

The Quest for the Perfect Ride:

Touring in a Bentley Continental GT

By Roger Witherspoon

There were a dozen men and women standing in the afternoon sun, gazing at the parked silver sedan. One man was on his knees, apparently trying to peer through the radiator, guessing at the power plant behind it.

Three women were looking into the windows, commenting on the burnished – not plastic coated – tulipwood finish on the interior trim, seat backs and tray tables, the hand-stitched leather seats.

They looked like kids, their noses pressed against the window of a candy store, wishing they could go inside: except they kept a respectful distance and didn't touch, as if afraid to get the slightest smudge on the silver finish. They looked at me in silent pleading.

“Would you like me to lift the hood?” I asked.

“Oh, Yes!” they exclaimed in unison. “And can I sit in it?” asked one.

Typical. The Bentley Continental GT is, simply, one of the finest sport sedans anywhere, and it draws a crowd wherever it stops: it's admired on the road, too, as it flies by. It melds the expected high level of Bentley quality with the road performance one might be more inclined to expect in a Ferrari or Viper.

But Bentleys were always meant to be driven. Decades ago, when Bentley and Rolls Royce were the same company, the stately Rolls were intended for those who wanted chauffeurs, and the Bentleys were for those who appreciated a fine ride and wanted to experience the power of a high performance engine in a luxury setting. The stately, elegant, imposing, Bentley Arnage moves its 6,700-pound steel frame from 0-60 miles an hour in 5.5 seconds – bringing astonished looks to the faces of smug Beamer owners as they fade to the rear. And that's with a V-8 engine.

When Bentley decided to build a sports sedan, however, its German engineers decided eight cylinders wouldn't do, and used the power in the Arnage as just a starting point. For the Continental, they melded two V-6 engines together to form their W-12 power plant with 552 horsepower. It reaches its torque level of 479 pound-feet at just 1,600 RPM – the engine speed at which most cars are just idling.

The Continental, therefore, begins with a slow roar from its twin exhausts the moment it is turned on. Its design – a short, broad front tapering backwards and resembling a coiled cat ready to spring – is an apt one in a sedan that leaps from 0-60 in just 4.7 seconds and tops out at just under 200 miles per hour.

The Continental's transmission allows you to operate it in fully automatic mode, or as a six-speed manual using paddle shifts behind the steering wheel, similar to the gear shift arrangement in the Maserati. And it is just as responsive – there is no hesitation or momentary delay between the time you hit the paddle and instant the gears shift and the engine responds. That response is handy when you simply want it: essential if you need it.

The road was dry, the sun was high there was only one other car on the deserted New England highway and it was too early in the day for anyone to have cocktails. Unfortunately, no one sent that memo to the other motorist, who had difficulty staying

within his lane. I gave him a wide berth, leaving him the left two lanes and slipping to the far right lane while approaching a long, gentle, banked curve at just over 100.

Suddenly, the road hog ahead began swerving more than usual, and it was clear he was going to come all the way across the four-lane road. Slamming the brakes was not a good option with such an unpredictable target. The Continental has four-wheel drive and traction control, and is as steady on curves as it is in the driveway. So I tapped the paddle down to 5th gear – my hands never leaving the wheel – and accelerated to 120, narrowly clearing him as he meandered off the road and into the grass – hopefully to sleep it off.

Bentley's designers gave as much thought to the interior of the Continental as their engineers did to the power parts. It has a pillarless cabin – there is no center post marking the doors or windows to mar the sight lines. The unbroken expanse of glass adds to the feeling of roominess in a cabin which can comfortably hold four NBA centers. Rear passengers even have scalloped, padded recesses for their elbows. It is luxurious, soft, spacious, quiet, and insisting on owning the road.

It was early afternoon, the New England sun was high, Jon Lucien crooned through the Bentley's nine speakers and we were alone on the road with only the watchful eyes of migrating hawks to mark our passage.

"It's so quiet in here," said my companion, "that it's as if the car wasn't really moving. Do you think we'd hear the wind if we were going fast?"

"We're at 140," I said. "How much more speed do you think we need to test it?"

"That will do just fine," she said, reclining the seat. "This is just perfect."

2005 Bentley Continental GT

MSRP:		\$155,990
EPA Mileage:	11 mpg city	18 mpg highway

Performance/ Safety:

0-60 Mph	4.7 Seconds
0-100 Mph	11.25 Seconds
30-50 Mph	1.83 Seconds
50-70 Mph	2.5 Seconds
Top Speed	198 mph

6.0-Liter Twin Turbo W-12 engine producing 552 horsepower and 479 pound-feet of torque @ 1,600 rpm; full automatic transmission with manual shift; four-wheel drive; ride height control; Bosch Electronic Stability Program and traction control; Bosch anti-lock brake system with brake assist and emergency brake force distribution; progressive air spring suspension; speed sensitive power assisted rack and pinion steering; vented disc brakes; electronic stability program; 19-inch alloy wheels; 2 full length curtain head airbags; 2 frontal airbags; 2 front seat thorax airbags, four side airbags

Comfort:

AM/FM radio; 6-in-dash CD changer with Alpine sound system and 9 speakers; hand polished tulipwood; hand stitched leather steering wheel and seats; individual climate zones.