

Is Your Snake a Replicant?

Unless you are building an S/C or Comp car replica, just say “no” to scoops, roll bars, sidepipes, stripes, and other incorrect items



Charles Terry

Air cleaner installed above hood is your first clue

DECKARD (Harrison Ford): Is this a real snake?

ZHIRA (Joanna Cassidy): Of course it's not real. Do you think I'd be working in a place like this if I could afford a real snake?

—Blade Runner, 1982

Okay, I'll freely admit I am a Cobra snob. I'm not as bad as one I witnessed at a Cobra gathering, running toward a replica yelling "I'm going to kick the lid off the Tupperware." Or another who wears a T-shirt that says, "Oh, you have a Cobra too? What is your CSX #?" But I do agree that most replicas do no justice to the original.

By definition, a replica should be an exact copy. I think most collectors would agree that nearly every replica Cobra ever bolted together is more of an interpretation than a replica. Some are better than the original, many are worse, but I've never seen one that was exactly accurate.

Whether it is the builder's own personal touches, better-engineered componentry, non-original colors, or a body that just isn't dead on, the replica world has lots of Cobra-like cars that are far from actually replicating the real thing. Somewhere along the line, the name "Cobra" became the Kleenex of the collector car world—anything that looked close, even if it had a/c and a Chevy big block, became a "Cobra."

I do understand why replicas exist. The original cars were flawed from the beginning and have been financially out of reach for many enthusiasts for years. Even collectors who can afford a genuine article aren't keen on thrashing a \$500,000 toy.

This is where replicas (or should I say tributes?) fit in. Available in just about any shape or size, with any kind of running gear you can imagine, and in inexpensive kit or even factory-assembled, turn-key form, replicas make sense for many. I also see the appeal of building one yourself. It's like restoring any old car, only you get instructions and new parts.

The good, the bad, and the ugly

When I ventured online to research the good, the bad, and the ugly, I was shocked at the number of replica builders. I will not list them, as I could never hope to get them all. If you're so inclined, Google "cobra replica"; my search returned 289,000 replies.

So what to look for? The most accurate replicas are without question the Shelby continuation cars in aluminum (with bodies again supplied by AC Cars); or the Kirkham aluminum cars. Both take some liberties with the original design for the sake of safety and performance. For example, billet aluminum suspension uprights were not an option in 1964 but are easy to produce now. The body skins are thicker, and the chassis are better constructed. Every aspect seems to be tweaked to make the new cars as good as possible while still looking the part.

As we get away from the aluminum cars from Shelby and Kirkham, some of the best looking fiberglass cars I

have seen are from Shelby, ERA, and Superformance. From this level, we proceed down through cars such as the Factory Five, which is a kit designed to use late-model Mustang 5.0-liter running gear and chassis parts. I consider these track day cars, as they don't look even close to an original Cobra. The main draw, I suppose, is that they are cheap to build.

The list of other replica builders is long, and all I can say is do your homework. My advice is much like restoring a collector car. Rather than try to do it yourself or, even better, to "make money" doing it because it is "so easy," buy a completed car and let the other guy take the financial and emotional hit.

How much motor is too much? That's easy

From my perspective, the dumbest thing I see replica buyers do is put in way too much engine. You do not need 800 hp in a 2,300 lb car, let alone one built in somebody's garage. A 514-ci Ford engine has no place in a Cobra, real or not. You can't get the power to the ground, and if you could, you'd break everything in the drivetrain—including the 14-inch driveshaft—like a twig.

Plus, with horsepower comes heat, and heat is what you don't want in one of these things. Trust me. For example, when I rebuilt the engine in my original 427 Cobra, I made it a 9.5:1 compression ratio, small cam, nearly stock, Ford spec unit, except with even less compression for today's fuel. It made right around 450 hp on the engine dyno and runs on 91-octane fuel. In my

Cobra, with slippery reproduction tires, the one time I took it to the drag strip it ran right around 11.9–12.0 second quarter-mile times—and that was leaving the line in second gear and smoking the tires through third. I guarantee a monster motor would have slowed it down.

Just say no to scoops, stripes, and sidepipes

The most appealing replicas are the most accurate. And that means unless you are building an S/C or Comp car replica, just say "no" to scoops, roll bars, sidepipes, stripes, and other incorrect items. You'd be surprised how good a Cobra looks without the Pamela Anderson Starter Kit. No street Cobra ever came with Le Mans stripes, either. Try to pick a traditional color and shy away from candy apple and custom van colors. Stick with traditional 15-inch wheels and period looking tires. Oh, and do you really need a huge stereo, digital gauges, and air conditioning? Why? Just remember that Shelby kept it simple and so should you.

So what are repops worth?

The best turn-key aluminum cars from Shelby or Kirkham cost around \$125,000–\$150,000, built to spec. On the secondary market, they seem to hover in the \$80,000–\$100,000 range. Fiberglass Shelby continuation cars are roughly \$20,000 less to start, and that carries through to the secondary market. A new Superformance car is around \$40,000 as a roller; add in an engine and transmission for roughly \$70,000 turn-key, and they sell for around \$40,000–\$50,000 used. As one would guess, with so many replicas out there, you can find them from \$15,000 though \$150,000. Common sense dictates that you need to do your research and look at many different ones before deciding to buy or build.

Even though I may not sing their praises, in some cases it makes sense to have a Cobra replica if you want 60% of the experience of a real one for 10% of the price. Not to mention the fact that every real Cobra owner will get the same question as you every time you park it: "Is that a real one?" For some people, it just isn't worth another \$600,000 to say, "Yes." ♦

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