

# GREAT CLASSIC KITS

Iain Ayre revisits his personal favourite among the UK Cobra replicas – the Cobretti Viper

## Pros & Cons

**Pro:** Strong build and heavy chassis give good ride; full-width Jag suspension gives excellent grip and comfort; you can crash with impunity; higher-caste Cobras retain a good resale value; bodywork lasts very well.

**Con:** Not a click-together kit; some hands-on GRP action required during build; heavier chassis requires more power; some people don't like the fat wheel arches



## Essentials

**Clubs:**

There isn't one, although customers tend to become friends of Bob's. Like Crendon, the number of cars built hasn't yet reached enough of a critical mass for a club to form. [www.cobraclub.com](http://www.cobraclub.com) has a forum with threads for Vipers.

**Manufacturer/Spares:**

[www.cobrettiviperv8.com](http://www.cobrettiviperv8.com) 01293 784601  
The Dell,  
37 Reigate Road,  
Hookwood,  
Surrey RH6 0HL



**C**obretti and I go back a long way. After writing a couple of books about the UK Cobra replica scene in the early 1990s, which involved thundering around the country in many magnificent cars, obviously I needed a Cobra quite badly. The choice of a Cobretti was a matter of flavour, as the rest of the cars I road-tested were all impressive in their own ways: I seriously considered each of them.

Cobretti goes back to the mid-1980s and to the Sheldonhurst Cobra replica, the source of the fat front arches extended to fit Granada axles. Sheldonhurst went bust and their agents Brightwheel copied the kit and carried on. Cobretti became Brightwheel's agent, and then Brightwheel went bust. Customers with

lost deposits or half-finished cars came to Cobretti for help, and through that process the Busbridge brothers carried on the Viper bust-and-revival tradition with their own version of the Viper, still on sale nearly thirty years on.

Although there have been design improvements over the years, the very simple and straightforward ladder chassis remains pretty well as it was. It's unnecessarily heavy and extremely strong, and passed a practical crash test with a Land-Rover in a nasty head-on 50mph + 50mph accident in Scotland with flying colours: one upper wishbone mounting had to be repaired, but otherwise the chassis was undamaged by destroying a Land-Rover. The body was also repairable, although it didn't look too clever after the crash. The Cobretti

bodywork is very difficult to remove, as it's riveted, bolted and bonded to the chassis, making the whole construction massively solid. Cobrettis don't creak.

The fat bubble arches are the Cobretti trademark, and the reason for them is the use of the standard Jaguar suspension set at its full original width. Apart from a reduction in the anti-dive geometry because of the lighter front-end weight compared to the Jaguar, the combination of grip and comfort provided by the Jag suspension is completely retained. The very wide track also means that tyre size is slightly smaller than most Cobra replicas, but a little research reveals that most Cobra tyres are too big to allow a properly weighted contact patch, although they do look cool. Avoiding



## Values

*Similar to Crendon, AK, high-spec Daxes – lows around £15-20,000 and top price so far has been £35,000.*





oversized tyres gets you a more consistent grip on poor and wet road surfaces as well as lower tyre prices, better fuel economy and more comfort as tyre sidewall flexibility is used as designed. Fat tyres are probably better for racetrack work in the dry, though, because you can load up a bigger contact patch by pushing hard into corners.

What I wanted in 1991 was a fast continent-cruiser, with massive lazy torque, comfy leather seats and underfloor exhausts, having driven enough hardcore and side-piped Cobras to get

sick of one-sided blattering and a single deaf ear. My Cobretti was also quite a cheap car to build – old Jags then as now cost £200, and I cobbled together a Chevy V8 out of mostly secondhand bits with a free autobox because I couldn't afford a four-speed. After which I realised that autos are faster anyway. The 5.7-litre Chevy 350 remains by far the best value in US engines, which is why Cobretti continues to recommend it.

There have never been very many Cobrettis built, as the business has been run in a

*Above: The owner of this abandoned project that has sat in a garage for a decade or two decided to ask Bob to finish the car and get it on the road. Right: The rare Cobretti Predator was based on a supercharged, modified and truly fearsome Chevy engine. It needed a lot of air, so there was a massive bonnet scoop and louvres down both sides of the bonnet. This bonnet style is still available. Below: If you're going to keep your Cobretti for 25 years and want it to stay looking brand new, you have to give the leather a bit of hide food and attention. The worn interior is the only clue to this car's age.*





## Technical

**Chassis:** Substantial ladder with added upper structures. Floors, bulkheads, tunnel and boot floor sheeted in steel with optional stainless steel engine bay liner

**Body:** Unstressed GRP shell with trademark bubble front arches

**Engine:** Recommended Chevy 350 V8 or other US small-blocks, or a frisky Rover

**Gearbox:** Tremec or Toyota Supra Turbo 5-speed, or a 700R4 GM four-speed overdrive autobox would be an excellent option

**Suspension:** Independent all round Jaguar XJ6 or XJ40, used full width with original geometry but reduced front anti-dive, Salisbury Jag diff

**Brakes:** Jaguar XJ6 or XJ40 four-wheel discs

**Performance:** Well-behaved but optionally monstrous with a decent 5700cc Chevy, and not bad even with a stockish Rover

**Economy:** Sub-10mpg when abused, but mine approached 20mpg with a Carter carb on a 350 V8 with a 350 Turbo autobox





*Above top: This recently built customer car was the last one completed in the cramped London premises. If the timing works out, this car will be at our Kitfest at Castle Combe on 19 July. Above left: The recommended Chevy 5.7-litre small-block engine starts at 250bhp/350lbs.ft, rising to twice that with frisky cams, fancy pistons and heads and more and bigger carb barrels. Above right: The interior of the freshly-finished Cobretti still has the Jaguar steering wheel for passing the IVA test. Black leather seats will only look better as they get comfortable with use. Below: There's a big Nitrous bottle in the boot, so there might be 400bhp on tap. Oo-er Missus!*



similar way to Crendon and other boutique Cobra companies. Cobretti did expand into a big factory once, but it ended in tears and the company retreated to Bob Busbridge's suburban London garage as a one-man band, where it's been putting out kits and complete cars at a slow but steady pace ever since. Like Bristol, Cobretti now repairs and restores its own historic cars. The business recently relocated out of London which is no longer fit for human habitation, and it's now in a village near Gatwick where customers and prospective customers can drop by to drink tea and chat. All the Cobrettis built so far are still known to Bob by their original customer's names, which is rather nice. Toyota, this is not

There were some Viper 4s built, which were a Cortina-based response to the Pilgrim

Sumo. I bought a finished one of those without an engine and fitted it with a Rover V8, and it wasn't a bad car, although not in the same class as my Chevy/Jag example. A Viper 4 would be good value at a Sumo price.

Market prices value V8 Cobrettis quite highly, probably because Bob has built many of them himself to a very high standard, and Cobretti customer/builders generally tend to be careful and thorough, and quite often they're time-served engineers like Bob. The massive construction avoids any long-term deterioration of the GRP as there's no flexing, and apart from patina'd leather, a 25-year-old Cobretti can look the same as a new one.

IVA has proved to be no problem, and Cobrettis are still thoroughly available, with a short waiting list. ■