



Clockwise from above: Glistening star-bearing cars line the well-kept grass; Paul Bracq and Erich Waxenberger were star guests; oddball vehicles like the Benzolino pickup added to the flavour; the M-100 V8 takes centre stage.

Displacement Central

Celebrity guests and amazing cars make the M-100 Group's annual meeting essential date for the diary, writes *Reed Hitchcock*

When I attended my first International M-100 Lode Star Fest two years ago, I thought it was the best car club event I'd ever been to. These guys put on quite a show – fantastic cars, great food, and they actually take the time to educate the members about the glorious machinery assembled, in part to attract attendees, but mainly to ensure that owners continue to properly feed and care for these most remarkable Mercs from the 1960s and 1970s.

Last year's event was even better. It incorporated all the same elements from the previous year, but with the added benefit of having one of my personal idols – none other than Mercedes and BMW design legend Paul Bracq – the man single-handedly responsible for the design of the 600, the Pagoda, and a host of other automotive shapes that we are all very familiar with. What could top that?

In a nutshell, the 2005 Lode Star Fest tops them all. To start, the event this year was held in Charleston, South Carolina, hosted by Axel Reinert and his excellent team at Star Motor Service. Axel's facilities are first-rate and an excellent venue for technical sessions ranging in scope from wood restoration to hydraulic system

service, leather rejuvenation, and the technology behind air suspensions. As a relatively recent M-100 owner myself, I learned how some of the simplest preventive maintenance can avoid repair bills in the thousands of dollars, and I can tell you that upon returning home I immediately added denatured alcohol to my clearly neglected air suspension system.

RETURNING STARS

But it was better than technical sessions and terrific surroundings. Not only did Paul Bracq return because he enjoyed last year's event so much, but the sometimes renegade engineer who essentially fathered the 300SEL 6.3 – Erich

Waxenberger – came with him. Over dinner at a seaside country club that looked to have been pulled straight out of a Hemingway novel, Bracq provided the specific details of design he hadn't had the time to include in last year's presentation,

showing slide upon slide of his Merz concepts, both classic and new, as a recently commissioned Benzolino. Waxenberger talked about what he learned from the extensive research and development that went into the M-100 motor, how I team re-engineered the power the motor without sacrificing drivability, and the hoops he had to jump through to accomplish things he did. Most interesting was the semi-secret development of the 300. Listening to them both, you certainly get the impression that modern controls and mechanisms have taken some of the fun out of the automotive development process.

In the end, however, it always comes down to the cars. The 2005 event featured over 30 M-100 cars of all types – 600, 6.9 – in addition to one-offs including M-100-engined hotrod and Karl Midd Benzomino, which won the Paul Bracq award due to the sheer courage it took to build the car. The question now, is how will I Fest 2006 top this? Just for starters, it hosted by the new Mercedes-Benz Classic USA, in Irvine, California. Roll on 2006!

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