survived to this day. It had become the brand's sanctuary, housing 280 historic Citroëns. Now it is about to follow the same destiny of being dismantled, leaving no trace of history behind.



Now Xavier Crespin, who used to be the managing director of l'Aventure Peugeot Citroën DS, and Denis Huile, the Heritage Manager of Citroën, have invited us for a last visit of their holy halls. Entering this austere and silent building for one last time was an experience full of emotions. It was a real journey through time, allowing us to rediscover the company's icons once more: the Traction Avant, the 2CV and, of course, the DS, among plenty of other cars including the Visa, AX, CX and the more confidential SM. The alleys were filled with rare treats: limited-edition cars, export-only versions or cars fully prepared for racing. The gigantic and quiet showroom also housed an entire library of plaster models of futuristic concept cars created in the 1960s - another testament to the sheer creativity of the double-chevron brand. We even sat on the very same bench that the Aulnay workers used to perch on during their breaks.





The farewell tour was all the more moving as it plunged us into different eras in which Citroën played a major role in European culture. The cars were synonymous with the first paid holidays, the Tractions used by the Resistance during the War, the austere family cars of the French working class, the CX and SM associated with speed when it became fashionable to drive fast, the 1980s ingenious city cars launched before a new generation of greener cars, not forgetting specific Citroën sedans designed for the Chinese market when globalization became en vogue.

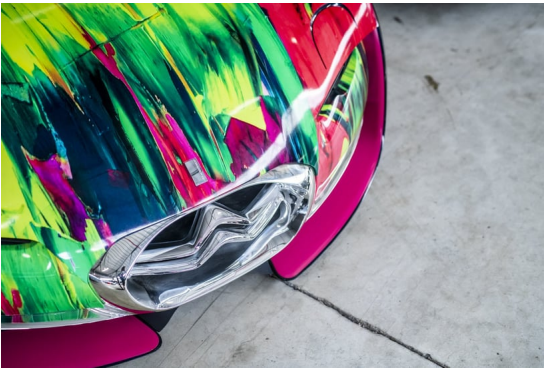


As Xavier Crespin explained us, the Conservatoire was born in a turbulent context: "It was created in 1982 by Pierre Peugeot. At the time, the PSA Group was in bad shape and under threat of nationalization. In order to protect the group's heritage on a long-term basis, Pierre Peugeot created l'Aventure Peugeot. In 1988, the Peugeot 205 saved the group economically and Peugeot created its own museum in Sochaux. L'Aventure Citroën, housed within the same organisation, always had its home in Aulnay-Sous-Bois." Under Xavier Crespin's leadership, l'Aventure had 55 employees and 40 permanent volunteers working in three historical locations: Sochaux, Aulnay and Poissy near Paris. L'Aventure was also in charge of eight kilometers of archives and 2,000 square metres of storage for spare parts.



Far from being confined to a static exhibition space, l'Aventure had developed a number of activities, including the online sale of spare parts with 18,000 references for Peugeot and Citroën models, as well as Simca and Panhard cars. Xavier Crespin, who has led this digital transformation, explains: "The parts come from three channels: existing labelled parts that we have in stock in our factory or dealership, batches from retailers or private individuals and, finally, parts that we refabricate using 3D, plastics or metallurgy techniques." 60 percent of the car maintenance and restoration workshops, which are essential for maintaining such a collection, were dedicated to external customers and 40 percent to maintaining the Conservatoire's own cars.





What struck us when we visited Aulnay was the excellent condition of the cars. "We make no compromises by using original parts and respecting period materials", says Xavier. Naturally, some of the concept cars are full of obsolete IT equipment and have no instructions for use, which present unprecedented difficulties. "It is by far more difficult to open a bubble to gain access to the cockpit of a concept car than to restart a prewar car". No doubt that with 620 Citroëns in the collection - 280 of which were on display at Aulnay - and a further 580 Peugeots, the management of such a heritage is full of challenges.



Some cars have quite interesting stories, such as the Citroën Ami 6 donated by the widow of an enthusiast who had purchased the car when new and driven it all his life. Not far from a brand new C15, we spotted the exclusive 2CV Hermès with its superb canvas and leather interior. More original still, the DS RHD produced in Slough parked next to the DS 'de la paye', which houses a safe in the back that held the workers' pay cheques.



But Citroën was not only a part of everyday life in France, the brand has also been synonymous with exotic adventures: so we marvel at the display of cars which have traveled the world - from the ZXs of the Dakar Rally to the 2CVs of the raids across Africa and Asia. Casually parked next to them is the limited edition Citroën 2CV 007, produced as a tribute to the star of the James Bond movie 'For your eyes only'.





Although l'Aventure Peugeot Citroën DS had ambition to promote the Aulnay site, it could not be preserved. The building belongs to the Ile de France region which has other plans today and is once again turning its back on its rich automotive past. So what does the future hold for this unique car collection? "There are plans to give access to the extraordinary cars from the Conservatory to a much wider public," explains Loïc de la Roche, managing director of l'Aventure, who now has the destiny of the collection in his hands. This new museum is not expected to open for at least three or four years, and the location is yet to be revealed. In the meantime, all the cars are due to be moved to a safe place.



This last visit to Aulnay was filled with gravity, nostalgia and respect. This silent and quite austere place was a unique testimony of the brand's industrial history. All we can hope for now is that this unique car collection will be back to life in a new site soon.

Photos: Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver

Gallery

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