

# ROAD TRIP JUNKIE

A father and son embark on an epic European drive  
in their 1959 Porsche 356A Cabriolet.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY IAN KUAH

In the summer of 2022, classic Porsche enthusiast James Demmert sent his 1959 356A Cabriolet from California to Southern Spain. This long sea journey was just the prelude to an epic Riviera Road Rally that would take James, his son Hudson, and their classic Porsche through Spain, France, and Germany to its spiritual home in Stuttgart, taking in Austria and Italy on the way back.

The story started over two years earlier when James and his family bought a house in Connecticut and decided to drive their 1974 911 over 3,000 miles from San Francisco instead of shipping the car.

"The car had no air-conditioning, and as it was summer, so the drive was not too comfortable," James recalls. "But the journey itself was amazing as we crossed parts of the country, like Montana and the

Great Plains, which we had never seen before. We were in awe of the wide-open spaces with few signs of civilization for miles. It was like being on another planet." The 911 was reliable, and they had such a great time that they vowed to do a road trip every few years.

"When we were discussing the possibility of buying a European vacation home in Southern Spain, it seemed log-

ical to ship one of our classic Porsches there and drive it across Europe to christen its homecoming," continues James. The car chosen for this second driving adventure was their 356A Cabriolet, which had been part of the family for approximately a decade.

Family Demmert had decided to base themselves in Marbella, on the southern tip of Spain. Known as the Costa del Sol (Coast of the Sun), this Mediterranean coastal area is the southernmost part of Europe, facing North Africa, and features a climate not dissimilar to that of Southern California. The Porsche duly arrived in Spain in the spring of 2022 on its California license plates and was given temporary import papers that allowed it to stay in Europe for up to six months.







**Situated next to** Porsche's Zuffenhausen Werk 2 at the time, Stuttgarter Karosseriewerk Reutter & Co. GmbH turned out just 447 of these pretty 356A Cabriolets in the 1959 model year, so the Demmert car is rare. Powered by a 1,582-cc flat-four overhead valve engine making 60 horsepower at 4,500 rpm, this early Porsche is no ball of fire, but it is a smooth and comfortable cruiser once you get up to speed in fourth gear.

Things went just fine on the journey north through Spain, the little silver Porsche humming along contentedly with James and Hudson stopping off in Madrid and San Sebastian before crossing into France and turning northeast towards Lyon. From there, they pointed the Cabriolet towards its birthplace in Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, the northernmost waypoint of their trip, where a visit to the Porsche Museum beckoned. They had a blast. Even so, working out the logistics of a trip like this in advance to the finest possible details takes work.

"You set up hotel reservations for each night, but when you have never made the trip before, it is hard to judge distance and time," James explained. "Sometimes you have to pick up the pace, but unlike in a powerful modern car, it is harder to make up time when you are running late and have just 60 horses!"

Judging fuel consumption and range was another issue. "We were mindful of the distance between gas stations and aimed to never let the fuel level fall below one quarter," continued James. "I knew from owning the car for many years that the mechanical fuel gauge was not very accurate, so I used the old-school solution of dipping a wooden spoon into the tank. The markings I made on its handle give a fairly accurate indication of when roughly 100 miles worth of fuel is left."

With the high point of their trip now behind them, the intrepid duo pointed the Porsche's nose southeast towards the Alps. They had just crossed the border into Austria, heading for Salzburg, when the car started to show signs of electrical problems. The engine started to go off song, its electrical power rising and falling in an anxiety-provoking scenario halfway into their trip and a very long way from home. Fingers crossed, they drove across

The original and immaculate 356A Cabriolet up close; its six-volt dynamo proved to be the single weak point.





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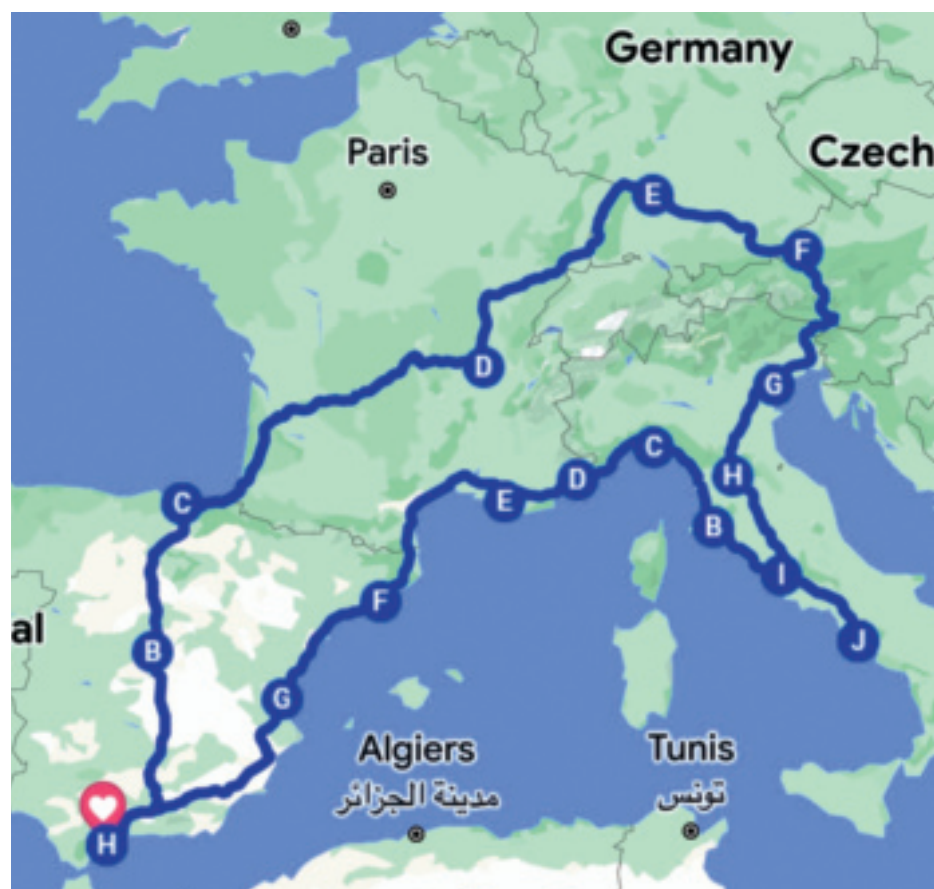


## 1959 356A Cabriolet

Drive	Rear-wheel drive
Layout	Rear-engine
Wheelbase	82.7 inches
Engine	1.6-liter flat-four
Transmission	4-speed manual
Horsepower	60 hp
Torque	81 lb-ft
Weight	1,874 lbs
Pounds Per HP	31.2 lbs/hp
0-60 mph	14.3 seconds
Top Speed	99 mph



At the tender age of 63, this early Porsche took the 4,350-mile European journey in its stride.



the border into Italy towards Venice and Florence, with the car intermittently losing electrical power.

“If I switched the engine off and restarted it, things would be fine for a while,” said James. “But once we were deep in Italy, the car really started to act up, and several times, we had to find people to help us push it up hills. It was the height of summer on the Italian Riviera, and we were hot, very frustrated, and on the point of packing it in and having the car trailered back to Marbella.”

Before calling it a day, the Demmerts had a serious discussion about their next step. They decided to press on despite being in the precarious position of not knowing when the car might expire.

“We were also between a rock and a hard place with the summer heat,” James continued. “If we drove with the top up, it was like being in a sauna; with the top down, we burned under the intense sun. We ended up driving along in our bathing suits to try and stay relatively cool! This trial by fire turned out to be a tremendous

bonding experience, and we managed to get through it by looking forward together rather than at each other.”

And so the Italian Riviera tentatively unfolded under the wheels of their stuttering 356A Cabriolet. One after another, the cities of Venice, Florence, Rome, Positano, and Portofino passed into their rearview mirror until they crossed the border back into France. Their westward journey took them through the coastal towns of Monaco, Nice, and Marseille before they turned south into Spain. Barcelona and Valencia came and went, and with near immaculate timing, the six-volt dynamo finally gave up the ghost as they reached Marbella, stranding them by the side of the road about 10 miles short of home.

A classic car specialist workshop, Marbella Service Plus, run by Belgian brothers Bart and Wout, had been recommended to James. They confirmed that the Porsche’s ancient dynamo was as dead as the proverbial Dodo and sourced a replacement. They also did a couple of other small jobs that brought the car back to peak mechanical condition, and it started and ran perfectly throughout our photo shoot.

Driving about 4,350 miles around Southern Europe in their 1959 Porsche 356A Cabriolet was an epic adventure. James and his family are fired up to make even more trips in the car, which was officially imported into Spain and now proudly wears Spanish Historic license plates. “While the 356A Cabriolet is valuable today,” said James, “I do believe cars like this are meant to be driven and not be garage queens.” ■

