

CLASSIC DRIVER

Kuwait Concours d'Elegance, 2-6 February 2011

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The 1956 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud Convertible of His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on display by the marina - just one of the many fascinating 'State' cars lined up outside the concours proper

Wow, what a great event. I'm not sure that any of us knew quite what to expect as we made our way through the VIP arrivals area at Kuwait airport. A few days later, though, having experienced Kuwaiti hospitality at its very best and also considered a world-class concours field, I have to say: "When are we coming back?"

Oh, and let's not forget a surprise visit by the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, finishing off what had been an almost surreal five days. I have the lowdown on Mr Blair's interest in classic cars, but let's leave that to the end.

The event, now in its second year, celebrated both the golden jubilee of the State of Kuwait and the 20th anniversary of the country's liberation from its invasion by Iraq. It was held under the patronage of arch car enthusiast, His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the country's Prime Minister and, with banners flying across Kuwait City, the Concours was clearly going to be a highlight for car-mad Kuwaitis.

The panel of judges under the guidance of head judge Leonardo Fioravanti, the famous ex-Director of Design at Pininfarina responsible for many Ferraris including the 365 GT4 BB, 365 GTB 4 'Daytona', 308 GTB and F40, was impressive: Valentino Balboni, for so many years Lamborghini's chief test driver; ex-Fiat and BMW designer Chris Bangle; Dr Bez and Marek Reichmann from Aston Martin; and Sandra Kasky Button, Chairman of the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, to name but a few.

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2011 Best of Show: 1934 Mercedes-Benz 380K Kombinationswagen

The cars were flown in from all over the world, in addition to many local vehicles from Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. From the USA came such disparate entries as father-and-son team Stan and Stan Kryla's bronze 1972 Chevrolet Chevelle SS 454 Convertible, the only surviving 'Bond DB5' (THE car that was in the films and [sold by RM in London last October](#)), a fabulous 1956 Alfa Romeo 1900 'Double Bubble' by Zagato and the outstanding, ex-Harrah Collection 1937 Bugatti 57SC Atalante (which RM will offer for auction at Villa d'Este this May).

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The unique 1962 Lagonda Shooting Brake and a classic Mercedes-Benz generate local interest

Several cars were entered by the Historical, Vintage and Classic Cars Museum of Kuwait itself. One of the mornings was devoted to a visit to the museum, some 30 minutes from the hotel and concours 'field', where an interesting collection of cars has been assembled.

From Japan came a positively gleaming Jaguar SS100, a special-bodied 1939 Rolls-Royce Wraith and a 1972 Ferrari Dino 246 GT. Other international entries included two Swiss-registered Miuras and a Lebanese 1967 Maserati Ghibli.

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Perfection: the Kienle-prepared 1954 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL 'Gullwing'

Bentley Motors had entered its own 1930 4.5 Litre 'Blower', while two highly fancied Mercedes (a black 1934 380 'Kompressor' and a delightful pale yellow 1954 300 SL 'Gullwing') were entrusted to marque specialist Kienle Automobiltechnik.

While the event's head of media communications, Eng. Zakaria Dashti, had organised extensive local television coverage, Wayne Carini and the team from the hit American Discovery Channel series 'Chasing Classic Cars' were there too, with Carini entering his own 1931 Chrysler CG Imperial Dual Cowl Phaeton by Le Baron.

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Former Prime Minister Tony Blair learns a thing or two from Simon Kidston. Or maybe it's the other way round

The competing classes were split into five categories, four being simply by age and the other for Muscle Cars. In the oldest, 1910 - 1930, category the 1923 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8 Torpedo Sport Castagna and its pipe-smoking custodian were firm favourites and duly won. Next up was for the immediate pre-War (1931 -

1945) class and no one was going to deny the gorgeous 1934 Mercedes-Benz 380K its win.

Class D, for 1946 – 1960 cars, didn't go to the much-fancied 'Gullwing', it was awarded to the two-tone, German-domiciled, 1954 Ferrari 250 Europa.

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Early sunset on the Concours field, as seen from the marina

Likewise, the popular Miura Roadster was denied a class victory in the final, 1961 – 1975, category; the winning trophy was awarded to another German-owned car, the 1968 Bizzarrini 5300 GT Strada.

There could only ever be one winner in the Muscle Car class, though. The 'two Stans' were popular participants in the event, and whether it was camel-wrangling (Stan Snr.) or helping others out in the parade lap (Stan Jnr.), they truly represented the spirit of the car-collecting movement. The big, bronze Chevelle SS 454 was in a class of its own and deservedly took another award home to New Jersey.

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A pre-War selection dominated by the 'Blower' Bentley

At a black-tie Gala Awards Dinner on Sunday night, these trophies, and the all-important 'Best of Show' (to the 1934 Mercedes-Benz 380K – no one would argue with that), were presented to delighted entrants. After a week of cleaning and polishing, a visit to a Bedouin tent, VIP receptions and fascinating lectures by many of the star judges, it was time to leave Kuwait.

Prior to that last dinner, however, for those present on the concours field come early Sunday evening, the event had one more surprise: a visit by Tony Blair.





The former Prime Minister was given a guided tour of the cars and, with many a “Gosh, that’s big,” “I haven’t seen one of those for a long time” and “You know... I expect that needs some polish!” he worked the field like the pro he is. In answer to my question on any classic car stories he could recall, Mr Blair proudly remembered his very first car: a Morris Minor.

With a final “See you, guys!” he was off, safely tucked up in a mightily armoured 7 Series BMW, on to his next engagement.





For an ex-PM it was another round of handshaking; Kuwait today, New York tomorrow, no doubt. And we'll all be off to Amelia Island, the Geneva Motor Show and Villa d'Este in the next few months. But I'll remember the Kuwait Concours for some time to come - a genuinely different new event which will get even better in 2012.







We'll have some more features for you from Kuwait over the next few weeks, including an almost other-worldly story of a driving legend behind the wheel of two of the concours cars on the streets of Kuwait City. Watch this space.



























With grateful thanks to Abdulaziz Ishaq and Zak Dashti of the Kuwait Concours d'Elegance, Paul Goldsmith and everyone at the luxurious [Safir Marina Hotel](#).

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