

CLASSIC DRIVER

Celebrating Bentley's most flamboyant decade - the 1990s

Lead

As Bentley turns 100 years old, so the Milanese fashion entrepreneur Guglielmo Miani will celebrate his beloved Continental coupés from the 1990s with an exclusive concours d'elegance at Lake Como and a flamboyant coffee table book. And now you can read the preface, written by our own Jan Baedeker...



If there are still faint glimmers of civilisation left in this automotive world, they might very well be the headlights of a Bentley shining through the London fog. Over the last 100 years, the marque has not only produced some of the most distinguished automobiles on which one could squander his or her fortune but also created a brand that has left its mark on the collective subconscious, producing long-lasting images, associations and emotions unlike any other manufacturer of cars. Whisper the word 'Bentley' in the bar of the Ritz or at the pool of the Chateau Marmont, and the connoisseurs around you will inevitably smell the rich and dark scent of the Connolly leather, see the pale light of an overcast English day reflected in the polished walnut veneer, and feel the looming wave of torque seizing hold of their body as the car gathers speed like an aircraft on the runway. Whoever has had the pleasure of driving a Bentley at least once in their lifetime will never forget the experience.



When I started working for Classic Driver Magazine as a young editorial intern in 2001, I was sent to pick up our publisher's two-tone Bentley Continental R from the garage. I cannot recall if I blamed the mechanics or the Hamburg traffic for my impudent delay, but it took me almost the entire day to return to the office, despite that the workshop was just around the block. This thing was not a car as I knew it. Riding along the Elbe river felt more like steering a speedboat, with its nose lifting above the surf under acceleration, or a locomotive being pushed to the limit by a pyromaniac fireman. I knew nothing about the 'Bentley Boys' or the 6.75-litre V8 engine that lasted half a century, but I was seriously hooked.



Even after 100 years, a Bentley is still the most distinguished car for any cultivated yet vivacious gentleman. Whoever chooses to worship the old saints of the international haute-volée between St. Tropez and St. Moritz could not pick a better, faster, or more refined Grand Tourer for his cross-continental jaunts. The digital jet set of the 21st Century might travel the globe in black Ubers and shared private planes available at their fingertips, but let's be frank: a Bentley is still the only means of transportation that combines that old world, whisky-and-leather grandeur of an English members' club with the mind-bending acceleration of a skeleton rider scorching down the ice canal at the infamous Cresta Run. There is no substitute.



And there is, of course, the ancient mythology of the brand that will be sermonised around the world for the centenary celebrations. There are the famous 'Bentley Boys' who won Le Mans five times in seven years between 1924 and 1930 and celebrated their victories like the prototype playboys they were: by storming the ballroom of the Savoy in London with their winning cars still dirty from the race. There is Ettore Bugatti, grudgingly referring to the unstoppable Blowers as 'the world's fastest trucks', which they probably were. [There's Ian Fleming](#), who put James Bond behind the wheel of a Bentley in his original spy novel *Casino Royale* - and Sir Roger Moore, who steered his Turbo R through the curves of the Swiss Alps. And of course, there is Keith Richards, fleeing the shackles of civilisation (and the British taxmen) to Marrakech with [Blue Lena](#), his [Bentley S3 Continental Flying Spur](#). But despite all the fame and glory, the countless daredevils and audacious gentlemen enriching the tale of the Bentley brand, the last 100 years were by no means a story of steady success. Forced into liquidation after the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression, W. O. Bentley was forced to witness the takeover of his company by Rolls-Royce. And after the production of the ground-breaking Bentley R-Type Continental ceased in 1955, the once proud automobiles carrying the Flying B on their grilles were soon little more than rebadged Rolls-Royces, selling in rather homeopathic dosages. By the late 1970s, less than five percent of the cars built in Crewe were Bentleys. The brand was as good as dead.



But what followed was not an exodus but one of the most audacious revivals in automotive history. Inspired by the motorcycle racer Barry Sheene, who had committed the sacrilege of customising his Rolls-Royce with Campagnolo aluminium wheels, wider tyres and even a spoiler, the styling department in Crewe started reconsidering the bold and sporty heritage of Bentley to better differentiate the two sibling brands. A powerful turbo engine originally developed for the Rolls-Royce Camargue was used to steer Bentley's limousines back into more dynamic territory during the 1980s, and with great success. And in 1991, the Bentley Continental R marked the brand's long-awaited return to its vibrant heritage of the roaring twenties. The silent sports car was back.



During its *independence days* at the turn of the Millennium, Bentley produced some of the world's most refined, rare, and exuberant automobiles money could buy. And there is a small but rapidly growing cult of international connoisseurs who see these grand yet undervalued tourers for what they really are - incredible pieces of engineering and craftsmanship, the epitome of decades of technical development and centuries of British craftsmanship, and the last masterworks of a bygone era. Since 1998, Volkswagen has taken Bentley to a whole new level, slowly replacing hand-built eccentricities with amazingly efficient, platform-based high-volume production cars, turning the make into one of the most successful and relevant luxury brands in the world. But it's the days of regained independence at the turn of the Millennium and the cars with their unprecedented level of artisanal refinement and customisation that I still find most fascinating. Luckily, I am not alone.



The [Milanese entrepreneur extraordinaire, president of his family's iconic fashion brand Larusmiani and influential car collector Guglielmo Miani](#) has been fascinated by the 'Big Bentleys' of the 1990s since he adored them lined up in front of the Monte-Carlo Beach Club as a teenager. But only later in his life did he realise how much rarer and more sophisticated they were than any other cars of their time. A maniac for anything handmade, he acquired his first Bentley – a very special all-black Continental R Mulliner SE – and he just kept searching for more. Since then, he has spent years travelling the world to find the most sophisticated cars from this short but vastly creative era and now owns one of the most distinguished collections of 1990s Bentleys, all of them customised by the brand's in-house dream factory to meet the discerning demands of their first owners. As the publisher of the new, limited-edition book [Bentley – A Century of Elegance and Speed](#), Guglielmo Miani celebrates the centenary of his preferred automotive brand – but more than that, he wants to show the most sophisticated cars from his preferred decade to the world like they have not been shown before.

With the brand's history masterfully retold by Italy's renowned automotive historian and petrolhead grand seigneur Marco Makuas, and the most distinct cars *mise en scene* by the ever jet-setting photographer-slash-influencer Ted Gushue, Guglielmo Miani has gathered just the right gentlemen to celebrate a century of Bentleymania in the most educated, civilised and yet exuberant style that W.O. Bentley, famous 'Bentley Boys', Keith Richards, or Roger Moore could have wished for.



But that's not all. On 26 May 2019, Miani is expecting likeminded connoisseurs at the very first Fuori Concorso, showcasing a selection of the most exceptional 1990s Bentley coupés at Villa del Grumello di Como. The line-up will include breathtaking Mulliner Special Commission cars from the world's finest collections, including the ex-Carlo Talamo Bentley Continental R now owned by Eugenio Amos, the 527HP Bentley Continental R 'Sufacon' built for the Sultan of Brunei, and the world's only two-seat Bentley Continental T. Inside Villa del Grumello, drawings from Petrified artist Martin Miškolci and photographs from Ted Gushue will also be on display.

So, if on the Saturday of Villa d'Este you've already had your fill of the Concorso d'Eleganza and you'd like to escape the crowds at Villa Erba on Sunday, simply board your Riva and head over to the Villa del Grumello between 2pm and 4pm to catch a glimpse of what might very well be Bentley's most flamboyant decade. Here's to the next 100 years – keep on waiting!

Photos by Ted Gushue / Drawings by Martin Miškolci

Gallery

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