

CLASSIC DRIVER

The incredible collection of Gerard Gombert

Lead

Welcome to the wonderful world of Gerard Gombert. Somewhere deep in Provence, hidden between Grasse and Fayence Tourrettes, lives 'La Gombe' – with his five dogs, a donkey and about 50 vehicles. He is an amiable fellow with white hair and a bizarre collection of cars in his overgrown garden...

There are, what, 50 or 60 cars here? "Je ne sais pas," replies the merry Frenchman, who at first sight appears to be closely related to Rumpelstiltskin – and who is absolutely crazy about cars. Just outside his patch of Provence sits a Mercedes *Stricht Acht* coupé that was probably parked there sometime in the 1970s and, by the look of it, hasn't moved since. The once glamorous gold car shimmering in the sunlight has fallen prey to lichens and moss, but Gerard Gombert has no doubts, telling us – with unwavering conviction – that with just a little work it would be ready for a tour of Cannes. Bien sur, Monsieur Gombert!





But when I see his entire 'Villa Hacienda', I am struck speechless. This is an open-air exhibition celebrating the history of the automotive industry: Citroen and Renault en masse, several BMW 02s, and a Mercedes-Benz W108 S-Class among the pine trees. There, a Mini Cooper, here a dozen Peugeot 504 coupés with Pininfarina bodies. A Lotus 30 slumbers in the soft light of Provence. And then there's some seriously fast machinery, too: AC Cobra, Matra D'Jet, R8 Gordini, Lotus Esprit, Lotus Elite, Lotus Elan. And a Citroën DS? Yes – one, two, three, four! Gombert, in his plaid shirt, smiles gently, the wind blowing his white beard around his face. What a place.





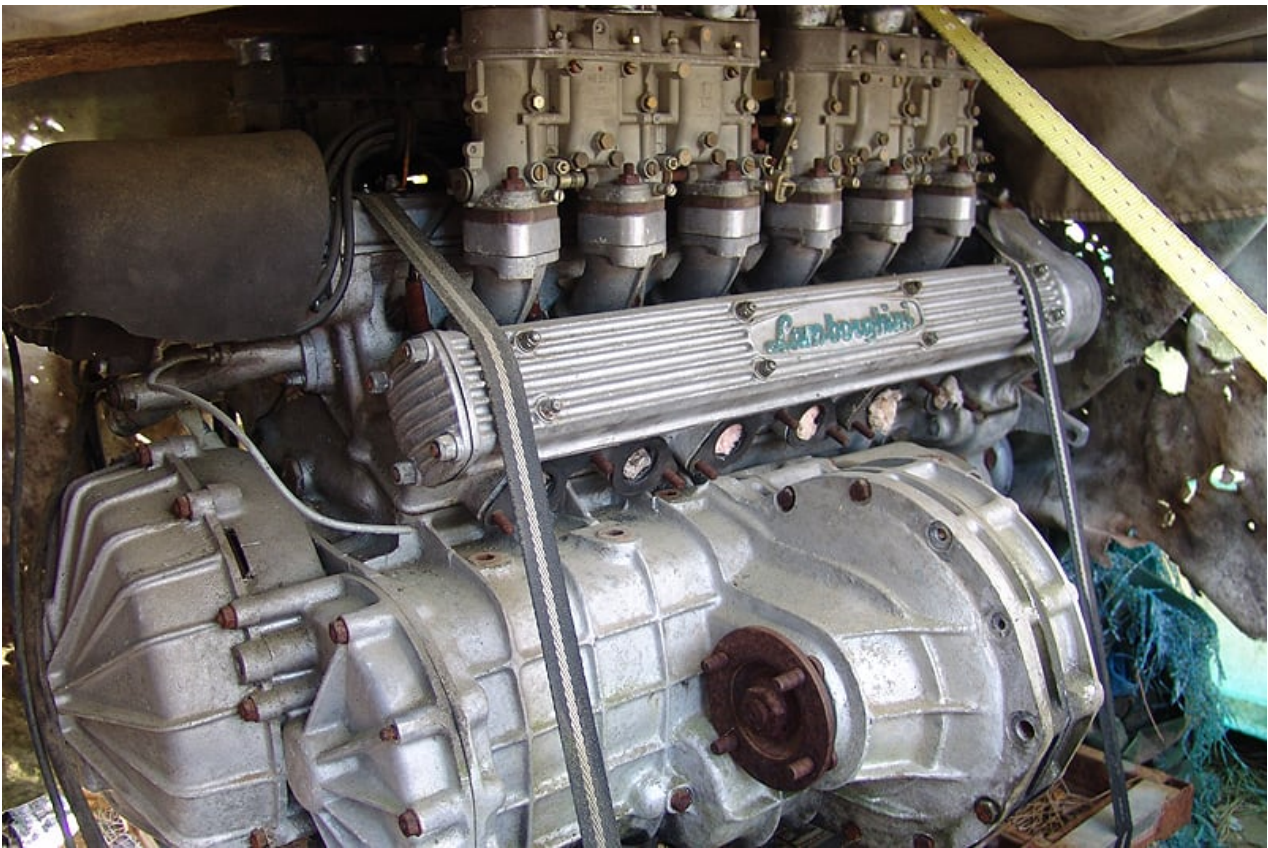
In the strange-but-true world of Gerard Gombert, his friends call him 'La Gombe'. La Gombe was once a rally driver and an automotive entrepreneur himself, driving Ferraris and Lamborghinis. Four decades ago, French beauties with oversized sunglasses sat in his passenger seat. In Nice, he ran the 'Garage Gombert' and he claims to have developed one of the first French plastic bodies for vehicles. "Oui oui. Entrepreneur La Gombe!"



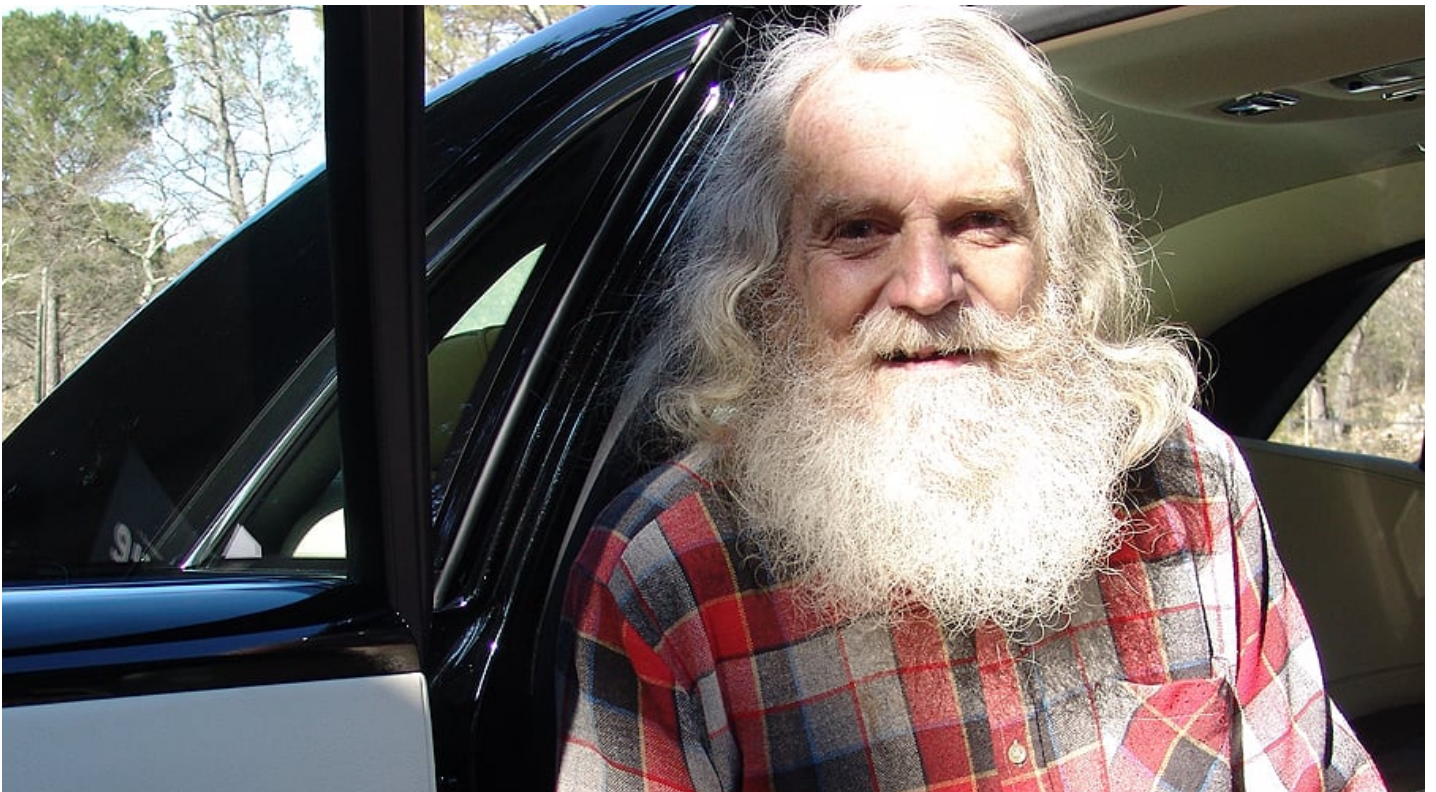


Gerard Gombert, who twisted his knee a few days ago, hobbles further into his collection. Ah yes, the Alpines – slumbering, side by side... A106, A108, A110 and Renault Alpine 210. “I also have a Lamborghini!” Gerard exclaims. I nod, and watch him lift a sack to reveal a fairly well-preserved and apparently complete Lamborghini Miura V12 engine.





"Pompom, pompom!" With an abrupt change of subject, La Gombe seems to cry out in distress. But it's nothing to worry about – Monsieur Gombert is simply calling to his donkey. "Eeyore! Eeyore!" the donkey replies at full volume. Which apparently means that he is hungry and is now ready to eat a sandwich.





As a small thank you, I offer to take La Gombe for a drive in a Rolls-Royce Ghost. The guardian of the French automotive industry is confused for a moment but, when he spots the great black vehicle, he is over the moon: “Sensational, magnifique, c’est extraordinaire!” – the words gush out of him. I open the car and La Gombe, visibly awed and brushing the dust off his shoes, takes his rightful place in the luxurious rear seat, just as it should be. I start the engine. The V12 carries us away, silent and powerful. And at last, La Gombe himself is finally stunned into silence.

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