



DELOREAN DMC-12

A name and a car synonymous with both 1980s excess and Hollywood history.

“The way I see it, if you’re going to build a time machine into a car,” says Emmett “Doc” Brown, in the 1985 classic *Back to the Future*, “why not do it with some style?” If it hadn’t been for Hollywood stardom, the iconic DeLorean DMC-12 time machine would have been just another futile attempt by an automotive upstart in the moneyed days of the 1980s. Yet, the DeLorean caught the attention of Hollywood—three years after the spectacular implosion of both the company and the man behind the curtain.

John Z. DeLorean was no upstart: he was a hotshot engineer at General Motors for over a decade before the DMC-12. His most famous accomplishment was ushering the Pontiac GTO into production, which launched the era of the muscle car. For his efforts, DeLorean became one of GM’s youngest executives.

Ten years later, DeLorean was staring at the possibility of becoming GM president when he walked away, beholden to no one. He was friends with celebrities and financiers, seen well-dressed at Studio 54, and dating models such as Cristina Ferrare (who would become his third wife). How hard could it be to leverage these connections into producing one of the most glamorous sports cars the world had ever seen?

To start, he turned toward Italian automotive designer Giorgetto Giugiaro. In 1972, Giugiaro helped establish the wedge-shaped, “folded paper” look with the Maserati Boomerang, a silver knife blade that would spark a design renaissance. While envisioning DeLorean’s dream, Giugiaro drew inspiration from the Boomerang, 1973 Audi Asso di Picche, and 1974 Hyundai Pony.

One can draw a visual line from these concepts to the first DeLorean prototype of 1976. Giugiaro was a master of employing sparse lines, balancing his designs to look both arrow-straight and squat, like a mechanical bulldog

on its hind legs. There were no complex surfaces: not a single curve was necessary for Giugiaro to convey the future. The DeLorean was devoid of excess flourish, yet, befitting an American grand tourer, it was more visually heavy than its predecessors—buoyed by rounded fender flares that extended past the tapering cabin.

What was remarkable about the DMC-12 came from DeLorean himself. He envisioned a car made of rust-proof stainless steel. In theory, there would be airbags, dent-resistant plastic panels, and self-reforming bumpers. Even a rotary engine was considered. However, the most dramatic part of the DeLorean happens when it’s standing still: gullwing doors, originally created to let the 6-foot-4 (193-cm) DeLorean slide easily into the driver’s seat.

From there, the DeLorean story is stranger than time travel. DeLorean established his factory in Belfast, which was being torn apart by “the Troubles.” American Express ran a campaign to sell DeLoreans plated in 24-karat gold: just 100 would be sold, but only four were snapped up, at \$85,000 apiece. DeLorean claimed conspiracy among enemies he made while at GM, who saw his car as a Corvette competitor. And then, DeLorean was arrested for cocaine trafficking. Perhaps conspiracy was right. DeLorean—who lost his reputation, his company, and his wife—was eventually acquitted by the FBI sting operation that entrapped him, right when he was most desperate for funds to save his dream.

In later years, DeLorean thanked the producers of *Back to the Future* for “immortalizing” his creation. Per behind-the-scenes lore, writer/director Robert Zemeckis had originally wanted the time machine to be a refrigerator. But co-writer Bob Gale convinced him otherwise, recalling: “DeLorean was on trial. He was news. And that stainless steel finish looks great.”