

My Drive With Irv



'Ever wonder what it'd be like to spend a few days and hundreds of miles with Irv Gordon in the 'Million Mille Volvo'? It's the Million-400,000-plus-Mile Volvo now, that red '66 1800S that makes us marvel.

First off, Irv won't let you drive his car no matter how good your record. Also he snores-no, not when he drives, when he sleeps, which isn't very much. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The call came during one of those rare times when all is going so well you want to pinch yourself. When Irv called, I'd just returned from a glorious ocean sail down the coast of California and fooling around islands in the sun on a good boat with good people, lots of whales, seals, porpoises, great food, and fair breezes.

He called to invite me on the 'American Mille' -a high falutin' motoring tour and fine dining experiences-Life was indeed rich; I've long wanted to go on one of these things but never could afford it even if I had a car that qualified. This time, Irv's Volvo qualified and the Volvo Corporation was picking up the tab. THANKS, VOLVO!

This tour through the California wine country, along the North Coast and inland was organized by the folks who put on a 1,000 mile run called the 'California Miglia' patterned after Italy's old Mille Miglia road race. Really wealthy car nuts pay some \$3,000 for that one, for a few days of driving rare old sports cars over our state's best two-lanes, staying in only the finest inns and eating high on the hog.

Other states have those tours too, called the Colorado Grand, the Copper State 1,000 (Arizona) and the like. They have police escorts. Cars and mechanics are sometimes flown in for them.

One year I caught up with the Highlands Classic just to drool on the cars.

Several participants had Larchmont . Lockjaw, that way of speaking as if your jaws are wired shut (very snobbish). I've also caught a couple of California Miglia starts to admire the cars. At a California Migha start, a participant asked what I drove. When I said a Volvo 1800ES, he said "Oh really?" with eyebrow raised-promptly walking off.

A car-nut social climber pal of mine damned near cried when he and his old Alfa were denied entry that event. For him and others of uncertain social station, not getting in the thing is akin to a Westchester girl being turned for the debutante ball. So I was tickled when Irv invited me on this tour, a 500+ mile version of the Miglia put on by the same folks but with a more democratic selection criteria. Cars had to be "interesting" and more than 25 years old.

It seems Volvo of America had caught wind of it, asked Irv if he'd like to do it for exposure and in appreciation for his goodwill work, and Irv said sure. When Ws friend who was to ride shotgun couldn't make it Irv, at Dave Rauch's suggestion, called me. "Delicious irony!" I yelled when I hung up the phone, remembering the snub my 1800 got from that Brooks Brothers type at a Miglia start two years ago.

That Friday, my ES glistened in the dawn during a swift run to Napa, 45 minutes from here. Hot air balloons dotted the vineyard sky over the fancy inn where I was to meet Irv.

Over a huge gourmet breakfast, we got reacquainted, and shortly joined the others as cars lined up for the start. Drivers and passengers mingled - a fine eclectic bunch of car-folk and cars. There were three '60s Alfas, an early Lotus 7, a Lotus Europa, Ferrari 330 Spider, TR-4, Ferrari 275 Berlinetta, Aston Martin DB-4C, Chrysler 300 convertible, Porsche 911 E, Porsche 356 SC, a perfect Hudson Hornet, two original Cobras, an AC Bristol, one Volvo 1800S, a Hispano-Suiza, the Buchanan V-12 - a wonderful sight!

Everybody got a bag of goodies monogrammed shirts and caps, heavy grill badges, pins, route directions. There didn't seem to be a snob in the bunch, but then this shorter tour cost only about \$500 to enter plus rooms and gas-and it was open to a broader array of cars.

Off we went through the vineyards in a long line of great sparkling machines. Irv's Volvo looking right at home in that company. We snaked through the hills on fabulous back roads on a picture-perfect day, at a brisk smooth pace bound for lunch on the North Coast.



How Irv Drives

Of course I was curious about how Irv drives. Of course he's smooth. He doesn't ride the clutch at stops on hills. He doesn't tailgate. However, on straight stretches, he lets the car wander a bit-onto the Botts dots and out onto the

shoulder but there are no close calls. He may seem to be drifting toward that bridge rail but in plenty of time he eases back. No need to get nervous-Irv is clearly aware of all that's happening.

What'd you expect? Through constant S curves, an original 289 Cobra astern, Alfa ahead, Irv takes the correct lines naturally, clipping apexes, easing to the outside for the next bend. He gets more precise in the serious the switch-backs. Everywhere, even minor pot holes are smoothly avoided; there's never any great swerving. Everything is taken in stride.

I usually can't stand being a passenger. Jolts to drivetrains bruise my soul. Crummy lines through curves or needlessly abrupt breaking are disturbing, but there was none of that with Irv. He handled nearly every situation as I would, his driving so similar it was as though I had thought-control of the car. Being a passenger this time was actually enjoyable. Of course Irv being an easy-going, unflappable sort with a good sense of humor helped.

Irv's Car

Regular SEES readers know I'm not in Irv's league in my Volvo's total mileage - a mere 400,000 or so on the ES - but I make annual coast-to-coast runs and drive plenty for fun and my job. Naturally I was curious about his set up. Again, it's a lot like mine. His car is boxstock while mine has a few performance modifications, but we both run with slightly outdated radar detectors and CB radios, fire extinguishers, a box of tools and a few essential spare parts.

A man of the open road, Irv usually dresses in black. So do smart hobos, motorcycle riders and truckers. Black doesn't show road grime. My road clothes are dark for the same reason plus they lend an air of being able to take care of yourself. Bullies are more likely to take on someone in white shirt and khakis. On long hauls alone, Irv also tends to run through the night catnapping before dawn in the driver's seat, taking a motel only every second night or so. Both of us keep our cars clean and luggage fairly neat (I'm more fussy, but Irv nearly lives in his car so he gets some slack).

Irv never drinks or eats anything behind the wheel while I'm always sipping coffee and munching. He sometimes listens to the car's original radio and the CB, but he doesn't play tapes.

"I like to pull into small towns and have a bite and coffee and watch people's reaction to the car," he said-as do I-but the urge to presson limits my stops: but then I don't have Irv's Volvo-ambassador role.

He cruises while I tend to hot-shoe.

Riding with him is like riding with a politician: Pass a kid on the roadside and Irv beeps the horn hello. It's a happy sort of thing: The kid, captivated by the unusual bright red car, usually waves, maybe a little thrilled to be recognized by someone who must be special.

And Irv is special.

Before you meet him you may wonder about a guy who'd drive so much, almost always alone. But he's no social club-foot. Unfailingly affable, witty, friendly and able, he's clearly comfortable with his own company but enjoys others. Our silences were as easy as our conversation.

In the quiet stretches he sort of dances in his seat, a subtle rocking to his own beat like he's communing with the car, urging it along with a little body-English.

For two days, we all ran from breakfast to catered lunch to fancy dinner with nary a sour note. Everyone was happy to be on this drive in well tuned machines on sunny back roads.

Well, there was one stretch we could have done without - a narrow, rough 30 miles where the scenery was great but the pavement (or dirt) was hard on the cars. Irv and I tensed as the suspension absorbed a washboard beating.

"This road is putting more wear on the car than the last 500,000 miles," he grimaced. We felt for the Volvo, sturdy as it is, and for the delicate Lotuses, the Bristol and buckboardriding Cobras out there.

Old West hanging trees lined this road. I found myself mentally devising a rope and noose of fanbelts, but the route selector was nowhere in sight.

Further along, the pristine Porsche 911E collected a pheasant with its windshield. Part of the bird stuck in the glass, feathers fluttering, cracks radiating out from its final perch right in front of the driver. Fortunately the driver, an endurance race veteran (Canadian 4,000 rally and the like), took it in stride at 70 mph. Other than that, a fiat and a fouled plug or two - and a gas problem that sidelined a Bugatti - there were no mishaps. Except, the organizer's keys did drop down a storm drain. Nobody could get them until Irv leapt into the breach. From the depths of his 1800, he fetched a magnet on a stick, racertapped a long ice-scraper to it and - bingo - up came the keys. "Our herol!" the women squealed, and the men applauded. That was icing on the cake. The fact that Irv drove out for this tour from New York was utterly amazing to most - until they learned that his was THE Million Mille Volvo! Some of those people thought they were serious car nuts until they met Irv, doing what most of them would love to do-just drive and drive and drive a mighty good car.

Grandpa's Axe

Like many, I've wondered how much Irv's car is like "Grandpa's axe" - you know, the ax that's had five new handles and three newheads, but that's Grandpa's old axel Irv's '66 Volvo ain't iike that. He had the engine rebuilt carefully just once -at 680,000 miles. More than 800,000 miles later, it needs no oil between changes. Only the grill has been replaced a few times, the rear panel once, and the rocker panels (he is from New York, after all). The car's been repainted several times. It looks showroom-new. Brake rotors, transmission, rear-end, you name it-all are original. The seats were reupholstered once a long time ago, in leather (ofcourse). They look fine. Carpet and headliner are original and less scuffed than a most families' year-old Toyotas.

Irv favors Bridgestone tires, uses only Castrol GTX 20-50 motor oil (changed every 2,000 to 4,000 miles, depending on what kind of driving he's doing). He puts 80-90 weight gear oil in the transmission/overdrive rather than the specified straight 30-weight. He sticks with genuine Volvo parts, of course. Asked how many years all those miles add up to in the driver's seat if he'd been able (and Gordon replied "I don't know. That's got to be one of the world's 10 most useless facts." Yeah, well, I was curious. If my calculations are correct, figuring an average speed for 1,400,000 miles averaging 40 mph (since most of the time he's on the highway and not in town) - if he had never stopped for anything he would have driven 24 HOURS A DAY FOR MORE THAN FOUR YEARS! It's probably more like five years in the car when you consider red lights and catnaps by the side of the road. Boy-howdyl 'Sorry, Irv, I just had to know.

Some may think all that time at the wheel would have driven him nuts, but he's surprisingly sane. He's probably driven nuts more by his job - teaching junior high science on Long Island. After our fancy tour, Irv stopped by my place. It's quiet here. I thought he might like a little R & R after our long weekend, but no --after an hour or so he calculated the daylight left and the route to Modesto: He could get in another hundred miles or more that Sunday so off he went. If you want to know more about this unusual man and his fabulous machine, get your buns to the National meet in Niagara Falls and ask him yerownself. He aims to drive there after he drives a few other places. But if you share a room with him, take earplugs! And if you get a chance to cruise with Irv-do it! He's a good, kind, smart and honest man. He wears well in the close company of an 1800 cockpit.

It was a pleasure, Irv. Thanks again!

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