

# THE LAST GREAT ROAD RACE

LA CARRERA PANAMERICANA PART 1: TUXTULA - MORELIA

BY JIM MUISE / PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR



LA CARRERA PANAMERICANA is a seven-day odyssey of epic proportions pitting collectable pre 1966 Americans and European classics in a masochistic battle of sleep deprivation and free flowing Corona. The route runs like a twisted arc from the far south Mexico to the Texas border at Nuevo Laredo. Along the way it transits tropical rainforest, through massive canyons, up mountains around volcano's and flat across the desert.

The cars are far from the 100-point concourse collectables shown at Pebble Beach. They are even more beautiful in their rough condition with scars that add personality. The dents and dings are heightened as the week progresses on both the vehicles and the competitors. There is nothing that compares with *the last great road race*.

It boggles the mind and makes you question the sanity of anyone who would willingly do this to themselves. Over 3000 kilometers and seven days of non-stop racing, recovering, partying and recovering again.

The original Carrera ran during the mid fifties as a place for the best of Europe to roll their hardware out against the best America could offer. The original race featured legendary drivers and machines pitched in battles that have become fables in themselves. Once billed as the world's most dangerous race the Carrera was stopped after too many of those drivers ended their careers and some ended their lives on the dusty side of a Mexican mountain.

La Carrera has an odd somehow communal relationship that evolves among competitors who know that finishing

the race is in it self a victory. The unspoken rule seems to be to do anything to help them in the pits so you can beat them fairly on the road.

After a landing that better resembled a strafing run between tropical mountains I then put my life in the hands of a Mexican Cab driver. This is where I first felt true fear. This is also where I first experienced a Topes [Tow-PAYs] or Mexican speed bump. In order to control some of the vehicular feeding frenzy; topes are so big drivers have no choice but to slow down. Not doing so will separate your car from your suspension in a violent and sudden stop.

When the organizers first brought this race back from the dead 17 years ago Mexico was a very different place. Racers who have made the trip multiple years are amazed how the country and economy have evolved. During earlier races it was necessary to have heavily armed military escorts for the race teams. Now, there is an emerging middle class and things are calm, at least off the racing line.

With no idea how to find the rest of the Texans I wandered till I found some likely racers. "We are from Belgium and I bought this truck on E-Bay." Enlisting their aid to find the "yellow car" it seemed pretty much par for the course. It is also not the last time I wandered off with complete strangers only hoping they were going where I needed to be.

The Belgians had shipped their wonderful little Triumph TR2 to Houston and then traveled south with a threadbare Dodge Ram truck they obtained in Texas. They said Vintage Racing in Europe was becoming too stuffy and they longed to try the "rally of no return" ever since a visiting American told them of this race that "was like no other."

Their car was perched on jack-stands right next to the yellow car. A small crowd had been bantering with David Bell, a slow talking deep thinking Texan. David is a great friend of Texas Driver Magazine and has been helping us network around the car collector world for the last couple of years. His company Winged Graphics specializes in



restoring vintage muscle cars and is located in an airplane hanger within earshot of Texas Motor Speedway.

The yellow car, a 1966 Ford Mustang convertible, is the culmination of decades of racing and turning wrenches. It is now a purpose built racer with many of the original creature comforts long abandoned in pursuit of speed and reliability.

The Mustang was in good form and most of the team was already there. Peyton Feltus, by day a commodities trader in Dallas and his co-piloto, or navigator, Todd Landon, were going over some of the things needed to complete the race. David was holding court with some of the other car owners regaling them with "Texan's Metaphors." His son Tyler was off someplace, wrench wizard Seamus Noland was tinkering under the hood and the team Mom, David's wife Suzanne, was marshaling up snacks. I tried to slip into my roll as the Canadian "fetch-it" guy.

The Fair grounds were a blur of activity as teams from around the world prepared for the next day's qualifying runs. The sponsors Corona and Pfizer were working the crowd with an ironic juxtaposition of samples with beer and Viagra. Both being represented by some of the most beautiful women I have ever laid eyes on.

In many ways this was the calm before the storm and the status of the teams could be read in the eyes of the competitors. The Mercury was beginning to look like a

race car and the oily grime on Asay's team seemed to be ground into their bones. Others sat comfortably prepared enjoying a beverage.

As everything began to wind down in the pits the momentum on the social aspect began to gather speed. In the heat of a tropical rainforest's early evening all the racers reconvened in a large thatch roofed tent for a little party. There the Corona girls kept dishing the cervezas and local musicians played into the night. Later while enjoying the free flowing Coronas you could detect a noticeable shift in attention from partying, to the impending time trials the next morning. We heard that Asay had managed to get his transmission problem solved. Which sounded promising for the multi time runner being able to join us in the morning until an exhausted and defeated looking team member walked up with a handful of Coronas. He told us that Doug went out to shake down the Mercury only to have the engine detonate less than two miles from the pits. To his credit they simply pushed the car onto the trailer and followed the race to its conclusion as the first of the carnage that was to follow.

The rules for La Carrera are relatively simple. "Run what you bring and tow what you blow". There are classifications for "Original PanAm" cars that would have competed in the fifties, Historic C which includes many



Above: A hot-rod Lincoln in the pits at the opening of the race. Top to bottom: Austin, TX based Terry Sayther's 1953 BMW saloon. The timers count down to start the yellow car. Opposite, top to bottom: The lineup for starting stage two heads into the mountains. The yellow 911 Porsche of "The Jade Pigs". The yellow Mustang sweeps across the Mexican landscape.



Top: The complete destruction of the '53 Studebaker didn't stop Pilot Chris Saylor (left) and Copilot Hershel Lamirand (right w/ camera) from enjoying a fiesta the next day. Above: A dejected Peyton looks around the corner at the yellow car in Mil Cumbres. Pierre de Thoisy flying by in a recreation 300SL Gullwing after replacing his blown engine.

of the sixties hotrods and Grand Turismo that seemed to be populated entirely of Chevy powered Studebakers.

The teams were just as diverse. On one end there were the Jade Pigs and Brose Racing with their Porsche 911's professional mechanics and support vehicles, on the other there were seemingly ill equipped, mechanically challenged, but passionate entrants bent on experiencing the race and not taking it too seriously.

The morning focus sharpened through many blurry eyes as the time trials began. The result was not really qualifying but more in determining who was to start in what position. In route to finding a good vantage point for photographing the cars blistering past I had wandered a couple of corners away from the team. Access to the road was being guarded by a local police officer and two young men in a hopped up VW Beetle.

With no knowledge of Spanish and very limited English on their part we managed to find a way of communicating and they attempted to trade their VW for my watch and camera. As the dealing and hand gestures continued I am pretty sure one of them offered me their sister as part of the deal. I managed to ask if his sister looked anything like him, and then called off the deal to the laughter of his friend and the cop.

After the trials I strolled back down the road to the service van where an agitated David Bell awaited, "Now Jim, you can't just up and wander off down here." He was more animated than I have ever seen him in three years. With that being said, an agitated David is somewhere close to catatonic for anyone else. "If we are ready to roll and you are not here we *will* leave you behind." It is just the nature of the race, there is no margin for coddling.

Qualifying went pretty much by the book with the exception of multi time winner and perennial favorite Pierre de Thoisy. His recreation Mercedes Benz 300 SL



Gullwing lost its BMW engine in a dramatic cloud of smoke. The top qualifiers were all local with knowledge of the roads coming in particularly handy.

Somehow amongst the frantic preparations we had neglected to pick up the stickers that identify us as part of La Carrera. So instead we simply went with the Grande Gringo identification system. Who else would be racing across Mexico with two full sized Chevy cargo vans? This and yelling to the accompanying Policia Federal seemed to work pretty well.

The race has not just the assistance of the Federalies and the highway patrol, but the daily presence along the route of Commandante Julio Tovar, the boss. My lack of Spanish and tendency to pronounce words with a French intonation seemed to give some of the locals fits of good-natured laughter. Especially when we came up to one of the control roadblocks. I rolled down the window and yelled "Serv-vacA..." instead of "Ser-Va-So" which apparently did little to identify us, although we were directed to where we could obtain beer.

Peyton and Todd had been fighting an ill handling car on one stage and somehow managed to careen off a concrete post on one of the mountainous roads, A good option given the 2000 foot drop just beyond. The car was undamaged except for a dent, a small gash and a broken front tie rod. The final member of the team joined us that night. Fellow Texan Will Munson got right into the game with his welder and cutting wheel.

In the scale of Mexican carnage this was minor, as earlier we made our transit through the mountains and valleys and came across one of the hot rodded Studebakers. They were not so fortunate. Chris Saylor and Hershel Lamirand from Oklahoma had lost it in a corner flipping the old beast three and rolling four times. The carcass of what used to be a purpose built racer was still sitting on the side

of the road in a worrisome example of what could very well have been much worse.

As Seamus drove the "Church Bus" there were moments where we were far exceeding the capabilities of the van but we had to keep moving. I found myself perched in the passenger side clutching the "Holy Seamus" handle looking at the stunning scenery as he pushed the big cube through a round hole.

Any trip like this involves logistics and preparing for the worst, the "Tool Truck" was crammed with everything ten years of Carrera had taught David including generator, arc welder and jack stands. The car was still at a celebration in downtown Oaxaha but would be arriving in moments. The rest of the teams were assembling their service areas as well.

The yellow car is usually a dream to drive but for some reason it was reacting differently than Peyton was expecting. We then discovered a missing pinion bar in the rear suspension. The bar is around eight inches long and braces the differential housing, and it could explain the handling issues. Made of "unobtainium" odds of finding a suitable replacement in Oxahaca Mexico at 11 pm were slim to anorexic.

After discovering the local Renault dealer had a large and not too cuddly dog guarding its scrap bins, I had to scour the other teams. No one had what we needed. Behind the Sam's Club we turned up carcasses of shopping carts and store display fixtures. With Will's welding and grinding skills one of the former displays was reborn as a pinion brace.

There are a lot of makeshift repairs with the skill of the teams being matched by their creative ability to adapt.

Yesterday we started in tropical rainforest and wound our way up and down a few mountains. Today we were into a landscape resembling Arizona's painted desert. The roads were surprisingly good throughout the trip and the scenery spectacular.

As the racecars headed off for a number of speed stages the service convoys jockeyed their way down the toll highway to meet in the colonial village of Tehuacán. The celebrity of La Carrera is such a draw that thousands of people were awaiting the cars in a town wide fiesta.

In the downtown square we found Chris and Hershel sans crashed Studebaker laughing and looking pretty good given their rough ride the day before. The curbside café we shared was filled with golden sunlight filtering through the town square's tree branches.

Hundreds if not thousands of children and adults pushed forward to get the drivers autographs. For some of the



competitors this was the first time anyone had asked for an autograph. For others they signed AJ Foyt or Jackie Stewart's name. "Hell," explained one of the drivers, "they don't know who I am. I run a business back home but this week I'm a celebrity in Mexico."

After the fiesta we found our service vehicles hemmed in by others still enjoying the festivities. A group of service members gathered near the church bus. An old man who's face looked of cracked leather shuffled up selling wooden toys. They were maddening contraptions where you would flip a wooden cup on a string up and around to try and catch it on a dowel pin. Even though he repeatedly showed us how easy it was, none of us could get the same flourish and we ended up buying 12 of them to annoy our families back home.

We ended the day at yet another Fiesta Inn, this time in Pueblo where the rapid routine of fixing the days efforts was well underway. Tension was gathering in the teams as the next day we had to navigate Mexico City and head into the most exciting and dangerous part of the race Morelia and Mil Cumbres' 1000 corners of destruction.

To be continued in the next issue of *Texas Driver Magazine*.