Iron Curtain Classics

The Technical Museum of Slovenia is a trove of Communist era transportation history

BY MICHAEL MILNE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARISSA AND MICHAEL MILNE

Would you buy a used car from Joseph Stalin? How about if it was given to you? That was the case for Josip Tito, the leader of Yugoslavia at the end of World War II. In 1945, when the Soviet leader wanted to thank Tito for his partisan fighting activities that helped lead to victory, he presented him with a 1937 Packard Twelve. Because Stalin had owned the car, it was also, for security reasons, heavily armored. It's on display, along with more than 55 cars and 50 motorcycles, at the Technical Museum of Slovenia, one of the former Yugoslav republics that is now an independent country.

The cars that were used by President Tito are set up in a barn and are part of a larger car exhibit located at a 16th-century Carthusian monastery that houses the collection. Also located on the grounds are museums devoted to forestry, hunting, fishing, and industrial trades. But the largest amount of space is devoted to transportation.

The hands-on displays range from wall-mounted wooden steering wheels that are turned to reveal tidbits of automotive history to touch screens set up by some of the cars for the visitor to learn more information about them.

It appears that Tito had a penchant for American metal. Other cars he used over the years that can be seen here are a 1936 Cadillac V-12, 1942 Cadillac Series 67, and a 1954 Cadillac Eldorado, with its rather pronounced Dagmar bumpers protruding from the front grille. Tito didn't seem too particular about marques; he was also squired around in a 1965 Lincoln Continental convertible.

One hefty car that could be mistaken for an army tank is a 1954 Soviet ZIS-115, a gift from Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev. With windows that are 3 inches thick and raised and lowered via a hydraulic system, it's the armored version of the ZIS-110. It stands out from Tito's American cars by sporting a hood ornament that is comprised of a red Soviet banner emblazoned with a communist star. It's long been part of automotive history that the Soviets created the ZIS-110 by reverse engineering a 1942 Packard 180, so the gift by Stalin of a Packard earlier was not so coincidental.

In one sign of the economic and technological differences between capitalist and communist countries in the Cold War era, the placard next to a 1976 Cadillac de Ville states that it was given to the museum and no longer driven because of its "wastefulness." Some of the extravagant features listed include a "large eight-cylinder motor… and numerous electrical devices: seat-setting, wing mirror setting, control door lock, etc. It also has a small light which lights up the door lock when you want to open it." Before this symbol of American decadence was relegated to the museum, it was used by politicians of the Assembly of Yugoslavia who presumably had no problem with all the added amenities.

All is not luxury here, though. On the second floor, many daily drivers from the likes of Renault and Citroën are displayed. In my travels to car museums, I've never come across a Yugo, the product of Yugoslavia's ill-fated attempt to crack the American compact car market. But there's a red one here. Although not seen any more on the road, the car lives on in popular folklore. The oldest maintained car in Slovenia is also displayed: a German-built 1906 Piccolo two-seater. Considering the armed struggles over the years in this region, it's a real survivor.

An exhibit produced with the Slovenian energy company, Petrol, highlights a prewar filling station and vintage gas pumps. Outside in the courtyard there's a display of farm equipment that includes the wonderfully named Bubba tractor, a make from Italy. Before leaving, it's also worth taking some time to stroll the grounds where an antique water-powered sawmill is on display that harks back to the pre-motor age.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Technical Museum of Slovenia

Bistra pri Vrhniki 6, Bistra, 1360 Vrhnika, Slovenia, www.tms.si. Click on the British flag to view the website in English. The displays in the museum are in Slovenian and English. The museum is only a half-hour drive southwest from the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana. Because the auto collection is just a part of the entire complex, you can easily spend a day here.

Michael Milne is the author of the *Roadster Guide to America's Classic Car Museums & Attractions*.