

Two and 1/2 Weeks in Sports Car Heaven!

By Larry Huber

Back Story: The following is an article I was asked to write for the AACA Gulf Coast Region in Houston, of which I am a member. I would like to put it into our newsletter. Larry Huber

Door County, Wisconsin, is sports car heaven! Door County is located on a narrow peninsula which juts up into Lake Michigan. Years ago, the French named it "Death's Door" because of all the shipwrecks in the sometimes treacherous surrounding waters. Green Bay, (the bay, not the city), is on the western shore and Lake Michigan is to the north and to the east. There



are several beautiful villages along the lakeshore and, inland, the peninsula is made up of lovely rolling countryside. Fabulous bluffs rise up off the lake and the views are spectacular. Outdoor activities abound, including sailing, motor boating, golf, swimming, hiking, biking, tennis, horseback riding and more. Evening activities are limited to enjoying good restaurants or sitting around a fire pit gazing at the stars. The weather is cool and beautiful in the summer. There are no chain restaurants, no chain businesses and no stoplights! It is a wonderful place for relaxing and driving sports and antique cars.



My wife, Carrie, and I annually visit Carrie's twin sister and our brother-in-law, who own a house on about 10 inland acres. Their property reminds me of Tuscany. For at least ten years, I have been complaining to anyone who will listen about my not having a sports car to enjoy in Door County. That we only spend about 2 ½ weeks per year up there is beside the point. Friends have suggested that I ship my TR6 up there and send it back at the end of our vacations. There are too many potential problems with that idea and it would become rather costly. Carrie finally put her foot down and

said, "Just buy something up there!" She thought it would be worth the expense just so I would stop whining about it. In that I have always loved just slightly better than "beater-quality" cars which are cheap and run great, I started my search.

Shipping a car up from south Florida would add too much to the total price to make it practical. I was convinced that, even from Miami, I could find a good sports car in Wisconsin for less than \$4,000. At the time, I did not consider the fact that salting the roads up there turns most cars into rust buckets. I initially thought about a Miata but could not find one which met all my criteria: stick shift, mechanically sound, presentable in

appearance inside and out, and pleasing to a sports car enthusiast, either in styling or historical significance. I had high hopes.

I have always been a British sports car snob. My TR 6 has great big wheels and tires, a big six cylinder engine, twin carburetors, a stiff clutch and hard steering – your typical macho roadster. I knew that buying a \$4,000 British sports car would be very risky. I happened to come across a 1969 Road and Track magazine with a comparison test of an MGB, a Porsche 914, a TR6 and a Fiat 124 Spider. To my shock and amazement, THEY LIKED THE FIAT BEST! The Fiat's engine was designed by a Ferrari engineer, the five speed gearbox was smooth, the ride was comfortable, the handling was great, the top could be raised and lowered in a flash, the Pinin Farina styling was lovely and it even had power brakes! I knew that those cars, produced from 1966 through 1983, were currently in plentiful supply and, therefore, low in price. Could my macho self-image accept the fact that the Fiats had small 13 inch wheels, rode comfortably, were easy to drive, and some of them even came with AUTOMATICS? I had a lot of thinking to do.



As great good luck would have it, Craigslist had a '77 Fiat 124 Spider for sale only ten minutes from my in-laws' house. The owner was a retired mechanical engineer who was formerly an extremely successful SCCA Fiat racer. He never raced the car he had for sale but he mechanically renewed it for cruising around Door County. My interest was piqued and I made arrangements to see it upon my arrival in Wisconsin.



The owner was a charming and lovely guy, selling the car for health reasons. The paint and upholstery were presentable and the car had nice alloy wheels. The dual overhead cam engine with its progressive linkage two barrel Weber carburetor and low restriction air cleaner sounded great and had a throaty exhaust note. The Fiat racer/mechanical engineer owner must have tweaked that engine because it sure felt faster than I thought it would. When that Weber carb opened

up, it sounded like a baby Ferrari! The gearbox and clutch were smooth and felt just right. The right rear brake got hot and smelly on the test drive but it was too late. I was already in love. The deal was struck: \$3,200, including a factory shop manual and car cover. I was on cloud 9. I finally had my used but not abused sports car in Door County, sports car heaven.

My "new", very inexpensive Pinin Farina-styled roadster lived up to my fondest expectations. It looked great from 20 feet away and had the feel and sound of a traditional sports roadster. I loved driving the smooth and comfortable twin cam, five speed Spider in that gorgeous part of the country. I did have an issue with

the occasionally sticky right rear caliper. When I let it cool down, it released and worked well so I plan to change the rear brake hoses this summer, on the advice of a national Fiat vendor. The caliper had been changed in recent times. The temperature gauge sometimes read hot but that was due to the car's having two sending units, one of which was defective. I just disconnected the second one, on the advice of the same Fiat vendor. It did the trick because the first sending unit tells the true temperature. It is counter-intuitive, but it works. Some complain about the position of the steering wheels in those cars, but I liked it.

The weather last summer was too cold for swimming, so I spent a great deal of time with the top down touring the area. Carrie thought the car was very comfortable and she enjoyed our long rides over canopied roads and along the lakeshore.



The story is not over. I left the car in storage in Door County, to the tune of about \$25 per month. If it starts readily next year, my eccentric car-buying choice will be vindicated. If not, I'll be a laughing stock! In either case, one might say that I'm very easy to please when it comes to old cars. That is true. Unlike most of my car buddies, I don't care too much about paint and upholstery. I just want to hear that engine, work that clutch, shift those gears and cruise. I will update this story next summer!