A dream has finally come true

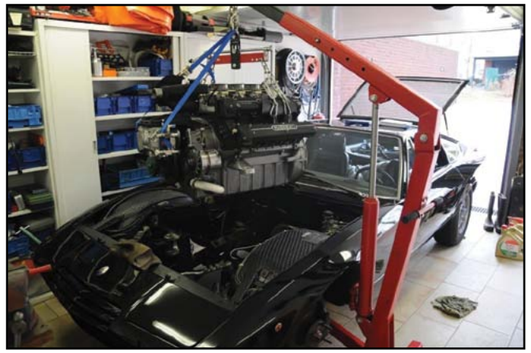
After a lot of travelling and seeing 27(!) Khamsins around the globe, “Dottore.L” has allowed me to buy his semi-prototipo Khamsin T-Top.

This is the one and only T-Top conversion done by the US California Maserati importer in 1977 as a reply to the US safety authorities trying to kill off the full convertible. I have copies of the communications asking for approval by Maserati but the Americans did not ship it back to Modena to have it factory approved. Probably a wise thing to do, they could never be sure how the Italians would react and if they would ever see the car back!?!

The car is in very good shape: no rust, anywhere! Despite this the head gaskets started to leak a bit when the Dotore and me were test driving and stressed the old lady a bit too much at 230kmh... I took the engine out to put the engine bay in a real nice shape and renew the necessities, rubber, gaskets, seals, etc. It is not easy to be a perfectionist!

The T-Top combines the best of both worlds, great fun. The combination of the iconic Ghibli and the extravaganza of the Khamsin makes me a proud owner. The Dottore had a “special” reason to sell the Khamsin: He has a hall that can house a limited number of Maseratis. He bought a Alfa Romeo 8C Spider and that car was not allowed to sit beside his Aston Martin! (As you probably know the AR 8C shares the Maserati platform.) So one Maserati had to go and he knew I was keen on his Khamsin: He sold the car to me with a lot of spares, manuals, articles on Khamsins (even the first article I read about the Khamsin and fell in love: An orange example in the mid seventies in ‘L’Automobile’!). I feel privileged!

Bart van der Weiden
The Netherlands



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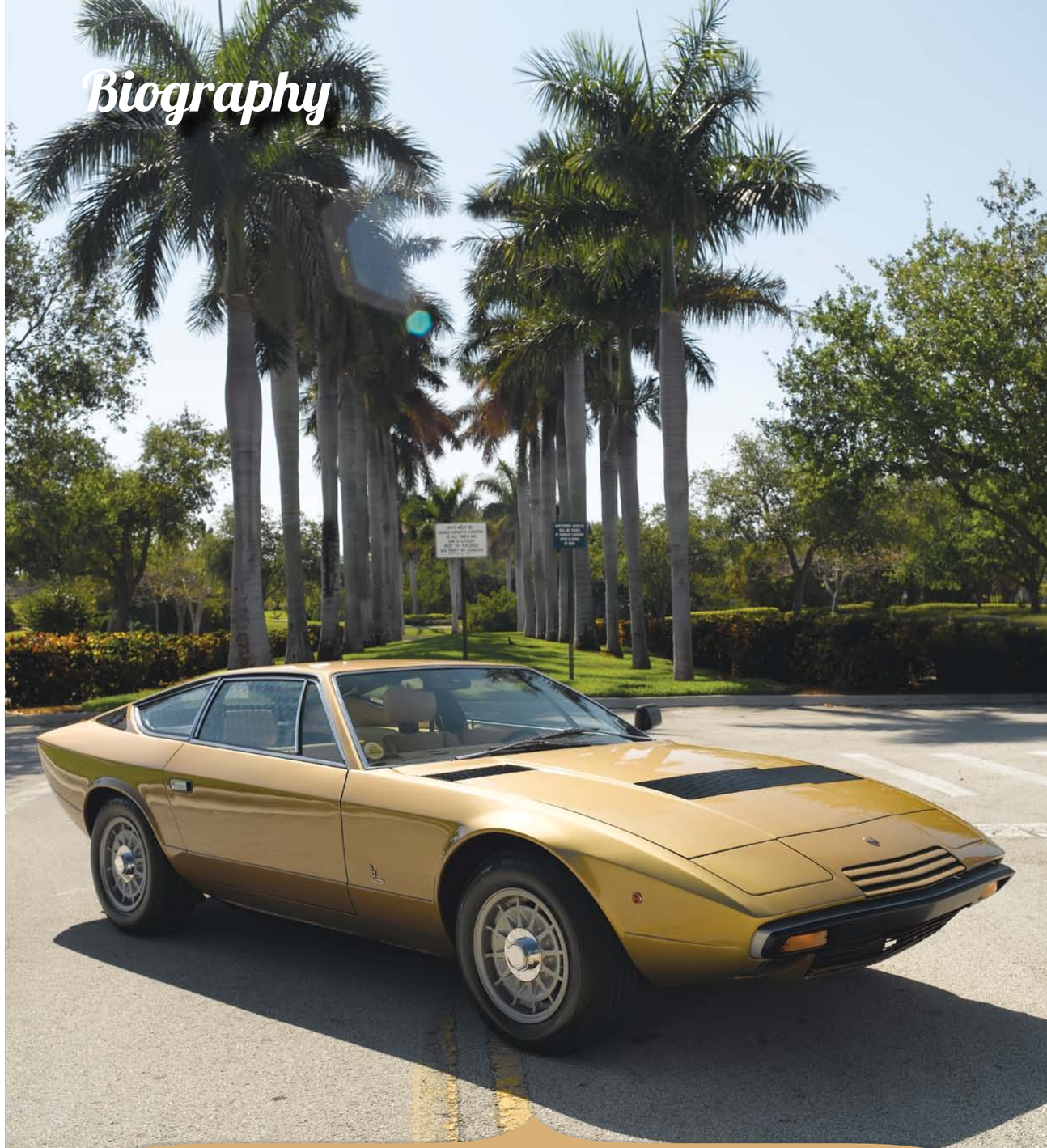

Maserati Khamsin AM120US1242

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Firstly, I actually wrote this in 2006 after leaving Florida and while in Modena. Having been through a lot since then it reads as though I wrote it 20 years ago. It was an easier time in my life, carefree...Secondly, I am much more oriented towards driving and racing – these are, after all, sports cars, not Ming vases – than toward endless tinkering and concours waxing, no offense meant- so this text certainly reflects that as the behind the wheel perspective is too often forgotten: I hope you enjoy it! MS, MASERATI KHAMSIN REGISTRY, January 2011.

This is an enthusiast's account of the acquisition and first year with his dream car; it is an emotional text. If you are, for example, an accountant in a funeral parlor or an earthworm DNA analyst, this text may just be too much for you.

1242 was officially sold by the Maserati factory to Maserati's North American importer on December 27, 1977, more than three months before it was built, in March of 1978.

This "virtual reality pre-birth sale" was due to yet more new US importation laws scheduled to come into effect in 1978, therefore thanks to this creative paper shuffling a few more cars including this one were built without the new rule complications.

It was painted Oro Kelso; medium gold, Kelso was a famous race horse in the 60s with a distinctive gold saddle base. The leather color was Senape, which means mustard. It was one of 155 US spec Khamsins made, one of exactly 100 5-speeds, one of 430 Khamsins built in total, 335 of which were 5-speed.

1242 was produced about three quarters into the 155-car US production run, which started with chassis AM120US1000 and ended with AM120US1330.

It was shipped by sea through the Mediterranean and the Panama canal and was offloaded with other Masers in Los Angeles, trucked to Maserati's Los Angeles receiving facility and, after being used in one test drive article by Sports Car Graphic, as well as a photo shoot with Rubenesque actress, Judy Landers pretending to wash it in front of a mansion, it was eventually dispatched to the San Francisco Maserati dealer.

A Blaupunkt Berlin Stalk radio, complete with microphone for dictating speeches to one's secretary at 120mph, was fitted and it was bought in January 1979 by a gentleman from Oregon, who kept it twelve years until 1991. He drove the car down to San Francisco several times for service, he may in fact have had a home in the bay area. The car, however, was registered in Oregon.

It was sold in 1991 to well-known classic car dealer, Fantasy Junction, (in the city of the same name, near San Francisco), owned by Bruce Trennery.

The only incident of the car's life took place when Bruce's wife was using the car. It had a minor argument with a San Francisco railroad car! This left a bash behind the passenger door.

There was only some sheet metal damage, which was repaired.

Ed Waterman of Motorcar Gallery in Fort Lauderdale then visited Fantasy Junction in January of 1992 and bought 1242, having the Khamsin trucked to Florida where it arrived in February of that year.

Ed used the car himself occasionally, which is when I saw it for the first time ever; passing by in traffic at Oakland Park Boulevard and the beach, roaring up the bridge as I came off it. I remember being struck by its interesting, unusual color. I did not see who was driving so did not think of stopping by Motorcar Gallery at the time and certainly had no idea I would own it 12 years later.

That July it was sold to Costa Rica and was flown from Miami to San José where it remained one year before returning to the US, again in south Florida. It was then in the care of broker, Steve Yanoshik, who sold it to a slightly less exotic destination: Kansas. There it stayed in the hands of a man also involved in vintage racing.

1242 was then traded with several other vehicles against a Can Am car and was displayed at Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, during the Chicago Historic Races of 1999.

The popular summer vintage race weekend features an informal parade from the track to nearby Elkhart Lake Village where race and road cars are displayed.

This is where its next and long-time owner, Lance Everson, first saw it; he had always been curious about Khamsins, but had never seen one in person before and within minutes 1242 put a spell on him, in fact he became its owner soon afterwards.

Lance enjoyed the car from his Mequon home, just north of Milwaukee, taking it on drives through the countryside, once going as far as a Ferrari club event near Chicago where the gold rarity drew a crowd.

In the summer of 2002, just two weeks before a trip to Wisconsin to take care of press relations for a French Ferrari team at the Elkhart Lake American Le Mans Series race of July 4, yours truly saw a small for sale ad in color at the back of Sports Car Market magazine.

I felt relieved and deeply happy as though the love of my life's very intimidating old father had approved me as a worthy son in law!

Even though I was nowhere near ready to make the financial commitment to buy a Khamsin (freelance writers get paid on February 29, if there is a full moon), the opportunity was too good to pass up. After a few phone calls it was agreed Lance and family would come up to Elkhart in the car so I could see and drive it and I would supply them with team guest tickets. In the meantime at Motorcar Gallery where I had by then worked for three months, I dug the car's photos out of its 1992 file and could not wait to see it...

When the day finally came there it was in the paddock at Elkhart: it looked stunning! A very different design in a very different color (more on this later). The cute thing was that the Everson's had two adorable 3-year-old twin daughters that just fit in the ridiculous tiny rear seats!

Wife and girls went for a walk in the paddock and we went for a drive, the car was solid, had tons of character, everything felt really good and strong, but it seemed tuned the wrong way – upon hard acceleration the power delivery was not right, even though there was no smoke. Thankfully, the riddle was solved a few days later when Lance and his mechanic realized that it was still in emission test mode, they had forgotten to reset it right. Apart from that it was fine, from almost entirely rust-free body on top, to a fresh set of Michelins beneath.

I wanted it. As badly as the dream girl in high school.

Unfortunately, I had a lot of planning to do before I could buy it and to cut a long story short was finally able to sell a Porsche 944 and get a loan in April of 2004. A very good friend of Motorcar Gallery who used to own Khamsin AM120US1054 happened to live in Milwaukee, offered to help and was the best customer of the garage that Lance also used, ensuring honest answers from the mechanic.

Thus one fine mid-April morning, connoisseur John Ling met with Lance at the garage, went for a drive, told me it ran stronger than his former Khamsin (even let me listen to the engine on the phone!). Compressions were done and came out very strong and after another phone call between myself in Fort Lauderdale and the three men around the car in Milwaukee a deposit changed hands.

I felt relieved and deeply happy as though the love of my life's very intimidating old father had approved me as a worthy son in law!

I could not wait for the honeymoon.

The car was paid for, paperwork taken care of and the Khamsin was picked up soon afterwards by a truck and began its 2000+ mile journey to south Florida, ready to begin a new life.

A few days later in early May, while working in the showroom one morning, I suddenly recognized the truck arriving, there it was! I could not help myself: I ran outside like a 10-year-old!

It was very dusty, Lance had run out of time and apologized, but no problem, to me it was the cleanest car in the world and it was my Khamsin!

That night, having washed it, I sat in the warehouse in a camping chair, walked around it looking at it from every angle (even from a ladder!) until a very late hour, a glass of single malt in my hand not believing after years of stress that this was happening, realizing that it was true, saying, "Oh my God! Oh my God!" about 300 times! The dream had happened, in time, 32 days before my 40th birthday!

After general safety checks, an oil change for the engine and also the gearbox and differential, new brake pads and spark plugs, I went on my first few drives, during which I could not keep from grinning idiotically. I passed through the Fort Lauderdale tunnel (the only tunnel in the state of Florida, very popular with car enthusiasts) with and without any excuse to hear the 5-liter V8's roar bouncing wildly off the walls and took ridiculous amounts of photos of my "Monsterati" in every pretty spot I could think of.

After about 10 days my tag (number plate) arrived in the mail and… yes! The state of Florida had consented, my tag was... Khamsin!

I then went on my first top speed runs in the Everglades.

South Florida is paradise in many ways, but is hell as far as driving pleasure is concerned. It is dead flat, has no challenging twisty roads and is in fact plagued by heavy traffic on straight boring roads clogged by incompetents in SUVs and massive police presence. It is about as different from where I learned to drive near our family country home in Burgundy surrounded by twisty challenging traffic and police free back roads as can be... so experiencing the handling of a thoroughbred in the southern-most state in the US is like drinking a Chateau Petrus in a plastic cup with a lime green looped straw: you just can't. For pure top speed bursts however, there are some remote roads with excellent visibility, no traffic or intersections, no place for a police car to hide.

My favorite road for this was like that, though it was just two lanes, pretty narrow for high speeds, but it was often totally deserted which is the required situation to even think of having a run. Well, thankfully my Khamsin at [CENSORED] 160 mph tracked straight as an arrow, seeming to hunker down for warp speed, as if it relished the joy of it!

The 15 miles between state road 27 on route 998 and Tamiami trail went by very quickly on those occasions, even though I of course only reached the higher CENSORED speeds for a few seconds at a time, a very special treat which I indulged in 26 times. Sorry Officer, I have left the country.

Europeans need to understand that being stopped at such speeds by Everglades police would mean pointed gun, handcuffs, jail, not to mention an impounded car for sure, and a damaged car most likely. Not the same as a polite speeding ticket in Europe. Yes, it somewhat perversely added to the thrill of the forbidden fruit!

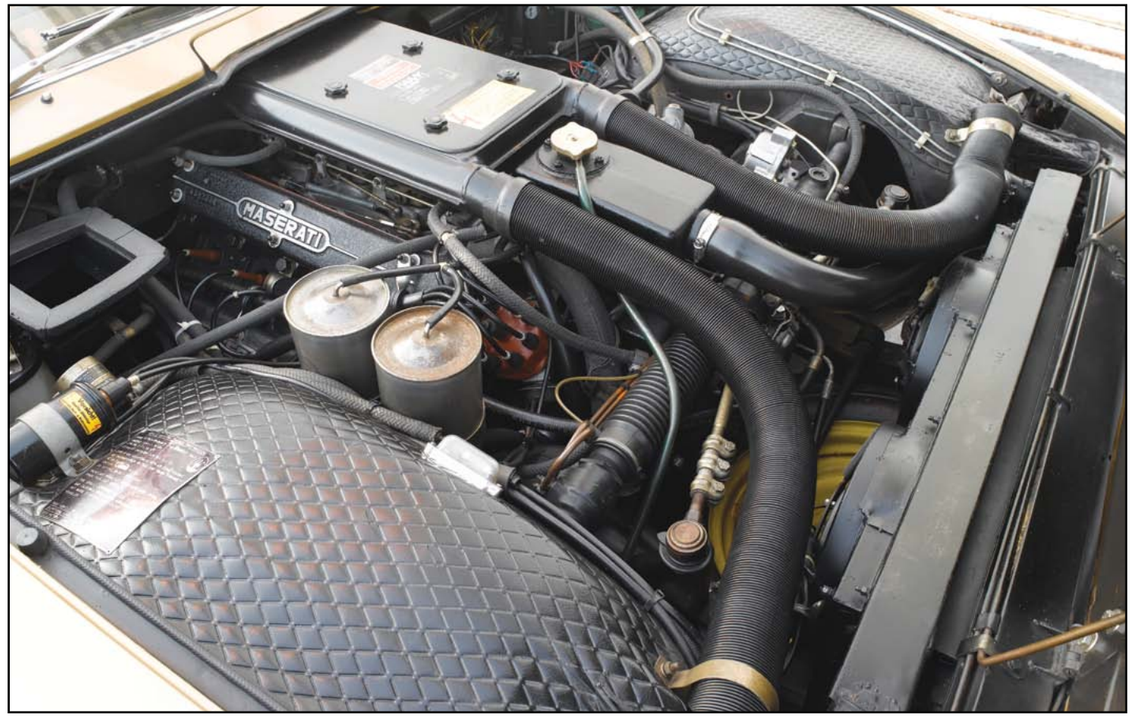
Actually, some very nice Fort Lauderdale police officers who were genuine car enthusiasts often visited Motorcar Gallery and one day asked me, "Come on Marc, tell us how fast you have been in the Everglades?!" After making sure it was off the record I did answer; they nodded appreciatively!

It was interesting to feel how the Khamsin seemed to shed its weight at high speeds, how overtaking was helped by the huge torque, how it seemed to come into its own above 80-90 mph, as if it began getting interested upon approaching serious speeds. It would get to 120 mph like nothing, get very quickly to 140, then a bit more time and more space was needed to get the needle to 160, but I never had enough clear horizon to get beyond 162. Some have compared the Maserati 5-liter V8 to a big rubber band and it could not be more true. I have no doubt that it would reach an indicated 170. Back in the seventies, in the hands of Auto Motor und sport, the number one German car magazine, a Khamsin reached 272 kmh (170 mph) during a comparison test with the first version Lamborghini Countach, the Ferrari BB512, the Aston Martin V8 Vantage and the Porsche turbo, putting it just 8 to 10 mph below the Countach and Boxer and ahead of the British and German cars.

The only problem I ever had during a top speed run was seeing a big alligator hundreds of meters ahead, apparently ready to cross the road, I threw the anchors and having lost much speed realized it was a big decapitated gator that poachers had dumped there after cutting off its head to just keep the skull!

I then went to Key Largo for the weekend of my 40th birthday at the wheel of my best birthday present ever. On the way back I set my personal record on one of the few enjoyable roads in Florida; card sound road, an alternate little known route between Key Largo and Homestead which is very quick and normally almost traffic free. I had done it with my family in 38 minutes a few weeks earlier, in a normal car, behaving myself. Since this time it was the day of my 40th birthday I decided to do something memorable and the conditions were right; I was treated to almost zero traffic; the result was that slowing down to 80 mph when there was anybody else around, I saw 160 mph eight times and arrived in Homestead 22 minutes later! Sorry officer I left the coun… oh, I already wrote that. This is all fiction anyway officer… really… I averaged about 93 mph. The reacceleration from 80 to 140 was just mind-blowing like a starved convict storming a smorgasbord: engage warp speed and it just lunges angrily at the horizon! The torque is so enormous (more than a Ferrari Daytona and its bear of a V12 engine) that overtaking becomes the easiest thing in the world, like an aircraft amongst horse carts.

That blissful year I drove it about three times a week around Fort Lauderdale, to Palm Beach, along the ocean, to quiet parks where I would look at it from every angle – and through the tunnel of course! – really relishing the mix of its precise almost delicate steering, clutch and brakes with its huge torque and power, or as one journalist had put it,



a mixture of Bambi and Godzilla. I did not really use it to go out on dates, too much potential for trouble with over-eager police checks, though I made an exception for a bodacious blonde nicknamed Mystery. She almost caused me to crash when, having asked her what kind of photo modeling she did answered, “Oh I do it all, baby,” just as I was tackling a highway on-ramp at a high rate of knots!!!

Ahem. My first goal ever since I settled on buying this US model had always been to convert it to Euro bumpers. There is no doubt that among all the Italian production cars upon which Washington imposed their ridiculous excessive 70s pseudo safety measures the Khamsin was the most disfigured, and the polite embarrassment or not so polite remarks I saw or overheard many times only made me feel even greater urgency in getting it done. Late that summer I ordered the bumper kit and had the job completed by Christmas, thanks to talented bodywork specialist Luc Grondin.

For those interested in converting their own US spec Khamsin please see my 18 page A to Z Euro bumper conversion article on my Khamsin Registry website. www.maseratikhamsinregistry.com

During that process I also had the ugly rectangular US market sidelights on the four fenders removed, the holes welded shut, a small round hole drilled for the small round Euro sidelights (on the front fenders only, as was originally the case), those areas were sanded, rust proofed, prepped and painted and, voilà, it was visually identical to a Euro spec Khamsin. Only a handful of US Khamsins have had this done. A few weeks later after the rear US bumper brackets were cut off, the exhaust was raised into its proper position, completing the task, giving the rear that clean distinctive upsweep which is so much a part of the Khamsin’s unique design.

In early spring of 2005, sitting pretty in a Fort Lauderdale park just after the completion of the bumper conversion.

Unfortunately, I then got a call from a very aggravated exhaust shop employee saying that they had inadvertently cut through some metal pipe and complaining that the car was relieving itself forcefully of some strange green fluid against the workshop wall!!!” Cue to call a tow truck and expert mechanic, Steve Claasen, who got it sorted in no time.

In any case, I must say the joy of having brought the car back to correct Euro spec and returned to its original design was even greater than the actual purchase and realizing I owned it. When I stood in the driveway of my friend’s body shop, tired and dirty after a 12-hour day helping him and suddenly realized we had finished, that my Khamsin looked the way it was meant to look by Marcello Gandini and Giulio Alfieri – it was a very special moment!

To un-disfigure it and return it to its rightful design was just the greatest satisfaction; never had any Modenese sports car been so ruined and robbed of its chance to stand in its rightful place in the history of Italian thoroughbreds.

People’s reaction after the bumper conversion was very clear. Only appreciative, admiring comments were heard and, illustrating how the model never had a fair chance to have its moment in the sun the two part comment I heard countless times was that people had never ever seen one and loved the design.

As noted earlier, what made it an even more special moment for those looking at it is that it is a very different design and, in this case, in a very different color, which means it forces the onlooker to visually take a second look as there isn’t the mental comfort of the usual red and/or the usual body shape; a situation totally contrary to your non car friends or wife/girlfriend commenting – ho-hum yet another red Ferrari, let’s go.

True connoisseurs know that a few among hundreds of these cars have character, thanks to a distinctive color combination which suits a particular body shape and it certainly is the case with this one.

Although I am absolutely not a concours fan and can get very annoyed by the ridiculous ego displays at such events where you get the impression that many of these cars never ever get driven in anger, I did in fact participate in three concours to show people what a Khamsin should look like and enjoyed seeing people discover it. At each of these events my friend Mike D. had his own silver US Khamsin, still with its big standard US version “garbage truck bumpers” and many could not believe that they were ruining to

Yours truly struggling in the Florida heat to undo the hard to reach US indicator lights: it looks as though the car is biting me in retaliation for hustling it to ridiculous speeds and fussing on it!

that extent the same sleek body as my car parked next to it.

My Khamsin turned out to be totally reliable, the only item that gave me any trouble was the ignition switch, which I changed. Other than that the car was bullet proof for the first year I owned it before deciding that I had to move back to Europe.

I had the big fake chrome center wheel nuts re-chromed, as well as the chrome disks which cover the real wheel nuts underneath, not cheap at $600, but it certainly looked great.

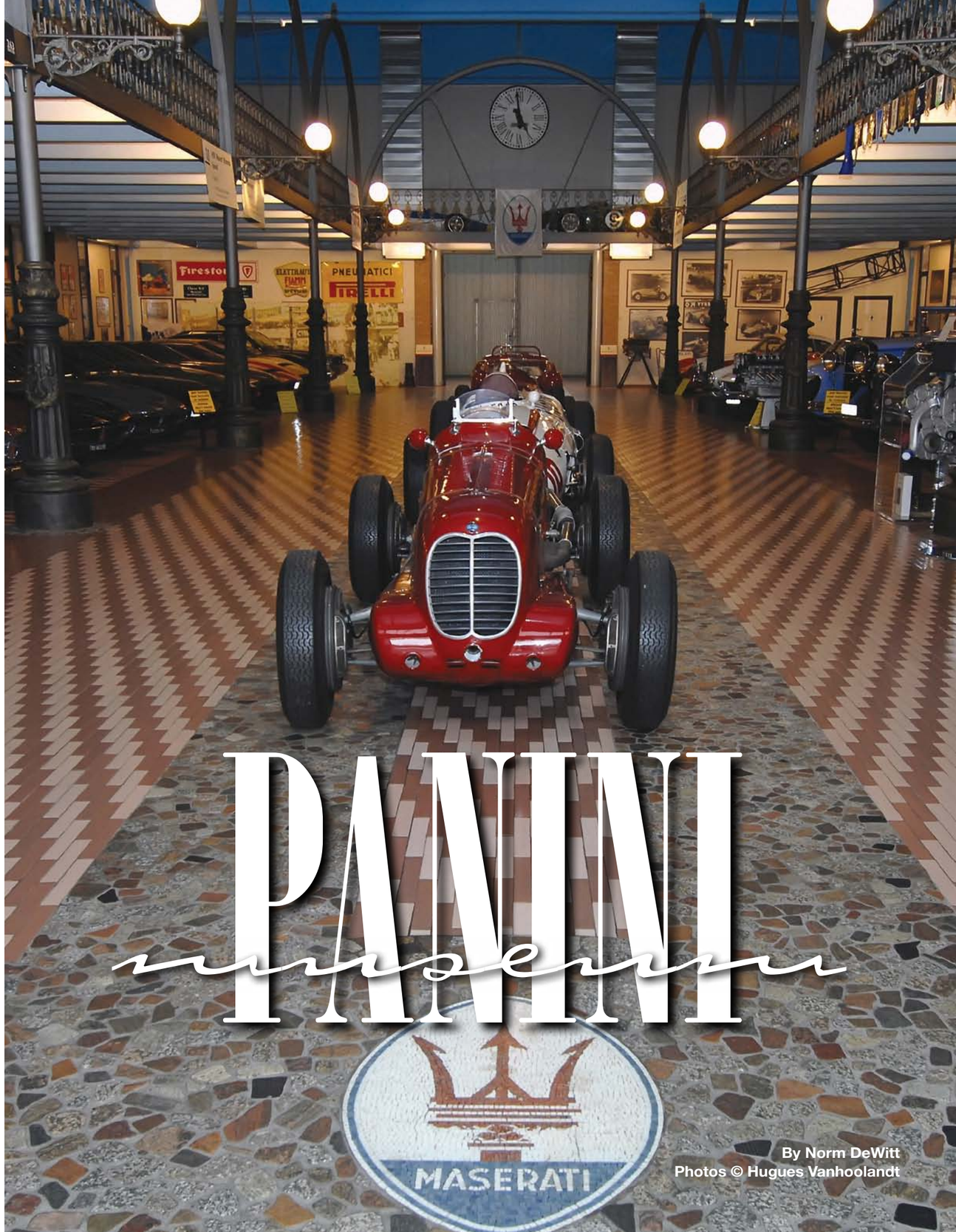
As the hydraulic spheres had not been serviced since 1994, I had them redone soon after I left the US by SM World in Los Angeles, which was quick and economical. The hydraulics are very reliable, all Khamsin owners who use their cars regularly will confirm that. Millions of Citroens have run every day in France for several decades without a problem. It is those hydraulically equipped cars that don't get used or not enough which develop trouble as the LHM hydraulic liquid does not like to be left idle for months, since it is hygrometric: water will then gather at the bottom of the system. Just drive it at least ten miles a couple of times a month and it will stay perfectly happy. The one possible catastrophe is when people put brake liquid or aircraft hydraulic fluid in the system, which totally ruins it and generates a very big bill to put things right. Only the correct LHM fluid should ever be used; it is not expensive and can be found at a number of specialty shops and at any Rolls Royce dealer (Rolls Royce used Citroen brakes for three decades from the mid sixties on, quite an endorsement) or through your classic Maserati specialist.

In May of 2005 I fitted a trident in the nose grille, as the Khamsin is the only Maserati – along with the Indy – which never received a nose grille trident. As confirmed to me by the Maserati factory's in-house historian, Ermanno Cozza when I interviewed him, this lack of a traditional trident was due only to the fact that the grille was low and that the need to have a front tag did not leave enough room for the trident. However in the US where most states don't require a front tag, it makes sense to fit one and, once again with the help of my friend Luc the bodyshop expert, I fitted a Ghibli nose trident and it looked just right, giving the front of the car that bit more gravitas.

I moved back to Europe in June 2005, things got complicated and costly and I had no choice but to sell it in October 2007. At least it went to a very nice couple in Laguna Beach, the wife actually drives it more than her husband, she loves to pull up at a traffic light and see gold diggers in the next lane smile at the Maserati driver only for their jaws to drop when they see her at the wheel! Her little boy, age three when they bought the car, calls it 'mama's race car,' so it seems there is a new generation of Khamsinites in the wings! ■

This text is an excerpt of Marc Sonnery's upcoming book "Maserati, the Citroën years 1968-1975;" Parker House Publishing 2011.

From right to left: Khamsin owners Ivan Ruiz, Mike Demyanovich, bodywork expert Luc Grondin, the author and Adolfo "Rasputin" Orsi at the 2005 Palm Beach International Concours.



By Norm DeWitt
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