

Homecoming King

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01/08/2018 The Japanese Toshiyuki Suzuki has made a road trip of more than 15,000 kilometres with his 356 "Pre-A" from 1953. His destination: Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, in time for the anniversary “70 Years Porsche Sportscar”.

In a quiet neighbourhood of Kamogawa, in the leafy Chiba prefecture southeast of Tokyo, an air-cooled flat-four coughs hesitantly into life. It is early April, and a pale morning sun breaches the dense cover of cherry blossom to ignite the silver paintwork of an early 356.

Backing slowly onto the empty road is Toshiyuki Suzuki, a 60-year-old businessman, husband and father, who with remarkably little fanfare is about to embark on what must surely be the ultimate Porsche road trip.

Ahead of Suzuki-san lies a 15,000 km solo journey across some of the most inhospitable terrain our planet has to offer, through remote mountain ranges, dust-filled deserts, across swollen rivers and

broken roads. And mile upon mile of road of relentless, unchanging highways, winding alpine passes, rutted agricultural tracks, pot-holed trunk roads across a vast and alien continent. His destination? Stuttgart, naturally, in time for the 70th anniversary celebrations at Zuffenhausen to mark the birth of the 356.

Suzuki's journey is one of old-school abandon, echoing the 'because it's there' mind set mooted by Mallory when explaining his desire to climb Everest. Drive a vintage car half way around the world for the sake of it? Why not?

Perhaps the reasons run a little deeper for Suzuki however. He has been a Porsche guy since the age of 22 when he bought his first, and has been a Porsche owner now for a remarkable 38 years. He has, over those years, formed a bond with these cars and with the marque as a whole. This journey is something a voyage of discovery then, putting his trustworthy 356 to the definitive test. And its driver along with it.

The punishing cross-continental pilgrimage will take in South Korea, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic and Austria before arriving in Germany and the spiritual home of Porsche in central Stuttgart. Suzuki's car will be returning to its birthplace some 65 years after it first left.

He speaks little English and no Russian, and will have to get by with essential phrases written on pieces of paper. He has also received no material support from Porsche Japan aside from a single serving of instant miso soup – a tongue-in-cheek gesture that has delighted our optimistic driver. Every arrangement for the journey was done by himself.

Suzuki's 1953 'Pre-A' 356 has been gone through top to bottom

Nevertheless, if a car of such an age can ever look ready for such a journey, this is it. Suzuki's 1953 'Pre-A' 356 has been gone through top to bottom, and now runs a carefully rebuilt 95hp 1582cc engine from a much later SC. The gearbox has also been stripped and refreshed, the suspension rebuilt to as-new. Inside, the original seat has been swapped out for a more supportive and safer modern bucket, and an aftermarket sat nav dominates the simple dashboard. Lashed to the roof is a top box that contains two spares, extra engine oil and a jack. Other than that though, this is very much an original early 356, ready to take on world. With a gentle pressure on the floor-hinged throttle, the car rumbles off up the road, indicator winking as it turns slowly out of sight, the sound of the engine fading into the distance.

His longest stint was 1,050 km in one day

When we meet Toshiyuki Suzuki again some fifty days have elapsed. The 356 is parked outside the Museum in Zuffenhausen, covered in stickers that bear testament to a journey that has joined the disparate dots of Porsche fans and owners' clubs across vast swathes of both Asia and Europe. The odometer on the sat nav has recorded a staggering 15,463 km.

Suzuki is smiling – he is always smiling – as people flock around his car, examining the hallmarks of almost two months solid on the open road. In his gentle but eager tone he describes days alone in the desolate grasslands of Eastern Siberia, challenging roadside fixes that included changing the fuel pump, of incredible hospitality, terrible food, and the surprising ease with which the tireless 356 soaked up the miles. His longest stint was 1,050 km in one day, a heroic distance in a modern car, let alone in something older than its sixty-something driver.

Suzuki also talks about an unfailing confidence that his car would make it to Zuffenhausen. The journey was largely trouble free, blessed by good weather almost all the way and a surprisingly reliable supply of high quality fuel. Towards the end of the journey the car lost first gear, but unable to fix it at the roadside, the unflappable Suzuki just did without.

Now, on the wide pavement in front of the Museum, car and owner have been welcomed with open arms, into the bosom of the Porsche family. Surrounded by media and reunited with his wife and, who has just flown in to welcome him, Suzuki and his beloved 356 have become a star attraction of Porsche's 70th anniversary weekend. So much so that for the next few weeks the car will be exhibited in the museum as part of a special anniversary exhibition. In a moment of pure poetry, the odometer had come to rest at 58,356 km as he arrived in Gmünd, where the first 356 was built.

After the dust has settled and everyone has returned home, what does the future hold for Suzuki and his loyal companion? The car will be shipped home by the Museum, back to the quiet, tree-lined roads of Chiba, but it seems its work may not be done. Suzuki tells us, out of earshot of his wife, that he is already thinking about the 80th anniversary; the perfect excuse to do it all over again.

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Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft
Porscheplatz 1
70435 Stuttgart