

**Replica is a dirty word to some**, but the great advantage of 'new build' cars is that you can actually use the buggers. So when *Octane* was asked if we would like to try one of the Bugatti Type 35B recreations built by Argentinian company Pur Sang, the conversation went something like this:

'Could you actually drive one of these cars every day?'

'I don't see why not. We know a guy in France who's done about 20,000 miles in his.'

'OK then, would you let us borrow the car for a week and commute to the office in it?'

To his great credit, Jerry Booen of Pur Sang agent The Old Racing Car Company wasn't in the least bit fazed by such a suggestion; not even when the proposed late-summer slot slipped in the schedule to become a week in mid-winter, complete with short days, freezing conditions and salty roads. What would it be like living with a 1920s Grand Prix car in such conditions? With the aid of a set of trade plates, we determined to find out. »

# Bug Life



Could you drive to work in a Grand Prix Bugatti? In winter? *Octane* spent a week living with one of the superb replicas built by Argentinian company Pur Sang to find out

**Words:** Mark Dixon **Photography:** Matthew Howell











## 'It's one hell of a Christmas present and, like with, my first instinct is to show it off

**There have been almost** as many Bugatti replicas as there have been fake Cobras, and some of them equally horrible. But the Pur Sang is propelled by a supercharged, 2.3-litre straight eight just like a real Type 35B, and has all the engineering detail of a genuine Bugatti, including the complicated hollow-forged front axle. There are differences, important ones, but we'll come to those later.

Pur Sang is cagey about exactly how many 35s it's built over the last two decades but the best guess puts the number at about 100. Recently it has diversified into other marques, with copies of the Mercedes SSK and Alfa 8C-2900, and its latest project is an airworthy replica of the WW1 Avro 504 biplane. These guys don't mess about.

The sheer quality of the PS Type 35 is obvious the moment that Jerry Booen unloads The Old Racing Car Company demonstrator outside the

Dixon motorhouse on Christmas Eve. From the square-headed body fixings – every one of them correctly wired to its neighbour zig-zag fashion – to the beautifully fashioned, curved track rod arms, it looks just right.

It's one hell of a Christmas present and, like anyone given such a fabulous toy to play with, my first instinct is to show it off to as many people as possible. Fortunately, vintage racer Geraint Owen has just completed his own Type 35B build, and a plan is hatched whereby I'll smoke over to Geraint's Herefordshire base in the Pur Sang, go out with a bunch of old-car friends for a curry, then blag my way into the VSCC's Much Marcle pubmeet on New Year's Day.

Knowing that the driver's footwell will be cramped, I've invested in a set of racing boots specially (my feet are size 12s, and you know what they say about we blokes with big feet –

yes, that's right, we have big shoes). A useful mod is a block of wood, found at the back of the garage, that jams neatly between chassis crossmembers to raise my right foot above the level of the left: brake and throttle are now more easily depressed by the right foot's sole, while clutch is operated with the toes of the left, and each foot is kept out of the way of the other.

Firing up the Pur Sang involves a number of pre-flight checks of the kind more normally associated with light aircraft. The important one is to remember to turn on the drip-feed oil tap for the supercharger; just as important is to turn it off again every time you stop the engine, so you don't fill the blower with oil.

Once you've twiddled various taps, pressurised the fuel tank and primed the engine with the Ki-gass pump, you press the button for the electric starter (no crank twirling required, thank God)





**Below and left**  
Former rally ace Russell Brookes stopped for a chat; saddling up Parkin family 30/98 for the run to Much Marcle on New Year's Day.



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and, provided you haven't flooded the plugs, the Pur Sang will now start. In fact, the word 'start' is inadequate to describe the volley of sound that's unleashed when that blown straight eight cannons into life. It is a truly great moment, and one that you'll never tire of experiencing.

No time to relax now, though, for you need to keep the revs up while the engine clears its throat and warms its plugs. This is a great excuse to make proper Grand Prix car *vroom-vroom/shriek-shriek* noises, although your neighbours might not be quite so appreciative at 7.30 in the morning. It has to be done, though, for the alternative is a stalled engine and the possibility of eight plugs to be laboriously unscrewed, cleaned and refitted before you can try again.

In fact, a couple of minutes is enough to get the Pur Sang tractable enough to trickle away in first. The outside gearchange has an unfamiliar

H-pattern, in which first is towards you and back, and the straight-cut gears have no synchro, naturally, but the change is smooth and precise and it's surprising how easy it is to make clean changes straight off the bat. If only all vintage cars – take note, you Bentley owners – were so easy to drive.

The clutch is of the all-or-nothing racing variety, so getting away smoothly is an acquired art, but once you're rolling it's fine. Having assumed that Pur Sang would have fitted a modern clutch for convenience's sake, I'm impressed to discover later, while doing a bit of home adjustment, that it's actually a close replica of Bugatti's multi-plate original, complete with external linkages and brass collars that are reminiscent of the speed governor on a Victorian steam engine.

I've plotted a cross-country route over the Malvern hills to Geraint's place near Hereford. It's

a typical winter's day, cold but dry, and while I've got my thermal underwear on (the best invention ever – try camping and outdoor pursuit shops) I'm wearing neither hat nor goggles. Surprisingly, neither is required. Air just seems to be deflected over the driver's head, although passengers are required to take the full brunt of the slipstream. The late Alan Clark's description of his D-type as 'the fastest oxygen tent on wheels' – he claimed he used to take his young son out in it, to cure his asthma – springs to mind.

There's no speedometer but the car is probably travelling faster than you think, and it's easy to get caught out by the occasional ridge that flips up the rear of the Pur Sang's stiffly sprung chassis, giving you that authentic 'Brooklands bump' experience. The steering doesn't kick back unpleasantly, though, and on its narrow Blockley tyres the PS can be placed exactly where you





**Below**  
Pur Sang replica  
looked right at home  
among 'genuine'  
vintage cars during  
VSCC New Year's Day  
meet, and seemed to  
be a crowd-pleaser.



'The day after the pubmeet, I'm back at work  
considered a wimp if I didn't use the Pur

want it. No excessive effort is required of your shoulder muscles, although you may suffer excessive movement of the backside muscles if you're careless on a greasy country-road corner – enter too fast and the PS will slide like a dog on a polished kitchen floor.

An exhilarating couple of hours later I'm pulling up outside Geraint's workshop. Through the open door I can see his eclectic fleet – Morris-Jap trials car, BMW-engined Frazer Nash, Land Speed Record car 'Babs' and Kurtis 500 racer – but right at the front is his latest project, a 35B that's been built from a mixture of new and original parts. Geraint intends to go racing with it, so it has a pretty hot engine to suit its equally hot driver.

Side-by-side, the most obvious difference between the two cars is in the cockpit. The dash in Geraint's car is stocked with period dials and has a proper Scintilla magneto poking through

the bulkhead, whereas the Pur Sang has a modern-ish distributor cap and comparatively garish, not-quite-right gauges. The rev counter, in particular, in the PS is an abomination, with a horrid plastic needle that is at odds with the car's otherwise superb attention to detail. Jerry at The Old Racing Car Co has already sourced a proper tachometer; turns out he's also thinking of offering a Scintilla magneto conversion, and maybe even the pukka Bosch job, to get the look just right. It would be money well spent, in my view.

After a welcome cup of tea, Geraint shoehorns himself into the PS and goes off for a quick blast. In the still country air, I can hear the shrill roar of its supercharged engine drifting over the fields for minutes after he's disappeared. Geraint being Geraint, when he returns his first words are: 'You can't spin the wheels out of a wet junction in first gear!'

To prove his point, he takes me for a ride in his methanol-fuelled car. Having perhaps an extra 80bhp on tap, it's undeniably faster. Much faster. On mud-slicked Herefordshire lanes, Geraint delights in fishtailing the Bug out of every corner, while I hang on for dear life and attempt to continue breathing. OK, point made, but even Geraint has to concede that the Pur Sang has one undeniable advantage – you just push a button to restart if you stall coming out of a junction.

(Jerry confirms later that the Pur Sang is available with two blower specifications – road or race – and he opted for the former, in the sensible belief that his potential customers, who may never have driven a Bugatti before, ought to return alive from their test drives.)

Next day I'm off to the pub meet at Much Marcle, following friends Matthew and Becky, and young son Louis, in their Vauxhall 30/98. The





at the *Octane* office, and I would rightly be Sang for my 140-mile round commute'

PS fired up first time after a night in the open but it sounds as though it's missing on one cylinder during our run through the country lanes. Still, it makes a pretty good noise running on seven, and attracts plenty of attention from the crowd thronging the car park of the Royal Oak. I'm hoping that the fact the car is now seriously dirty and the passenger seat packed with overnight gear, tools and a sleeping bag will earn me enough Brownie points to compensate for the undeniable fact that it's not the real McCoy.

Two cars along the row is what looks very much like a real 35B but owner Mike cheerfully admits that it's a Tim Dutton-built car – the closest rival to a Pur Sang, but made in much smaller numbers. All you need to know about its quality is that Mike has driven it 20,000 miles in three years with no trouble whatsoever: he has taken it to France and Italy, and it's used two or

three times a week during the summer, and regularly through the winter.

I'm curious as to whether he's ever been 'pulled' by the law for running the car open-wheeled, like the Pur Sang (wings are supplied, but I couldn't bear to fit them), but he says: 'The only time I thought I was in trouble was on the Embankment in London, when a motorcycle cop pulled alongside, but he just gave me a thumbs-up and roared off!'

Like the Argentinian car, Mike's is fitted with a plain-bearing crank for reliability's sake, instead of the notoriously short-lived roller-bearing cranks fitted to original 35s. This is one of the greatest sources of contention within the Bugatti Owners Club: original cranks are very heavy indeed and purists say that the extra weight changes the handling of the car. But given that even a newly assembled roller crank running on

the best modern lubricant may only last 10,000 miles between rebuilds, it's not difficult to see why owners who actually drive their cars are happy to accept the compromise.

The BOC has had an ambivalent relationship with the Pur Sang ever since company founder Jorge Anadón set up in business more than 20 years ago, but its attitude today is that the Club neither approves nor disapproves of replicas; its main concern is to make sure that they're correctly recorded as such for posterity. Now that top-notch replicas are fast gaining credibility with the old car movement as a whole, it's a realistic and sensible approach.

The day after the pubmeet, I'm back at work in the *Octane* office, and I would rightly be considered a wimp if I didn't use the PS for my 140-mile round commute. The journey takes no longer than it would in a modern and for once

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even the supercars adorning the carpark of our sister publication *Evo* are upstaged by this 'proper' motor. The *Evo* boys are far too cool to come out and gawp at it, of course, but office manager Janet later confides that everytime it fired up, there was a rush to the windows...

Crunch time. Could you live with this car on a daily basis? Yes, if you wanted to. Is it worth the money? Yes again. At £250,000 on the road from The Old Racing Car Co it's less than its only serious rival, a Tim Dutton-built car, and a fraction of what a real T35B would cost. And unlike an original car, you can drive it as hard as you like, without worrying about breaking it.

The great unanswerable is how a replica like the Pur Sang will hold its value when compared with a genuine vintage car – a good chain-gang 'Nash, say. I'd suggest that the 'Nash would certainly outstrip the replica as an investment: history is everything. But look at it another way: while you could buy, say, a new Ferrari 430 for the same money as the Pur Sang, a few years down the line the Argentinian car is likely to be worth more, going by the prices realised recently for quality replicas.

One last thing to bear in mind. As I was heading back from Herefordshire in the Pur Sang, accelerating up the Malvern hills, I passed an old boy at the side of the road who, perhaps transfixed by this vision from his past, stood stock still and gave me a smart military salute. You just don't get that kind of response when you drive a Ferrari.



# **PUR SANG T35B**

## **SPECIFICATIONS**

**Engine**  
2300cc straight eight,  
plain-bearing crank,  
single overhead cam,  
three valves per cylinder,  
twin-rotor supercharger

**Power**  
Up to 170bhp @  
5500rpm depending  
on supercharger and  
fuel used

**Transmission**  
Four-speed manual,  
multi-plate dry clutch,  
rear-wheel drive

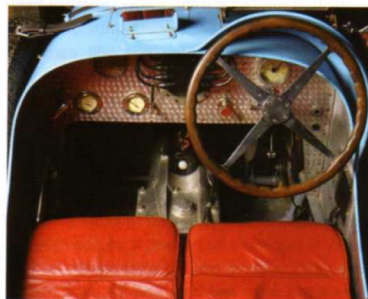
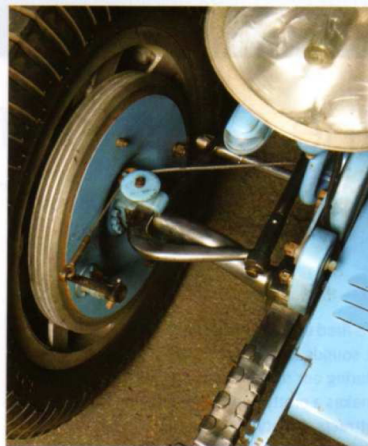
**Suspension**  
Front: beam axle,  
semi-elliptic leaf springs,  
Bugatti-type friction  
dampers. Rear: live  
axle, quarter-elliptic leaf  
springs, radius rods,  
Bugatti-type friction  
dampers

**Brakes**  
Cable-operated drums  
all round

**Performance**  
Top speed c120mph

**Price**  
£250,000

**Right**  
Front suspension  
shows that most of  
car is beautifully  
detailed, but dash's  
dials let it down –  
easy to fix, however.



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