

B02 GET READY, GET SET

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011 BLOG

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In the back of my mind, for the longest time, was the idea of returning to Europe to re-do our honeymoon in the same car. It could help explain why we still have our faithful MG after 52 years... kept the last 35 under an MG Mitten in our carport. "Let's just fix her up, fill the tank and take off in June" was my bold suggestion to Louise. Her jaw dropped and stayed open until her teeth were almost dry. Finally she said, "How are we going to pay for it?" and then, not wanting to hurt my feelings, said more tactfully, "Sounds romantic but how ARE we going to pay for it?" I could tell right away there was more to be done than getting the MG back in shape.

Lifting the car cover, I made a quick assessment. Squinting at it from a distance, the car still looked pretty good. Up close though it showed the ravages of age and little use. The paint had cracked and crazed over time and no amount of polish or spit shine could raise more than a dull luster. "The rest is OK though," I told myself. The engine had only 20,000 miles since the last overhaul and the upholstery was like new.

"We'll just spruce up the paint and be on our way," I said, hoping Louise would overhear.

At this point luck was with us. I'd come to know a man who has a love affair with old MG's, so much so that he's restored five of them from the frame up. Even though Jerry Alban knows his stuff, working on old cars is not his chosen profession. He has a Master's degree in piano pedagogy and makes his living as a music teacher plus giving private lessons after school. A very busy guy...at one time. Thanks to the Los Angeles Unified School District's de-emphasis on music in schools and a similar disinterest by young parents, he was available for our project.

"It's gonna need a lot of work" he muttered as we walked around the car. "Well, just some sanding and a new coat of paint ought to do it," I muttered back. "No way. See those cracks?" he said, running his fingernail inside a particularly deep one. "That means your old paint is too thick and even if we sand it down it'll crack again." "So?" I said defensively. "Gotta take the car apart and go down to the metal," he said firmly. "Otherwise I won't do it." We shook on it...the first of many concessions I would make to logic and experience.



He showed up early one October morning and, after we had taken the obligatory “before” picture, he went to work like a man possessed. “Has to come apart the way it went together,” he said explaining why he started by removing the spare tire and gas tank. By the end of Day 1 the hood, fenders, running boards and doors were in a pile. Next we pulled the grille, radiator, engine and transmission and by the end of Day 2 the MG looked like a plucked chicken on wheels. Before long they’d be gone too.

Since I insisted on being on site, Jerry used me as another tool. “Go pick up that heavy item and drag it over here,” was his favorite command. “After that you can clean fifty six years worth of grease from the engine compartment. Shouldn’t take too long.” After the first day of using grease remover, paint stripper and lacquer thinner, I found it difficult to stand up, walk a straight line or take a deep breath without coughing. “You might want to buy a mask,” he said helpfully. “That’s a nasty hack you’ve got.”



And so it went day after day with each one presenting a new problem. “Gotta get a new one of these,” he’d say, holding up a part. I’d phone Moss Motors to order the replacement while Louise would ask, “How much is this going to cost?” I had no ready answer since Jerry and I’d squabble about the need to replace another costly item. He’d lecture me on “doing things right” while I pointed out he wasn’t encumbered by having to pay for it. It didn’t help he was born under the sign of Leo while I am a Capricorn. Not exactly an oil and water situation but not gin and tonic either.



By the first part of December everything had been stripped, primed and ready for the spray booth. One good piece of news was no rust and no rot. Most don’t realize from the cowl on back the MG is made of



wood. All the metal parts are simply nailed onto an ash frame so wood rot can be a serious problem only discovered when you take the car apart. Chalk one up for the budget. Work continued through the holiday season, taking time off only for Hanukah and Christmas. By New Year’s Eve all parts had been color sanded and ready for re-assembly. We celebrated by opening a bottle of Vouvray to toast the New Year.



Jerry was walking a very tight rope. He had to balance the MG work with student piano lessons, holiday party gigs and concert appearances where he could demonstrate his skills in classical music. He never left, however, without giving me something that “has to be done by tomorrow morning or this whole project will fall apart.” I spent many cold evenings in the carport scraping, buffing and polishing to meet his demands and softly cursing the only classical pianist I knew with grease under his nails.

Can't say that everything went back together like greased lightning but Jerry's experience at reassembling



five other T Series MG's showed through. He had a simple organizational method. All small parts that came off the car went into a box. Reassembly was a simple matter of pawing through the box until you found the right one. Ideally, when the job was through, it would be empty but

ideal is not real life. Now that the job is finished I am really torn about discarding the parts still left in the box while wondering, "What did we leave off?"

Through it all, Louise was the glue that held this whole thing together. She settled our squabbles, fixed our lunches, reminded us to wash our hands before going in the house and insisted we save up our parts orders to get a better UPS rate



For her the biggest moment was when we removed the seats from the living room even though it made sense to store them there during the cold, wet winter. They were even useful during the holiday season as temporary seating although it was rather difficult to get up gracefully while holding a drink.



The day finally came for a road test. We started the MG and drove it around the neighborhood to make sure the only smoke was coming from the tailpipe. We stopped once to check out a suspicious burning odor but traced it to the new paint on the engine, muffler and tailpipe. There was no evidence of dripping fuel or puddles of oil. Once in direct sunlight I was almost startled to see how beautiful the new paint job looked. It is a gorgeous deep red (original MG color) that gives the car an almost regal look. The last step would be a new top and side curtains and a set of new tires. Then it would be roadworthy and more striking than new.



So the experience is over and Jerry is no longer a part of our daily life. In the beginning I was a bit concerned about the difference in age and personalities. After all, he is young enough to be my son and yet he was in charge. I did play the age card a time or two during the process but, by and large, we respected each other for what we each brought to the project - - his experience and our money. Of course, we shared the same goal. On Day One I brought out a portable radio and turned it to KUSC, a local classical music station. Jerry was busily sizing up the job when he stopped, looked at me and said, “What a great day this is. I’m working on my favorite car, listening to music I love and sharing it with someone who appreciates both. I’m a very lucky guy.”



But what about my other problem...that of Louise’s original unflattering assessment of my romantic idea? After witnessing the dedication, hard work and huge expense that went into the refurbishing of the MG, she has developed a softer attitude. She now refers to our *Return to Europe* plan as ambitious, challenging and even adventuresome. I could quibble but I’m taking that as a “Yes” so we’re good to go.