

Fax Me a Copy

INTERMECCANICA'S SPEEDSTER 6 AND ROADSTER RS OFFER A CHANCE TO DRIVE BRAND-NEW FAVORITES OF THE FIFTIES — WITH PLENTY OF IMPROVEMENTS. STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID COLMAN.



Bolt nuts can turn to Restoration Hardware. Lovers of classic speedboats have Riva Boats. And garden dandies have Smith & Hawken. But where does a Speedster lover go for a fix? Better yet, a cheap fix for an expensive car? Certainly not the want ads of this magazine. Or any similarly legitimate resource. Decent cooking variants start out at about \$40,000 and travel up from there.

Rare ones are much less affordable. Take the 1959 GS/GT, for example. With enough perseverance you might even be lucky enough to locate one. But you better dig deep: According to factory historian Olaf Lang — now sadly departed — Porsche produced just 25 of these ultimate, lightweight, four-cam Speedsters. A good one will probably cost more than your house! This is the problem Mike Wiggins encountered after deciding he needed a GS/GT Speedster more than life itself. Wiggins, a Michigan patent attorney with a Mopar background, and his father had restored a series of Challengers and Barracudas, but the clarion call of the Speedster rang ever louder.

"The Mopars were nice, but I always loved the clean look of the Speedster," says Wiggins. "But I didn't have the couple of hundred grand it would take to buy a real GS/GT. And secondly, I wanted a car to *drive*, not park — something I could take to the track."

Then he found Intermeccanica, a 14-letter, double Scrabble-Out word synonymous with Speedster replicas since 1976. Over the last 25 years, the Vancouver, British Columbia firm has built nearly as many Speedsters as Porsche built itself. Mike Wiggins ended up paying \$33,711 for his new toy and, six months after he placed the order, his car was ready to ship. Wiggins opted to supply \$8,000 worth of his own parts for the build, which is okay with Intermeccanica so long as the submitted equipment is sound. He provided a 2.7-liter 911 engine rebuilt to RS specs, a fresh 915 gearbox, plus most of the suspension and brake parts from a 1988 911. We journeyed to Vancouver to drive Wiggins' car before it was shipped to Michigan.

As described on the order form by Intermeccanica's Henry Reisner, S/N IM 13361 is a "high bow 1958 coach with integral tubular steel frame." Reisner's recently deceased father, Frank, founded the storied coach building firm in 1959 in Turin, Italy.



Originally conceived as a speed equipment supplier to Renault, Simca, and Peugeot, the company began fabricating Formula Junior race cars for Conrero in 1960. An air-cooled, 500-cc Fiat special called an Imp soon followed and, by 1962, the firm was constructing fetching Buick-powered Apollo GTs for American Milt Brown.

When the Apollo project terminated in 1965 after 101 cars were built, the company went on to build Omegas for Jack Griffith, Torinos and Italias for Genser Forman of New Jersey, and the Corvair-based Phoenix for John Fitch. But after building 11 Ford 429-engined Murenas and 125 Indras for Erich Bitter, the coach builder boutique market began to wane. By 1974, Intermeccanica had turned to replica vehicles. First came a Jaguar SS 100 copy for Squire, followed by the 1975 Speedster replica it still produces today. Because the tooling for the Speedster originated in Los Angeles, the firm moved there in 1976. Five years later, it landed in Vancouver.

Today, Henry Reisner and his mother oversee the company his father founded 43 years ago. The shop still has the look of a traditional Italian

coach building firm, with hand tools and subframe dollies scattered everywhere. A coterie of highly skilled workers methodically assemble Speedsters alongside replica Convertible Ds called "Roadsters." Roadster production began in 1981 in order to offer clients a more civilized form of the Speedster. Says Reisner: "We went to the Roadster for the same reason Porsche developed the Convertible D. It's a more livable car."

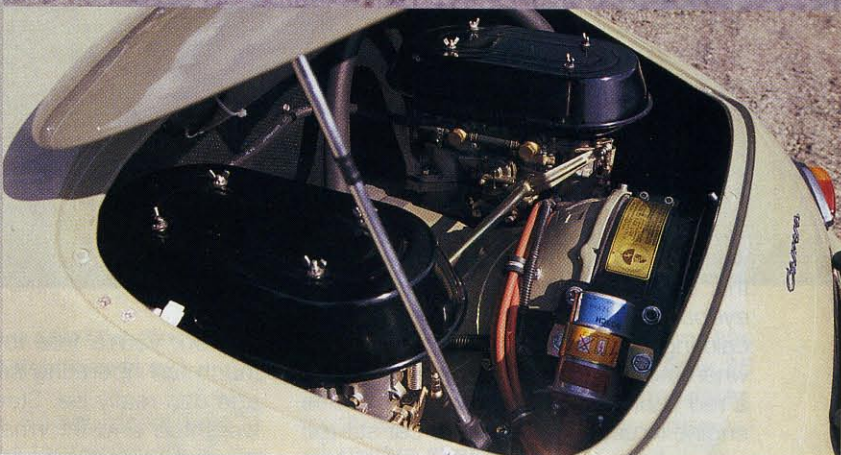
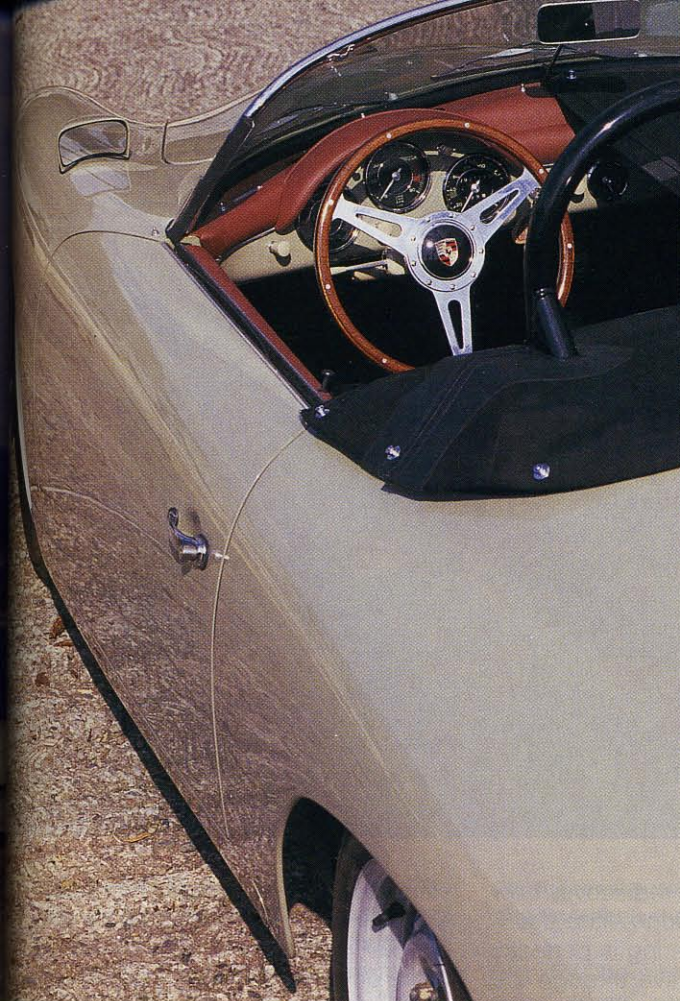
Kubelwagen copies also share the modest four-bay assembly line. Reisner has produced about 50 of these authentic-looking buckets to date. Because the company builds no more than two 356 replicas per month, orders take six months to fill. Fiberglass bodies for all three variants are produced to Reisner's specifications at a nearby specialist using Intermeccanica-designed molds. Final paint and upholstery are also outsourced. It's somewhat ironic that Intermeccanica, which made its name as a specialist aluminum body builder in Italy, should now subcontract fiberglass bodies in Canada.

The immaculate interior and exterior panel fit and finish are pristine, howev-

er, and Wiggins' car looks authentic enough to make a run up the Freiburg Hill Climb. Listening to Reisner explain what goes into shell production, you can't help but develop a new respect for the art of blowing glass.

"The most important thing in building a car like this is to achieve a stable surface for the paint," he explains. "That in turn requires the highest level of exothermy, so the body will cure in the mold." West Coast Fiberglass, located near Intermeccanica, does all the lay-up with a chopper gun, and uses a two-percent catalyst mixture for best results. Another secret is its use of an iso-resin designed for tooling rather than boats. The company still uses the same 356 molds designed by Frank Reisner back in 1975.

A perimeter reinforcement strip keeps the nine sections of the body from twisting while curing. The resulting one-piece unit, says Reisner, "shows no telescoping or change through the whole structure." All three bulkheads in the car are then riveted and bonded to Reisner's space frame with hundreds of aircraft-quality rivets. After a black gel coat is applied, Reisner sets the finished body under an enamel-dryer for



several days to leach resins from the form. He long ago learned the importance of this step. Says Reisner: "We had a car that shrank in the hot Texas sun. Now we take five days to cure our cars so they won't shrink."

Painting, done by an Austrian master craftsman, is an arduous task involving many stages. The initial coat of BASF epoxy primer is sanded with 80-grit paper. Glasurit polyester spray filler then covers the shell. When dry, it's block-sanded with 180-grit paper. A guide coat of Glasurit acrylic urethane is then applied and wet-sanded with 400 grit, followed by another guide coat wet-sanded with 800 grit.

Wiggins, who fell in love with the reduced-to-essentials look of Gary Emory's Outlaw 356s, decided to emulate Parts Obsolete with his Speedster. To do so, he chose telltale GS/GT options. For example, he specified the "original-look round fender edge treatment," because he "wanted to keep the look simple and original." So the fender contours and inner lips match the stock Speedster template because any semblance of a flared fender would have detracted from the sanitary look Wiggins was after. Retaining

1) Customer-supplied Derrington wheel and red leather hit all the right buttons.

2) Carrera RS-spec 2.7-liter motor was also supplied by Wiggins, as was the badge.

stock fender clearances meant using carefully backspaced 15x5.5 front and 15x7 rear wheels. Though Wiggins worried he might have too much motor for his tires, he was willing to accept a self-imposed rim limitation for the sake of period-correct appearance.

The rest of the order form reveals the owner's familiarity with GS/GT nuances. He chose original 356 Carrera square-weave vinyl carpeting, a Haartz Stayfast high-bow top, original dash and door trim including a passenger grab handle, and a Carrera switch layout for the dash with original ivory fuel pump and coil pull knobs. External cues to the visual authenticity of this copy are cast vertical headlight grills, relocated parking lights, clear glass front signal lenses, and original-style door handles with locking push buttons. A distinctive Carrera engine lid with ventilation louvers adorns the rear. Carrera-style polished bumper strips look suitably lightweight while a period-correct roll bar completes the illusion.

"I did everything I could to make this car a good facsimile of a GS/GT," says Wiggins. The retro formula works wonders. Wherever we parked his Glasurit Stone Grey over Ruby leather Speedster, we were surrounded by admirers who refused to believe the car was not original. We had to show them the Intermeccanica badge on the hood grab handle before they would believe us. Even the owner of a 1955 Jaguar XK-120 was startled when informed of the Speedster's recent genesis. We convinced him of that fact by lighting off the twin pipes of the 911's sport exhaust. A couple of staccato raps found him shaking his head in amazement that something so faithful to the original concept could hide such a mutant powertrain.

Performance is vivid. With just 2,300 pounds for 200 horsepower to motivate, straight-line pop approximates that of a 2.5-liter 914-6. From inside the minimalist cockpit, the blat of the sport exhaust dominates everything. The twin-pipe muffler resonates louder than in any other six-cylinder Porsche because of its proximity to your ear. You couldn't ask for a better road to wring out this car than Canadian

Highway 1 from Vancouver to Whistler Village. This is the same road Porsche used to film the 550/Boxster "Rip Van Winkle" TV commercial — the one where the 550 owner wakes up from a coma, fires up his Spyder, and finds — to his utter astonishment — that the Boxster has been born in the interim.

What better place to shake down Mike Wiggins' Speedster? It could have played the lead in that very commercial. The trip started with some trepidation owing to the top being up. While Haartz' Stayfast tent is taut and vibration free, it impedes side and rear vision so drastically that driving in urban traffic becomes hazardous. Add in a fender-mounted racing mirror of pillbox proportions and an inside rearview smaller than a purse compact and you've got some fairly serious vision issues to overcome.

Exiting downtown Vancouver, the enclosed Speedster felt like a worm in a world of whales. Sure, you can soak in this bathtub while lug nuts whiz by at eyeball height, but the effect is less than calming. Things got a little out of hand when the still-cold 911 engine stalled at a red light located atop a long hill. The engine refused to restart, the car started rolling backwards, and my right arm proved too short to reach the tunnel-mounted emergency brake. Meanwhile, oblivious traffic continued flowing up the hill from behind — just managing to avoid the roadblock I had created. A little heel-and-toeing remedied the problem, but it was no fun at all for awhile.

Immediately thereafter, the Stayfast top retreated into its compartment, where it Staydown for the duration of the trip. A nifty Haartz tonneau, designed to cover either the aft portion of the cockpit, or the entire interior, snapped securely into chrome-plated Tenax fasteners located at strategic points on the deck and dash.

Topless is the *modus operandi* for the Speedster. Visibility goes from nil to 360° in less than two seconds. Buffeting inside the cockpit is no worse than that of a motorcycle with a bikini fairing. In other words, bring a brimmed hat and a hooded jacket or you'll be fed up in short order. The windshield is so short that air pours over the top frame and directly into your face. Above 60 mph, a banshee wail dominates everything.

Sounds miserable, right? Wrong. Like a good motorcycle, the Speedster reduces driving fun to its elements. Without all the comforts of sedan civi-



lization, you're free to rediscover how much fun operating such a lithe package can really be. Steering is perfectly weighted and informative through the 15-inch wide Derrington wood wheel. Driving a sports car without power assist is a rare treat these days, and the lack of boost means you're not depending on a slave unit to interpret what's transpiring at the front contact patches. The front suspension geometry is also revised to increase caster angle for better response.

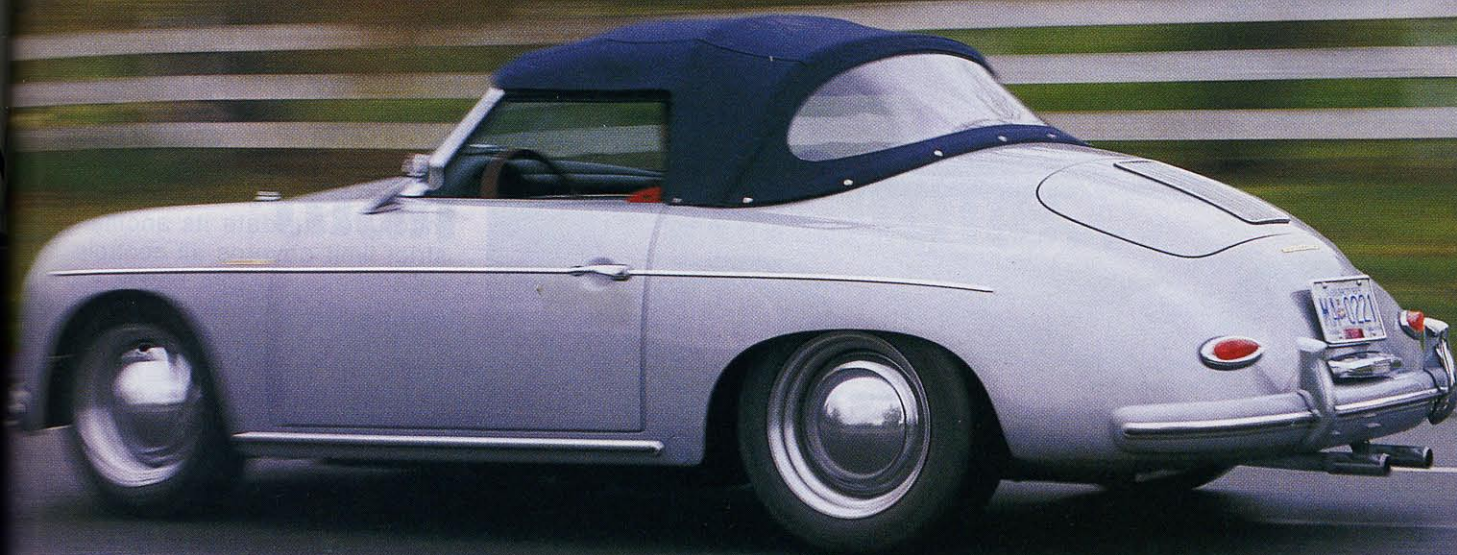
The stubby short-shifter, mushroom-capped by a spun aluminum knob, slots into each of the 915's five gates with scrupulous dexterity. So fierce is the acceleration of the 2.7 that short gears are utterly unnecessary. In fact, the stock ratios of the rebuilt transmission are perfect for brisk bursts tempered with relaxed highway cruising in fourth and fifth. The fresh innards of the 915 required decisive lever movements for the outbound trip to Whistler. By the return voyage, the required physical effort to change gears has diminished from heroic to merely athletic.

Handling came as a pleasant revelation. Wiggins' initial fears about the inadequacy of his small contact patches prove unfounded. Instead, the Speedster's neutral behavior and limousine ride assert themselves. Thanks to the pendulum effect of the 911 engine mass, the car never lets you forget about its decided rear-weight bias. But

Henry Reisner has craftily compensated for that physical handicap by using special radius arms which move the entire drivetrain forward by three inches versus the four-cylinder model. This inspired redesign minimizes oversteer and contributes to placid handling. In fact, due to the size discrepancy of the 5.5-inch wide front wheels and optional 7-inch wide rears, the Speedster enjoys just a refreshing tad of understeer. Nothing like a severe plow, mind you, but a certain front-end lightness that warns of incipient breakaway long before the rear lets go.

The choice of Yokohama AVS tires sized 195/60VR15 and 205/60VR15 is the best \$285 option Wiggins could have selected. They afford plenty of grip in wet and dry conditions and their 60-series sidewalls, tall by today's rim condom standards, complement the cushy boulevard ride. The Speedster chassis is immensely stable, thanks to 5x3-inch side rails fabricated from 0.188-inch wall thickness mild steel (the four-cylinder cars use 0.125-inch walls). Says Reisner of the chassis: "It's nothing revolutionary. It may be low-tech but it's effective."

Up front, stamped steel strut towers feed loads into cast aluminum plates fitted with spherical ball joints, which Reisner says "give a wide range of adjustment and precise location of the top of the strut." The front subframe of the six-cylinder Speedster is twice as



long as that of the four-cylinder version. Sway-A-Way front torsion bars soak up the bumps without flinching. Out back, a 3x2-inch subframe — used only on six-cylinder models — extends all the way to the tail. Arched reinforcements over the rear wheels, not used on four-cylinder models, contribute added stiffness. Reisner equips the pivot for the rear trailing arms with a T-bar adjustable mechanism that allows ride-height changes to be made without suspension removal. An eccentric bolt also permits camber changes from 0-4° negative.

Because Intermeccanica has built its Speedster for more than 25 years now, it's got all the suspension fine-tuning figured out so well that the car handles like a demon but rides like a dove. Even on a 120-mile road trip into snow country, the Speedster's suspension never beat us up. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said of the wind. By our return to Vancouver, we were more than ready for soaking in a bathtub of a different kind. But what an unmitigated blast this car was to drive.

Gird yourself, however, to be the center of attraction wherever you come to roost. We had one fan block us in at Whistler so we couldn't back out of our parking spot. After thinking he wanted our spot, it dawned on us that he wanted our car. "Is that a Beck?" "No. Look in here and you can see that it doesn't use the space-limit-

For those who want a bit of civility, the Roadster RS is the right way to go...

ing VW floorpan. So you don't have to drive it with your feet splayed to the right because of wheel-well intrusion."

"What is it, then?" vies with "Is it real?" for the question du jour. The beauty is, you can make up just about any story you like, and sell it to the public without remorse. Just don't say it's a Porsche, because it isn't. How's that? Says Reisner: "Speedster is a generic term. We don't misrepresent the car as a Porsche. It doesn't say Porsche anywhere on it." What about that familiar crest in the steering wheel? "Mike Wiggins provided that wheel for his own car. We use a Nardi on our production cars."

Intermeccanica has enjoyed a benign relationship with the factory since the debut of the Speedster at the LA Auto Show in 1975. "Three factory muck-a-mucks came by our stand," recalls Reisner and "checked our car with great interest. They said *Sehr Gute* and walked away. We haven't heard from them since."

The other car Intermeccanica builds that might remind you of a Porsche is its Roadster RS. Due to its superior weatherproofing, this model is far more popular than the Speedster. Roadsters account for 20 of the 25 cars Intermeccanica produces each year. In fact, since Vancouver produc-

tion began in 1981, the company has produced 500 Roadsters to only 25 Speedsters. As with the Speedster, both four- and six-cylinder powerplants are available.

The base \$26,750 RS offers a 1600-cc flat four breathing through a single Solex carb to produce 72 hp at 4500 rpm. It takes 12 seconds to reach 60 mph from a standing start and posts a top speed of 95 mph. An optional 1600-cc Super engine produces 85 hp thanks to twin 40-mm IDF Weber carbs and an OEM Porsche muffler. The Super, which accounts for nearly 50 percent of all Roadster production, adds a spin-on oil filter and enlarges oil-sump capacity to five liters. A 2.1-liter mill with 145 hp at 5500 rpm is an option and propels the car from 0-60 in 8.0 seconds and on up to 118 mph.

Both four-cylinder Roadsters use four-speed synchromesh transmissions and weigh just 1,850 pounds dry. Full-tank weight is 2,000 pounds. Since 1995, Intermeccanica has also offered a six-cylinder version of the RS called the Roadster 6, with displacements ranging up to 3.2 liters. Prices on this one start at \$19,975 with the buyer supplying mechanicals from a donor 911 of 1969 or newer vintage.

Reisner turned us loose in his own personal RS, but the anticipated frolic turned into a tussle with persistent Vancouver rain. Luckily, the Roadster was far better equipped for the ele-



ments than the Speedster. For starters, it's got an effective heater and a fan. The Speedster offered only footwell heat and had no blower. Add in heated seats, a higher windshield, a bigger backlight, three larger rearview mirrors, and a Blaupunkt CD stereo to come up with a sports car that behaves more like a grown-up than a brat.

S/N IM 112375 is a silver-over-black leather Roadster RS powered by the 2.1-liter, C.B.-built engine — a package which also includes an upgrade to 1.5-inch heat exchangers and a merged muffler. The exhaust is genuine Porsche rather than VW, because Reisner feels the "worst thing about any repro car is that tinny sounding, crummy looking VW exhaust." And you won't mistake the exhaust bark of this RS for a VW. Unlike the Speedster, whose six-cylinder shriek seemed out of keeping with the character of the car, the 2.1-liter four sounds just right. It emits the snap, crackle, and *doo wop* you expect from a tweaked boxer.

Reisner delivers 75 percent of his Roadsters with the \$1,680 optional air-conditioning. The installation below the dash face looks professional and neat, just like a dealer-installed option from the sixties. The fact that the adjacent stereo tweeters are the same size as the A/C orifices makes the lower fascia panel look all the more professional. 175 square feet of Italian Spinnybeck leather upgrade the interior surfaces for \$1,560. Crafted by Croatian upholsterer Frank Dehlick in Vancouver, the rich black hide adds immeasurably to the finish level of the RS. Of particular note are the neatly sewn door pockets fitted with attaché-case closure flaps. There are no unfinished surfaces, no loose ends, absolutely nothing to sug-

A crisp Spring day, 200 hp, 2,300 pounds, and fantastic roads...

gest kit-car origins.

Ceaseless rain on our seven-hour drive and double ferry trip from Vancouver to Victoria and back prevent pushing the RS to the limit, but it proves extremely stable in the wet, never so much as twitching its tail. If anything, the four-banger RS feels even better balanced and more neutral than the tail-heavier Speedster 6. Dunlop Sport A2 M&S-rated tires handled the wet with an aplomb the dry-pattern Yokos on the Speedster would have been hard-pressed to match. Mounted on \$495 optional 15x5.5-inch front and 15x7-inch rear wheels, the combo of 195/65R15 and 205/60R15 Dunlops provide dependable adhesion in the heaviest downpour.

Unfortunately, the wipers and demisters are not as well suited to the task as the tires. Stiction causes the three-speed wiper blades to catch and release on their swipe stroke. The three-stage fan makes lots of noise on its highest setting, but no combination of fan, heat, and position clears the windshield as well as a couple of quick strokes with a "Fog-Off" sponge Reisner so thoughtfully provided.

Adding to our woes, the Roadster is shipping water in the passenger footwell and more behind the driver's seat. When the 2.1 liter goes off-song about halfway through the trip, we know it's time to head for home. Clearly, the RS will get you through days of heavy weather better than the Speedster. Had we been aboard Wiggins' car, we would have turned around before milepost 10.

That the RS made it through such a

putrid day of inclemency relatively unscathed is a tribute to its sound engineering and construction. The trip puts me in mind of driving my Jaguar XKE through blinding snowstorms in the sixties in Massachusetts, when all systems were marginal at all times. Never forget that the RS is basically a 40-year-old design and, no matter how much you update its ancillaries, a strict limit governs all controls. It is called the Law of Dim, Flicker, and Off.

Before the 2.1 developed its itinerant miss, performance was scintillating. Launching the torquey RS from a stop proved even easier than getting the high-revving Speedster 6 off the line. A couple of 5500-rpm passes through the gears confirms that this motor really cooks. The four gear ratios pick the C.B.'s powerband up smartly on each upshift. Our test RS, which has a Borg-Warner spiral bevel-gear differential with a 3.876:1 ratio, is also fitted with an Emco reverse gear lockout slider attached to the shift lever. The Emco trombone looks hokey in the otherwise NOS cabin, but it effectively kept us from nicking reverse.

Just like the Speedster, the RS is a first-class head turner. When parked in the hold of the ferry that swept us back and forth across the Strait of Georgia, it attracts enough attention to warrant hand pointing and inquiries. Compared to the fleet of tipsy SUVs parked in the Queen of Cowichan's belly, the RS looks small enough to qualify as a circus clown car.

Ferry riders, not knowing what to make of the silver apparition, observe it with bemused indulgence. Then come the questions, faster than waves on the Queen's prow. "Is it a real Porsche?" If you're asking whether Porsche built it, the answer is clearly no. But if you meant, *could* Porsche have built it, the answer is just as clearly yes. Intermeccanica's replicars remain faithful to the spirit of the 356 even if they vary in detail and execution from the originals.

These cars behave like vintage Porsches without subjecting you to the agony of delete. Nothing civilized is missing from them. You can forget about crummy 6-volt electrics, hard-to-source original parts, and all the other niggling vagaries of early era motor-ing. Both the Speedster and the Roadster have the mettle to be daily drivers. And because they do so without resorting to metal, they promise to last ever so much longer. ■