



Deeply, Madly, Bentley

Bond loved them, but there are as many ways to fall for a Bentley Continental GTC convertible as there are variations to the way you can primp this splendid ride.

Words KATHY MALHERBE

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN COOL TO DRIVE A CONVERTIBLE. Make it a Bentley and you're up there with the likes of Bentley lover James Bond. Fleming tells us in *Casino Royale* that Bond spent \$3 000 (amounting to half his capital in those days) converting his sports saloon body, Heath Robinson-style, into a convertible. Fleming says, 'Bond loved her more than all the women present in his life, rolled – if that were feasible – together.'

Bond's predilection for Bentleys in print didn't translate into movies, however. 'We weren't prepared to trash a Bentley. Not even for 007,' says Nigel Stoddard, curator of the Bentley Museum in Crewe, central England.

Founder WO Bentley said in the early 1900s that he wanted 'to build a good car, a fast car, the best in its class', which is what the craftsmen at Crewe have been doing since 1946. The latest Bentley, the Continental GTC, is sensuously sculptured, and is all unrivalled luxury cocooning a six-litre W12 engine. The all-wheel drive of a Bentley means sharper, safer steering. The wider track and retuned steering accommodate the more spirited driver and offer the primitive delight of a powerful, responsive sports car. It's a blend of the definitive Bentley DNA with modern design and technology.

All this has attracted a new fan base. Bentley board member for sales and marketing Alasdair Stewart says 7 003 Bentleys were delivered

internationally in 2011 – up 37 percent from 2010, with a very strong growth in China. At around R2 million a pop (way more if you dig deep into the accessories bucket), that's a lot of forex. And a good proportion of these have been the new convertible.

Stewart runs off some of the attributes of the Continental GTC, including the super-formed aluminium, the three-layer fabric hood and the renowned Naim infotainment centre. Not forgetting the effortless acceleration from 0-100km/h in 4,8 seconds.

Bentleys are 'born' at Crewe in England in a design studio that's a hub of artistry. A large plaque on the wall quotes French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: 'A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing more to take away.'

There's a kind of hush all over the 60 hectares of factory floor where the white-coated staff appear to be enjoying a favourite craft rather than working on a multi-million pound production line.

The factory is spotless, with air replaced every few hours. Groups of engineers calculate, measure and check a chassis; artists paint silently and polish a bonnet with zero-rated, ultra-fine, wet-and-dry paper as smooth as a sheet of monogrammed bond. The hides are chosen from animals who live in thorn-free

Owning a Bentley is not just a luxury experience, it's a privilege. Right down to the hand-stitched hides (from carefully selected animals) used in the plush interiors

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areas, and when they pass to the tailors, they’re stitched by hand.

Next to them, a studio of carpenters – generations of whom have worked at the factory – apply layer upon layer of wafer-thin walnut veneer; a sophisticated and complicated decoupage where each piece is mirrored back, front, left and right so that, from any angle in the car, it’s symmetrical. In the event that the customer wants a bespoke picnic table, iPod holder or eyewear case, the veneer must come from the same bundle.

A bespoke Bentley may come off the floor brand new, but the wood veneer is at least 80 years old. Just like the *rabassiers*, the Provençal truffle detectives who hunt these fungi secretly at night, searching and identifying the perfect wood is a covert operation. Considering a tree with the perfect burl can fetch \$50 000, it’s unsurprising that the location is top-secret.

How personal is the process? Very. ‘The answer to every request from a prospective Bentley owner is “Yes”,’ says Stoddard. Even though the brief may stretch a little beyond Bentley’s classic framework. A Superman hood ornament? No problem. Queen Elizabeth wanted her Bentley to have part of the roof connected to the doors so that ‘We’ could stand before exiting the car. HRH got her way. One famous story is of a prospective owner who didn’t like any of the 117 colours available. Eventually he arrived toting his powder-blue food blender as a colour match. Other requests include matching the colour of a bridesmaid’s dress or nail polish. Eccentricity comes standard, it seems.

One can ogle all day, but the only way to put a Bentley through its paces is beyond the confines of Crewe’s sterile factory. Croatia’s serpentine coastal roads, where we did just that, was not the place to put the car’s top speed of 314km/h to the test. We chose cruise mode, which begins as a discreet whisper then, as you put your foot down, the engine vamps into race-mode supercar – a sound as spine-tingling to a petrolhead as a fine rendition of an aria to an opera lover.

One Bentley Continental is enough to bring on a bout of serious envy, but a cavalcade of them sashaying through Croatian villages turned out to be a head-swiveller. As was the coastline of Croatia. The towns are pristine, the roads magnificent and flanked by a sheer drop to the Adriatic. There is something about

driving with the top down that engages your senses, from the salty tang of the coastal air to the aroma of fresh-baked bread as you pass a village bakery. And the rather pungent whiff of a dairy farm.

But the one scent you can’t get from driving a Bentley is a product that buoys the Croatain economy; the truffle. Buzet, known as the City of Truffles, is officially the smallest town in the world, and the source of a gourmand’s dream, the white truffle. You’re first shown what looks like a lump of clay moulded in a children’s pottery class. It’s a model of the original found in 1999, a Kohinoor of a truffle that was then valued at 20 000 Deutsche Mark. Today, a first-class white truffle costs about R30 000 a kilo, which probably accounts for the 2 000 licensed optimistic truffle hunters in the area.

The truffle only gives off its ‘take me now’ aroma for a couple of hours so finding them is an eureka moment. Traditionally, pigs were used to ‘hunt’ them, but the creature’s penchant for the delicacy meant they often scoffed their spoils and had to be retrenched – if not pâtéd – for their greed. Today, dogs whiffle out truffles in return for cookies, we’re told. This is no time to dispute pig-dog intelligence, but the proof, it seems, is in the eating.

From Buzet to Pula – with its legacy of invaders from the Venetians – to the Romans, French Italians and Yugoslavs. A gregarious guide took us through Pula’s grand amphitheatre, which saw its fair share of slaves versus hungry lions, raging bulls and bears.

But, back to the theme of smart dogs, it was the Rottweilers and their wily aggression that were the most-feared opponents. Every legionnaire, we’re told, had Rottweilers trained for battle. The ‘paw-soldiers’ had spears attached to their chests and they’d run into the enemy line to wound from the waist down. Apparently, some of the greatest victories of the Roman Empire were ascribed to these four-legged missiles.

Not quite a weapon on four wheels, but sure to make you buckle at the knees, the Bentley Continental GTC is an irresistible investment for anyone with Bond’s passion for the brand. And remember: they’re obliging at Crewe. If you’d like your leather infused with the subtle fragrance of eau de truffle, they might oblige.

Just be a little careful driving anywhere near Buzet. You’ll have a hound in the hot seat and all over you in a nanosecond. □



What’s in a name? In the case of Bentley, the brand’s history emulates a thriller – laced with daring visions, narrow escapes, sensational comebacks and stellar achievements

