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- ▶ 375 MM—full throttle on the Colorado Grand
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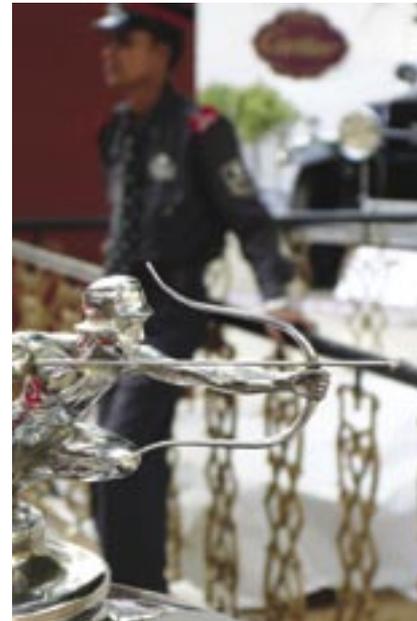
Jewels in the Crowd

Cartier's inaugural Concours d'Elegance in India tempted 60 exotic cars from Maharajas' palace garages

by Simon Kidston



Motoring history on display at the Turf Club



Pierce Arrow

Cartier's inaugural Travel with Style Concours d'Elegance confirmed once again that the society jeweler doesn't do anything by halves. When I was asked to head a judging panel I expected an exotic location and I wasn't disappointed.

From the moment our jet touched down in Mumbai (the former Bombay, population 20 million) we were swept away by dazzling colors, faded colonial architecture overshadowed by soaring modern structures, magnificent temples, exotic scents, the warmth of the people, and the buzz of life.

I was in good company...

Fellow judges at this most exclusive car gathering included Nick Mason of Pink Floyd, Gordon Murray of McLaren Grand Prix fame, fellow designer Peter Stevens (who styled the F1 road car), Hong Kong collector Sir Michael Kadoorie, veteran war photographer Don McCullin, TV producer Mark Stewart (Sir Jackie's son), cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, British collector James Lindsay, the ever glamorous model Yasmin Le Bon (wife of Duran Duran frontman Simon and a closet petrolhead), and Prince Michael of Kent, the ever-impeccable Bentley racing cousin of Queen Elizabeth.

Keeping the show on the road, and the man who dreamed up the concept in the first place, was conservationist and traveller Mark Shand, brother of the Duchess of Cornwall. I was in good company....

Wafted from the airport in a fleet of chauffeur-

driven Mercedes, one of the first things that struck us in India was the driving style. Omnipresent Hindustan taxis (think 1954 Morris Oxfords, none of which have a single undamaged panel) seem to be piloted with a blind faith in fate. Coincidentally, perhaps, reincarnation is a popular local belief.

I didn't need to ask what the bumper sticker "Honk Me" signified, as no driver let more than ten seconds pass without leaning on his horn. This has various meanings, ranging from "Watch out" to "I'm passing you and I'm about to hit you," or simply "Hello." Add to this pedestrians playing a game of chicken (a five-inch gap between you and cars passing at full speed is deemed plenty) and it's like a gladiatorial video game.

Concours based in Taj Palace Hotel

Our base for the weekend was the Taj Palace, Bombay's most famous hotel, located right on the seafront but oddly facing the city, not the Indian Ocean. It was commissioned in 1902 by a young, upcoming businessman named Mr. Tata (yes, *that* Mr. Tata) after he was refused entry as a non-white to another luxury hotel. Legend has it that the European architect handed over the plans to local builders and informed them he would be back in six months. His reaction upon finding they had built the hotel backwards was to jump off the roof.

A short Mercedes ride later and Dashrat, our friendly driver in a crisp white uniform with hat and gloves to match, pulled up at the Royal West Indian Turf Club, where a red carpet stretched from the entrance into the heart of this most colonial establishment. Founded in 1880, it's still the center of horse racing in India. Finding staff is not a problem in a country of 1.1 billion people, and I counted over 300 looking after entrants, guests, and judges. Service was like stepping back into Rudyard Kipling's novels.

Prince Manvendra Singh, one of India's leading motoring authorities, had pried 60 of the most opulent vintage cars out of largely hidden garages. Many belonged to Maharajas, and most had been in the families from new; they don't really do "second-hand" here. Most were pre-war and carried bespoke coachwork built to the order of



Some judges scrutinized more closely than others



Best of Show-winning Delahaye with owner Maharaj of Jodhpur



Entrant prizes with style

their flamboyant and fabulously wealthy owners.

Most curious of these, perhaps, was an open 1930s Rolls-Royce with cut down bodywork and three rows of seats to transport the Maharaja's cricket team. But there were also supercharged Mercedes of the 1920s, a magnificent Daimler Double Six (the 12-cylinder rarity) built for King George V's planned visit in 1935 (he didn't come but the car did), and a lovely streamlined Phantom II Continental with rakish coachwork by Gurney Nutting.

Lifestyles remained lavish after independence

After India gained its independence in 1947, the power and wealth of the ruling classes was dramatically curtailed, but lifestyles still remained lavish. A trio of handsome XK 120 roadsters on display were all sold new in India, along with a Mercedes-Benz 300SL Roadster, which was raced all over the country by the prince who bought it new—and who still owns it.

Most spectacular of all, and Best of Show, was a voluptuous 1939 Delahaye 135 roadster, extravagantly bodied by Parisian coachbuilders Fioni & Falaschi. Shipped to Bombay in 1939 with a sister car by a Frenchman escaping the conflict in Europe, this showstopper remained in India when its owner left and has been in the same Maharaja's family ever since. The current prince swapped it with his older brother in 1958... for a used Willys Jeep.

Mumbai society was out in force: Cartier has been here since the 19th century and its invitation carries weight. Top Bollywood names arrived with entourages that would put Hollywood to shame, including megastar Shahrukh Khan (India's answer to Brad Pitt) and action hero Jackie Shroff (think James Bond meets Rambo), who entered his SS 100 Jaguar—another car shipped new to India.

If you're a Western collector expecting a sudden influx of Indian buyers, you'll need to be patient. Not only are exports of historic cars banned from India, but they can't be imported either. Yet. ♦

"We have seen a most horrific event in Mumbai and our hearts go out to all who suffered and were impacted directly or indirectly. But we also need to move on and not let these cowardly acts cow us down. So here is something to change the mood and hopefully spread some cheer."—Bob Rupani, Executive Editor, Auto India

Bob Rupani sums up feelings shared by everyone who attended this recent motoring event in India's largest city. Just weeks later, the historic hotel where we stayed was devastated by the terrorist attack that killed at least 195 people.

