

The New York Times

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Sharing the Tips That Keep Classic Gullwings Running

By JIM McCRAW NOV. 9, 2012



SPRY Gullwings on parade at the annual gathering of the Gull Wing Group in California. Credit Jim McCraw

La QUINTA, Calif.

FIFTY-ONE years ago, Ernie Spitzer, a San Francisco printer and the owner of a Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing, had an idea. He went to the Department of Motor Vehicles, and for 39 cents each obtained the names and addresses of all 35 registered Gullwing owners in California.

By letter, he invited each of them to show up at Ricky's Motel in Palo Alto on a Saturday morning in August 1961. Eighteen owners did, and that was the beginning of the Gull Wing Group.

The original band of aficionados grew into an organization of national, and then international, scope. By the early 1980s membership had swelled to around 1,100 owners of 300SL coupes — which were nicknamed for their roof-hinged doors — and open-top roadsters.

A half-century on, a shining, multicolored armada of 60 vintage 300SLs, 37 coupes and 23 roadsters, took over an entire wing and parking lot of the historic La Quinta Resort here in the Southern California desert for the Gull Wing Group's 44th annual convention, a long weekend of tours, rallies, technical sessions and entertainment, along with a swap meet and a car show.

The initial Palo Alto gathering was no spur-of-the-moment meeting.

“This was a project that I had entertained for about four years after I bought my car in 1955,” Mr. Spitzer said. “I typed out the invitations on my Smith Corona typewriter. The idea of the club was to teach each other how to maintain these cars properly. In those days, most of the dealers did not have a mechanic that was trained by the factory to work on these cars.”

Mr. Spitzer did all of the routine upkeep and repairs on his own car, guided by the factory shop manual. He shared the knowledge, teaching others at meetings once or twice a month, and filming the step-by-step procedures while the car was on a lift for others to see.

Mr. Spitzer, now 84 and living in the Central Valley city of Fresno, said he was initially against letting owners of roadster versions of the 300SL, introduced in 1956, join the group because those cars did not have the distinctive Gullwing door. But he was outvoted.

“Now we all get along very well,” he said.

Mr. Spitzer sold his Gullwing in 2010 when he developed Parkinson’s disease, affecting his left arm. “You can’t drive this car with one hand,” he explained.

The technical sessions around which the group was organized are still part of every convention, usually lasting about three hours. This year’s subjects were the generator and the fuel-injection pump diaphragm.

The Gull Wing Group conventions are put together, starting three years in advance, by volunteers. Membership is about 650 worldwide, with the cars’ owners now the stewards of a line of classic German sports machines, prized for their advanced features and heralded for their racing triumphs.

The Internet and the club’s Web site have made technical information much easier to come by than it was in 1961, as has the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center in Irvine, Calif. This year, the Classic Center, a factory-run resource for parts and restoration, brought a fully restored rolling chassis so the members could see what’s under the skin of their cars.

The gravitational pull of these fast, beautiful cars can be very strong and cover long distances. One longtime member of the group, Joel Morris, 87, of Nashville, bought his 300SL Gullwing new in 1957, journeying all the way to Manhattan to buy it at the Park Avenue showroom operated by Max Hoffman — the Mercedes-Benz importer who was instrumental in creating the roadgoing version of the SL.

“I thought it was the prettiest car I ever saw,” said Mr. Morris, whose 88,000-mile SL is black with a red leather interior. “I drove it every day for the first 10 years. Drove it everywhere. Went duck hunting with my Labrador in it. I trained my Labrador to jump up on the package tray.”

Such long-term loyalty is not unusual in this group. In 1960, Jim McCarthy, 74, of Reno, Nev., traveled from San Francisco to Los Angeles to buy a used ’56 Gullwing for \$5,450. He joined the group the next year, becoming member No. 12. He still has the coupe, silver with blue tartan upholstery, which had been stored since 1970. It came out of storage three years ago and was under restoration until a few weeks before the La Quinta event.

Not all of the cars in attendance had such long histories. Peter Thomas, a Scottsdale, Ariz., car and parts broker and a native of Berlin, went to Germany to buy the first of his many Gullwings and

roadsters. The car he brought here, finished only weeks before the event, was a replica of the all-conquering 1952 W194 racecar, the predecessor of the production Gullwing. Built in Australia over eight years, it cost more than \$900,000, he said.

There are many reasons for owners' attachment to their SLs. Marianne MacDunna of Bryn Mawr, Pa., has had a Gullwing in her life since 1956. Her late husband, Stuart, bought the car in Norristown, less than 20 miles from home, she said, trading in a Jaguar XK140.

Mr. MacDunna drove it, and raced it, against young newcomers like Roger Penske. At the races in Nassau, Bahamas, Mr. MacDunna lent the car to the young British driver Graham Hill, who went on to win the Formula One World Championship.

Like other owners in the group, she plans to keep the car. "It would be really difficult to sell, to be honest," she said. "It's been such a big part of my life."

These timeless cars sold new for about \$11,000 in the '50s, but now can bring \$1 million or more at auction, depending on their condition and provenance. One of the 29 aluminum-body Gullwings built for racing sold for \$4.6 million by Gooding & Company at the Scottsdale, Ariz., auctions last January.

The SL option list was short: Rudge knockoff wheels, meant for faster pit stops at the races, \$350; leather upholstery, \$142; matching fitted Mercedes-Benz luggage, \$142; a Becker Mexico radio, \$200; and bumper guards, \$35.

All of the 3,258 300SLs built from 1954 through the end of production in March 1963 had 4-speed manual transmissions, and none had air-conditioning. The vent windows tip inward at the front, and the side windows tip outward at the rear — that's why most of the Gullwings and roadster owners at La Quinta kept the doors up or the tops down in the 100-degree temperatures.

Should you want to fit your Gullwing or roadster with an air-conditioning system that looks as though it came from Stuttgart, the going rate is \$35,000 to \$40,000, according to Steve Marx of Costa Mesa, Calif., a 300SL expert, historian, mechanic and racer.

If your 300SL didn't come with the Rudge wheels, no problem. You can have the wheels, hubs, nuts, paint and the special brake system installed for about \$70,000, according to Nate Lander, the workshop project manager at the Classic Center.

Mr. Marx said the biggest mechanical problems with these cars were caused by a lack of use.

"These are high-performance sports cars, and they are meant to be driven and driven hard, not sit in a garage," he said. Parts like the diaphragm in the fuel injection pump "dry out and crack."

That potential failure, a topic of the technical session at this year's gathering, may have been circumvented by a rally that took the cars through Palm Springs, into the San Jacinto Mountains for lunch in the town of Idyllwild and back to Palm Springs. After all, preventing the need for repairs fits as well with the group's original mission as learning how to make the fixes.