

CONTINENTAL SHIFT

Kicking off a double helping of grand-touring grandeur courtesy of Bentley, the rake tears up the bitumen on America's most iconic stretch of road, Route 66, in the marque's most muscular soft-top to date: the Continental GT Speed Convertible.

by nick scott photography jamie lipman and nick dimbleby

DASHING



In the sun-kissed forecourt of a well-appointed hotel in Scottsdale, Arizona, a fleet of vehicles in an array of colours — prosaically flashy bright red, funereal black, sumptuous aquamarine — is arranged in a semicircle. Drawing invisible circles in the air with my index finger, I let out a luxuriant hum of indecision before pointing at one that looks like its Junoesque curves and contours were fashioned entirely from melted-down gold bullion. “That one.” Like a spoilt child picking a dodgem.

Except the multihued fun-buggies glinting before me in the spring Arizonan rays are not fairground bumpers, but spanking new Bentleys. The Rake has been invited to take part in an epic 600-mile journey, from Scottsdale to Las Vegas via the twisting roads of the Tonto National Forest, Route 66 and the Grand Canyon, in the illustrious British marque's new Continental GT Speed Convertible. Before setting off, having placed my luggage in the glorious metallic-caramel chariot you see before you, I put one of the most meticulously crafted pieces of machinery I've ever been within slobbering distance of through a cursory inspection — otherwise known as a wide-eyed, guppy-mouthed bout of auto-lust, given unconvincing semblance of informed curiosity by a sage nod here and a nonchalant tyre-kick there.

You see, this car doesn't instantly inspire esoteric, petrol-head babble about transmission ratios and torque curves, because it tends to render the most dedicated oily-rag-sniffer speechless. From its regal front grille — an integral strand of Bentley's DNA — to the curvaceous rear haunches, it exudes hand-built pedigree and poised-to-pounce sportiness. Its high-tech hood has already been retracted today, and so the interior opulence — the diamond-quilted hide upholstery, the deep-pile floor mats, the richly grained dashboard wood with purposeful-

looking chrome dials and a stunning Breitling chronograph in the centre — is on full display, causing passers-by to neck-crane on an involuntary basis.

But it's the seductive shell of this classic grand-touring convertible that will turn heads all along our journey. Outside Hackberry General Store, for example, the last standing bastion of a mining town that fell into disrepair in 1919 — all old-school petrol pumps and Route 66 paraphernalia — a burly pair of gents astride rusty Harleys sneer at our wheels and brogues (in both senses of the word) before nodding in appreciation, stroking their ZZ Top facial fuzz and exclaiming, “Nice ride, guys!”

PUTTING THE 'REV' BACK IN 'REVOLUTION'

The most commonly reported reaction to seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time is one of humility and awe. I've been told numerous times by peers and pals, writers and reporters, that even a secular soul such as I would, taking in this dizzying expanse of geologic splendour, catch a fleeting glimpse of eternity — a tantalising peek at the glory and might of an omnipotent creator. And, as I stand on the lip of the Canyon's north rim, adjusting my eyes to focus on the snaking, thread-like Colorado River a mile beneath me, I realise they were absolutely right: I feel existentially dwarfed. A sense of my own insignificance overwhelms me in an all-consuming epiphany.

Then I get back behind the wheel of the Continental GT Speed, and instantly feel like Bobby Big-Potatoes: Janus, the Roman god of travel, channelling Juan Manuel Fangio on a mission to make Jack Kerouac's trans-America mythical odyssey look like a trip to Walmart for some Sellotape. It had become apparent early in the journey that this vehicle is the most



The author takes a couple of well-earned (by the car) breaks from breakneck grand-touring (below) at some landmarks of varying authenticity along Route 66.





driver-friendly Bentley ever built, thanks to its eight-speed transmission, upgraded lowered suspension and permanent all-wheel drive. A couple of hours into my gradual ascent into terrain high enough above sea level to have patches of snow by the roadsides, with the driver's seat massaging heat into me from behind and the chrome metal vents pumping it at me from the dash, a redolent, leathery haze billowing around me, I had decided that it was also the most comfortable.

Now, tearing along the gently contoured, perfectly straight ribbons of scarcely used yet excellently maintained road, the raw power of its turbocharged 6L, 616bhp W12 engine — the top speed of 202mph and a 0–60mph time of 4.1 seconds makes this the fastest four-seater convertible on the planet — becomes brutally apparent. As I paddle-shift into Sport mode for an even sharper throttle response, the engine starts leaping through sonic stages: an impatient baritone at 60mph; a visceral, orotund bark at 90mph; a roar of exhilaration at over 120mph. Flooring it from stationary (there were hardly any other cars to worry about), the rise from funereal to bug-splattering to magistrate-bribing speeds is like a fairground ride from hell — in a good way. The jaunty but morbid roadside signs saying, “If daisies are your favourite flower, keep pushin’ up those miles-per-hour”, frankly, pose little deterrent when it comes to placing the pedal firmly on the metal.

Slowing down for a spot of whiplash recovery, I begin contemplating Bentley's gradual transition, over recent decades, from a luxury car aimed at older royalty and silver-haired

captains of industry to one that not only retains classical dignity, but also appeals to those who are going up in the world without using a stairlift. And it soon occurs to me that the brand's new philosophy and marketing stance is harmonious with the very tenets of this magazine. Sophisticated gents, young and old, visit tailors or watchmakers, desiring the very best of classicism — the accumulated benefits of centuries of aesthetic tinkering and technical expertise — along with state-of-the-art modernity. It is this double-whammy, cake-and-eat-it expectation from today's consumers of luxury craftsmanship to whom Bentley now caters with aplomb.

Hence, this model still has oodles of aristocratic charm to it — indeed, when I return to it after a lunch break in Williams, Arizona, to find a band of sticky-pawed teenagers poring over it, I yearn for a gold-tipped cane with which to disperse them — but it also has plenty of tarmac-shredding whoopee factor: not as much as the average Ferrari, granted, but way more than enough for the grand-touring gent with a yen for craftsmanship and comfort, and a long journey to be made at a decent speed.

So, is it worth the anticipated USD240,000 price tag? The bad hair after long journeys? The abuse from urban buccaneering Boxster-boys? Yes. And, come to think of it, the regular panic attacks when bare-chested types try to debug the windscreen at traffic lights with an egg-stained cloth on the streets of my native London. This man-made wonder dazzled me as much as the natural wonder widely considered the most awe-inspiring of the seven did. Without the requisite modesty, of course ...

POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

Five subtle ways in which the new Continental GT Speed Convertible goes that extra few million miles:

- the Dark Tint Aluminium 'engine spin' finish, inspired by the dashboards in the Bentleys that regularly cruised to victory in the Le Mans of the '20s;
- the Naim for Bentley system — an audiophile's dream, incorporating custom-built speakers and eight Digital Sound Processing modes — is available now;
- if you opt for the superior sound system aforementioned, you can rest assured that the four-layer hood guarantees perfect acoustic insulation;
- the 21-inch wheels are available in silver, or with an optional dark tint; and
- other wonderfully indulgent optional extras, including a heated steering wheel, radar-based adaptive cruise control, carbon-ceramic brakes and lambswool rugs.



PEAK PERFORMANCE

Not content with a single fix, he raked decided to traverse the powdery mounds and rugged contours of the Swiss Alps in the hardtop version of the Bentley Continental GT, while enjoying performance-enhancing adrenaline courtesy of another technological marvel: Zai skis.

words and photographs by sam tinson

DASHING



The knotty question of whether the Swiss are proficient drivers is not one I've had much cause to ask myself before, but as I take my place in the passenger seat of a Bentley Continental GT poised at the top of a narrow, winding mountain pass high up in the Swiss Alps, it suddenly seems extremely pertinent. The man at the wheel is Simon Jacomet, ski designer du jour and general guru of all things cool, slippery and fast. I've watched the 49-year-old master ski, and can confirm that, when it comes to finding the quickest (and usually most airborne) route down a mountain, he's the business. My concern right now, though, is that he might try the same feat in a newly minted luxury automobile.

I can take some comfort from the fact that Jacomet knows this territory well. A few miles back along the valley is the small town of Disentis, his birthplace and the spiritual home of Zai, the ski brand he co-founded with his partners Benedikt Germanier and Patrick Aisher in 2003. Since then, Zai has made a name for



With the two luxury brands so firmly committed to technological innovation, the Bentley-Zai partnership should meet an avalanche of success.



itself as a producer of state-of-the-art handmade skis and ski gear, setting industry benchmarks for craftsmanship, technology and performance, and becoming the go-to brand for discerning powder-heads the world over; so much so that when Bentley Motors decided to release an exclusive ski for its customers, they chose Zai to build it. Which is how I came to be sitting in a Bentley GT at the top of a precipitous icy descent with a self-confessed adrenaline junkie at the wheel. I check my driver's face for signs of lunatic intent, but his eyes are as cool and expressionless as a polar bear's — somehow typically Swiss, I can't help but notice.

Jacomet pushes the start button and the Bentley's 4L twin-turbocharged engine barks into life before settling into a low, contented burble. The car is the new V8 variant of the GT: a lighter, more agile and less thirsty alternative to the sledgehammer force of the original 12-cylinder model. This one is equipped with 19-inch diamond-cut alloy wheels, snow tyres, and a metallic-magenta paint job so hot, I'm concerned it might trigger an unseasonal thaw. It also ships with permanent four-wheel drive — a fact for which I'm grateful, considering the road ahead resembles a toboggan track, albeit one with a bare rock wall on one side and an almost-sheer vertical drop on the other. Shouldn't a highway like this be closed to traffic? "Oh, it usually is at this time of year," Jacomet informs me with typical insouciance. "Bentley had it opened specially for us. Don't worry, we had a helicopter go through dropping dynamite to trigger any avalanches in advance."

And with this sobering reassurance, he prods the accelerator and I'm shoved firmly back into the soft handstitched leather as the first of several blind, snow-dusted bends comes rushing up to meet us. As we near the corner, I wait for the reverse Gs to kick in... and wait... and wait. The Swiss, it turns out, are fans of late braking. I'm preparing to eat airbag when Jacomet wafts his foot somewhere in the vicinity of the brake pedal and points the GT's nose towards the apex. We're still travelling at close to motorway speeds on fresh powder snow, and I fully expect to become closely acquainted with a pine tree any second. But the stately Bentley doesn't even break sweat, slingshotting calmly around the corner and out the other side without so much as a twitch of traction control. "The really great thing about this partnership we have with Bentley," Jacomet says, downshifting in preparation for the next hairpin, "is that I get to drive these cars."

When Jacomet isn't pushing the envelope on the slopes, he's pushing it in the workshop. The Zai factory is a reassuringly small-scale affair (the entire workforce numbers less than a dozen) located a snowball's throw from Disentis Abbey, the historic Benedictine monastery that dominates the town. Among its workbenches and high-tech machinery are skis in countless shapes and styles and in various stages of build, along with raw materials such as carbon fibre, Kevlar, natural rubber, Dyneema (an industrial-strength polymer tougher than steel) and different kinds of wood. Jacomet has even discovered a method of building skis from stone, using wafer-thin layers of local granite sheathed

in a carbon-fibre skin. The resulting ski, the limited-edition Spada, sent snow-sports and design bloggers into paroxysms of desire when it was launched in 2009.

"When we started Zai, we knew that if we wanted to succeed, we needed to go very high-end, make something totally different," says Jacomet, who previously worked as a ski designer for French brand Salomon. "A lot of competitors have tried to copy what we do, but they don't get there. If they do get there, we have other possibilities. We're waiting for them to catch up." Is it Jacomet's ultimate aim, then, to produce the perfect ski? "If I made the perfect ski, then my job would no longer be interesting," he laughs. "For me, it's more about trying to get there. When I decide that a ski is finished and ready to sell, it's because I can say there is no way I know of that it could be better."

The partnership between Bentley and Zai began in 2009 when Dr. Franz-Josef Paefgen, then Bentley's CEO, tried out a pair of Zai skis. A visit to the factory followed, and Paefgen — an engineer passionate about technology and performance and whose career highlights include the development of the Bugatti Veyron — asked if Zai could come up with a ski design to complement the soon-to-be-launched Bentley Continental GT Supersports. The two brands already had a lot in common — innovation, perfectionism and good craftsmanship, not to mention an obsession with speed and performance — and Jacomet didn't need any persuading.

"We didn't want to go the way of other brands: just take an existing ski from our line and put the Bentley name on it," he says. "We started from zero with a new product and new materials. We needed to work out how we could incorporate Bentley lines into the shape of the ski, and bring together both brands in one product." Jacomet took to the task with typical fervour, spending time driving the Supersports and making several trips to the Bentley factory in Crewe, England, to see the car in production.

"It was important to drive the car in order to understand what was needed," he says. "My impression was of this amazing power

and acceleration, but no matter what speed at which you drive, you always feel safe and in control. This is what we wanted to achieve with the ski: maximum performance from minimal effort."

Can a pair of skis really exhibit the same performance characteristics as a car? I tried them out for myself — all in the name of journalistic research, of course — and can testify that, yes, surprisingly enough, they can. On the slopes outside Disentis, I found myself performing high-speed parallel turns, which would normally have seen me taking an unseemly tumble at the first attempt. Even when I did eventually overextend myself and end up in a heap with my skis sticking out of a snowdrift, seeing Bentley's 'Flying B' badge on their carbon tips somehow made even crashing seem reassuringly elegant.

It's not surprising that Zai skis help those who wear them to perform at their best on the slopes: they are built to a higher specification than professional racing skis, using materials that are forbidden under current racing rules (Jacomet compares it to Formula 1, where the best available technology is not always what's allowed on the circuit). The technologies developed by Zai are so advanced that they have attracted interest from engineers in other fields, including yachting, kitesurfing and motor racing. Last year, the company even entered the golfing market, launching a handcrafted Zai putter.

For all the diversity of options open to Zai, it's safe to say that the company's path will never stray far from the snow line. For Jacomet, the partnership with Bentley is not just a chance to work with a company that shares Zai's uncompromising approach to its product, but an opportunity to develop new ideas, apply new technologies and continue his quest for the perfect ski.

And it also means, of course, that he gets to drive delectable cars in rarefied settings. ■

www.zai.ch
www.bentleymotors.com

The completely hand-built Zai-Bentley skis (middle) are topped off with the iconic 'Flying B' logo.

