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## This lady is currently driving the Belgian classic car scene...

22 November 2016 | Jan Baedeker

*Sandra Hermsen Kowalski's fierce passion for classic cars is unrivalled by most of her male colleagues. We travelled to Bruges in Belgium to visit the charming showroom of Sandra's business, Classics2Drive...*



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**What are your earliest automotive memories?**

I was always fascinated with cars. While other girls were playing with dolls, I was outside pedalling small tractors, scooters and go-karts. I've got petrol in my blood!

**From where did this passion for classic cars originate, and how did it develop?**

Enjoying classic cars with friends has always been my family's passion. We always had an ever-changing garage of classic cars, each of which we'd only keep for a year or two. I'm forever asked why I did not turn this passion into my profession sooner, but I learned a great deal in a completely different field, studying and working in the fashion industry in Germany.

**Was it a big step to go from the fashion industry to the motor trade?**

I'm not a car dealer in the 'normal' sense. At any one time, I'll have between 10 and 15 cars in stock, with a focus very much on quality. Our charming private showroom in the heart of Bruges is housed in an extraordinary historic building, where clients can enjoy complete discretion and tranquillity. There are also a number of exclusive higher-end cars that I can offer to select customers on behalf of their owners, who wish to remain private.





### **How did you start the business?**

Before I founded Classics2Drive three years ago, I worked with a well-known German dealer for two years, heading a branch in Bruges. Ever since 'going it alone', I've attended many classic car fairs as an exhibitor, not only to sell cars but also to make contacts, reunite with former customers and generally talk about what I love most: cars!

### **What's your business's philosophy?**

At Classics2Drive, we're a team of good friends who all share the same passion for driving and collecting classic cars. Our philosophy is to treat every aspect of the business, be it selling, buying, pre-sale inspection or scouting good cars, as though we were doing it for ourselves.

### **How do you select cars for your inventory?**

We're constantly looking for special cars, and the fun is in the chase. Many of our vehicles are sold on a commission basis, so treating both the client and the customers with respect and complete discretion is vital. Our showroom, which was built in 1898, serves as the perfect environment in which to entertain clients. Since we're lucky enough to be located in the beautiful city of Bruges, we can often combine customers' pleasures, too - the men can come and ogle classic cars, while their companions can enjoy the city. People often come here as strangers and leave as friends.



### **What can a customer expect from you that he or she might not be able to find elsewhere?**

Buying a classic car is, in many ways, a life decision akin to buying a house. You don't make such a purchase quickly, rather you think about it extensively and weigh up the pros and cons. We want to help our clients make that decision by giving them the necessary time and transparent, honest advice. Customers can expect a high level of professionalism in addition to our high-quality vehicles.



**From where does your penchant for pre-War cars stem?**

I've driven a number of pre-War vehicles on the road or in rallies, from Bentleys and MGs to a very rare Singer Le Mans. These cars are so different - their starting procedures are much longer, brakes weaker and steering heavier, for example. But that's what makes them so fascinating. Several years ago I went on a 4,000km road trip with two pre-War Bentleys, some good friends, fabulous clothes and a small selection of spare parts. It was unforgettable!

**There are many references to Goodwood in your showroom - what does the place mean to you?**

Goodwood is a magical place. We've visited the Revival for the last 15 years, and it's always a highlight that you simply can't put into words. We always take our good friends and a number of classics, and always put lots of effort into our period costumes. A few years ago I even won the 'Best Dressed' award. We're looking forward to next year's event already.



**How would you assess the current collector-car market?**

The market has changed quite drastically in the last year. The most obvious and immediate impact is the change in exchange rates of the pound to the euro. As a result, my vehicles have become more expensive to the UK market and English buyers are, understandably, reluctant to buy. The English market has accounted for around 35-40% of my sales in the past, but there is uncertainty across Europe, too, with the refugee crisis and the situations in Ukraine and Syria. We don't know where the market is going, and thus need to focus even more on quality in this uncertain time.

**Is there a car that you're particularly proud of selling?**

There are many. I was especially proud of the Aston Martin DB6 Volante because the customer had been looking for the right example for so long. It becomes about so much more than the vehicle – you get to know interesting people, who become good friends and, in most cases, customers come back again. I bought a 1931 Bentley 4.9-litre many years ago, and my heart still hangs onto that car. Every time I meet the owner at a fair, I ask if he wants to sell it back to me.



**What do you drive in your spare time?**

We've got several vehicles, both modern and classic, but I prefer to drive something pre-War and preferably open-top in my free time – with the wind in my hair, the rich smell of petrol is like a perfume to me. I also love my Morgan 3 Wheeler. It's not a classic, but an incredibly fun and fast thing to drive nonetheless. I even drove it all the way to Scotland, with no heater or luggage rack.

**What's your dream car, regardless of price?**

Every car has its own special charm, but my dream remains a Bugatti Type 35, a Lamborghini 350 GT or a Fiat 8V Supersonic. So long as you're dreaming, you're alive!

*Photos by Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver © 2016*

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