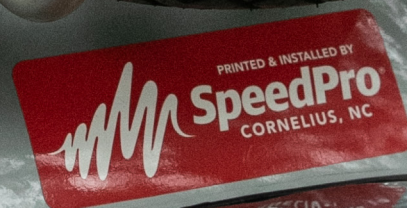




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On Their Own
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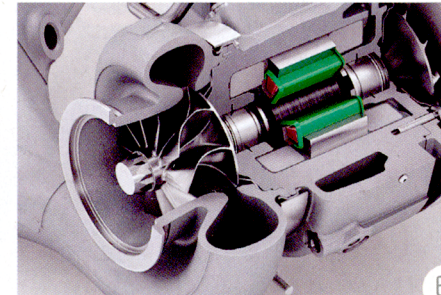
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ON

RACING A 356 IN LA CARRERA PANAMERICANA

THEIR

CREATED A LIFETIME ADVENTURE.

OWN

STORY BY **SEAN CRIDLAND**
PHOTOS: **NICOLA VENCHIERUTTI COLLECTION & BY THE AUTHOR**





When it comes to celebrating life, Italian-born Nicola Venchierutti, now of North Carolina, prefers creative imagination and the spirit of adventure over the world of expectations and conventions. So when he thought of racing in Mexico's legendary La Carrera Panamericana open-road stage race, he had something special in mind: a self-supported trip carrying all tools and parts, driving his 356 race car to and from the event.



The son of a prominent Murano glass maker with a global customer base, Venchierutti was encouraged early on to become conversant in several languages. When it came time learn English and a trade, Southern California called to his spirit. He spent the summer of 1986 at UCLA learning English, then returned in 1990 to study business at Pepperdine. That's when Venchierutti found himself in the midst of a California car culture rife with all the 1960s- and early 1970s-era American muscle cars and started a business shipping American iron back to his friends in Europe. When someone requested a 1952 Porsche 356 he wanted as an investment, Venchierutti found it, but there was a 1953 parked right next to it. "I figured if my friend thought it was a good investment, I should get one, too," Venchierutti said.

There was something both enchanting and endearing about the early Porsche he hadn't expected. "It was in really rough shape back then, in primer grey, but I was driving it to school every day," Venchierutti said. "All my friends thought it was such a cool car, and it got comments everywhere I took it. So I slowly fell in love with it, too. Gradually, I started to learn more about Porsche history and culture. Then it became a passion."

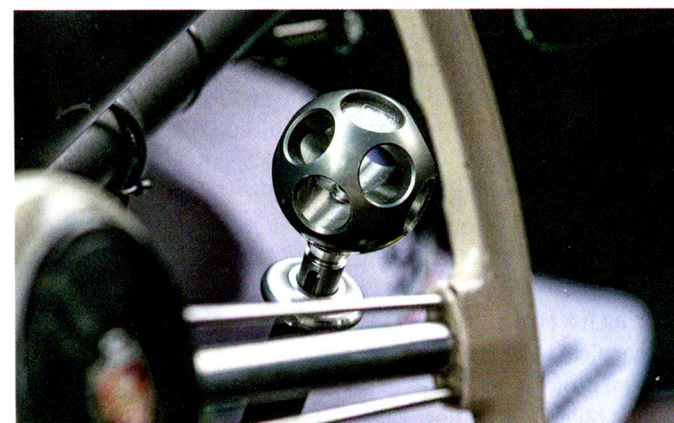
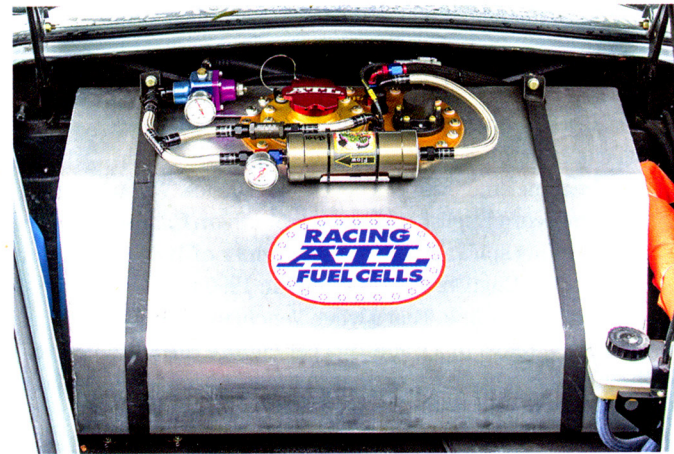
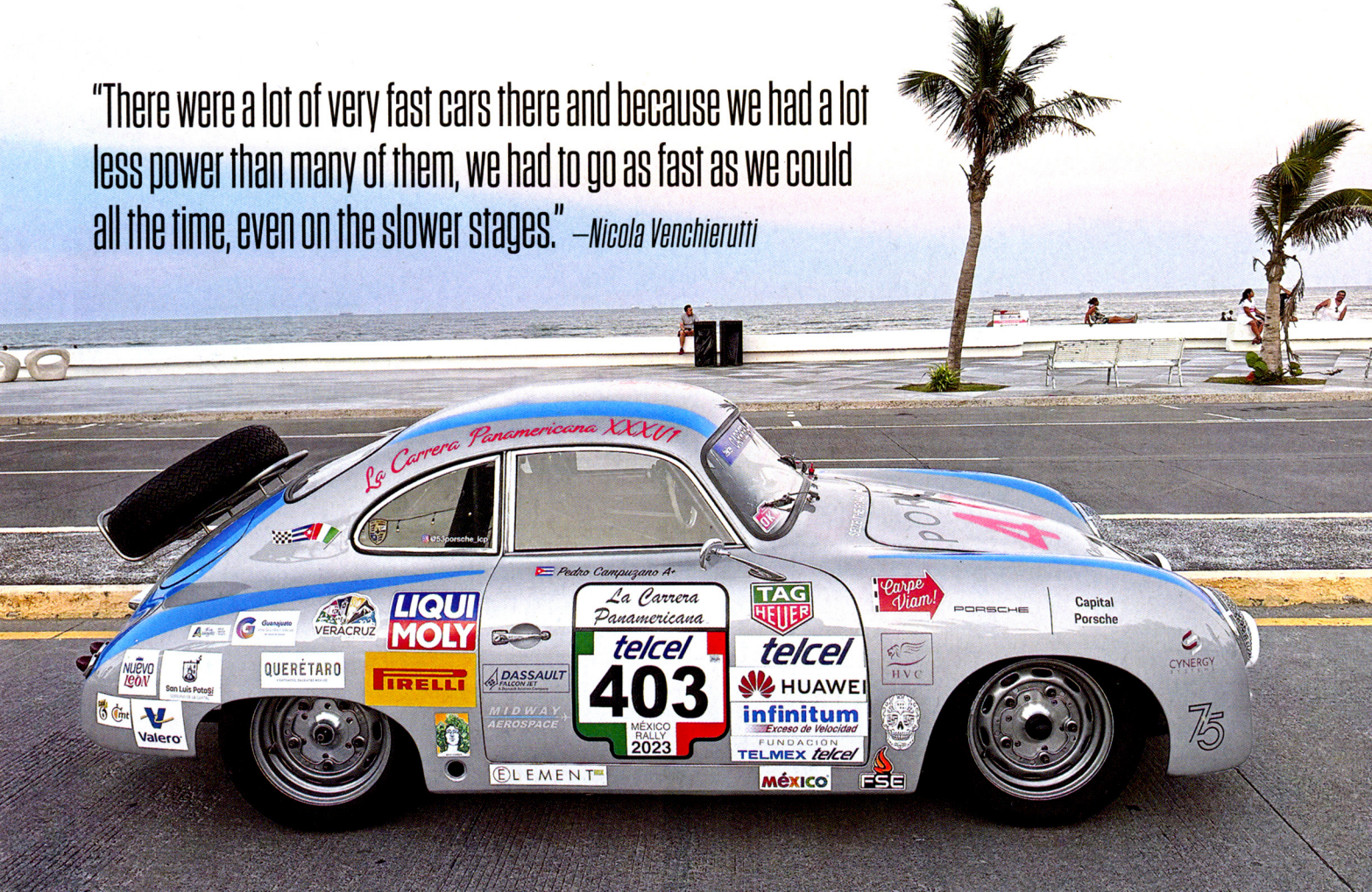
So much so that when he returned to Europe after getting his degree, the car went with him. It stayed there

while he worked as a stockbroker in the early 2000s, then when he moved to North Carolina in the fall of 2013 for a position in the aerospace industry, he sent for the 356 and began driving it regularly in rallies and entering concours events, where it received high marks from his friends in the Porsche community. But showing a car and driving from restaurant to restaurant were never part of Venchierutti's Porsche dreams. He needed something more engaging.

Through some acquaintances in North Carolina, he met fellow enthusiast Pedro Campuzano. It was instantly apparent that Campuzano had oil, gas, and Porsche air-cooled engines running through his veins. His father ran an independent sports car repair shop in Georgia, specializing in Porsche. Still in his teens, Campuzano crewed for several national-level SCCA teams, then worked as a mechanic in IMSA Camel Lights (the less powerful version of the fabulous GTP cars of the 1980s), applied his skills for formula-car constructor Ralt, and then joined the Newman/Haas IndyCar team. Since then, Campuzano has worked as a design engineer at Joe Gibbs Racing for most of the last two decades and keeps his mechanical skills sharp working in his home shop on personal projects and those of his friends.

Initially, they talked about how Campuzano might

"There were a lot of very fast cars there and because we had a lot less power than many of them, we had to go as fast as we could all the time, even on the slower stages." —Nicola Venchierutti



help to overhaul Venchierutti's car for better street performance, but it didn't take long before the conversation turned to a more ambitious project: La Carrera Panamericana. Why La Carrera? Of course, there are the obvious ties to the Porsche line of performance cars, almost all named Carrera, but there was more. "It's the only classic car event where you go as fast as you can on an open road," Venchierutti said. "For me, classic cars are far more interesting than modern ones. Yes, there are other classic events such as the Mille Miglia and the Targa Florio, but they are more social than they are competitive. I wanted both worlds: Classic cars going as fast as they can go. No other event does that."

EVENUALLY, TALK TURNED from whimsy to evaluating the work needed to ready a car for a multiday stage race, as La Carrera Panamericana traverses nearly 2,200 miles from Veracruz to Nuevo León across eight states in Mexico. Gradually, Campuzano started building lists of performance and safety modifications. Though it was an ambitious project, Venchierutti was convinced they could do it, but imposed only two limitations: The car had to retain its 1953 shape, and he wanted to do a self-supported trip to and from the race. The two agreed, and in 2021 Campuzano got to work stripping the car of its engine, transmission, suspension, and all interior bits to ready the car for a 2022 entry at La Carrera.

That meant room for two men, personal gear, commonly needed replacement parts, and the tools needed for a three-week expedition. With that in mind, Campuzano's first project was to build a roll cage that would keep the duo safe during the running of the legendarily dangerous race, provide more chassis rigidity for crisper handling, and also leave enough space for everything they brought along. Once completed, he replaced its 1500cc engine with one more suited to the project.

Using a 1958 case with a 912 third piece (timing cover), 1962 heads, and Shasta cylinders and pistons, Campuzano built a 1720cc unit providing extra power and rock-steady reliability. That accomplished, he went through the transmission, replacing any questionable parts with ones he either purchased or milled himself to create a piece that could survive the rigors of competition, but shift easily for everyday driving. The same attention was paid to all suspension and steering components. The suspension was the perfect solution needed for a comfortable ride over several thousand miles, but rigid enough for precise handling at racing speeds.

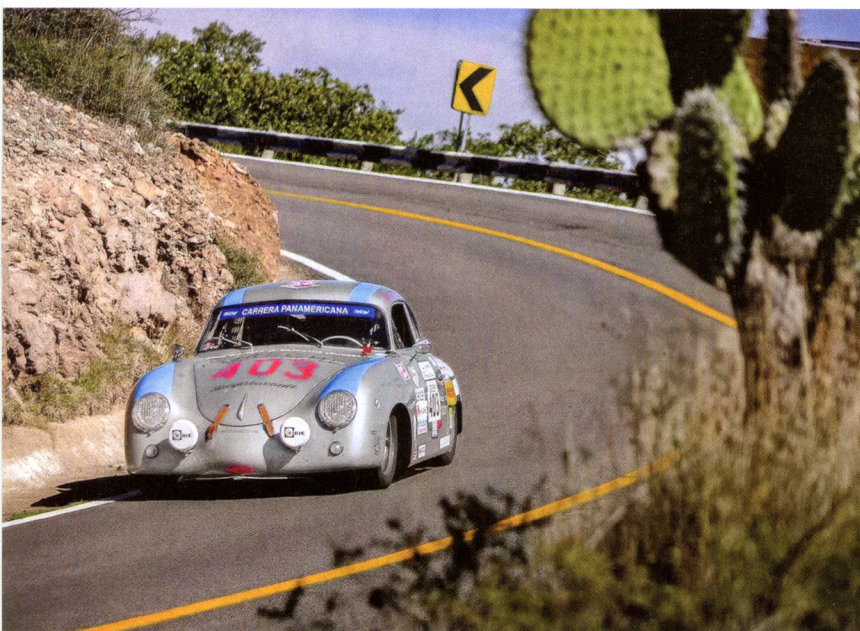
When it became apparent that their goal of racing in 2022 was impossible, they reset their sights for 2023, giving them time to double-check their lists, test the car's mechanical viability, and plan their routes to and from Mexico. Even with the extra time allotted, the early October 2023 start date came up quickly. After taking several days to load their equipment, they set off for the adventure of a lifetime.



The 2023 edition of La Carrera Panamericana included seven stages from Veracruz to Nuevo León, traveling from sea level to altitudes well over 7,000 feet and a total distance of nearly 2,200 miles, plus another 4,000 miles on their journey to and from the race. Below, Pedro Campuzano and Nicola Venchierutti pose proudly at the finish line with their medals of achievement.

From Charlotte, they traveled to Atlanta, where they visited the Porsche Experience Center and showed off their car to staff and visitors. Then it was on to Tallahassee, where Venchierutti and Campuzano and their La Carrera racer were featured guests of a dealer during a new-model introduction. They visited friends in New





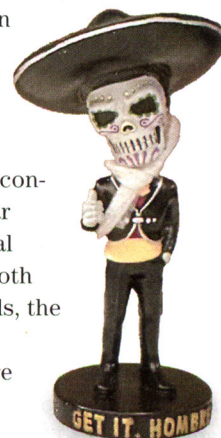
Orleans and San Antonio, then made their way to the border crossing at Laredo and on to the start in Veracruz. The two were ready to race—or so they thought.

THE PAGEANTRY WAS overwhelming, with ceremonies and parades celebrating the start of the event, press pushing for interviews, and all the competitors checking out each other's racing cars. More than that, the competition was daunting. If Venchierutti was looking for a challenge, he found it. Even if the entrants aren't vying for world championship points, most of the cars entered had full team support, were brutally fast, and mostly driven by semipro and fully professional drivers. "There were a lot of very fast cars there and because we had a lot less power than many of them, we had to go as fast as we could *all* the time, even on the slower stages," Venchierutti said.

In almost every stage they found themselves bringing up the rear, though it probably didn't help that they were carrying an extra 600 pounds of gear that their competitors weren't. Though Campuzano had so thoroughly prepared the car that they had no serious mechanical issues, a faulty navigation system got them into trouble a few times. "Our GPS was cutting out. A couple times we got lost," Venchierutti said. "Then we'd see a car we knew was in the race and stay with it for as long as we could. Sometimes that meant driving faster than we would have liked, but it worked out."

Still, they soldiered on, doing daily maintenance when most of the other drivers were either celebrating a stage victory or sleeping. With no major breakdowns or crashes, they finished second in class OP (Original Panam). "From a competitive standpoint, I think doing it the way we did was the best," Venchierutti said. "It started out as a budgetary constraint, as the only way we could afford it was to self-support. But I think it was much more of an adventure for us than the 'arrive-and-drive' guys with full transport and mechanical support. I wouldn't do anything different, and I think those guys missed out on a true adventure. It was also life-changing to see all the people who came out to watch. It was very humbling to see the kind of poverty so many people live with, and then compare it to our lives and the kind of adventures we're so privileged to enjoy."

Since then, they've taken the car to prestigious Amelia Island concours and some other smaller car shows, and have plans for several others. Though they've earned both competitive and concours awards, the real trophy has been the experience of undertaking an adventure shared by very few in the motor-ing world. ●



Nearly all the cars Venchierutti and Campuzano raced against were more powerful and faster, plus none carried personal and mechanical gear.

