

One nice day after another made up the maiden drive of the turbocharged New Beetle across Germany, posing for pictures, blowing away 328s and wondering: "Why is everyone so damn happy?"

Have a Nice Day

So we're on our way to Germany, sharing an airport shuttle with two Frenchmen. We reveal that we're going to drive Volkswagen's New Beetle in The Fatherland, and they both smile mischievously. "We talk of ze Beetle often. I love it—he hates it," says one, pointing to the other.

"I *hate* ze Beetle," says the other. Why?

"Because, it is ugly and *stupid*."

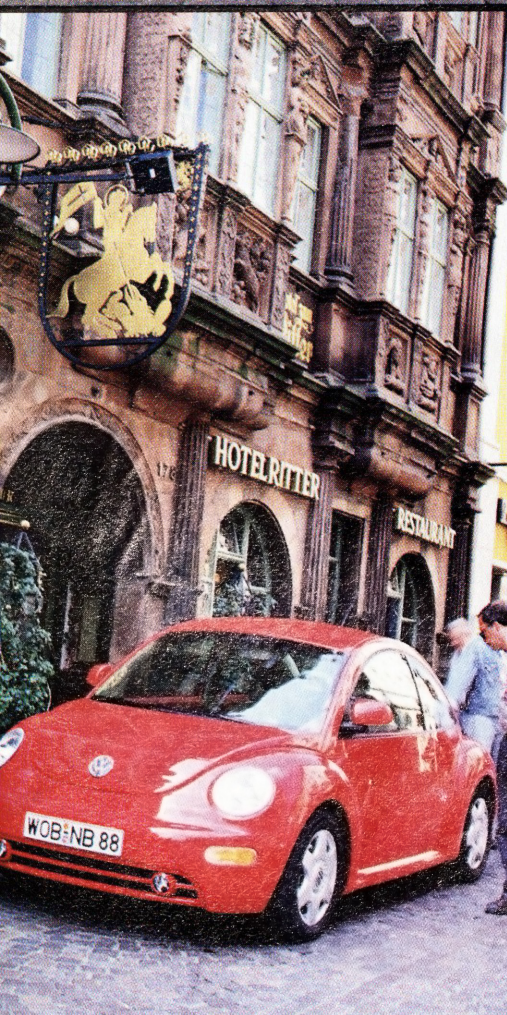
Says his friend: "He has no sense of humor."

Well, we think but do not say, he's French.

Do you *have* to have a sense of humor to fall in love with the New Beetle, a car built just to make you smile? If so, where does that leave the Germans? Will they get the joke? Or is the car, to them, just another joke played on Americans? The New Beetle won't be available in Europe until early 1999; VW is letting the good vibrations float backward across the Atlantic in advance of European launch. Beyond the pure historical significance of the Beetle there, Germany is the most important market in VW's ever-expanding Fortress Europe. If any VW brass are the least bit nervous about the Beetle's reception there, they don't show it. But a week on the autobahn and the winding country two-lanes should answer the question. If it doesn't... we can certainly think of worse ways to kill a week.

MONDAY Since we begin the day at VW's fabulous museum in Wolfsburg, a history lesson: In Germany, as in America, the old Beetle conjures up warmth and good feelings—but it represents something more significant than Flower Power. It's the symbol of Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder*, or "economic miracle" of the 1950s and '60s, the term that describes the way a starving, demolished country pulled itself up out of ruin.

BY JOHN P. CORTEZ • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM FETS



With no New Beetles in Germany yet, we draw crowds wherever we go, and the 1.8 turbo ensures we get there quickly. In Heidelberg, a GenXer says, "It's like Star Trek." Really? You mean it looks futuristic? "No," he says. "I mean you have Star Trek and then there's The Next Generation. I like the old one better."



German families sacrificed in the '50s and were rewarded with the car, *der Kaefer*, a crude but cute means of family transportation. Every summer, they'd cram the kids and the luggage into *der Kaefer* and drive over Austria's fabled Grossglockner Alpine pass, and into Italy on holiday. So that's what we thought we'd do; forget Haight/Ashbury, we'll do a typical German family vacation, leaving from Wolfsburg.

"It is not as important for the car to be as successful here as it is in America," says VW's Holger Ploog, over lunch. Ploog is project manager for the A-platform cars (Golf, Beetle, Jetta, Audi A3 and TT coupe and roadster, Skoda Octavia and Seat Toledo). "But it's very important to have the Beetle name in the European market." After spatzle and schnitzel, we catch our Bug: a bright red 1.8-liter, 150-hp turbo-charged New Beetle. It is smiling. It's a prototype ("so *please* be careful"), as turbo production won't begin till fall; it will be available in the U.S. market by December. Since nobody's driven the turbo yet, we don't know what to expect. But we do know we're looking forward to the opportunity, as we've enjoyed the 1.8-liter turbo so much in the A4 and in the Passat. As we get into it, we find we're not disappointed.

The guard at the VW compound raises the gate for us, and we pull out, punching the throttle in first gear and lifting the clutch and, quite loudly and quite unintentionally, lighting up the front tires. This is *not* the New Beetle we know—but it's the one to *have*. In 10 minutes we're on the autobahn. Since the car hasn't been seen on these roads, we cause an immediate stir. Beep! A wagon full of kids doing Linda Blair head-turns honks as we merge. Snap! A couple in a Golf Cabrio takes our picture. Kiss! (*Kiss?*) Two girls in an old VW van blow kisses at our car. It blushes. This is all in the first 90 seconds. So far it's just like America.

Getting up to speed, we're distracted by the sound of the roof-mounted spoiler rising. Its loud mechanical whir reminds us of the sound our late, lamented long-term VW Corrado made. The turbo Bug is tight and quick, letting us grab and hold the left lane for long stretches, moving occasionally for 911s that make our 115-mph clip look leisurely. We stare down the tail of a 328i that finally, grudgingly, cedes the left lane to us. As we pass, the driver looks astonished, both because he's seeing a New Beetle on the road and because it's blowing his doors off.

Finally it's time for petrol—about \$40 worth. We briefly consider tracking our miles per gallon, until we realize we're dealing with liters, kilometers and deutsche marks, and decide it'd be better to focus on navigation and ambulation. An old Beetle that crossed Grossglockner in 1938 recorded 33.5 mpg at 56 mph (90 km/h). The turbo won't get quite that kind of mileage, but it won't make you stop at every gas station, either.





In Freiburg, we trip the car's alarm at our hotel, as if we don't get enough attention. It's deafening. People still smile, but now hold their ears too. Brain in a cranial cramp, we fumble with the key fob and door handles. Finally, mercifully, the honking stops. We still don't know why.



A 50-ish German man approaches the pump. "*Der neu Kaefer?!*" He runs his hand along the A-pillar and climbs inside, touching everything. "*Wunderbar. Wunderbar. Wunderbar.*" Laughing, he tweaks the daisy in the bud vase and smiles wider. "Ooooh, yes, yes, yes, yes!" He thumps his chest. "My first car—*der Kaefer.*" He says he would buy one for his son. A smile and a Coke later, we're back on the road.

A four-hour 'bahn after that, we reach our destination, the tourist town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, an medieval walled city. We navigate the narrow streets to the hotel garage, kids running alongside shouting, "*Der neu Kaefer!*" As we settle in for a good night's sleep, we decide that this fantasy trip could easily cause us to lose grip on our reality. Not difficult in Europe. We turn on the TV for a reality check and it's right there: A German sports channel is running a half-hour NASCAR show with highlights from Charlotte. In German. Somewhere, Bill France is smiling.

TUESDAY The chunky middle-aged woman launches a JoAnne Worley laugh at the Bug parked in front of the Hotel Riemenschneider in Rothenburg. "We did the same thing when I was a little girl," she says when we tell her our trip plans. "My two sisters and I would ride in the back, our things piled up." Was it comfortable?

"Of course not, but it was *our* car! And we loved it." Beaming, she remembers the family Beetle trekking up Grossglockner, the car proudly wearing the sticker of passage like a war medal. Might this new car re-create some of those magical moments?

"Oh. . . no. I don't think so. You cannot. But it's nice to remember."

We coast through the city gates and out of the old town, whose castles date as far back as A.D. 970, or almost 1000 years Before Beetle. Soon we're gripping the two-lane tightly toward the next tiny town. And the one after that. In between towns, we amuse ourselves by looking at the stunned faces in oncoming cars. It's like a series of snapshots as we pass them, moments frozen in time. . . a woman smiling, a man pointing, a child flabbergasted. The faster we go, the better our eyes' shutter speed has to be to catch their faces.

We follow the winding banks of the Neckar River to Heidelberg, where we arrive late afternoon. The college town's city center is bustling with students and travelers. Just down the street from our hotel, through the throngs, we spy an Irish pub called Napper Tandy's—make mental note for later. We inch to the front door of our hotel, get out of the car and meet the masses.

A fortysomething who pulls up in a BMW Z1 says he likes his car better. Duh. "I don't understand the fuss," he says. "It is just a *car*, isn't it? It is a car with an egg shape. And they are buying them straight off the transporters!"

Such naysayers are in the minority, as passers-by continue to swarm the car and snap pics.

ven more in the minority, VW would be glad to know, is a traditionally garbed Indian couple. The man says: "It is a very nice car. What company makes it?"

We peel the car away and garage it for the night. After a buffet at Pizza Hut, we head out to talk Beetle with the populace. If you really want to talk cars, we always say, talk to the Irish. Napper Tandy's, anyone?

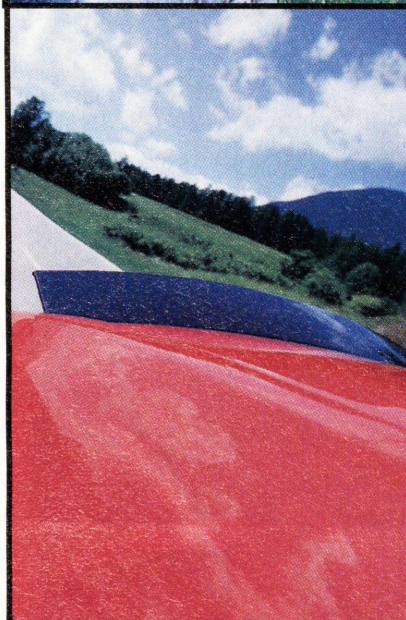
WEDNESDAY The morning begins in a Guinness-thick haze. And that's just in the hotel room. It's Colin the bartender's fault. First he told us James Napper Tandy was an Irish revolutionary who led armed insurrections against the British in the late 1700s. Then he introduced us to all his mates at the pub. After that all we recall is that we *did* ask about Beetles, and everyone thought they were a great band. And everyone thought that James Napper Tandy would have liked cars very much. Sigh. Work is hard.

So the need for a clear head on the autobahn gets us a later start than we'd have liked. The New Beetle first sees daylight with a gas and wash. As we pull out of the station, a kid on a bike shouts, "Geil!" Which literally translates as "horny" but is used by hip youths to mean "awesome." We're guessing, hoping really, he means the latter translation.

Suddenly, a problem. The "check engine" light flashes, then stubbornly remains alit. The car is running fine. Here we go—OBD II has reached its ugly hands across the Atlantic. Can't take chances with the prototype, so we find a VW dealership and pull up to the big glass service bay doors, which instantly swing up to release a squadron of service guys in big blue overalls. They've not seen the car yet, obviously, and in fact they're not allowed to so much as point a wrench at it without specific orders from Wolfsburg. So a series of high-level top-secret phone calls begins. The Cone of Silence is lowered. We decide to wait outside with the mesmerized overall boys.

After 90 minutes or so, the phone calls are made, the orders given, the car examined, the electrical bugs exterminated, the OBD II codes reset, the daisy watered, and the good-byes said. It was nothing, as expected. But it was a chance to turn an ordinary day in the service bay into a love-in. Soon, Heidelberg is in our rearview mirror.

And on to Freiburg we go, another hopping college town. Another day of zipping through curvy two-lanes, letting the turbo whet our appetite for the 150-hp Beetle 1.8T that *AutoWeek* will soon add to the long-term fleet. The 2.0-liter 115-hp New Beetle fades into more distant memory with each Opel we pass. We check into the Hotel Am Rathaus (which, incidentally, means "town hall" and not "house of rats"), we creep into bed for



Spoiler up on the way to Fuessen, we're toasted by excited, stein-hoisting women. In town we get a car wash but don't know we have to buy a "dry" too. The attendant gives us one for free because, he says, he likes the car. Hey, free dry, man. Can't beat that.





the night, surfing TV for that elusive reality check. A world away in Los Angeles, on CNN, they're eulogizing Frank Sinatra, his final encore. Somewhere, certainly, Frank, Sammy and Dino are smiling, leaning over a smoky bar dotted with stubbed-out butts and shots of Jack, baby.

THURSDAY Terrific. Today's a holiday in Germany, and that means one thing: traffic. The two-lane taking us from Freiburg to Fuessen is clogged. Not just bumper-to-bumper, go-slow traffic. But far-as-the-eye-can-see, stopped-dead traffic. The kind that drives people to killing sprees. The kind where even the New Beetle gets old if you're planted motionless in it long enough.

Through a few hours and showers we inch our way toward Bodensee, a large lovely lake rippling in Bavaria. We park near shore and the sun finally peaks out, drying the children playing on the rocks and the skateboarders and picnickers nearby. Of course, a crowd. . .

"Look at the cupholders—typical American," snorts one old gentleman. He is rebuked, surprisingly sharply, by an American woman who says she lives in France and *hates* European cars. "There's nowhere to put your drinks. It's so asinine," she says in a Boston accent, angry eyes pale blue and icy like a Husky's. We think, beyond the cupholders, she has some issues.

The old man tells a young blonde that the car is basically a tarted-up Golf. "Yes," she says, "but *no*. This has personality. If you have a Golf, then all you have is a *Golf*."

She gets it. After a last look at the scores of sailboats lazily doing the Bodensee bop, we take off for Fuessen, tourist haven and home of royal castles such as Neuschwanstein, built by mad King Ludwig in the 1800s and almost as convincing as its replica at Disneyland.

After we wash the car and put it to bed, we end up at a traditional German beer hall, your typical sing-along tavern with ales by the yard. It's jammed, mostly with locals who cater to the tourist crowd by day, dressing up in funny costumes at the castles to amuse Americans who will inevitably call them Hans and/or Franz, much as they do at the almost as convincing Oktoberfest in Orlando.

A comely young nursing student named Christiane asks about our travels. We tell her about the Beetle but she's not impressed. "You need to climb a mountain," she says, barley-sparkle in her eyes and hops-driven defiance in her voice. "We have beautiful mountains in Bavaria and if you climb one you'll know what it means to be free. You'll *never* feel more free."

Is there a place to park our car up there?

"You do not *drive* to climb a mountain," she sneers indignantly. "You must *walk*."

ut... we have a car. She walks away.

Later we ask another local, Richard, what he thinks of the Beetle. "I am not interested in cars," he grunts glumly by way of making us feel welcome. "I do not care about the Beetle. I can't afford it. Even if someone gave me the money to buy one I would use it to pay for my house or spend it on my family."

Across the room, on a smoky summit above the crowd, Christiane is dancing on a table top, smiling.

FRIDAY We're parked at a cafe near Neuschwanstein. An octogenarian German fellow studies the car with visible delight. An American GI from the base up the road, a 40-ish guy with a southern accent, studies the old codger. "Look at 'im," he says to us, plenty loud. "The ol' homeboy probably worked on the line at Hitler's Beetle plant." He then adds a guffaw good enough to get him invited back to the studio audience at *Hee Haw*. We smile the awkward smile you smile when you're embarrassed for your country.

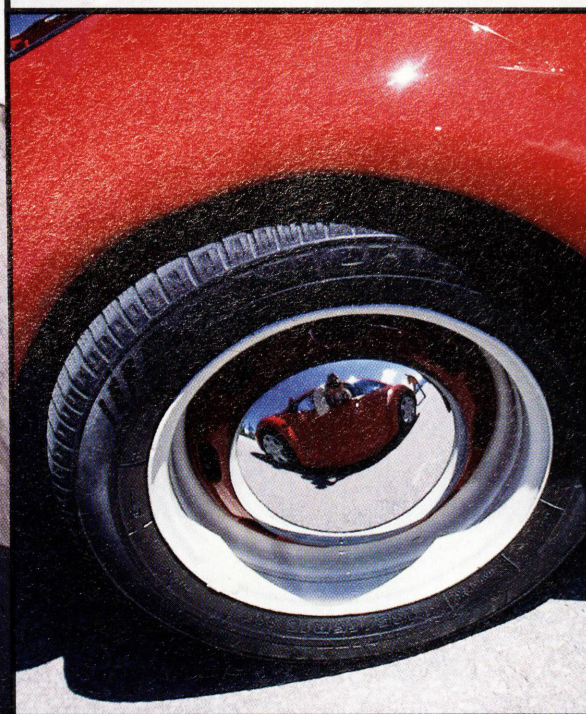
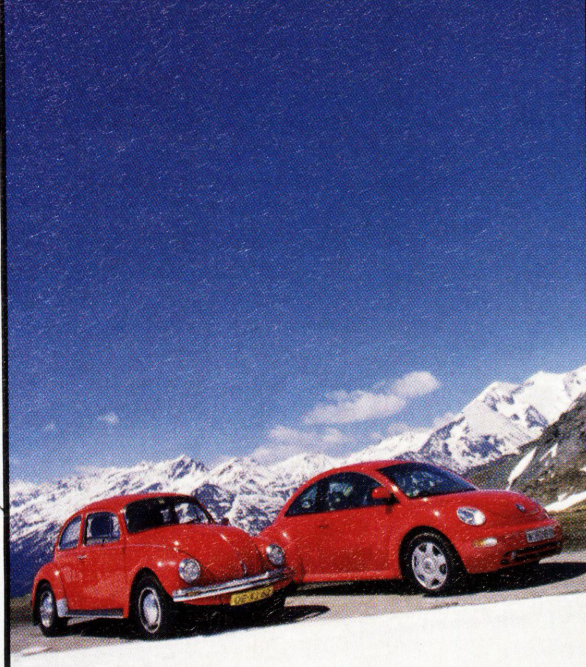
It's a tough thing for VW, and Germany, the history of this car. We had asked to start our trip in Berlin, where the Beetle was first introduced by Hitler himself. VW officials said that "would not be so good." They're making a direct play on the past simply by building a revamped Bug, but they want to pick and choose *which* past to conjure up. *Wirtschaftswunder* and Woodstock, *ja*; World War II, *nein*. And yet, listening to our big-mouthed American friend here, we can understand the Germans' reluctance to bring it up. It's awkward. And it seems the harder the Germans work to leave the past in the past—banning Nazi salutes and such—the harder their odd nutjobs and skinheads work to reclaim it. You hope hatred and bad feelings and awkwardness will die away with the generations, and then you go into a 7-Eleven in Wichita and see a spike-haired kid with a swastika tattoo. It's a conundrum we address by heading for Austria.

We cross the border to about as much fanfare as entering Ohio, and have a late lunch in Innsbruck. It's evening when we finally reach Zell am See, a ski resort town near Grossglockner. At the Hotel Porschehof (yes, owned by *that* family), a man tells us the only New Beetle he has seen on the road belongs to Ferdinand Piech's mother, who lives nearby. We wonder if Frau Piech rates a turbo.

The reality check after this long day comes with TV coverage from Belfast and Dublin, where Irish voters today overwhelmingly approved the peace accord. Somewhere, James Napper Tandy is smiling an enigmatic smile.

SATURDAY At last. The pinnacle of the trip. Grossglockner. We can't wait to get up there and take pictures of the New Beetle





On the mountain, we're greeted by scores of old Beetles and screaming masses. They represent several Beetle car clubs that meet regularly to climb Grossglockner, and they are shocked and ecstatic to see us. We are pretty happy to see them too. We're hoping to get some free T-shirts.

where so many old ones had tread. Pulling into a gas station for a last fill-up, we're told that this Saturday just happens to be the day when various old Beetle clubs meet to hang out on the mountain. We've never won the lotto, but we now know how it feels.

As we head up the mountain, the overcast turns to fog, until we're literally driving through a cloud. When we finally reach the old wooden restaurant near the top of the pass, about 8000 feet up, we can't see a thing. Snowdrifts are three feet high and the air is solid white with fog. Picture driving on one of Jupiter's moons. We park and climb out. Oh, this will make for dandy photos! Feels like our lottery ticket fell through a sewer grate on our way to the store to redeem it. We hear the rumble of a bus engine idling, but can't see the bus; it's exactly 20 paces from us.

Through the fog appears the ghostly form of an old red Beetle, a '78, Mexican-made, like ours. A nice Dutch couple gets out and starts taking pictures of our car, and we theirs. We follow them over the pass and down the other side, and as we do, the fog lifts and suddenly we see blue skies. And sunshine. And Beetles by the score. They're everywhere. Each gaggle that we pass honks and waves and shouts and reacts with gleeful shock. The frenzied scene that played out on German streets all week is multiplied tenfold. No naysayers here. Everyone has to touch the car, feel its surfaces, pat its steering wheel, probe its every detail. Their dogs sniff it.

We found that lost lotto ticket, standing in the brilliant sunshine, looking at a New Beetle, surrounded by Old, against blue sky and whitecapped Alpine peaks. No wonder those von Trapps were singing all the time. Nerts to you, Christiane—we feel pretty free right about now.

And so we make fast friends with the Kaefer Club. We giddily head down into the valley, toward the motorway to Italy, thinking about all the Beetles that have made this drive before us, trying to make sense of it all, come to some grandiose conclusion.

But there is none. We had a blast, like our predecessors. These thoughts dangle as we sprint downhill toward Milan at a buck-ten. Things are moving much faster. We've put 1800 miles on this Beetle, in three countries. The trip has come to a sudden end with an adrenaline rush of a day, and we can only think of one thing, and it's not what are we going to do on a Saturday night in Milan? No, it's VW's Holger Ploog, back in Wolfsburg on Monday, an eon ago, telling us about the viability of the New Beetle. He said: "For six years we believe we can sell more cars than we can produce." And then he smiled.

There's a reality check for you. ●