

# **Barrier Breaker**

**Text by Sean Cridland**

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**and by Sean Cridland**

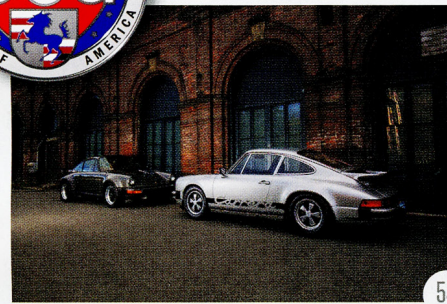
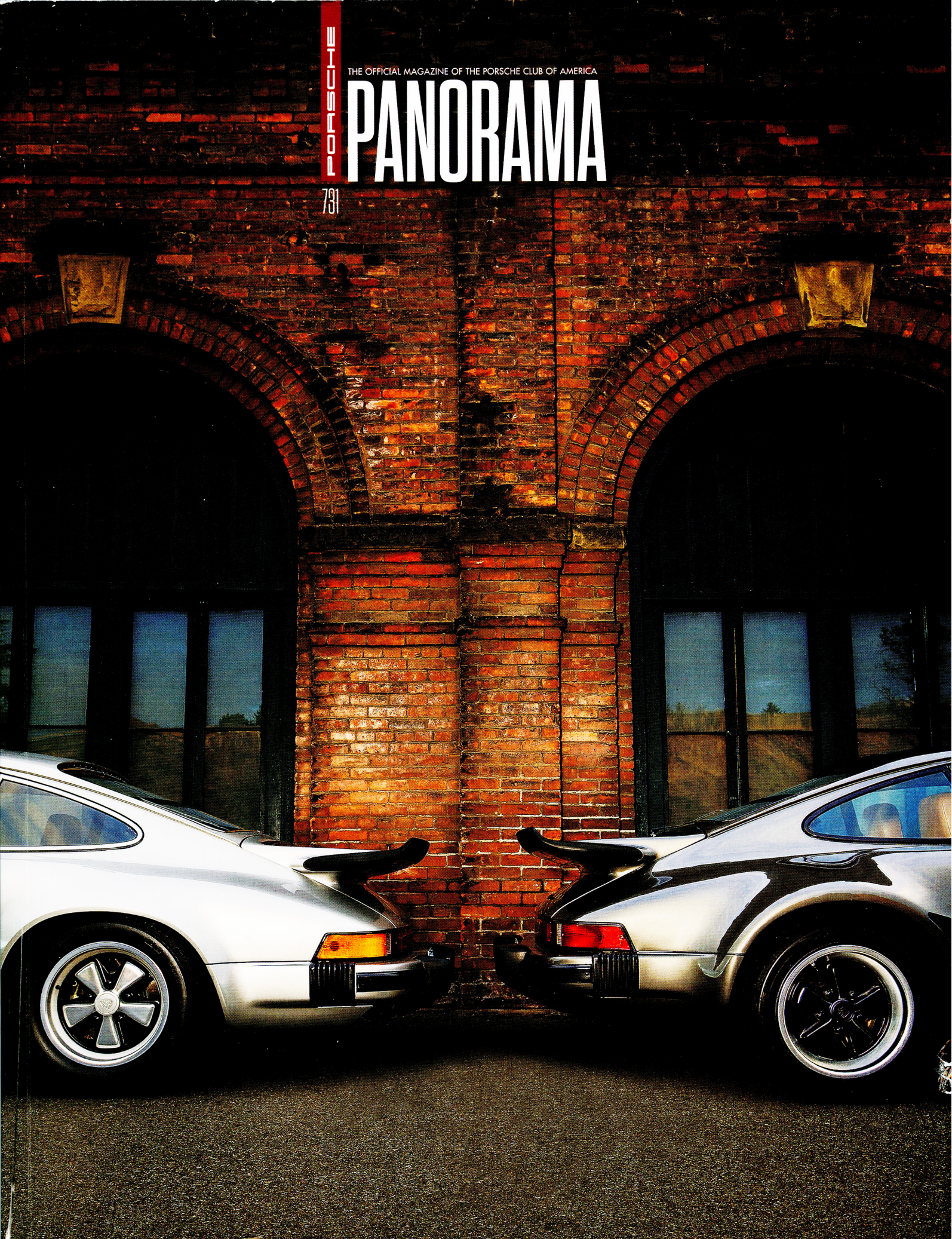
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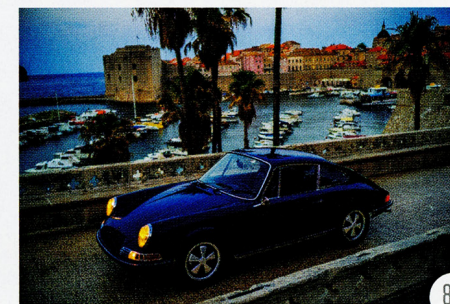
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# BARRIER BREAKER

ONCE RENÉE BRINKERHOFF  
DECIDED TO BECOME  
A RACE CAR DRIVER, NOTHING  
WAS GOING TO STOP HER.

STORY BY **SEAN CRIDLAND**  
PHOTOS COURTESY **VALKYRIE RACING**

**WATCH RENÉE BRINKERHOFF** cavort on stage with the likes of Alain de Cadenet and Donald Osborne at Monterey Car Week's Concours on the Avenue in Carmel, California, and you'd never guess her background. Not in a million years. Although she's becoming well-known for her exploits in the current-day version of La Carrera Panamericana, her past is equally intriguing and her future promises even bigger, almost unimaginable dreams.

Like many in the Porsche community, she's never been one to live conventionally or be limited by perceptions and expectations. As this writer said when introducing Renée to Pikes Peak legend Jeff Zwart, "What she has in mind sounds crazy, but if anyone can make it happen, it's Renée."

With five La Carreras in her past (winning her class twice), Renée and her Colorado-based Valkyrie Racing team have decided to up the ante. The plan is to participate in raid/rally races on all seven continents in the span of three years, all in the same 1956 356A coupe she's been racing the last several years.

Having recently completed the 2017 La Carrera, the car has been in preparation for the last several months and—by the time you read this—will be aboard a ship en route to the 2018 Targa Tasmania, the second leg of the Valkyrie Racing World Rally Tour, which will span the globe and wrap up in Antarctica in the "balmy" December weather of 2020.





It wasn't that long ago that ideas like this were the stuff of Jules Verne novels. Throughout the span of automotive history, there have been a smattering of "race around the world" type events, but few have crossed north/south hemispherical boundaries, nor have any ventured to Antarctica. And certainly none have done it with a 356.

## RENÉE WAS A SELF-DESCRIBED

housewife for most of her life. We all know by now that the term "housewife" is a loaded word, which in less appreciative times was not held in the highest esteem. But that's no longer the case. Renée was a homemaker of the most involved and active kind for all of her adult life. Along with her husband, William, she home-schooled her four children, writing her own curricula while encouraging each of her kids to learn to play a musical instrument and participate in sports. Typical of Renée's style, it was an around-the-clock job of the highest intensity that allowed little time for her own pursuits.

Renée was the third of four girls born to Captain Howard Ferris and Muriel Mushett. Renée's dad was a U.S. Marine who saw action during the Korean War and became fluent in Mandarin, making him a valuable asset as a military liaison and translator in the ensuing decades. Renée spent her early years (ages 2-4) in Taiwan. Later, her dad's expertise took the family to Hong Kong and Macau, where Renée attended fifth, sixth, and seventh grade during Mao's Cultural Revolution in China, some of which spilled over into the British and Portuguese colonies. For young Renée, it was just part of growing up.

After a couple of years in Pennsylvania, the family moved to Vientiane, Laos (less than 300 miles from Hanoi), where her dad was in charge of security for the United States embassy between 1972 and 1973 during the later years of the Vietnam War. Though she never felt imperiled, she had classmates who lost family members to coups and other military actions. It's no wonder Renée isn't fazed by much.

After graduating from high school in San Clemente, California, Renée spent time in Maui, Hawaii before attending college at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where she met William Brinkerhoff at a church group social. The connection was instant. They were engaged three days after they met and got married three

months after that. Pre-med student Renée shelved her career goals to raise children William Jr., Mark, Juliette, and Christina.

Renée's dedication to her kids and husband kept her constantly busy, and this commitment limited her ability to go on the kinds of adventures she'd grown up with, until one day—after the kids were through college—she found herself saying, "One day I'm going to... race a car." That might sound like something any Porsche aficionado might say, but for 56-year-old homemaker Renée, who knew nothing about cars or racing, it was an epiphany.

## WHAT FOLLOWED WAS

an extensive internet search about the different kinds of car racing, from stock cars to sports cars, dirt cars to Indy cars. Renée learned anything and everything she could. Her husband's cousin Kenny had vintage raced a Corvette for years and took Renée to a Cars and Coffee, thinking she'd be happy just to have a nice car and show it occasionally. She didn't find that satisfying at all. She didn't want to be a poseur. Perhaps one of the driving schools might fulfill her appetite? No. She didn't want to play at racing. She wanted to race.

At some point in their conversations, Kenny mentioned he was getting involved in the Porsche 356 market. When she saw one, Renée knew instantly that the 356 would be her car. During another conversation, the contemporary version of La Carrera Panamericana came up. She did some intense research about the seven-day, 3,000-kilometer (1,864-mile) event, and the mold was set. That would be her race. The fact that she had never driven a racing car of any kind was not a deterrent. She'd figure it out. La Carrera would return her to the life of adventure she had yearned for.

Of course, there were many people—including family—who tried to discourage and dissuade her because of the inherent dangers of racing cars, the reputation of the

Mexican open-road race, and the potential hazards of racing in a country rife with drug wars and civil unrest. But the woman who'd grown up all over Southeast Asia in the 1960s and early 1970s wasn't bothered.

With the help of California 356 specialist Jim Ansite, she found a 1956 356A coupe. Then she had it converted to racing specifications by Coloradoan Greg Johnson of Eurosport in Denver, with a 12-volt electrical system, two-liter engine, dual Weber carburetors, five-speed transmission with limited-slip differential, 911 rear suspension, four-wheel disc brakes, full 3R-installed roll cage, 80-liter fuel cell, and on-board fire suppression system. Johnson also worked with Renée on the overall concept of the car, which has louvered, enclosed rear quarter-windows. Later, as Renée's racing schedule increased, Ansite took over full responsibility for the car.

Renée attended several sessions at the Porsche Sport Driving School, where she got a chance to ride with Hurley Haywood. She still recalls the warmth she felt when Haywood told her, "You're teachable; you're following instructions. You can do it." Soon, Valkyrie Racing took flight. Between driving schools, she worked with Ansite and Johnson to learn as much about the car as she could, trying to master as many of the mechanical and handling intricacies as possible. Words like camber, caster, toe-in, rebound rates, and compression were completely new to her vocabulary. Although she admits mechanical details are not her strong suit, she started to participate in conversations on how the suspension would be set up and how much they should push the engine.

**IN 2012, BEFORE FIELDING** her own car in La Carrera, Renée figured it might be better to participate with someone who already had experience with the event, so she joined forces with Paul Frame in his 356. It was an eye-opener on every level. La Carrera is no longer the internation-

**Right: At last summer's Carmel Concorso on the Avenue, Renée Brinkerhoff awed celebrity hosts Alain de Cadenet and Donald Osborne with her energy, optimism, and drive.**

**Below: Her faithful 356A before its first race. We wonder how it will look in 2021 after her world tour is completed.**



PHOTO SEAN CRIDLAND



**In 2013, Renée's first La Carrera Panamericana in her own car brought challenges—on the road and in urban areas—that she couldn't have dreamed of only a year earlier.**





Twisty climbing stages are a special challenge for the 356 racers attempting to maintain speed without losing momentum.

al spectacle it was in the 1950s, but throngs of spectators still crowd the start/finish areas and line the highways as the racers speed past.

The open road nature of the event, both in terms of its speed and distance, was unnerving. The logistical commitment was huge. During the very first stage, a competitor died. Another stage sent several cars off a cliff. Yet somehow, Renée wasn't intimidated. Instead, she was mesmerized by the adventure, the color, the crowds, the scale, the countryside. She was bitten by the Carrera bug. She'd be back in 2013 with her own team and car. But who would be her navigator?

She set several criteria for a co-driver. She wanted someone who knew the territory, was bilingual, and was a youngish, good-looking man. Before you start snickering, consider her reasoning. Obviously, someone who knew the territory would be valuable for giving on-course directions. A bilingual co-driver would help in dealing with local organizers, shops, hotels, and fellow competitors. But a young, good-looking

man? Renée spells it out in practical terms: "As one of very few woman competitors, it would be important to have a younger man who could handle a female team leader, rather than an older man entrenched in the ways of machismo." Similarly, she knew that in the search for sponsors, having a good-looking man on the team literature would help. She was right on both counts. Roberto Mendoza filled the bill. Young, experienced, and good-looking, he's co-driven with Renée in each of the four Carreras she has driven.

**AFTER A BRIEF TRACK TEST** at Colorado's High Plains Raceway, just east of Denver, the team set off for the start of the race—her very first one as driver—in Veracruz. Some of her crew had never been out of the country and were leery of everything they'd heard about Mexico. Even Renée, whose dream it was to be there, confesses that she prayed intensely every morning because she was afraid of the speed and the roads. Yet, somehow, they won their first stage, then stretched it out to

a substantial class lead that transformed into a win.

The next year, a vastly more experienced Valkyrie Racing fought weather generated by two hurricanes, including rain, fog, and muddy roads. Despite that, they managed to finish 14th overall and second in class.

By 2015, the car was fully sorted and Renée had three years of experience under her belt. In addition, she had brought on an energetic team manager, Johana Mendoza (no relation to co-driver Roberto), to carry the responsibilities of logistics, travel arrangements, and public relations. Life should have been much easier, but it wasn't. If anything, the successes of the previous two years carried the pressure of expectations. While naïvete and a sense of wonder had carried Renée through the first couple of years, the realities of racing had set in, leaving her to wonder if she could live up to the image she had created. Doubts set in, but Renée the racer decided to forge ahead.

Then it happened. During one of the faster portions of the route,

there was oil on the road, a car off. She swerved, narrowly missed going off a cliff, and overcorrected. The car skidded in the other direction and careened over the guardrail. Fortunately, it was a safe landing. As all experienced racers know, it's only a matter of time, but it was devastating to Renée. Looking back, she remembers coming into that corner and noticing the crowds, a sure sign that it was a corner ripe for drama. It was a signal she blames herself for missing. Photos from the incident show her face ashen with the guilt of letting her team down.

That's when both Mendozas displayed their value to the team. Roberto calmed his driver and put his knowledge of the locale to work, finding a suitable garage in which to do repairs. For Johana, it was time to do the real work of team managing. This was the first car race she'd ever attended. Until that moment, she hadn't anticipated having to coordinate repairs on a race car and revive the spirits of her star driver.

Although the car was significantly damaged, they found a work location and the crew managed to pull out the dents and fix the suspension and steering overnight, enough so it could race the next day. Then, more trouble. After the team had already gone on ahead, the car lost most of its gearing, meaning it would have to be hauled by the sweep vehicle for that stage. A local Porsche enthusiast had the parts she needed, but there was still more drama ahead.

The crew told Renée that unless they were given a full day to look



through the entire car for potential trouble spots, they would pack up and go home. It was the right thing to do. They found a cracked steering box, not something you want on fast, twisty roads in one of the world's most dangerous races. Despite the crash and the down time, they managed to finish second in class. "It's

always the team that puts you across the finish line," says Renée, "Win or lose, it's the team."

Back home, it was time to assess the event: not just what had happened to the car, but also Renée's approach to the race. After a thorough examination, it was determined that the car's body had been twisted and



Veteran racers know it's inevitable, but for relative newcomer Renée, her first significant crash brought soul-searching and self-doubt. She's since moved on to newer and bigger challenges.



La Carrera in 2017 showcased the maturity of Brinkerhoff and co-driver Roberto Mendoza. They played it smart and outlasted a large group of 356s for a class win. **Opposite bottom: Brinkerhoff with her energetic team manager, Johana Mendoza.**

torqued and would require major reconstruction and restoration. It was shipped to European Collectibles in Southern California to receive attention from body man Andy Elsener.

The other half of the equation was more complicated, requiring Renée to get together with her family and manager Johana Mendoza. What were her goals? Had she already accomplished what she had set out to do? Was she satisfied, ready to let go? There would be time to reflect while the car was repaired.

Although she still blames herself for not recognizing the signs leading

up to her 2015 crash, Renée and her team have gained enough perspective to know that racing incidents happen and that racers move on, learning from their experiences.

**2016 WAS A REBUILDING YEAR**, both literally and figuratively. Once the car was presentable, Renée and Johana took it to Monterey Car Week, where they presented it at Carmel's Concours on the Avenue (it won an award) and PCA's Werks Reunion. "That was so much fun," she says. "People just loved seeing that car." The public show of support was just

what she needed to revive her confidence and reinvigorate her competitive spirit.

Rather than shrinking from the challenge ahead, Renée and Johana came up with the idea for the World Rally Tour. If the old saying, "When the going gets tough, the weird turn pro," embodies anyone, it's the now inseparable pairing of Renée Brinkerhoff and Johana Mendoza. The two started scheming. Because of Renée's Asian upbringing, she had yearned to do the Peking-to-Paris rally. But why stop with that grueling, month-long event? The dream

of the World Rally Tour was born.

They contacted Dwight Knowlton, author and artist of *The Little Red Racing Car*, *The Greatest Race*, and *The Small Silver Speedster* to design the logo. Work on the car continued through early 2017, but it appeared at Luftgekühlt in May and again at Concours on the Avenue in August, where de Cadenet and Osborne were bowled over by Renée's optimism and adventurousness as she announced the Valkyrie Racing World Rally Tour, comprising six races on seven continents. There are only six races because it's doubtful

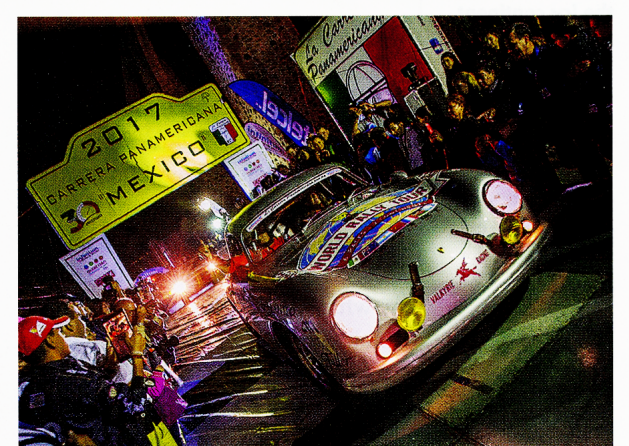


PHOTO SEAN CRIDLAND



# Project 356

Valkyrie Racing's World Rally Tour started at La Carrera Panamericana in 2017 and is scheduled to conclude on the icy continent of Antarctica in 2020.

**LA CARRERA PANAMERICANA**  
October 13-19, 2017  
■ 7 days  
■ 2,000 miles

**TARGA TASMANIA**  
April 16-21, 2018  
■ 6 days  
■ 1,200 miles

**GRAND PRIX OF SOUTH AMERICA**  
Oct. 18-Nov. 17, 2018  
■ 30 days  
■ 5,700 miles

**PEKING-TO-PARIS RALLY**  
June 2-July 7, 2019  
■ 36 days  
■ 9,300 miles

**EAST AFRICAN SAFARI CLASSIC**  
Nov. 23-Dec. 1, 2019  
■ 8 days  
■ 1,200 miles

**ANTARCTICA ICE 356**  
December 2020



that anyone else will challenge them in Antarctica.

The team returned to La Carrera this past fall, but again Renée was the only female driver. She remembers being at the pre-event drivers' meeting and being struck that she was the only woman among a group of what she calls "*Men men*: men you knew who were practiced in the arts and skills of survival."

It caused a brief meltdown, but she made it through. She wondered if she should even be there, in that man's world. But then she said, "No, this is exactly where we need to be. We have to do this. There's nothing to prove to anyone else. It's all about proving to one's self we could do it. We, as a team, decided to drive with our heads, not our hearts; to keep on the road and stay ahead, and it worked." By now, you will not be surprised to find out that the team took another class victory.

**WITH LA CARRERA PANAMERICANA** in the rearview mirror, the car is now being prepared for its next event, the Targa Tasmania, a famously fast and challenging race that has caught many an experienced driver off guard—and off course. The 356 is being completely rewired with a Motec data-acquisition system, making it easier for its mechanics, now led by Simon Red-head, to source difficulties.

Renée is in the process of choos-

ing a new co-driver with more expertise in the types of raid/rally events in which she will be competing. "If we're going to race as fast as we can, we need to be speaking the same language, and we'll have to adjust to working with a new person. You have to have good chemistry because you're spending hours a day in the car together, and days stretching into weeks. It's the only way it can work."

When the race in Tasmania is completed in late April of 2018, the car will be transported to Tuthill Porsche headquarters in England for a thorough inspection. The suspension and engine will be updated to appropriate specifications for the Grand Prix of South America, where it will race through desert and jungle from Buenos Aires, Argentina to Cartagena, Colombia. The 30-day, 5,700-mile race will start in mid-October 2018.

The daunting Peking-to-Paris rally—a 36-day sojourn through China, Mongolia, Russia, and most of Europe—will require a trip back to Oxfordshire for refitting and adaptation. The little 356A will later undergo yet another transformation for the mud holes and deserts of Kenya and Tanzania in the 2019 East African Safari Classic. And, finally, 2020 will see Tuthill transforming Renée's 356A coupe for its harshest challenge of all: the sub-zero temperatures of Antarctica.

"There are so many factors to consider," says Johana. "Most people think about keeping the little air-cooled engine warm enough so the lubricants don't freeze, or the logistics of getting the car to the far ends of the earth. But it's more than that. Extended exposure to extreme cold takes a toll on metals, which become brittle to the point of cracking and snapping. Fortunately, Tuthill has consulted with Jason De Carteret, who drove a specially outfitted Toyota Tacoma truck to the South Pole in 2014. He's lending his expertise to be sure the little 356 is properly outfitted to survive the cold. We'll be there and we'll be ready."

They considered having separate, specialized cars for each of the events, but Renée eventually decided that this 356 has a life story, and that the World Rally Tour is it. What happens beyond, she can't say. It



may end up in a museum, or it may become her daily driver.

Though Renée and Johana haven't worked out the details of the Antarctic event, they're currently calling it the Antarctic 356—it might be 356 miles, 356 kilometers, or 356 laps around the McMurdo Station research center—and expect perhaps only a few thousand penguins and some bored scientists as spectators.

After that, we have no doubt that Renée will find some new barriers to break. ☉



With two wins in four attempts, Brinkerhoff and Mendoza have become celebrity mainstays of the modern La Carrera. Now it's time for new challenges.