

CLASSIC DRIVER

2012 Copperstate 1000

Lead

Twenty-two years, and just getting started... how could I have gone so long before participating? asks Don Rose, Consignment Specialist for RM Auctions.

Saguaro cactus, desert flowers, eucalyptus groves, big sky and remnants of the Old West. Great roads, great cars, and one nice bunch of people. And no rally clocks. What's not to like? Well... nothing. (We were warned about the occasional infestation of javelinas on the road – if you don't know what they are, look them up – but no sightings were reported.)

As first-timers, my co-driver Evan Shone (of San Francisco Motorsports – consider him your SF connection for 'just about' anything in the area) and friends/colleagues from RM Auctions Gord Duff and Stephanie Jacklin, were greeted warmly by what seemed like a huge crowd of repeat offenders when we arrived at the Tempe Stadium, the event's starting point. Everybody polishing away for a dignified launch, this was the last time anybody would see clean cars for the next four days of driving.

I'd very recently acquired a Bentley Continental Sports Saloon (R-type) and, inspired by period photos of these lightweight behemoths on Alpine and Monte Carlo rallies, I figured I needed to sort out how to drive it at speed. Meanwhile, Gord and Steph arrived from Ontario in appropriate style of a different sort: Gord's 1966 (its an 'early car' he assures me) Shelby GT350 in classic 'Sebring' white with blue stripes, the perfect blacktop burner.

Exactly 100 cars were registered, with the field dominated by Porsches (14), all 1973 or earlier, so 911 RSs as well as Dino Ferraris and Panteras were all well represented. Of the nine Ferraris entered, three running were 330 GTCs, with their reputation for excellent driving dynamics and (ahem) air conditioning... a fine choice by anyone's lights for this event.



Other highlights must include rally veterans Bruce and Sandra Massman's 1926 Bentley Speed Six Le Mans (get out of their way!), Chris Andrews' badass 1955 Kurtis 500 (built for the never-held 1955 Carrera Panamericana), some very interesting Jags including a one-off Cozzi Special, an XK120 John May Special and my personal favorite, a Zagato-bodied XK140. Saving the best for last, there was the overall winner of 'The Car I'd Like Most in My Garage Award,' a fabulous early D-type.

Another favourite was the 1942 Alfa Romeo 6C 2500SS with a gorgeous recreation Touring Barchetta Aerodynamica body by Jim Stokes, which appeared to stunning effect, fresh from its debut at The Quail in 2011.

The Conti R-type aside, this is really a most appropriate event for sports cars, with its fast pace over curvy and sometimes unsettled roads. (I learned you can make the big car handle, with the old 'slow in, fast out' technique and found it has the power for just a bit of throttle steer... just.) The field was rounded out by two other big, pre-War cars, both American, a 1935 Auburn 851 Phaeton (supercharged) and 1937 Packard Dietrich Convertible Victoria.





The event begins in the Phoenix suburb of Tempe, with a baseball stadium (The Field of Dreams) which serves as the staging area. Members of the public are invited, including many of the area's 'cargnosenti', to see off the participants. Dressing in layers is highly recommended as the Arizona terrain spans the gamut from scorching heat in brilliant sunshine to snow and frosty temperatures.

Lunch on the first day was good ol' American barbeque, served by the Circle Bar Steakhouse in Bagdad, a small settlement surrounded by the day's best curvy and hilly roads (Skull Valley). Afterwards, en route to Flagstaff, the itinerary directed us through approximately four miles of the old Route 66, apparently the last remaining vestige of this legendary highway. Today it is festooned with neon and souvenir shops, a sort of movie set version of the American open road. A bit odd for me but foreigners might find more appreciation for its tacky charm. Along the way we suffered a puncture caused by a failed tube inside a brand new set of Michelin Pilote radials fitted just for the occasion. Pressing on regardless with an old Dunlop cross-ply spare, we plotted our early morning recovery to rescue the Michelin.

The freezing part came overnight in Flagstaff, and we'd just missed a 12-inch snowfall the day prior, but hardly anyone thought to bring scrapers for our frosty windscreens. Bright sunshine soon rectified that, and after a short tour of local tyre shops, we were once again on our way.





Now to Tucson via some 50 miles of long sweepers, through a designated national forest on Lake Mary Road. High speeds were easily and safely achieved on this relaxing stretch. After a catered lunch at a roadside rest area in Punkin Center, our day ended at the Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain, where we spent two nights in and around Tucson. The third day leg brought us parallel to the Mexican border where we encountered numerous Border Patrol details. My understanding is that our 16-foot fence separating the two countries has spiked considerably the sale of 18-foot ladders south of the border. After another steakfest lunch, at The Steak Out restaurant (where else?), participants were given the option of the short return to the Ritz (spa, anyone?), or a longer leg through a U.S. Army base, where apparently everyone got lost and wandered around. No spa for me, but I took the short route back to scout for spare tyre tubes – once bitten, twice shy!

One of the attractive things the Copperstate has to offer is that we have motorcycle escorts by Arizona state troopers. They are very happy to tolerate fast driving on open roads, of which there are many, but caution us about the small towns who depend upon unwitting speeders for revenue, where they have no jurisdiction, and infractions were numerous.

Notably in a bit of cosmic synergy, BOTH drivers of the D-type received speeding tickets, attesting perhaps to the speed capabilities of their car and the enthusiasm with which they comported themselves...



The fourth and final day of driving brought us back to Phoenix on the longest strip of undulating straight road I've ever experienced – a bit of a carnival ride – which made me appreciate the supple suspension of the Conti: no bottoming out, no matter how fast we went. Lunch and entertainment were served up at the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving, where participants were afforded the opportunity to drive their cars around the race circuit, burn hot Corvettes around an autocross course – and what day of track amusement would be complete without a session of fast karting? (Albeit very close to the scorching pavement which must have been radiating over 100 degrees F by that point.)

The festivities concluded at the Arizona Biltmore, still a temple to both Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired modernism and to Hollywood glamour circa 1930.

At the closing banquet I was awarded the 'distance' award (called the Fur Piece). At first I thought it was the consolation prize for making so many wrong turns, as I was positive we put more miles on our car than anyone else. But alas it was for being a resident of Massachusetts, a 'Fur Piece Away' place... as the placard says. Even though the car has yet to become a resident of Massachusetts itself, I felt sorry for the delightful Ribadeneiras who hail from Ecuador (although their DB4 was recently acquired at the RM Arizona auction in January, so it hadn't strayed far yet either).



place of any broken-down cars so the drivers might carry on. A few did, including a nice couple who broke their Austin-Healey and were given a shiny new McLaren MP4-12C in a suitable shade of burnt orange to finish the tour, with both speed and air conditioned panache. Thanks Bell Lexus.

Last but certainly not least for kudos are the tireless organisers from the Men's Arts Council whose principal beneficiary is the Phoenix Art Museum, where the opening dinner was held in a private gallery featuring an exhibition entitled 'Frank Lloyd Wright: Organic Architecture in the 20th Century'. Perfect.

Mark your calendars now for April 6-10, 2013!

Photos: Alan Benoit

Gallery

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