

# ENGINEERING GREATS ON SHOW

Most motor museums focus on the sleek lines of classic automobiles, but it takes an engineer to see beyond the beauty and focus on what's under the bonnet. French-born Alain Cerf has a background in mechanical engineering and founded Polypack, a packaging equipment manufacturer and designer. Cerf's particular interest in automotive technology is on full display at his "side project", also known as the Tampa Bay Automobile Museum. This collection of more than 65 vehicles is located on Florida's Gulf Coast.

Cerf, along with his son Olivier, has compiled a world-class set that highlights innovation over the years – as well as the engineers and designers responsible for them. "Sometimes innovation works," he says, "and sometimes it doesn't. I like to showcase the engineers who make it possible."

He has a soft spot for vehicles that were designed in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly those with front-wheel drive and rear engines.



The section on British classics includes an ex-Earls Court Motor Show Jensen prototype alongside a Series 3 Jaguar E-type fhc



Founder Cerf with the museum's Tatra T87



Darl'mat was the first car that Cerf bought



Mathis featured in C&SC, November 1998



Olds Toronado is part of front-drive group

As impressive as it is, at one time many were 'merely' used cars.

"When I was younger," remembers Cerf, "I was not collecting classic cars such as a Delahaye, Talbot or Salmson, which were not yet considered collectible. The first one was a Peugeot Darl'mat, which is still running as well as all of the other cars."

A section of British motoring might is led by the 1953 prototype of the Jensen 541, which is joined by, among others, a 1950 Allard P1.

Unusual exhibits include a 1965 Ford Mustang that was shipped to the UK to be converted into an all-wheel drive vehicle by Ferguson Research. There's also a 1929 Ruxton, with its distinctive cat's-eye headlights, parked next to a 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado – but there's a method to this curatorial madness. The Ruxton prototype was the first attempt at a front-wheel-drive vehicle in the US, a layout it shares with the Toronado.

And that's how Cerf rolls. His collection seeks out automotive

innovations, some of which were quite unusual and faded away, while others eventually made it into mainstream production.

An example of the former is an area dedicated to the sleeve-valve engine. The three machines on display are a 1928 Willys-Knight Type 56, a 1927 Avions Voisin and a 1939 Panhard Dynamic.

Cerf has an affinity for Tatrás, with seven in the collection. His 1930 T26/30 open tourer took a roundabout route to Florida – the military vehicle was purchased by a representative of Studebaker in the US to learn more about its technology. It was discovered in Ohio, in a crate that had been emblazoned with 'Studebaker'.

There's also an example of the distinctive rear-engined 1942 T87. This particular car was last owned by a US Army officer – story has it that German personnel were eventually forbidden from driving the T87 because of the number of fatalities they suffered.

The 1938 T97 is a smaller

version of the T87 (it even shares the striking dorsal fin) and would heavily influence the VW Beetle. Once Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, however, production was halted. Only 510 were made.

The likely winner of the 'Oddest-looking vehicle' award might be the extraordinary beige 1942 Mathis VL 333. Designed by Jean Andreau, the round-nosed three-wheeled front-driver can be variously described as 'an egg on wheels', 'the bubble car' or 'the blob'. This all-aluminum prototype was built under restrictive, and secretive, wartime conditions and is the only known survivor.

The cars here are not merely pretty relics of a bygone era. As Olivier points out: "All of them are supposed to run unless we are working on them, so about 90% can be driven at any given time. All of the cars should be used at least once a year and that is tricky to do with 70 of them. We have a mechanic who regularly starts them and we also drive them home on the weekends."

With palm trees swaying in the breeze, cruising along the Florida coast in a classic Tatra or Delahaye sounds like a pretty good day at the Tampa Bay Automobile Museum.

**Michael Milne** 

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

## The knowledge

**Address** 3301 Gateway Centre Boulevard, Pinellas Park, Florida, 33782, USA

**Where?** Across the bridge from Tampa on the west coast of Florida. It's a 102-mile drive south-west from Orlando International Airport

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