

LOS ANGELES

# HAUTE LIVING

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# THE THRILL OF THE HISTORIC BUGATTI

BY TIM LAPPEN

ITALIAN AUTO DESIGNER Ettore Bugatti founded his company in Molsheim, France, started producing cars in 1910 and, over the succeeding decades, built some of the quickest and most-coveted automobiles in the world, cars that are today among the most collectible on the planet. How collectible? A Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic in Peter Mullin's amazing collection in Oxnard, California reportedly was bought for well north of \$30 Million in 2010, making it one of the most-expensive cars ever sold (by the way, the prior sale for that car was in the early 1970s and I am told that the price then was \$59,000).

Oh, but to jump in the way-back machine and enjoy those historic Bugattis, feeling both Gatsby-esque and Warbucksian, given that today those cars can cost more than ten times the price of the average American . . . house (you were expecting "car"?). Into that quandary vaults Pur Sang. They are an atelier focused on recreating some of the most memorable cars of the past. And what vehicles they are.

What makes Pur Sang (French for "pure blood" but, colloquially, "genuine") most unusual is the fact that, working from original Bugatti plans and

specifications, they create virtually every part of these cars, using the same type of manufacturing processes and assembly techniques which prevailed during the time when these cars ruled the roads. Examples? The engine block is cast in sand as it was in the 1930s; the metal body panels are hand-formed by hammering them over wooden bucks; and the painstaking process of creating the complicated aluminum-alloy wheel is just as it was done over eighty years ago.

Why use "old technology" when modern ways are more readily available? Part of it from the way the cars "feel"—they are the closest thing that one can experience to what it was like to drive a new Bugatti, as Pur Sang's cars not only look like the originals, they sound and drive like them, too. And in today's hot market for collectible cars like these, driving an original historic Bugatti can be quite unnerving, given the potential impact on the car's value a wayward pothole or neighboring SUV texter can have on your beloved.

So what is it like? I was lucky enough to have a few visits with the Pur Sang Type 35B and what a thrill!

First off, fortunately for me, Jay Leno is an enthusiastic supporter of the Pur Sang vehicles and



he allows their U.S. rep, John Bothwell to keep an example of their inventory at his garage so checking out the surroundings could have been another two-day event. Just his workshop alone is incredible. But, I digress—back to the Pur Sang Type 35B.

Well, let's start with the first sense, the visual. It sure looks like an original Type 35B. I am told that specialists viewing the Pur Sangs and historic Bugattis side by side may be good enough to point out slight differences but it takes a while. The Pur Sang editions are as stunning as the originals, with their rakish stance and athletic builds. The cars are invoiced by Pur Sang as their types ("Type 35B", for example) and sold as recreations.

How about sound? It fires up like an original, too (hand-crank it or hit the button for the electric starter) and emits a great raspy and throaty roar. Like the one I drove, these cars typically are straight-eights so they sound off with authority.

Shall we venture next into the sense of smell? Well, I was fortunate enough to have a neighbor who, when I was a kid, would periodically blast by in his supercharged Type 37 and, for blessed minutes after passing by, the wafting, cloying smell of Castrol was in the air (the lubricant was made from Castor beans at the time). While one might think that burning oil was an indicator of problems, it actually was a part of EB's design—in order to keep the supercharger's bearings suitably slippery, oil was dripped from a small reservoir tank down a tube and on to the front and rear bearings and the excess then was sucked into the updraft intake system and burned off. While that may not exactly be politically correct today, what with all

that oil burning, it left those of us who savored the experience with indelible memories.

What about the tactile? Well, "my" Type 35B (a recreation of a 1929 model) felt and looked great but let's talk about real-world issues first. It has one bench seat, with right-hand drive. The pilot should get in first, to navigate around the steering wheel, which is really big in order to provide the leverage needed to help steer the car (of course, there's no power-assist). When the passenger gets in, one of the immutable Laws Of Science comes readily to mind:  $DW + PG = P$ , where the Driver's Width plus the Passenger's Girth equals the Possibility of sharing the cockpit for more than five minutes. Another way to put it—if you have a chunky driver, you need a willowy passenger. In my first experience, I was lucky that John Bothwell is on the fit side of things as, while I do my best, my high-school-athletics physique (such that it was) now is in the rear-view mirror (at least, that's what I am told, as I can't really turn my neck that far anymore). Anyway, it does make for a cozy drive.

Driving the Type 35B does take some effort as the non-synchromesh transmission likes precision and the lever—located just outside the body—takes some getting used to, but driving this car really gives the pilot a feeling that he's accomplished something.

Put it all together and what do you have? A thrilling

ride, not unlike a vintage British motorcycle (an experience with which I am quite familiar), in that it's neither smooth nor quiet and, with the Type 35B's minimal windscreen only helping the driver, it leaves the passenger with a windblown experience that includes the occasional wayward bug. Is it worth it?

Absolutely! The whole experience comes together, much like when "man and machine become one," harkening back to a time when pilots were intimately involved with the operation of their machines and had to work at it—clutch! brake! turn! While Bugattis predate the Internet by about a century, I could find no report of a driver of an historic Bugatti dozing off at the wheel (nor texting while driving).

Bottom line—these cars are not at all like the "replicas" of the past, many of which were created by adding a fiberglass body over a VW frame and engine. This is a well-built machine made with high-quality materials in a very labor-intensive process. Is the price reasonable to charge for an "old car"? Here are some interesting pricing metrics: The Type 35B sells for about ten percent of today's cost of an original Bugatti counterpart and it's about what one might expect to pay for a restoration of an original. In other words, do you want a fully-equipped Gallardo or a Pur Sang Type 35B? In many respects, this is a new car made with the old designs and workmanship. Some will say that it's possible to get cars which are more "civil", faster and reliable for far less money, allowing one to arrive at the destination point quicker, quieter and more composed. To that, the owners of the Pur Sangs will respond that "the drive is the point." I'm with them.