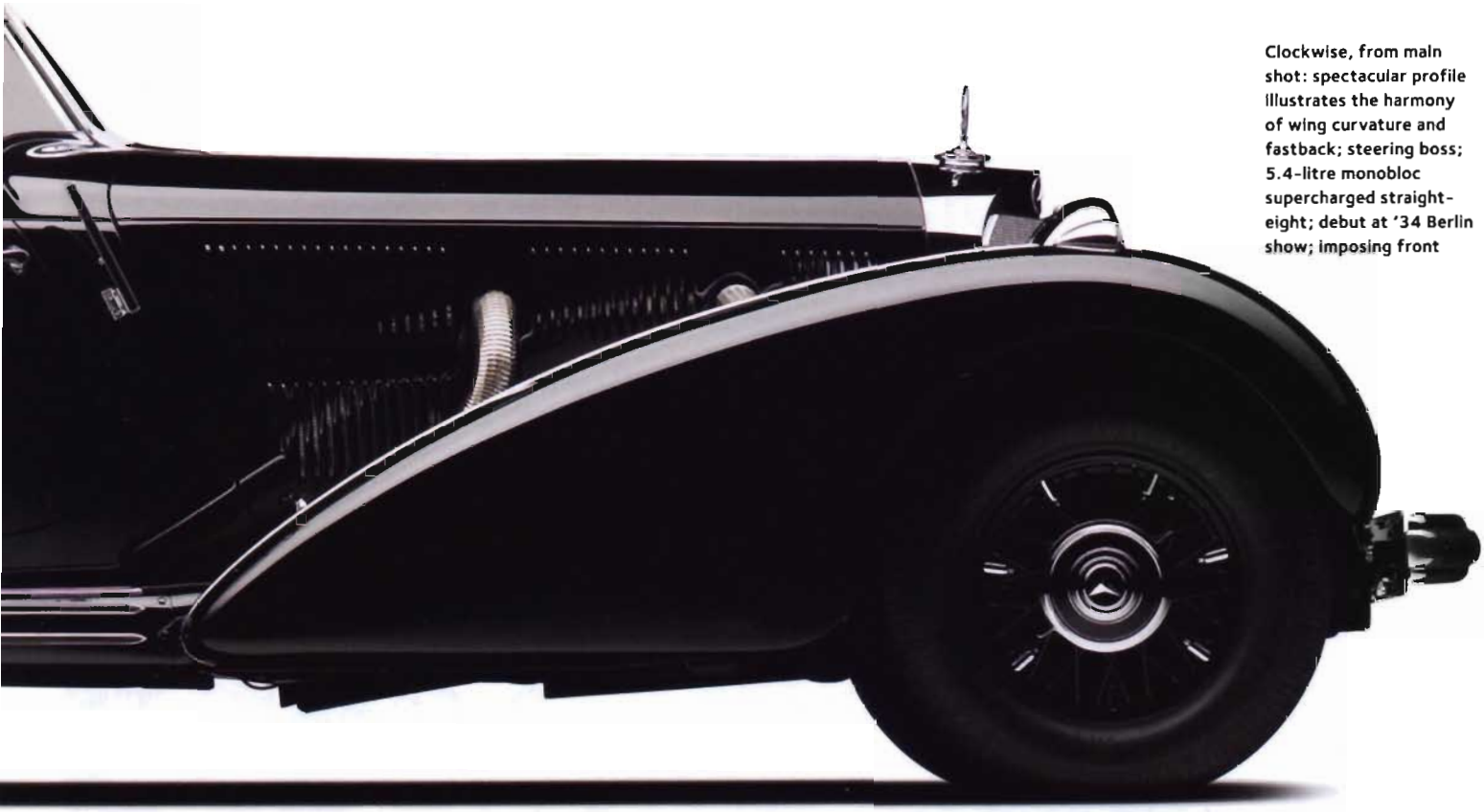
Express delivery

Supercharged Mercedes-Benz road cars were often over-dressed exotics for movie stars and moguls but, says **Mick Walsh**, the glorious Autobahn-Kurier broke the mould PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL FURMAN

The Berlin Motor Show opened in February 1934 with President von Hindenburg on his deathbed and Hitler preparing to take the final step to absolute power. With dramatic Reichs-Autobahns coursing relentlessly across Germany and the heavy tax on new cars abolished, a fresh era had dawned for the motor industry. No car at that March exhibition encapsulated the optimistic mood in manufacturing more than a magnificent black coupé on the Mercedes-Benz stand. Streamlining was all the rage and the special 500K, with its pontoon wings, long aggressive bonnet and lithe, fastback cabin, was the talk of the show. Legend has it that when Jean Bugatti saw the Teutonic beauty he was stunned, and rushed back to Molsheim inspired to design a rival coupé. The Aérolithe was born and it's easy to appreciate the link.

The basis of the dramatic Mercedes was the new 500K, with enlarged 5-litre supercharged straight-eight fitted to the advanced, all-independent 380K chassis. The exclusive 1933 model needed more power and, with a longer wheelbase and 160bhp, it at last had the performance to match its style. While most 500Ks and uprated 540Ks had extravagant coachwork, the new streamliner had a leaner look. Among Stuttgart



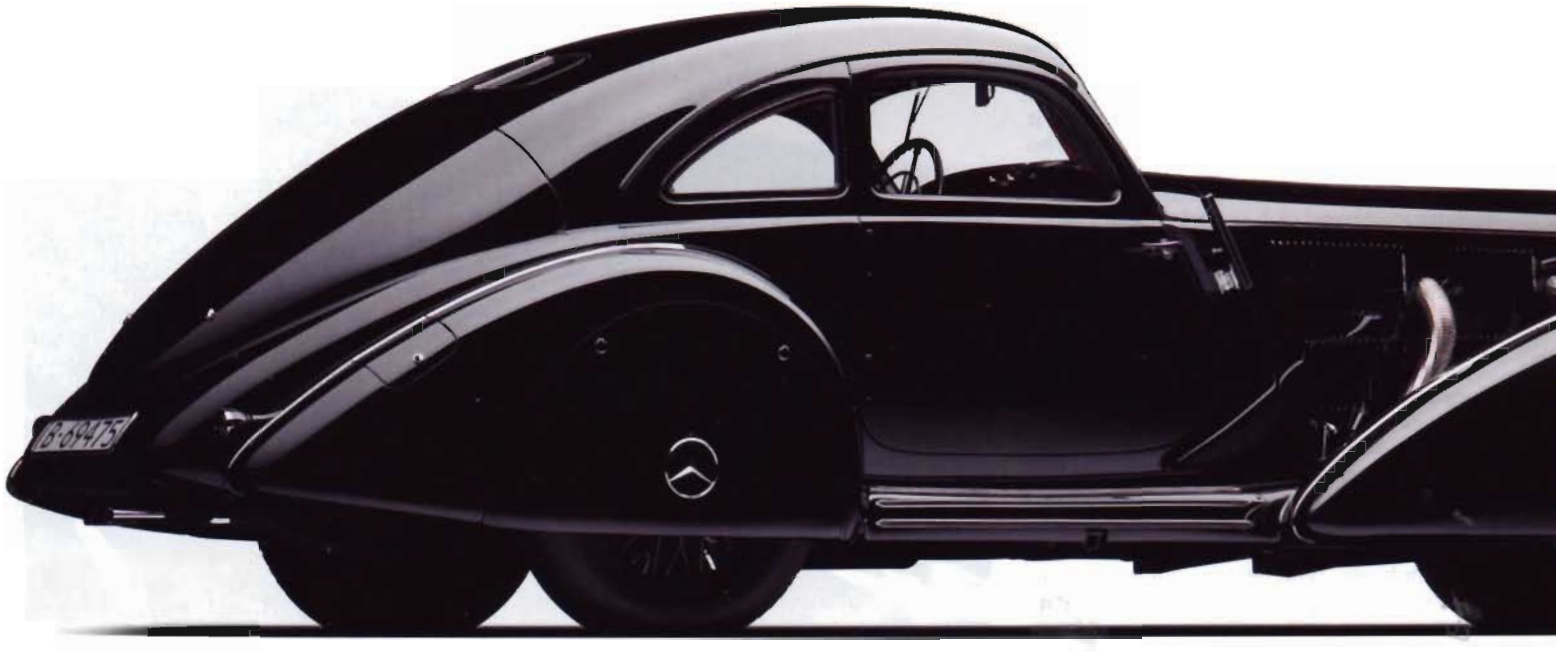
Clockwise, from main shot: spectacular profile illustrates the harmony of wing curvature and fastback; steering boss; 5.4-litre monobloc supercharged straight-eight; debut at '34 Berlin show; imposing front

road cars, only the 300SLR coupé would rival its position in Mercedes history.

Christened the Autobahn-Kurier to celebrate the opening of Germany's new super-highways, the coupé was styled in-house at the Sindelfingen body plant. Designers were rarely credited in pre-war Mercedes-Benz history because it wasn't company policy, so no one knows who styled the Autobahn-Kurier. Ironically, the Stuttgart firm had been hesitant to grasp the new aerodynamic trend and, at the '33 Berlin show, had ordered the Berlin coachbuilder Erdmann & Rossi to remove all Mercedes-Benz badges and three-pointed stars from its Type 170-based gold streamliner. The design, it claimed, 'detracted from the firm's reputation for style and quality'.

As with American manufacturers, Mercedes company directors were worried that the new fad would discourage customers, but thankfully the sensational Autobahn-Kurier briefly broke from that conservative policy. The factory archive reveals several drawings for bodies with cowled radiators, but these were never built because the top brass insisted on the signature Mercedes grille. Only one Type 540 Stromlinien-Limousine followed Hungarian aerodynamicist Paul Jaray's theories, with a fully streamlined front.

200
Km
0
180
20
160
40
60
120
100
80
Start



Used by Dunlop's experimental department in unsupercharged form, it was good for 115mph.

The stunning survivor featured here was the last built. Order number 288557 confirms that the factory completed it in 1938 for Professor Ignacio Barraquer, a successful Spanish eye specialist based in Barcelona. For years there were stories about the car's arrival in Spain, as a gift from a Nazi party official after a successful operation by the professor, while another rumour claimed that it was a present from an Arab Prince whose vision was saved by Barraquer. The truth, as once reported by his son Jose, is less intriguing: "At the time, my father had been working in Germany and that is when he bought the car." One thing is clear: Barraquer loved driving his new German coupé and, in '38, he set out with his wife on an epic adventure from Spain through north Africa. From there, he pointed that long black bonnet across Libya and on to Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, after which the car was shipped home to Barcelona.

In total contrast to the sleek, shiny form presented here in Michael Furman's elegant studio studies, the Autobahn-Kurier looks astonishing in Barraquer's photos from the trip. Be it parked in front of the Fellini Arch, an Italian victory monument in Libya, or on the docks at Alexandria, the car looks magnificent covered in dust. The journey wasn't without its problems. As well as broken dampers and shredded tyres, the engine developed head-gasket problems in the desert. The Spanish opthalmologist wasn't fazed by the breakdown and, in the midday heat, he took out his tools, removed the cylinder head, replaced the gasket and adjusted the valve timing before continuing on his journey.

Barraquer would let no one else drive his prized Mercedes and Jose had vivid memories of the Autobahn-Kurier: "He liked to drive fast but I always felt safe beside him even at 170kph. It was a car he really enjoyed and used as much as possible. I remember well how incredibly hot the car was inside on journeys, yet that didn't bother my father. We never had an accident but once, near Grenoble in France, we suddenly skidded right around. That was quite a fright."

Just as vivid for Barraquer junior was a high-speed chase on the road from Rome to Naples: "My father was driving at full speed when we spotted an Alfa Romeo catching us. No way would father be overtaken, so he hit the compressor, but for some reason it didn't engage. My father was frustrated yet salvation came a little further down the road when we spotted a cart pulled by a donkey. We slowed and pretended to wait for a safe point to overtake. The impatient Alfa roared past, but my father felt that he'd saved the honour of Mercedes-Benz."

By the 1950s, Barraquer found sourcing spares difficult and local mechanics weren't competent enough to work on the pre-war exotic. In the end a 300S replaced the 540K, which Barraquer gifted to his son-in-law. Eventually, Barraquer senior bought it back and willed it to Jose who had it overhauled, repainted and retrimmed. The bumpers were refitted – his father always preferred to drive without them. For a period it was loaned to a local car club for display, but for decades few outside Spain saw it.

Most books state that the Barraquer Autobahn-Kurier is the only survivor yet there is another, earlier chassis that has spent its entire life in Iran. Hitler gifted several exclusive Mercedes-Benz cars to Middle-Eastern dignitaries in the hope of securing them as allies, and 500K chassis 130898 was dispatched to Mohammad Reza Shah in 1935. Few have seen this car, which is now owned by Julian Majzub who remembers driving it around private roads at the Shah's summer palace. "The engine had holed the block and Dad had replaced it with a Cadillac motor while it was repaired," recalls Majzub. "I was too young to have a licence but the roads were so empty. I remember having real trouble finding top gear because no one had told me about the odd gate and clutchless change. Although it was listed as a 500K, the car had a bigger, 5.4-litre engine. Mercedes had fitted a supercharger but the casing had no rotors. With the potential problems caused by sand, my dad reckoned that the factory had left them out because they figured it would be one less long-distance phone call to the service department. When I was a teenager, it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen, and was much smaller than you'd expect, but I remember being disappointed by the heavy way it drove."

That Autobahn-Kurier was rarely driven by the Shah who, in 1939, gave it to his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi on the occasion of his wedding to Princess Fawzia, the daughter of King Farouk of Egypt. Majzub's father Fuad was a successful accountant in Iran and one of his clients was a Mercedes truck importer, where he discovered

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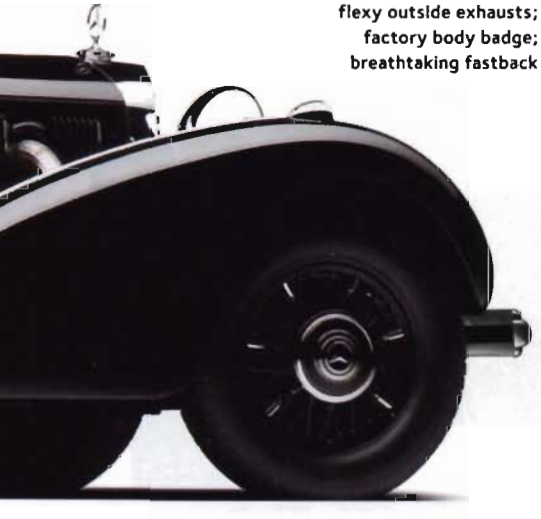
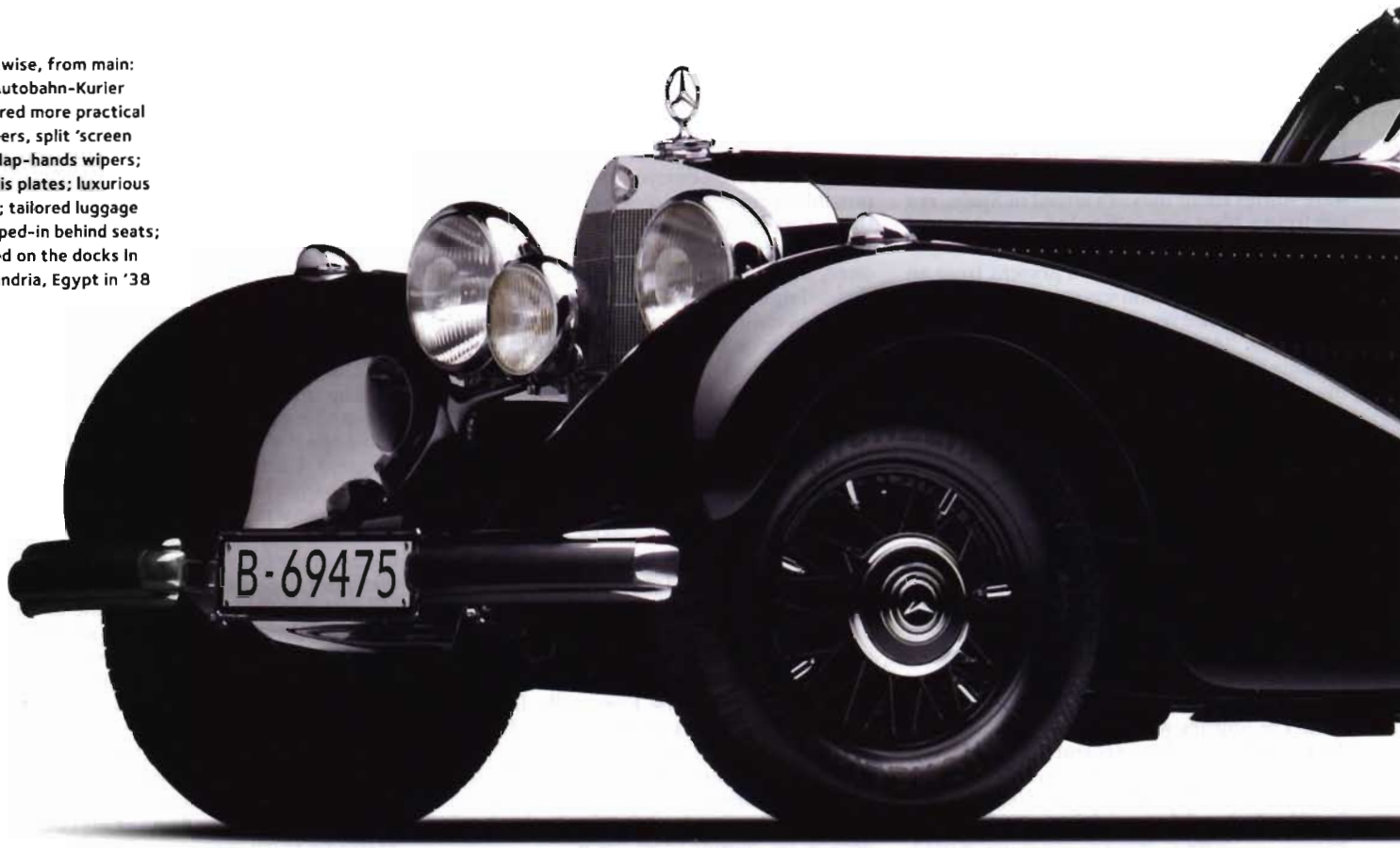


Clockwise, from top left: handsome Veigel speedo, 180bhp Autobahn-Kurier was good for 185kph (115mph); Professor Barraquer with Merc in Libyan desert; signature flexy outside exhausts; factory body badge; breathtaking fastback

Clockwise, from main: last Autobahn-Kurier featured more practical bumpers, split 'screen and clap-hands wipers; chassis plates; luxurious cabin; tailored luggage strapped-in behind seats; parked on the docks in Alexandria, Egypt in '38



MERCEDES-BENZ 540K A-K

Sold/number built 1934-'38/two (or three)
Construction steel ladder chassis, with wood frame and steel panels
Engine monobloc, with cast-iron head and block in unit, sohc 5401cc straight-eight, with two valves per cylinder, Mercedes updraught carburettor and Roots-type supercharger
Compression ratio 6.13:1
Max power 115bhp normally aspirated, boosted to 180bhp when supercharger engages at 3500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, with semi-automatic change on top, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent all round, at **front** by double wishbones, coil springs **rear** swing axles with trailing arms, twin coil springs per side; hydraulic shock absorbers front/rear
Steering worm and nut
Brakes Lockheed hydraulic drums, with Bosch vacuum servo
Length 17ft 3in (5258mm) **Width** 6ft 3in (1905mm) **Weight** 5516lb (2502kg)
0-60mph 15 secs **Top speed** 115mph
Value today £3-4million

the Autobahn-Kurier with its broken engine during the 1960s: "Dad was into the shape of things, and this amazing coupé fascinated him. The car was totally original with about 10,000km I think, and painted black. Although the headlights are different, we've always believed it was the Berlin Motor Show car." Unlike Barraquer's Mercedes, the Iran Autobahn-Kurier features the encased front chassis of the prototype.

During a business trip to the Untertürkheim plant, Majzub senior mentioned the Autobahn-Kurier he'd bought and the company was amazed to learn that it had survived. The factory museum did some research and discovered that the car was originally a two-tone green.

Later, in the early '70s, Mercedes asked if the Autobahn-Kurier could be borrowed for a major exhibition in Iran and, as a goodwill gesture, it sent green paint and velvet material for a refurbishment. Majzub firmly believes that the car should remain in Iran with all its history: "It's definitely not for sale, but I'd like to bring it here to put the engine back. Ultimately, it should be in a national collection in Iran."

How many Autobahn-Kuriers were built is still a mystery. Majzub says that the Shah of Iran's example was black when his father found it, yet there is an intriguing photo, dated 1936, in the first volume of Swedes Jan Melin and Sven Hernström's *Mercedes-Benz: The Supercharged 8-Cylinder Car of the 1930s*. This clearly shows a two-tone 500K Autobahn-Kurier with centre spotlight and conventional headlamps rather than the elongated style of the 1934 Berlin show car. Other differences are the wipers – the prototype's were clap-hands style – and wheeltrims.

Majzub, however, isn't alone in his belief that there were only two true Autobahn-Kuriers. If you include those that match the styling of the 1934 show-stopper – and not variations such as the '34 Deutschland Fahrt rally car and the

ungainly coupé used by Tan Tjoan Keng for touring Egypt and Turkey – this certainly reduces the count. Pre-war Mercedes authority Etienne Vern believes that just two of these fabulous cars were built, while the factory claims three.

Frustratingly, the works will now only confirm chassis numbers to owners, so it is difficult to verify if the Berlin Show prototype and the Shah of Iran chassis 130898 are the same car. Certainly, there were detail modifications to the first car between the prototype 500K's display at Berlin and Brussels, but by the Montreux Concours d'Elegance the front had gained a bar between the headlights and it was road-registered 111A 29231. Would Hitler or Mercedes-Benz have given a used car to the Shah of Persia considering the delicate diplomacy in the Middle East?

Irrespective of how few were made, the Autobahn-Kurier remains one of the most fantastic cars of the 20th century. After decades unseen and 'never for sale' in Spain, chassis 408336 featured here was secured by a lucky broker for Seattle-based collector Bruce McCaw in 2004 and sent to premier American restorer Paul Russell for a sympathetic renovation.

Just prior to the car's much-awaited debut at Pebble Beach in 2006, it changed hands again and became part of the world's greatest Mercedes-Benz collection outside of the factory museum. The Autobahn-Kurier was hotly tipped to take Best of Show, but it was out-voted in favour of a Daimler Double Six with drophead bodywork by Corsica. For many, including Vern, the result was a travesty and the premier US concours lost much of its credibility for him. "The Autobahn-Kurier is the optimum of engineering and elegance from the 1930s," says Vern. "Very few Mercedes-Benz models have this ultimate combination and that's what makes the car so special. The result was a joke."

Enthusiasts will get a rare chance to see the remarkable Autobahn-Kurier when it returns to Europe later this month for Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este before going to a special automotive art exhibition in Munich. With its jury of prominent car stylists, my money is on another Mercedes-Benz winning the historic Italian event for the second year running – much to the chagrin of sponsor BMW. ■

Thanks to Michael Furman, Paul Russell, Bernd Loosen, Jan Melin and Josef Ernst/DaimlerChrysler Heritage (see www.mercedes-benz-musuem.de)