

Sunday Drives: San Francisco

05/03/2023 Jay Ward, the self-confessed "carsultant" behind the *Cars* movie franchise, heads south to the Bay Area's motoring hub.

Where:

King's Mountain, northern California

Length:

30 miles (approximately)

Type:

A mix of quick curves and slow, narrow passages through ancient redwood forests framed by far reaching views

From a small booth in Alice's Restaurant on Skyline Boulevard, Jay Ward stares through a dusty window at the Minerva Blue 911 parked up amidst a variety of American and European sports cars. As Creative Director of Franchise at Pixar, Ward has become one of the most familiar and influential names in big budget animation, his encyclopaedic knowledge of vintage automotive guiding and shaping the *Cars* movie franchise for more than 15 years. Ward has driven up to Alice's, a go-to for local gearheads since the 1980s, in his highly original air-cooled Porsche and is explaining over coffee why this car is quite so close to his heart.

"It came from across the street from where we live, from a woman whose husband had died suddenly," Ward says. "She asked me to get the car running because it had been sitting for a number of years. She paid for the parts and I worked on it in the evenings, learning all about old 911s along the way, changing the oil, the battery, all the fluids – it was a lot of fun."

After several months, Ward finally got the engine running, but it was smoking heavily and needed significant work. The projected costs were sufficiently high that the owner decided to sell, offering its volunteer mechanic first refusal. Ward bought the single-owner 1976 911 S without hesitation and continued the painstaking process of bringing it back to a road-worthy condition.

The Minerva Blue Metallic paintwork was all original, and wherever possible Ward kept it as such, celebrating the patina of its 40-year lifetime in the local area. He modified the car to European specification, lowering the ride height and swapping in amber indicators, H4 headlights and narrower outriders. Throughout the process, Ward kept finding mementoes and keepsakes from the original owner, an orthopaedic surgeon, and left everything in place in his memory.

Strong association with blue 911s

Even today he still pays regular visits to the surgeon's widow in the car, helping her to maintain the powerful bond the couple shared with their cherished Porsche. It's clear that the strength of emotion that automobiles can evoke, which gives the 'Cars' movies such a warm heart, runs deeply in Ward too. When he talks about the effect that hearing her husband's car run for the first time in years had on his neighbour, the softly spoken mid-westerner's voice drops a tone or two.

Ward's association with unusual blue examples of the 911 is also a strong one, reaching far back into his career in animation. When, in 2005, he began advising Pixar's design team on the original 'Cars' concept, one of their most famous creations was Sally Carrera, a now-instantly familiar interpretation of the 996-generation 911, a full-sized replica of which can be found in the Porsche Museum today. The car was revisited earlier last year when a one-off 992-generation 911 Carrera was turned into the 'Sally Special' by Pixar Animation Studios and the Sonderwunsch team in Zuffenhausen before being auctioned off for charity. Such was the affection felt for the creation by an entire generation of enthusiasts and collectors that it raised an astonishing $3.6 million.

Today, the 52-year-old Ward leads a busy life overseeing the 'Cars', 'Toy Story' and 'Finding Nemo'

franchises, all global brands in their own right with theme parks, merchandise, video games and publishing under his auspices. So drive-outs to Alice's Restaurant are an essential way to unwind when time allows, connecting with like-minded local devotees of classic motoring.

"It's a real place of pilgrimage for people who know," he explains. "The Bay Area has a great car culture and Alice's Restaurant has been the definitive meeting place for classic cars for decades. In part that's because the roads that lead up here are some of the best around, with stunning stretches through redwood forests and sections of switchbacks that seem to go on and on. But you also never know what you'll see when you get here. It's like an organic car show – the original cars and coffee!"

Other than following the squadrons of Porsche GT cars heading up the hill from Silicon Valley, the simplest way to get to Alice's is to take Interstate 280 south out of San Francisco, peeling off it at the Highlands intersection heading for Half Moon Bay. From here, the 35, also aptly known as Skyline Boulevard, passes over the vast Upper Crystal Springs Reservoir before climbing through the wooded curves of Half Moon Bay Road to a lookout point around 3,300 feet above sea level. Skyline Boulevard then snakes along the high ridge of Kings Mountain, steep in places and occasionally very narrow, with the Purisima Creek Redwood Preserve falling away west towards the Pacific Ocean. Alice's restaurant is around 12 miles south, just before the 35 meets the 84, La Honda Road, which can be followed in a leisurely clockwise loop to the coast and Highway 1, or used to return you in short order to the Interstate.

For Ward, the 911 is the perfect blend of performance and dependability for undertaking such a drive. "I have other old cars," he says, "but the nice thing about an old 911 is you can just get in it and drive it, all day, every day. You can do whatever you want with it because they are so useable and so driveable. And so quick. I very rarely get into fifth gear on the highway and there aren't many old cars you can say that about. But a 911 is really meant to be driven."

Ward drives his to work at Pixar frequently and always turns to it for his annual judging duties at the Pebble Beach Concours. "I will park that car on the street, walk away and not worry about it, because it doesn't have a perfect paintjob and it's not a trailer queen. The lady who sold it to me really used it and dinged the doors and these are all little badges of honour now. It's always been treated like a car and I love that about it."

Sunday Drives

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