

Frendz of the family

Does Renault's latest concept car, the Frendzy, herald a return to form for the past master of the MPV segment? **Richard Webber** finds out

PHOTOGRAPHY STUART PRICE



From some angles, the Frendzy looks almost like a production vehicle

Few manufacturers have done more to help build confidence in the real-world possibilities of concept cars than Renault. Axel Breun, the company's concept car chief, admits that concepts were once "too futuristic" (he was involved with the outlandish Racoon in 1993), but times have changed. It's just two years since Steve Cropley whirled through Renault's Technocentre in the seemingly madcap Twizy, and now the four-wheeled tandems are buzzing like wasps around that creative hive and will hit our roads next March.

We've come to the Technocentre's Parisian antipodes at Mortefontaine, a test facility north-east of the capital, to drive Renault's latest creative edict, the Frendzy. The battery-powered MPV-cum-van is the fourth of six concepts based on the human life cycle, following the DeZir

gullwing coupé, Captur crossover and R-Space sports MPV. Those cars were made to illustrate the human stages of 'love', 'journey' and 'family' respectively, while the Frendzy represents 'work'. (The final two stages will be 'play' and 'wisdom'. The former is said by Breun to be something "sensual, cute and sporty", and the latter is odds-on to be an executive saloon.)

The Frendzy's philosophy apes that of the popular Kangoo MPV, combining work-focused utilitarianism and family-friendliness. The Kangoo's other key strength – affordability – is less easy to reconcile with the polished, space-age Frendzy, but when it's time to facelift the Kangoo, it's the Frendzy that will, to some extent, provide the freshening spritz. There are also a host of innovations on the Frendzy that could reach production, while the market launch of the electric



Renault Frendzy | Drive



Touch-sensitive panels make the doors open



Its screen can be used to display advertising



The Frendzy's theoretical range is 100 miles



Front end gives clues to Renault's future look

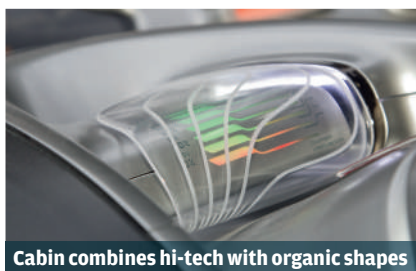
Kangoo van later this month will prove the basic formula.

The concept's sturdy silhouette is finished in a combination of matt grey and pale green, with smooth surfaces on the right side of bulbous, and behind the conventional front doors there's a sliding rear passenger-side door (with integrated 37in TV screen) opposite a suicide-style driver-side door.

Of the aesthetic, Breun says, "It provides an orientation for our designers to find sensuality and attractiveness in vehicles like the Kangoo and Traffic; utility can be sexy." While the absence of B-pillars is a designer's dream, and Breun is proud of asymmetry achieved in league with elegance (the first sketches of the lopsided Frendzy were "far from attractive"), production reality of those features is unlikely, especially given the complications of building a mirror-image →



Driver sits high in a sophisticated and airy environment



Cabin combines hi-tech with organic shapes



The dashboard features a BlackBerry tablet



Slots are for electrical and storage gadgets



Digital displays are sited behind the wheel



'You can imagine some of the Frenzy's functionality making the

← version for right-hand drive markets. Nevertheless, it's an exceptionally composed design, and the oversized Renault badges, new-age family grille and overriding sculpted smoothness are likely contributors to future production vehicles.

Touch-sensitive panels spring the doors, revealing an environment that mixes overtly hi-tech features with organic-looking materials. The fixed driver's seat snakes out of the floor, perching you in front of two adjustable aluminium pedals and a flat-bottomed steering wheel and binnacle that all adjust to suit. A BlackBerry tablet is mounted on the floating centre console for connectivity and multimedia, while



Renault's Breun shows Webber neat details

basic telemetry and a task-based navigation system (listing errands rather than destinations) occupy the lintel, above which a wraparound screen offers good visibility.

Panels are finished in black and silver plastic, with large expanses filled with backlit nodules that look ready to bear alien eggs but actually provide plug points for electrical accessories or mounting points for modular trinkets like cubbies and water bottles.

The front passenger seat stows forwards for extra work space, and the rear seats (numbering two on a solid bench, as opposed to the Kangoo's splitting row of three) fold beautifully into the floor to achieve a flush, wood-panelled surface as tantalising as a Riva Aquarama speedboat's. An outlandish comparison for an MPV, you might think, but Breun is quick to make the distinction between luxury and sophistication. "Luxury has connotations of expense that aren't appropriate for the Kangoo," he says, "but we can use new interior materials in a clever way to achieve sophistication."

Indeed, the 'wood' panels that cover the floor and seatbacks are actually very convincing, weathered-effect textured plastic, and faux leather interwoven



Sliding rear door on one side, suicide door on the other

FACTFILE

RENAULT FRENDZY

Price	na
Top speed	81mph
0-62mph	na
Range	100 miles
CO ₂	Zero (tailpipe)
Kerb weight	1420g
Engine	Electric motor
Power	59bhp
Torque	167lb ft
Gearbox	Direct drive, with reverse



Wood-panelled load area is completely flat



Accessories can be slotted in and out at will



Seat covers are faux leather interwoven with metal strands

FAMOUS FIVE

The pioneers of the MPV world

Renault Espace (1985)

Just beaten to production by the Dodge Caravan, the Espace had been on Matra's drawing board for some time before Renault gave it the go-ahead. Front-engined, front-drive, one-box layout and seven seats set an enduring template.



Renault Mégane Scenic (1997)

Compact MPV returned Renault to the forefront of family transport innovation. Just 5mm longer than a Mégane hatch, but much taller. Three rear seats slid fore and aft; underfloor cubbies aided storage.



Citroën Berlingo (1998)

After introducing the 'MPVan' idea to the UK as a flexible five-seat three-door with full-length sunroof, the much-loved Mk1 Berlingo gained two sliding rear doors in 2000. It sold 50,000 units here and over a million in total.



Fiat Multipla (2000)

Its unconventional exterior was (almost) matched by its unusual cabin layout, employing six individual seats in two rows of three. The back seats could be removed, but even in place they afforded impressive boot space.



Ford S-Max (2006)

The first MPV to hold genuine dynamic appeal. It combined an involving drive – featuring independent suspension all round and up to 217bhp of power – and '5+2' seating with two back rows that folded flat into the floor.



options list in the near-ish future'



with metal strands covers the seat cushions.

At three years old, the current Kangoo is too fresh to overhaul, but you can imagine some Frendzy functionality making the options list in the near-ish future. Breun confirms that tablet integration is scheduled for production soon, and innovations like the fabric roof could later become an alternative to the Kangoo's overhead parcel shelf. The soft roof is a fixed covering that stretches to allow awkward loads a few extra inches of room.

Other production prospects include the transponder sensors that record incoming and outgoing cargo (ballast which itself can be invisibly tethered via the magnetic floor) and the lower section of the split tailgate that electrically slides outwards then down to a parallel position, allowing easy access to the flat floor in a very compact arrangement. The outward-facing TV screen, commendable for its clean integration, could be used for business advertising. All become more affordable with the ubiquity of technology.

There are less welcome compromises, though, as the rear half of the interior is forced upwards by the lithium ion battery

pack underneath, compromising maximum storage space by more than 20 per cent. But the production Kangoo ZE van is packaged to accommodate batteries without affecting floor height, so it can be done. There is also no boot partition or rear glazing.

Our test track drive revealed tramlining from the unassisted steering and chunky 19in wheels, scuttle shake, rumble, body roll, anaemic brakes and whining from the motor. But with the lofty view and airy cockpit, it was easy to mentally reconcile the cultured driving environment with the soothing progress a properly fettled zero-emissions descendant might offer. Theoretical range is 100 miles, with a full charge taking six to eight hours, and Renault's 59bhp motor offers 167lb ft of torque from standstill and musters a top speed of 81mph.

You won't find any game-changing packaging on the Frendzy, but there are plenty of clever features that could collectively edge forward the art of the MPV, not to mention quiet, emissions-free electric propulsion, and the prospect of sophisticated yet affordable, rugged interior finishes is also enticing. **A**