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Dazzled by the Ford GT's performance but not its concept, and dreaming about desert drives in a big, black German coupé
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Fabulous Mercedes-Benz 540K fresh out of Paul Russell restoration

Retro wonder

The awesome performance of modern supercars such as the Ford GT is very seductive. Editor Elliott, art man Port and I were stunned by the refined punch of the retro king as it cannoned to 100mph in less than 9 secs, but ultimately the car was just too big and impractical for a real motoring adventure. In recent years it's the ordinary duties that supercars have accomplished, such as Thomas Bscher commuting in his McLaren F1, that seem to stand out. Like precious jewellery, they're run out for footballers' parties or celebrity road races with film crews giving chase.

With no spare and barely room for a soft bag, not to mention the impracticalities of its ridiculous girth, the Ford GT is a long way down my choice of motors for a blast around the Alps or a chase across Montana. I recently read a story by Miles Collier – a man with immaculate automotive taste and one of the greatest car collections – about driving his newly refreshed McLaren, the car that Bscher had maxed daily down the *autobahn* to his bank, around the Treasure State. He seemed more concerned about paint chips and the cost of replacing the windscreen than the great roads he discovered in Gordon Murray's

masterpiece. Hours were wasted at road works due to the F1's impossible ground clearance. The fact that Ford delivered its 1.2:1 scale GT40 clone to our test location by truck says it all about these 200mph dinosaurs. For me this ode to the Le Mans legend was just too quiet, too refined, too heavy and too American. And a missed opportunity. Just think what a great, affordable Ford sports car could have done for the Blue Oval's image. Better to vanquish the latest Corvette than chant about beating Ferrari four decades back.

Ultimately, after our test I wasn't thinking about what to remortgage to buy a GT – but what a bargain an Elise or a sorted Europa from Banks Service Station would be. But then a millionaire's perspective would be very different.

Autobahn King

Back in the '30s, most lucky customers of the world's greatest cars bought them for the right reasons, such as the fabulous Mercedes-Benz 540K *Autobahn-Kurier* that was the talk of Pebble Beach. Now mint after a fastidious rebuild by Paul Russell's expert team, this supercharged streamliner has had more owners in recent weeks than the rest of its eventful

68-year life. Rather than presented pristine on Pebble's lawns – cars never look right on grass to me – I imagine the *Autobahn-Kurier* covered in desert dust, parked outside a Cairo hotel, or burbling across Alexandria in the tracks of TE Lawrence's armoured convoys.

I treasure a 1:43 miniature of this legendary 1938 supercar, produced by the Mercedes-Benz Club of Spain. The car's remarkable story has long captivated me. Legend has it that the *Autobahn-Kurier* was a personal gift from Adolf Hitler to a Spanish orthoptist for successfully correcting the eyesight of a prominent Nazi, while other stories relate that a blinded Arabian prince presented it to the same doctor for saving his vision. The truth is less colourful. Certainly the 540K was owned by a leading eye specialist,

sun, Barraquer thought nothing of removing the cylinder head, replacing the gasket and adjusting the ignition timing before continuing his travels. Just imagine the drama if a Bugatti Veyron failed. Tracked by satellite, a misfire would probably require a transporter for the car and a helicopter for the owner.

Back street beauty

Barraquer's son has vivid memories of high-speed runs all over Europe in the *Autobahn-Kurier*, including a road race with a supercharged Alfa between Rome and Naples, and a dramatic spin near Grenoble in France. After WW2, Barraquer bought a new 300S, yet never sold the 540K. Later it was loaned to the Antic Car Club de Catalunya and displayed in Barcelona, but few

Poor rear vision with high window, but twin spares and fitted luggage



Above: *Autobahn-Kurier* on Alexandria dockside; Prof Barraquer in the desert

outside the local group saw this magnificent Mercedes.

One of the few was American auctioneer David Gooding who discovered it by chance while backpacking around Europe as a student in the 1980s. "I was exploring Barcelona," Gooding recalled, "and by chance spotted a pre-war Alfa inside a back-street workshop. It was the base of a car club and out back was this fabulous black coupé. I'd heard stories about this amazing Mercedes in Spain, but never expected to stumble across it."

For years dealers and brokers tried to buy the *Autobahn-Kurier* from the Barraquer family but none succeeded until a secret deal was done in 2004. Pebble Beach was the car's first show but hopefully we might see it back in Europe, maybe at *Rétromobile* in Paris. In recent months a few lucky people could have witnessed it being road-tested by Russell around Massachusetts: "People don't appreciate how great a properly sorted 540K is to drive. It rides really well and taking that clutchless change from third to fourth at speed is superb. The car felt so good I wished I'd had some place to go and a three-hour journey." Just imagine the view down the long, black bonnet on those beautiful New England avenues.