

Z8 ROAD TO JOY

A sudden impulse sparks a spectacular roadster run to California's wine country.

Story and photographs by Andrew Macpherson



It started as a simple idea: Wouldn't you love to see the harvest moon rise over Napa's vineyards? And with the magic of the Internet, it became a rallying call for the most magical and memorable drive of the year.



THE SEED WAS PLANTED ON OUR FORUM IN MAY, AND BY THE TIME WE CLOSED THE BOOK ON RESERVATIONS AT THE END OF JULY, WE HAD CONFIRMED FOURTEEN CARS, INCLUDING THREE SHIP-INS FROM TEXAS, OKLAHOMA, AND WASHINGTON—MAKING IT THE SECOND-LARGEST GATHERING OF Z8S WE'VE EVER SEEN IN THE USA.

Many of our drivers were bringing their significant others, too, which meant that we had to step up the game, and make sure that our passengers would have a lot to enjoy in what was a big chunk of driving, at least for all our Southern California cars.

Fast-forward to dawn on the last Thursday of September, and we're pulling into our traditional meeting point, Starbucks in Valencia, just north of where all LA's freeways merge into Interstate 5—the perfect

place for cars from all over the LA area to gather for the run north. Within ten minutes we have all six cars, three from LA, one from Orange County, and both of our long-distance guests from Washington and Oklahoma. After coffee and a bite to eat, we synchronize our walkie-talkies and radar detectors—vital accessories for fast open-road runs—and pull out to storm north up and over the Grapevine under a clear blue sky. As we roll down into the San Joaquin Valley, the low sun

rakes across its hazy, open agricultural expanse. Once we're past the junction of Highway 99, down on the flat valley floor, we tear off thirty fast freeway miles to get a jump on the day before peeling off the I-5 at Buttonwillow.

There we fill up with gas and drop our tops for the drive over to the coast on glorious Highway 58, the road that made me move to California. Twenty years later, I'm still in love with it, whooping for joy as we tear up its twisted

serpentine ascent out of the baking valley. Cresting the pass, 58 shoots arrow-straight across a high desert in a series of roller coasters that completely unload the suspension at anything over eighty. Then it changes again, leaving the high desert plateau to meander down toward the Paso River through low rolling hills, surrounded by California oaks, in a beautifully flowing 40-mile series of fast sweepers.

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to the coast and into the cold, damp marine layer by Cambria. The temperature goes from the inland scorch of 95° to the coastal chill of 55° in thirty minutes. We fill up there, then head north along historic and scenic Highway 1.

The fog may have stolen the view, but it can't spoil one of the best roads in the country, and after an hour of driving nirvana, we pull into our lunch spot on a mountain top high above the marine layer in Big Sur. After being in the cars for just over five hours, it feels great to stretch our legs and enjoy a delicious lunch in the sun, looking out over the vast cloud-like top of the seemingly endless fog.

Fed and fueled, we head back north along Highway 1, which is

beautiful for about half an hour—until we hit solid traffic in Carmel. It's moving like molasses in winter, and doesn't ease up, all the way to Santa Cruz. The battleship-gray marine layer makes it feel like we've slipped into winter, so we try to escape the gloom and the traffic on the only road the map shows running through the coastal redwoods, linking with the Bay Area's famous Skyline Drive. The connecting road turns out to be a tiny single-track tarmac lane with a surface as pocked as the moon. Sadly, our Washington car hits a rim-destroying pothole, forcing us to limp into Los Gatos to get it repaired. The run-flats do their work! However, the rim is too far gone, so we have to leave Tom and

Lisa there to await a spare delivery in the morning, and carry on north to meet the Northern California crew at the Moss Beach Distillery for our prepaid dinner.

Leaving Los Gatos, we make a fast sprint north on the freeway as the moon rises to the east, then cross the coastal range and drop back into the thick, drizzling fog. We get to the restaurant just in time to get fed, fourteen hours after leaving home—a long day's drive!

Friday morning, the lineup of thirteen cars, all perfectly frosted with a thick coat of drizzle, makes for some interesting photos, but a very gray and dull drive north. Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, the fog is so thick that we can't see one of its towers from the other,

and as we carry on up Highway 1 toward Stinson Bay, it feels like we're driving in a cloud. But by the time we pass Point Reyes, we finally move inland far enough to see some sunlight and blue sky, which lifts the temperature—and our spirits. We pull over for lunch at Nick's Restaurant—well known to BMW fans because it was featured on the cover of *Roundel* when Alpina launched the B7.

After some fine oysters and great conversation, we pile back in our cars and head north to the Russian River, then turn inland to wind our way along its banks all the way into Sonoma, where we branch off and cross the hills into Calistoga at the head of Napa Valley. The Cottage Grove Inn is our destination; it's

a charming row of little cottages facing each other, each with its own individual parking space, making it a perfect base for our team.

There we unpack, clean up from our day on the road, and prepare ourselves for dinner in Saint Helena, twenty minutes to the south. Leaving the inn just after sunset, we take the east side of the valley, turning onto Napa's glorious Silverado Trail. The full harvest moon peeps over the hills, majestically rising into the twilight sky as we start our gentle drive south. It's the realization of a little dream born online, and it gives us all a moment of shared magic from the open cockpits of our Z8s.

Our Northern California team has organized dinner at the glorious Tra Vigne restaurant, right in the gastronomic heart of old Saint Helena. That's where our final Z8 joins us, bringing our number to fourteen. After a delicious dinner, we cruise back along the Silverado trail, heated seats cranked up and hot air blasting from the vents to keep the autumn chill at bay as we enjoy the valley and its vineyards in the light of the full moon. Once back at the hotel, we open a few bottles of wine and talk cars late into the night.

Saturday starts out with our early-morning fast-blast film,





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something that's become a Z8 tradition. We leave the inn under another gray layer of low cloud, which has made its way north from the bay, down near Sears Point. Pulling over at Anguin Road, we all attach our camaras—GoPros, Replays, Contours, whatever anyone has to make a video. Back in our cars, we climb out of the valley and above the fog into clear sunshine and a perfect blue morning. We pass through Anguin and drop down into Pope Valley, one of the truly great driving roads in California. Turning north at the Pope Valley

Garage, we fly up the valley, all cameras rolling, through the high, twisty pass and down past broad white-fenced pastures to the north before pulling over to make sure everything is recording. Then we head back over the pass, south along an amazing, tight, twisty little river valley, and on around a large reservoir before dropping back down into Napa after a glorious hour of high-speed fun.

It was our fourth trip to Napa, and experience has taught us that less is more: The big mistake we made on earlier trips was planning too many things in a day. You don't need to try all the wines, or see all the vineyards; it's better to kick back, chill, have a lazy lunch, pick one vineyard, and then spend a lot of time there. This

trip, our only scheduled visit was to one of the smallest producers in the valley, V. Madrone Cellars; they are only allowed a handful of visitors a day by the very strict Napa Tourist Office. That means you get to spend a good couple of hours hanging out, tasting wines, hearing the owners' stories, and getting a real insight into their lives as producers; best of all you feel like a guest, not a tourist on a conveyer belt.

After our visit we made a group photo, then everyone meandered off to do their own individual tourist and shopping things for a couple of hours before gathering back at the inn and preparing for our grand gala dinner. John, our local owner, persuaded the beautiful old Chateau Montelena

(1882) to open their private dining room and prepare a meal for us. This is not something done often or lightly, so we all felt greatly honored as we headed out in our finest dinner clothes. Just to make the evening perfect, they even let us line our cars up on their forecourt, right in front of the Chateau—and even provided me a forklift from which to take the group shot!

Dinner was, of course, sensational, and after dinner we all piled back into the cars and rolled sedately back to the inn. The party moved into my room, of course, and with many bottles of wine to consume, we watched old videos of other trips, and reminisced about our now-decade-long love affair with the Z8.

Sunday morning, it's already time to turn south and start the long journey home. We say our farewells, and five cars set out to retrace our tracks over some of the best driving roads in the world. The weather has changed completely; an Indian Summer heat wave

has suddenly taken the state, and a little over an hour later, we're crossing the Golden Gate under a crystal clear sky in bright sunlight. We wind our way south through the hilly city and pick up a short bit of freeway before making our way up onto Skyline Drive for lunch at Alice's Restaurant. After lunch, the temperature soars; we see 100° as we drop down off the mountains into Santa Cruz, which has hellish traffic even on a Sunday afternoon. An hour later, we arrive in Carmel with enough time to drop our things at the hotel, take a quick shower, and cruise over to Point Lobos for a sunset stroll. It really is one of the most magical spots on the coast; if you're in the area, do take the time to walk around it, especially if you like taking pictures.

Monday morning we're all up early, packed and on the road by eight, which means a crystal-clear 75° blue-sky run down Highway 1—with absolutely

no traffic at all. What a glorious way to start the day! An hour later we're taking on gas in Cambria. Knowing it's going to be over 100° inland, we put our tops up to enjoy the air-conditioned comfort of our cabins as we make the fast run back to town.

Sure enough, within ten miles of the coast, the temperature is over 90°, but the back roads I love are empty, and we make fast time all the way from Cambria across 58, and back onto I-5 for the final run into LA—where, arriving in the early afternoon, we see 115°!

What started as a sudden impulse has morphed into a 1,600-mile five day dash across the Golden State—an adventure that was simply magic. It defines why I love my new home, my car, and our Club: the pleasure and camaraderie of sharing glorious open-road drives and delicious meals with like-minded enthusiasts. **R**

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