

Extended Joy Rides:

The Car as a Vacation

By Roger Witherspoon

LAS VEGAS – The towering hotels along the Strip faded to a glittering orb in the rear view mirror as both the desert sun and speedometer in the Shelby Mustang GT topped 120.

This was a custom modified Mustang, augmented in Shelby's facilities hard by the Las Vegas Speedway to give it more power, better handling, a lower stance and the ability to transport the imagination as well as the body. This was the car Steve McQueen used to roar down the bad guys in *Bullitt*, and I couldn't help but imagine a posse of assorted motorized bad guys trailing in my dust.

Heat waves shimmered off the nearly deserted highway and cactus flew by as the black Shelby with the twin gold racing stripes roared along. The image of the high powered car racing along the open desert roadway trailing a gently arcing cloud of dust has long been a staple of car ads and boys' imaginations. So when Hertz provided the opportunity to take a 325 horsepower Shelby Mustang GT and just go in any direction I jumped at the chance. And though Las Vegas – the nation's glittering gambling capital and architectural wonderland – was the base of operations, the lure for this trip was the open road and sports cars to play with.

And that is the objective of a growing vacation niche, which postures the car as part of the destination rather than just an additional expenses to get you from one fun place to another. For Hertz, the notion of the car as a part of the destination comes in two flavors: activity vehicles, and show cars.

If you want a high profile as part of your vacation, you tap the company's Prestige line and rent a Cadillac XLR – the high powered sports car with the retractable hard top and ability to hit 180 miles an hour – or a Jaguar, Lincoln Navigator, or other set of wheels that turn heads as you cruise by. Or if adventure is what you crave, you tap into Hertz' Fun Collection, which includes the custom Shelby Mustang GT, the Mazda Miata, the eclectic PT Cruiser, or go off-road in a Hummer H3 or Jeep Wrangler.

You do pay a premium for the fun: Shelby Motors converted 500 Ford Mustang GTs into the high performing sports models bearing the Shelby logo specifically for Hertz, and they cost more than \$300 per day to rent. You pay a premium for their other vehicles as well. In addition, you risk forfeiting the insurance coverage and violating the rental agreement if you truly go off the deep end in their off-road vehicles.

The notion of a car as part of the vacation came from Hertz' marketing vice president Frank Camacho, who joined the company eight years ago after a career in the hotel business.

"I thought cars were exciting," Camacho said, "and I always felt when people went on vacations at resorts they loved to pamper themselves and do something that was special. A lot of people save up all year long to take a one or two-week trip but would pull up to a luxury hotel in a four-door sedan that they wouldn't want to own. That didn't make sense to me."

So he came up with the Prestige line of luxury cars – the XLR will set you back about \$100,000 – for vacationers to travel in style. From that beginning evolved the Fun

Collection for those who didn't care about their profile, but wanted to have fun on wheels. Essentially, the Fun collection has cars in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range and with the exception of the Shelby, will cost about \$150 to \$200 daily to rent.

In that price range you can get a Mazda Miata, put the top down and head out across the desert. The two cup holders are perfect for the required two bottles of water – one to drink, and the other to periodically pour into your hat to prevent sunstroke. It is not nearly as fast as the Shelby, but when you are low to the ground in a roadster, pushing 100 miles an hour and sliding through the road mirages shimmering just above the highway, the feeling is pretty much the same.

For those to whom the car *is* the vacation rather than an exotic part of the vacation, there is Club Sportiva. If you crave excitement and really want to splurge, you can pay \$3,000 to \$12,000 and join Sportiva, a performance car time share, and have access to a Ferrari, Maserati, Lamborghini Gallardo or Formula 1 race car and private club house to talk to other hot rod enthusiasts about the day's adventure.

This is not a rental, but an investment. Sportiva is a time share membership requiring the purchase of points which are redeemed for cars for varying periods of time. Essentially, the membership gives you 30 days' a year behind the wheel of the sports car of your choice, plus year-round access to its club houses. (www.clubsportiva.com)

Sportiva is relatively new to the vacation car business, with operations currently in San Francisco and San Jose, California, and Munich, Germany. But as word has spread, it is expanding to Las Vegas – primarily the Speedway outside of town – Miami and San Diego. And there are plans to spread to Florida and elsewhere in the South and Southwest.

“We are not rushing to get into the Snowbelt,” said Sportiva founder Torbin Fuller. “It is counter intuitive to encourage people to drive a Lamborghini in snowy weather. Putting a \$100,000 sports in the snow would give you pause.”

To people like Suzanne Garner, a software engineer from Santa Clara, Cal., adventure and vacations were synonymous. She had left her keyboard to go step out of a plane 3,000-feet above Oahu and skydive over the Hawaiian isle. She has a white Mazda Miata with pink and purple racing stripes which she pits against other small roadsters in stock car races set up by Hooked on Driving, which sponsors events in northern California.

The thrill of the race and push of the gravitational forces deeply into her seat became Garner's drug of choice, and she began driving bigger and faster cars. Then she saw a brochure for Sportiva, with a Formula 1 Prost race car with an 800 horsepower engine and the opportunity to try it out at the Las Vegas Speedway.

“As soon as I saw it, I said I must do that,” she recalled. “There was no question I was going to Las Vegas.”

It was a cool morning by Las Vegas standards with the temperature hovering around 100 degrees when Garner left the clubhouse and walked across the paddock to her car of the day.

“I remember thinking it was much smaller than the Miata,” said Garner, and it has half the weight. But then there is that huge engine. I remember feeling a grin all across my face and thinking ‘This is mine’. And then, things got real intense.

“That thing was a rocket. I didn’t move the throttle more than two or three degrees and my body was jerked back like the way a plane takes off – but multiplied by a hundred. And I just yelled ‘Wow! This thing can go!’ It was such an amazing car.”

And when the day was done, and she finally rolled in for her last pit stop, “the grin was real wide and it didn’t leave. I loved sky diving and the thrill of leaving the security of the airplane and stepping off into the unknown.

“But the Formula 1 was a million times more fun than sky diving.”