A Sunset (Boulevard) Safari

04/01/2020 Meet automotive journalist Matt Farah's solution to urban travel.

Not all city cars are born equal. Well, not according to YouTube star and world-renowned automotive journalist, Matt Farah. Shortly after moving out to the west coast of America from New York, Farah realised that the crumbling infrastructure in LA made his daily drive more like an expedition down a back-country trail than a traditional city commute. From the monstrous expansion joints on Interstate 405 to the cracked roads in downtown Venice Beach, only his Baja inspired pick-up truck was capable of smoothing out the various lumps and bumps.

"Although we are blessed with places like the Angeles Forest and Malibu Canyons, two of the finest places on Earth to drive a sports car, the city itself is a nightmare," Farah explains. "The infrastructure is crumbling, repairs are rarely thorough, the freeway expansion joints are a sports car owner's worst nightmare, and for a city as 'spread out' as LA is, it's awfully crowded all the time. It can be a real challenge in low, modern sports cars."

Which is why his Raptor pick-up with its off-road suspension set-up and huge sidewalls was, as he puts it, a "gamechanger". But of course, while Baja-inspired trucks ride well, they're ultimately too unwieldly for tight city streets – even in car-friendly LA. So what was the solution? For Matt, the answer was easy: "I wanted something like the Raptor, but smaller, so the obvious answer was a rally car. Once I drove Leh Keen's personal Safari 911, it was like a light bulb moment."

A two time Grand Am Rolex GT Champion and lifelong Porsche fanatic, Leh Keen has spent the last half a decade designing and building Safari 911 for people who want the ultimate go-anywhere vehicle. Matt, being a rather well-connected chap, got the opportunity to drive Leh's first Safari build (that's right, car No. 1) for his show on the /DRIVE network and although Matt admits the concept, "is totally different to what most people think you should be doing with a 911" he was sold. "I sent him a deposit check almost immediately afterwards."

As part of what is known as 'The Keen Project', Leh is happy to either source a donor car for the customer (the base car must be a G-Body 911 from 1979 to 1989), or they find their own. Matt went with the latter option as he wanted to choose "the colour, the year and the interior."

For Matt, it was particularly important to have a 1987-1989 G-body with the G50 gearbox as "it has a more direct shift feel", so he settled on an '87 3.2 Carrera in striking Cassis Red; a rare and retro hue that he decided to preserve with an Xpel car wrap, rather than repaint – something the majority of buyers choose to do when moving to a rally spec.

It was a decision Matt wasn't sure about at first: "The colour was actually a bit of a controversy. I had originally planned to paint any car I found Dalmatian Blue, which is probably my favourite Porsche colour of all time. I was just looking for any clean coupe with a G50 gearbox and straight body. As luck

would have it, the guy I bought the car from was not exactly Annie Leibovitz, and photographed the car at high noon, which makes Cassis Red look horrific; like Cyndi Lauper's lip gloss. I was sort of down on the colour on Instagram and said I was going to paint it, which caused a bit of a ruckus with the purists. It was priced cheap and seemed to have nothing else wrong with it. When I got there to pick it up and saw that the colour was actually incredible, I decided immediately not to paint it. I frequently get 'I told you so' from the fans. Honestly, I'm gonna take some credit for the fact that Cassis Red is cool again."

After finding his unusually pristine donor car, it was shipped straight out to Keen in Atlanta for a new interior and the fitment of the Baja-inspired hardware. The parts list reads like a Tamiya brochure: bash bars, skid plates, rally light pods, shaved side door mirrors, tucked bumpers, Braid motorsport Fuchs wheels, Elephant Racing Safari suspension, a Quaife limited-slip differential and BF Goodrich K02 tyres – the same tyres, coincidentally, that are used on his pick-up truck.

For the cabin, Matt opted for what he describes as an aggressive interior design: "Leh actually found the commercial grade LA city bus fabric and when I saw it, I was sold almost instantly. The car came with factory Burgundy full leather, and was in incredible condition, so we were able to retain the headliner, door uppers, dash upper, and base carpet. We were nervous if the bus fabric was going to work with the Burgundy leather, but it worked out. The hardest part was the matching leather MOMO Prototipo steering wheel; apparently it took the guy like 20 tries to make it work, and I had a temporary black steering wheel for like six months. But it's basically the Pasha concept really turned up to crazy, and it's also super functional because that fabric is designed to last 20 years in a bus; it'll probably outlast the rest of the car".

After some engine work on its return, the car was ready for the road. The finished build couldn't be further removed from what most drivers would consider to be a 'city car', but for Matt, it is perfect. "It is literally my daily driver. I recently loaded three bushels of firewood behind the rear seats. I mean – it's not meant for attacking the canyons or going to the racetrack, it's meant for going to the shops, driving to my office, running errands and then taking to the dirt for some fun. It really is the best parts of a Baja truck and the best parts of an air-cooled 911."

It seems city cars don't have to boring. They just have to be fit for LA's urban safari.

Info

Photos: Larry Chen

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