# Dream Cars in Paradise

**What better use for a unique pair of home-built Mercedes-Benz performance cars than driving them through America's Golden West?**

Turning wrenches and driving vintage cars has always been a passion of mine. Owning a W109 6.3 some years ago got me into the Mercedes hot-rod world. As the brainchild of company engineer Erich Waxenberger in the later 1960s – factory-built and as refined as any Mercedes of the era – the 6.3 is a wonderful car and definitely a factory hot rod. As a student in France, I have very fond memories of driving this car on the breathtaking Napoléon Route in the French Alps, establishing my expectations for a vintage car and how it should be used.

I've always thought it was a shame that the big-engine strategy wasn't applied to the other beautiful Mercedes cars of the same period, such as the W111 Coupe and the W113 Pagoda. So I started thinking of building my own. My dream was to create a car that could be on par with the rare GTs of the era – a Maserati, Iso or De Tomaso – in terms of performance and still retain all the Mercedes refinement, build quality and reliability.

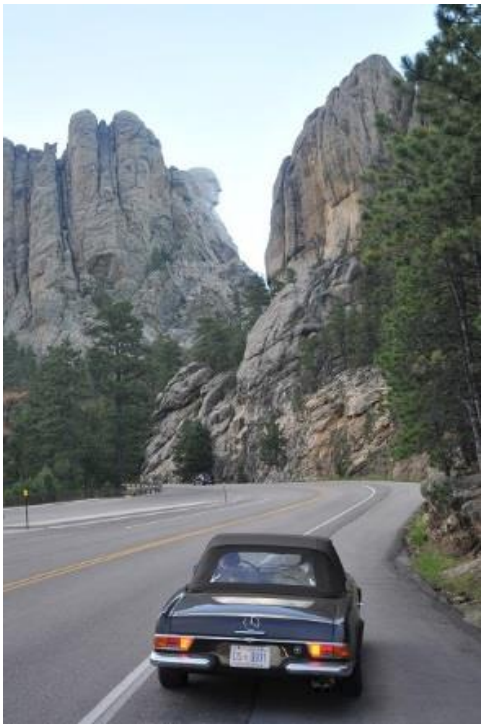
In my vision, the car would be equipped with a light and powerful M117 engine, manual transmission and brakes, suspension and differential upgraded to match the performance. I would use my dream car for long holiday road trips across beautiful landscapes. However, that dream would have to sleep for some 15 years: Born in Turkey of French parents on NATO assignment there, I enjoyed travel, so after defending my Ph.D. thesis, I worked in a variety of countries.

While working in Uganda, I met and married the woman of my dreams. Though she had been born in India, she had grown up in the United States, so in 2008 when we finally tired of travel, we decided to settle in this country. This is when I discovered that America is paradise on Earth for any Mercedes-Benz vintage-car enthusiast: Having been one of the brand's main markets for many years, there is a great choice of older Mercedes vehicles at affordable prices in this country. Parts are available for about half their cost in Europe and there is a vibrant vintage M-B community always willing to help out. Add to that gas at half the cost of what it is in Europe, and the fantastic road-trip opportunities among the most beautiful sceneries on this planet, and it wasn't long before my dream began to resurface.

Hence, as soon as I arrived in the United States, I bought a 1962 W111 Coupe and fitted it with a European-spec 5-liter M117 motor and a manual transmission, and upgraded the brakes, suspension and differential. The beauty of the upgrades was that with the right choice of stock M-B parts, everything fitted as straight bolt-ons, ensuring factory build-quality and reliability. But it is much faster and nicer to drive. On the way to spectacular Monument Valley Park in Utah on our first trip, in the 1962 W111 220SE Coupe: A dream come true!

## 1962 Mercedes-Benz 220SE 5.0 (W111)

TYPE: Two-door, 2+2 seater fixed-head coupe
ENGINE: M117.960 V-8 5,025cc, programmable EFI and Ignition systems, AMG camshafts TRANSMISSION: 5-speed manual with floor shift
HORSEPOWER: 300 (DIN) @ 5,250 rpm TORQUE: 336 ft-lb @ 4300 rpm LENGTH: 192.1 in CURB WEIGHT: 3,109 lb FUEL EFFICIENCY: 20 mpg
PERFORMANCE: Zero-60 mph 5 sec; Top speed 160 mph



The following summer, a childhood friend and his family visited the United States; we are very close friends and I am godfather to his younger daughter. So this was the perfect occasion for our first coast-to-coast trip – we live in Washington, D.C., and my friends were to land in Las Vegas.

We made it to Las Vegas in three days, and with our friends in a rental car, we visited Death Valley, Yosemite National Park where we had a memorable night encounter with a bear, and San Francisco. As our friends are winemakers, we visited Napa and Sonoma valleys, stopping at renowned wineries to taste some of the best wines in the world.

We visited some of the breathtaking national parks in Utah, including Zion, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Arches, and finally Grand Canyon, alternating treks and drives across amazingly beautiful landscapes. This was a wonderful adventure for us. For me, it was a dream come true. The car never missed a beat and it did everything I had built it to do.

A few years later, having built a Pagoda following the same recipe I used for the Coupe – this time with a 5.6-liter M117 motor, manual 5-speed transmission, a 6.3 differential and upgraded brakes and suspension, I proposed yet another trip to our European friends.

My wife and I drove from Washington to Denver to welcome them. This time our trip took us to Rocky Mountain National Park; Cheyenne, Wyoming; the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse Memorial; and finally, Yellowstone National Park. Again, we alternated tours and drives, visiting old Cody City where the original wagon trail is still visible, attending a rodeo in Buffalo, and enjoying the incredible combination of geothermal features and exotic wildlife in Yellowstone.

We took turns driving the Pagoda so my friend could enjoy the driving and the top-down experience in such a wonderful environment. We drove home through the amazingly beautiful mountain roads of Montana and North Dakota. Our modified Pagoda did not miss a beat and finished the whole trip without needing oil.

## 1971 Mercedes-Benz 280SL 5.6 (W113)

TYPE: Two-seat convertible/cabriolet
ENGINE: M117.967 V-8 5,549cc Early Euro K-Jet injection and Hall Effect ignition systems TRANSMISSION: 5-speed manual with floor shift, rare AMG set-up
HORSEPOWER: 280 (DIN) @ 4,750 rpm TORQUE: 345 ft-lb @ 3,800 rpm
LENGTH: 168.7 in CURB WEIGHT: 2,954 lb FUEL EFFICIENCY: 25 mpg
PERFORMANCE: Zero-60 mph 5 sec, top speed 160 mph

Both the Pagoda and Coupe are very well- balanced cars with the same feel of endless power experienced in a 6.3, but very sporting, thanks to their lighter weight and manual transmission. However, the cars have different personalities. The Coupe is a bit more aggressive with its AMG camshafts and programmable EFI and ignition systems, producing 300 horsepower. The 3.27:1 rear-end differential encourages a heavier foot on the accelerator.

The Pagoda is a bit more relaxed and torquey, with its bigger displacement motor and early K-Jet injection system delivering 280 brake horsepower through a 2.82:1 rear-end differential. I am very happy with the performance, reliability and ease of maintenance on both models. I smile each time I drive them, pleased with their power, safety and handling and the satisfaction of having built both of these cars myself, with the precious help of my good friend Dimitri Seretakis who welded together some of the specific parts needed for both transplants.

What's next? My wife has just bought a nice Fintail she found on Craigslist – it reminds her of the car her grandfather drove during her child- hood – and because it has four doors, she can carry friends and family.

However, she has asked me for some improvements: She wants her new Fintail to be an automatic, equipped with air conditioning – of course – and silent and comfortable on long- distance trips. It turns out I have this spare Euro 5-liter motor lying in the garage next to a 6.3 rear end. And my friend called the other day to say his past holidays in Italy were very nice, but he missed the big open spaces in America. I can already see where all of this is going.

## The M116 & 117 Engines

The first M116 came in 3.5-liter form with an iron block and produced 200 horsepower (DIN) at 6,500 rpm. It was first fitted in the W111 Coupe and the W109 sedan in 1969. It then evolved into a 3.8L engine with aluminum block in 1979 and then into a 4.2L variant in 1986. It was fitted in the W108, W109, W111, W116, W126 and R107 cars. The first M117 came in 1972 in 4.5L form with an iron block and produced 225 horsepower DIN (European-spec). It then evolved into a 5.0L with aluminum block in 1978 and then into a 5.6L variant in 1986.

The M117 engine is basically a stroked M116 engine with a higher block deck to accommodate the longer stroke. It was installed in the W108, W109, W116, W126 and R107 chassis. Its most powerful version produced 300 hp DIN in some European-spec W126 560 models. AMG developed five tuned versions of the M117 engine with capacities that ranged from 5.0 liters up to 6.0 liters.