

CLASSIC CHOICE
Pagoda V8

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This 5.6-litre M117-powered Pagoda was not Gaël's first Mercedes-Benz project and it certainly won't be his last. It does, however, represent his most ambitious project

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Manual muscle

One man's vision to
create a W113
280SL with period
fitting performance
led him to build
something quite
spectacular in this
M117 V8-powered
Pagoda manual

WORDS **REED HITCHCOCK**
IMAGES **KAVEH SARDARI**





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HEN I FIRST MET GAËL GRIETTE, THE owner and craftsman behind this car, I naturally assumed he was an engineer or a mechanic at a minimum. I was wrong. Gaël is a diplomat for the EU whose focus is stabilisation in areas of unrest. It

just turns out that in addition to his diplomatic skills he has an eye for detail, a passion for cars, a respect for engineering, and vision. This 5.6-litre M117-powered Pagoda was not Gaël's first Mercedes-Benz project and it certainly won't be his last. It does, however, represent his most ambitious project to date.

Out of the box, a standard 1971 280SL Pagoda is a remarkable car. While not the all-out sports car that its 300SL predecessor was, it's an excellent touring car with a sporting flair. Still, it's somewhat relaxed in everyday driving, maybe a little lacking in oomph – especially when compared with more modern GTs. Gaël's vision was to take the classic W113 body and chassis, retain its brilliant Paul Bracq style, but bolster it with period Mercedes performance.

Having cut his automotive teeth on cars like the Citroën DS and BMW 2002, Gaël saw Mercedes-Benz as the next logical step. His first Mercedes was a W108 280SE 3.5 with a four-speed manual transmission and he admits that the quality and over-engineering of the Mercedes was a whole new level of car. Although rusty and in need of mechanical work, he dug in to the car to make it his daily driver. Ultimately, he performed an LPG conversion on that car and used it to travel throughout Europe.

But that was just the beginning. From there he considered the next logical step would be an M100-powered 300SEL 6.3. He was already familiar with the chassis, but the 6.3 meant substantially more power. Unfortunately, it also meant exponentially higher operating and parts costs. While enjoying the 'Banker's Hotrod' performance of the 6.3, Gaël also brought

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have preferred the motor in a W111 coupe over the saloon – and it was that preference that led him to an M100 6.9-powered W111.

HIGH ROAD

It was also that car that ultimately led Gaël down the path to his Pagoda. Although it's large and massively torquy – especially for its time – the M100 6.9 is tremendously heavy and in the shorter W111 chassis it made for a very front-heavy car. It was a great idea in concept, but lacking in execution. Admittedly, the car had also been more or less used up by the time he got it. Still, it got the wheels of his mind spinning.

Gaël's thought was to build a performance Mercedes in the image of some of the great 1970s exotics: reliable V8 power in a classic, stylish body. He set his sights on the M117 – in five- or

▷ The interior has been lovingly restored too.

▽ The car looks very original from the outside.

▽ Even the warning lights still work.



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5.6-litre form as the last and best performing iterations of the motor that first came out in the early 1970s. It also did not elude him that these motors were essentially a bolt-in to any Mercedes application starting from the mid 1960s through to the early 1990s. The other major consideration was weight. After the M100, he wanted a large and powerful V8, but without the extra pounds. With its aluminium block and heads, the M117's weight was comparable to Mercedes' period six-cylinder motors, but could drive circles around them.

His theory was further tested when Gaël and his wife moved to the US, where they bought a 1962 W111 coupe outfitted with an M116 3.5 V8. The pair thoroughly enjoyed the car as it was, using it to drive coast to coast and, more importantly, confirming his theory that the smaller, lighter V8 was the way he wanted to go with his next project.

After some online research and digging around various internet enthusiast forums, Gaël came across something that piqued his curiosity. A fellow in the Middle East had converted a five-litre G-Wagen from automatic to five-speed manual. Knowing full well that there was no such vehicle that came out of the factory so equipped, Gaël examined the pictures posted online. What he found was that the fellow had used a special bellhousing developed by AMG to mate the venerable Getrag 265 five-speed manual to the M117 V8. After some back and forth with a seller, Gaël found himself the proud owner of an AMG five-speed manual 'box setup. All he needed next was to decide what car to put it in and which motor to attach it to.

It was not long after receiving the transmission setup that fate again intervened and Gaël found himself the proud new owner of a 5.6-litre M117 motor out of a wrecked car. A short time ▶





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The result was a powerplant over 30kg lighter than the 2.8-litre M130 motor it replaced

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▷ later the powerplant’s recipient came along: a tired but very solid 1971 280SL. As Gaël puts it, “The car was covered but was in a bit of a sorry state, hadn’t been run in years and the body was full of dings – but it was complete and rust free.”

Although the newer, bigger motor is pretty much bolt in to the W113, it is not plug and play. That is to say, the M117 in 5.6-litre form from the late 1980s comes with all manner of electronic add-ons, particularly in the ignition and fuel management departments. Gaël added European camshafts to the motor and retrofitted an earlier M117 five-litre Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection that didn’t have nearly as many

electronics to be made to work in the much older Pagoda. The result was a powerplant over 30kg lighter than the 2.8-litre M130 motor it replaced.

In order to allow everything to fit in the now significantly more crowded engine bay, the battery was relocated to the boot. While freeing up some much needed space, this also helped the car achieve a nearly perfect 51/49 front/rear weight distribution – something Gaël felt particularly strongly about after the 6.9 coupe experience. The only major non-factory parts bin customisation that he had to make was a quality, mandrel-bent exhaust system – necessary to quieten a V8.

CHANGING GEAR

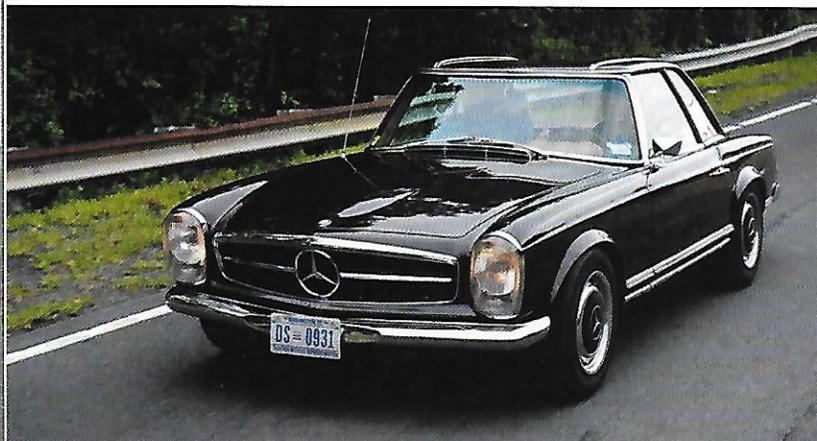
Pagodas with automatic transmissions – as this car started life – are a little high-strung when it comes to gearing. The five-speed manual was an improvement, but with the additional power from the M117 motor Gaël felt the car still needed more. He used a 2.82:1 rear differential out of a 300SEL 6.3, which he finds “Does an excellent job exploiting all that torque through the five speeds of the Getrag 265.” Now, instead of running ▷



◀◀ The M117 V8 is a snug fit but looks at home.

◀ Manual gear lever is connected to a five-speed.

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The car chirps as it nails you back in your seat with a seemingly endless band of torque
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△ Out on the road, the Pagoda is very effective.

△△ You can just make out the relocated battery.

▷ over 4,000 rpm at US highway speeds, as a stock 280SL does, Gaël's car cruises in fifth gear at 80mph turning just 2,500 rpm. He says that in doing so the car returns 20.5mpg.

The first time I drove Gaël's Pagoda, about four years ago, it still had the original (to the 280SL) 14-inch steel wheels with painted factory hubcaps. This bothered him no end, because modern performance tyre options are so much better once you get into 15-inch and bigger wheels. Not long after that first drive, he found 15-inch wheels that retained the factory sleeper look, retaining painted hubcaps, and was able to achieve the driving experience he wanted. To complement the wheels he also upgraded the brakes, but everything else from the seats and carpet to the chrome trim remains original Pagoda.

Having owned an automatic 280SL Pagoda in the past, I came into this car with certain lackadaisical expectations. Right off,

the gear knob struck me. I'd only ever driven one manual Pagoda before – a 230SL, and it was a four-speed.

You crank this car over and it fires with a muted but still very present V8 rumble. The car shifts smoothly into gear and under light load feels very much like just about every other Pagoda. It's when you plant your foot that the difference comes through. The car chirps as it nails you back in your seat with a seemingly endless band of torque. Rowing through the gears I gave up well before the car ran out of steam. I don't for a minute doubt Gaël's sub-5 second 0-60mph estimate nor a projected top speed around 160mph.

PERFECT MATCH

The real joy of this car, however, is in the execution. With his history and experience, Gaël knew how to pair the mechanics with each other and with the car, to make it look as if it had been done by the factory, and to make it work seamlessly. Having driven other conversions in the past, this one is striking in its functionality and lack of compromise – even the dummy lights work as they should! What's more, he took a rough Pagoda and in the process of the build restored it to a very nice level – yet retaining its original colours and patina. If I didn't know better, I'd think Gaël did this for a living. Maybe someday he will and I just might be his first customer.

