

B03 OUR PALM SPRINGS SHAKEDOWN CRUISE

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011 BLOG

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It's that time of year when travel ideas turn toward cruising and the DeTournay family is no exception. One little difference is that ours was a test cruise and it was to Palm Springs in the desert instead of on the ocean...a round trip distance of 400 kilometers. We have kept many of you informed about our latest project of taking our antique 1954 MG apart, stripping it to the metal, repainting it and then reassembling it. We even removed the engine and transmission to install a new clutch. When finished it makes sense to give it a good road test. Why Palm Springs you ask? That is where our MG mechanic of forty years retired so if we had mechanical problems he would be only a cell phone call away.



A Monday morning was the day of departure. It was a bit chilly so we installed the side curtains, dressed warmly and drove onto the Ventura Freeway. Traffic was moderate to heavy as we made our way across the city. Louise used this time to make friends with the new Garmin GPS in the glove box. Anticipating freeway noise, I turned the volume up to 90% which was not nearly enough. When we merged with the major freeway to the East we encountered a stream of heavy trucks carrying goods from sea ports to stores across the nation.

After 52 years of ownership, we know the MG is at its best cruising at 3,700 RPM (92 KPH), exactly the advertised 55 Miles Per Hour speed limit of the truck lane. That's where we were when I checked the rear view mirrors and saw the massive bumper and grille of an 18 wheeler riding my rear bumper. Eventually he changed lanes and passed, almost drawing us under his trailer. I checked the mirrors again and there was another large truck followed by a string of trucks waiting for their chance at us. We decided to move over and let them have the slow lane to themselves preferring to be rear ended by another car than bulldozed into the sagebrush by a tractor-trailer.

Most of the truck drivers appreciated this act of courtesy and gave us the “thumbs up” as they passed. Others gave us an “up” sign as well but chose not to use the thumb. We waved and smiled anyway.



By the time we reached Palm Springs, the woolen mufflers and jackets were gone and the car heater was unnecessary. Unfortunately, the shutoff valve handle had not been re-installed on the heater so we had no way to turn it off. Our feet were hot for hours. After parking our bags at the apartment loaned to us by good friends, we went off to find former mechanic Mike Goodman. He was complimentary of the new paint job and sparkling condition of the MG but, using his eagle eye of experience, noted several small items that could be improved. The car passed his mechanical inspection however, leaving us confident about the return trip to Los Angeles.



During our short stay nature began to show its ugly side. Temperatures rose into the 90's (32.2 c) and the wind began to blow so we decided to leave the side screens in place as protection. As we left town the warning signs for blowing sand were out on the Gene Autry Trail.

In fact, the wind was so strong that I had to hold onto the driver's side screen to keep it from being blown away. Keep in mind, the left hand is on the steering wheel; the right is dedicated to shifting gears or holding onto the side screen. The eyes are busy looking for 18-wheelers coming up behind and the feet are on alert to hit the clutch or brake, whichever comes first. A peculiarity of all MG's is a vibrating gear shift lever that makes an irritating noise and can be silenced by putting a firm hand on it. Well, it doesn't take a mathematician to realize if one hand is steering and the other has a death grip on the side screen, there is no way to silence the gear shift...except by moving the right knee hard against the lever to silence it while still maintaining the precise amount of pressure on the accelerator to keep the engine from over-revving. After a few miles in this pretzel position the body begins to notice. Especially difficult is an itch (doesn't matter where) and the decision of which item to let go of in order to scratch the irritation. Fortunately, Louise was willing to grasp the shift lever from time to time but, after a few miles, the constant vibration put her hand in a state of numbness that she couldn't tolerate. All the time I kept an eye on the MG's heat gauge but it held steady with no sign of overheating despite the hot desert temperatures. And, so it went until we finally put Palm Springs well into our rear view mirrors.

We kept waiting for a dramatic drop in temperature as we headed toward the ocean but it never happened as the Los Angeles area was in an early heat wave. When you combine the sunshine with cruel cross-winds, unbearable noise from truck tires and the full open heater, it was a bouillabaisse of torment that lasted the entire trip home. By the time we reached the city limit of Los Angeles even the GPS had enough and begged us to take the next exit from the freeway even though we were miles from home. To end its misery, we turned it off.

When we arrived home safely in Woodland Hills our lips were cracked, our throats parched and our bodies wickered of any sign of moisture. The MG did better and was running just as steadily as when we left. As for its occupants, instead of a shakedown cruise it was a rude awakening. "I don't remember it being like this" Louise said when I turned off the engine. "Next time, let's go to Santa Barbara instead."

Our next task - get the MG ready for its ocean voyage.