

Into the wild – in a Porsche 356

07/01/2022 In search of the perfect mix of tranquillity and adventure, a road trip is the perfect way to go. About the attraction of the horizon, poetic rhythm and the realisation: to be found, you first have to get lost.

A loud bang brings us back to the here and now. In our heads our road trip is already well under way – even though in reality we are still checking tyre pressures and making last minute adjustments. A 10-year-old boy was pumping up the tyre on his BMX bicycle when it happened – too much pressure for the delicate tyre. We laugh as the bang is followed by a ringing in our ears but soon stop when we notice the tears running down the boy's cheeks. "I just bought a new inner tube," he sobs, inconsolable. It becomes clear that my friend Desmond and I have to help and as we buy him a new inner tube we tell the owner of the bicycle shop about our forthcoming trip. "But that is no mobile home," he laughs, when he hears about the wheels we're taking on our adventure.

"Nic, what's the plan?" asks Desmond, when I pick him up in the morning in a Porsche 356 B Super 90 Coupé. The answer is that I haven't really got one, preferring instead to drift along and follow the horizon's power of attraction. The only plan I do have in mind is to camp in the Karoo semi-desert, to take a photo of a small hill called Koppie for a photographic project, and to take my 1963 Porsche 356

for some maintenance at a workshop in a small town en route – the only fixed element of the trip.

When I was 10 years old, I was sitting in the car next to my adventure-loving father when he did a U-turn and bought the very Porsche I'm talking about just a few minutes later. I can remember a number of trips we went on in the 356 – and that it was the perfect daily driver. Thirty years and a restoration project later, and our relationship has developed further. The 356 is usually parked safely away in a garage in Cape Town, while I commute by bicycle. But every few months I wake up the Porsche and take it on a special trip – sometimes 1,000 kilometres or more, depending on my mood. We have often been camping with it, and have sometimes carried two bikes on the roof.

Semi-desert Karoo

Driving towards the Karoo – a semi-desert in the high plains of South Africa, 500 km north-east of Cape Town – Desmond and I pass a small bush fire. The strong wind looks like it could fan the flames into a disaster so we turn round, just like my father once did, jump out of the Porsche and stamp out the flames with our feet. It is only when we're several km down the road that I remember I have a fire extinguisher in the car.

Desmond, who works as a professional car photographer, repeats how attached he feels to the Porsche, even as a passenger. "A bit similar to riding a motorcycle, we are like one," he says. Driving in the 356 with its four-cylinder boxer engine, we feel closer to the road than ever. The headwind is ever-present and it's a memorable experience. Of all the many cars I have taken on road trips, passing through the landscape in this particular classic is something special. The 356 is an object of beauty that resonates with its surroundings, including the people who wave, smile and give us the thumbs-up.

As the sun begins to set, we are still looking for the perfect place to camp in the Karoo. Too many fences and private land force us to turn off, turn round and try out new directions. It seems as if there's nowhere we can stay the night, especially if we want to light a camp fire, and the weather is getting worse by the minute. As we pass a farm, a pick-up truck pulls up next to us. "You cannot keep driving here without asking the boss," says the farmer's son. Jan du Plessis, the father – also known as the boss – is not very talkative. Desmond points to the large protective trees near the ravine above the house. Jan then says, "If the cemetery does not put you off, then feel free to stay the night there."

Bonfire between the 356 and a cemetry

It is windy and cold. We try to find protection between the 356 and the low cemetery wall. A bit of lamb, mushrooms and sweet potatoes cooked over the fire soon make us feel better. But although we have dug a hole for the fire and placed large stones around it, the strong wind carries the sparks far from the pit. We place a few more rocks around the flames and make sure that the last embers have died down before we retire to our tents.

The distinctive voice of Jan du Plessis wakes us the following morning. He is standing next to one of the graves with flowers in his hand. “Yesterday was my mother’s birthday. She would have been 90,” he says. We ask him about life so far from the beaten track. “Living here is tough – but I like it. I cannot imagine being anywhere else,” he tells us, adding that we are welcome to visit again. “But come a little earlier next time. Then I can show you a better spot on the other side of the ridge. There are wild horses there.”

In recent years I have happily taken the 356 to Arno van Wyk for servicing. I like to call his workshop the “air-cooled shrine”. The family-run Andreno Motors was founded more than 60 years ago and is decorated with huge pictures from past car rallies as well as being home to a unique collection of air-cooled cars, including the prototype of a 1954 Beetle with only 36,000 km on the clock. “Probably the only one in the world today,” says Arno. Even if the qualified engine builder only has to carry out an oil change and replace the filter, I still value his experience.

Poetic rhythm at work

His many years in the job have given his work an almost poetic rhythm. If it were up to him, a well-maintained engine could run forever. He points to a wall on which broken engine parts are exhibited. Above them, the text “Broken parts? We fix them”. Arno is certain that every defect is the fault of people and not the machine. A missed oil change, overworking a cold engine, just too much somewhere and somehow.

Between the service, a cup of tea with Arno and his wife and the telling of many rally stories, we take a look at the workshop and the engines on which he is currently working. It saddens me when I think about the fact that Arno’s son will not continue in the family business, but he simply earns more in an office job. I ask myself who will maintain the Porsche 356 in 20 years. Will it be taken care of with such poetic rhythm?

After I have taken the photo needed for my project, we set off on our homeward journey. I look back on the trip and think about the less pleasant moments, such as what it feels like to not know where you are going to set up camp before nightfall, but also about how it is worthwhile meeting strangers with an open mind. My conclusion: you first have to be lost in order to be found. See you soon, Jan. I’m already looking forward to the wild horses.

Info

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