

BUICK NATIONAL MEET AT COLORADO SPRINGS, USA

It was a wet Friday evening that we boarded our Qantas flight through to Tokyo and then by American Airlines through to Los Angeles. Arriving in LA about 10.30 am we headed to National Car Rental to pick up our previously ordered Buick Lucerne or a Lacrosse. But no, said the bloke behind the counter, we no longer keep Buicks! Alan's motto is that you always upgrade, never downgrade so we drove out of the National lot in a pretty snappy Cadillac CTS which had only done about 4,000 miles. We bunked down locally and slept off the rigours of 20 hours flying time.

Sunday saw us in Las Vegas in hot weather. I walked into the Imperial Palace on the strip and booked for two nights, the first night was \$20 per night and the second was \$40. We had a lovely room on the 10th floor so this was a real bargain.

A visit to the Auto Collection at the Imperial Palace revealed an awesome 1954 Skylark Convertible for sale at \$125,000, and a 1980s Gran National for \$45,000.



1954 Skylark Convertible at Las Vegas

Australian group Human Nature was playing at the Imperial Palace so we booked for their concert which was tremendous. Talking to the blokes afterward as they signed our CD, they said they had been given a one-year

contract at the Imperial Palace. They were certainly well received by the mainly American audience.

Leaving Vegas we headed north in Nevada and then across to Utah. There is a hair-raising road in southern Utah called the Moki Dugway with a speed limit of 5 mph as the road snakes down towards the flat country near Mexican Hat. This is not for the faint hearted as there are no safety rails and it is better not to look over the edge. A rainstorm swept across as we reached Mexican Hat on the San Juan River with the river turning blood red from the red dirt being swept into it. Blood red waterfalls cascaded across the road from rock ledges. The storm disappeared as quickly as it had begun and we found ourselves in a very clear and freshened Monument Valley. We drove someway in and stopped at a sign which told us that this was where Forrest Gump in the movie had stopped his run and returned home.

That evening near Twin Navajo Rocks Diner at Bluff, we came across a 1949 Buick Super abandoned without its engine. The body was a bit rusted but wasn't too bad. Perhaps it will be snapped up by someone one day.



A project waiting to happen

The next day we had reached Colorado and the town of Durango at about 8,000 feet. We booked on the Durango-Silverton narrow gauge steam railway for the next day. The coach we had chosen had a glass curved roof but open windows so safety glasses were a must to avoid grit in the eye. The scenery was awesome with waterfalls and vertiginous drops into a fast flowing river. A lot of "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" had been filmed from the railway, including the scene where they both leap off a cliff. This cliff was actually only about 20 feet high but looked a lot more in the movie. Silverton was an old mining town and had a 19th century charm about it, despite being cold and wet.



A hair-raising ride on the Durango – Silverton express

We pushed onto Colorado Springs and soon found the Crowne Plaza which was the host hotel. Its wonderful to pull into a huge parking area and see Buicks bustling around, being washed, hoods up and every make and model that you can imagine. The 59s (about 29 I think) had pride of place in the lineup in front of the hotel, this being their special anniversary year.



Happy 50th birthday for these Buicks!

At registration we met up with Colin Hinxman and Adrian Dearing from Queensland and Ray and Mary Cook from Melbourne. Somewhat later we spotted Dave and Aileen Chaffey from Tasmania and Doug Hawkins from Queensland who seemed to have bought his usual swag of cars to take home. The following morning we ran into Jack and Barbara Gertskamper who had driven from Washington state. Those who attended the Queensland Nationals will remember Jack visiting from the US. Simon Fraser from Victoria and two of his friends made up the Aussie contingent.

The town of Colorado Springs is very pretty with some lovely houses and old historic buildings. Strategically it is the centre for the army base of Fort Lincoln with 24,000 grunts on site as well as the Air Force Academy and the Petersen Air Base. As well as all this, there is the NORAD base (North American Air Defence) in Cheyenne Mountain, about 400 feet underground and bristling with all sorts of antennas.

The Buick Club of America had planned a good assortment of events including a cog railway ride up to Pike's Peak which is over 14,000 feet. The air was somewhat thin at the top and there were patches of snow. The day we went up was remarkably clear and you could see down to five American states from there. Other events were a trip to the Cripple Creek Casino which was a lot of fun plus a coach ride to the Royal Gorge with its suspension bridge and aerial car across the gorge. One of the benefits of these events is that you eventually get talking to the other Buick members and some great stories get swapped.

A very well attended event was the Flying W Chuckwaggon dinner. There was some rain as we all alighted from half a dozen coaches so it was decided that the mob would eat inside a large barn building instead of in the open. We bumped into a rather grim Doug Hawkins who told us he hadn't been able to find a bar. Unfortunately the venue was totally dry (except for the rain). I must say that there are a lot of Americans who do tend to wowsersism and if they consider an event is a family thing, then its dry! We found a table up the back and sat with Ray and Mary Cook. The feeding was along prison type style with everybody getting in a queue, taking a tin plate and being served. The food was okay, beef or chicken with beans and bread. Afterwards you had to scrape your scraps into a bin and return to your seat. The entertainment was a group of country and western musicians and singers who were excellent. This was for about an hour and then we headed back to our coaches. I guess those of us who had attended the R M Williams Spectacular in Queensland were pretty spoilt as far as food, drinks and entertainment went. This was the gold standard and anything else was less!

With the American nationals, the judging of the cars is a big thing. This seems to take up most of the Saturday and is taken most seriously. Some of the cars are trailered in but most do seem to have been driven. Some Florida cars had certainly covered some ground to attend. There were nearly 300 Buicks on display.

The dinner was in the Summit Ballroom with a lovely view of the mountain peaks out of the windows. Mind you, everywhere in Colorado Springs has a view of the peaks.

The centrepieces on the tables were red, white and blue as it was after all Independence Day. The Aussie table consisted of Adrian, Colin, Ray, Mary, Alan and myself, Simon Fraser and his two friends. Prize giving for the many categories took place with pictures of the cars shown on large screens. There was a special category for modified Buicks which seems to be gaining ground compared to the Seattle meet. The President of the BCA and other Buick luminaries gave speeches.

The next morning saw the Cooks, Adrian and Colin and ourselves at the local IHOP for breakfast. This stands for International House of Pancakes (not I hate old people). This was the usual total American overindulgence with the table soon jam packed with breakfast fare ranging from oatmeal to grits and everything in between.

Farewells were made and the group split to go in various directions. All the lovely cars from the main parking area were leaving or had already left. It is just so amazing to see such a superb collection of Buicks. These can be viewed on our website.

From Colorado Springs we drove south into New Mexico. We stayed at Taos for the first night and then drove up to Los Alamos in the Bandelier Mountains. Los Alamos was the site where the scientists such as Oppenheimer, Fermi and Teller and others worked on the A-bomb in utmost secrecy. The guard stations to the town were only removed in 1957. Today the town is on a high plateau with pine trees and wonderful museums showing the workings of the scientists. The Los Alamos National Science Laboratory is still a going concern with an annual budget of \$2.2 billion dollars. This sort of thing certainly reflects a country's wealth.

About lunchtime we noticed rumbling thunder and some lightning. As we walked between museums we could hear the sound of hail. We took cover under a small tree and watched in horror as hailstones about the size of golf balls struck the cars in the street and the car park, including our Cadillac. One large hailstone hit me on the head and nearly laid me out so we decided to make a run for the shelter of some office buildings. For over half an hour this icy deluge continued. Hanging baskets with petunias were stripped bare, as were the street trees. The ground turned white as the hail mounted up and the temperature dropped considerably. When it was all over we examined an old Buick (about 80s model) and marvelled at the dents all over it. And then we saw our car with at least a hundred indentations over the roof, the hood, the trunk and a red plastic strip below the back window had been shattered. At this point in time we were glad we were not the owners! We drove down to Santa Fe and there was sunshine and warmth and no sign of any storms. We checked into our favourite El Rey Inn and notified National about their peppered Cadillac.

On our second morning we were in the lovely breakfast room and who should come around the corner but Ray and Mary Cook. They had been down to Albuquerque and Ray had bought a 1954 Buick Roadmaster convertible for a pretty good price. Apparently Richard Nixon had sat in this car in his pre-presidential days. It was great to catch up again. The Cooks were heading towards Durango and we were heading south to Alamogordo so our trails split at this point.

We turned west at Alamogordo and drove past the White Sands Missile Base and over the mountains to Las Cruces. At Deming we headed north. The border patrol is fairly active and have checkpoints in this region but usually they spot two gringos in the car and wave you through.

We stopped for a break about midday and had some fruit and a drink. We spotted a police car pull in behind us. Sheriff Loma from Luna County very courteously asked us were there any problems. We had a chat to him and he said there had been a report about an abandoned car on our road. Seeing we were alright he took off up the road. I noticed he was half crouching down when he approached our car from the rear. It probably pays to be cautious in this neck of the woods.

We passed some huge copper mines further up the track. At Eagar we branched off to the Gila Wilderness Area. Geronimo who was a Chiricuhua Apache, was born in this area in 1809. His famous portrait, kneeling with a rifle, certainly portrays him as a wild eyed bod. We trekked along side a river and then climbed up to where there were cliff dwellings of the early Indians in this area. This was very enjoyable and it was good to stretch legs a bit.

We drove through Fort Apache on the San Carlos Apache Reservation and through the stunning Salt River Canyon. What a road and what it must have cost to construct. It was like driving down one side of the Grand Canyon and up the other side.

Arizona was bakingly hot. We came out of a diner about 8 pm one evening, south of Phoenix and the temperature was 111 ° F. We decided to head for San Diego and hole up there for a few days.

Because the road runs so close to the Mexican border, there were about four border patrol checkpoints for traffic, obviously looking for illegal immigrants. They actually call these people illegal immigrants, because that is what they are. They are entering the USA illegally, somewhat like our asylum seekers who are entering Australia illegally. We had no problem here and got into San Diego late one afternoon. Accommodation is very easy to come by so we booked in for four nights.

Spent a great few days sightseeing including the USS Midway, the aircraft carrier which is permanently moored at Navy Pier. When this was finished in 1945 it was too large to fit through the Panama Canal. Its great that some of the blokes working as guides had actually been sailors on the Midway. One was giving a talk on the flight deck about the difficulties landing on a carrier.

The pilots have a saying that a carrier is the only thing that appears to get smaller as you approach it.



The USS Midway at berth in San Diego

Because San Diego is a naval base as well as a submarine base, there are 37,000 sailors permanently based there. We cruised past the naval dockyards and saw all sorts of modifications and work being done.

San Diego is only 15 miles from the Mexican border, so we decided to take a short trip down on a little tourist bus. There were only 16 of us on board as the driver said not too many tourists were interested in going to Mexico because of the drug cartel wars and violence there. He asked Alan what we were doing in the US and Alan replied we had come over for the Buick Nationals.

When we arrived in Tijuana a Danish bloke from the back of the bus came and introduced himself as Eric. He had heard Buicks mentioned and he himself had a 1970 Pontiac in Denmark. He is a member of the American Wheels Club in Aarlborg which has about 200 members, including some with Buicks. They sounded a fairly active bunch (only in the summer). They weren't into judging but from his photos they seemed to enjoy BBQs, drinking and driving around. Sounds familiar. We swapped websites with him and promised to keep in touch. Its great to network with international likeminded people. While the rest of us were doing some serious shopping in Tijuana, Alan and Eric were showing each other car photos and discussing engines!

The next stop was LA and then dropping "Al Dente" off to the National Car Rental. We drove into the return lane and about four Latinos' jaws dropped open. "What happened?" was the cry. We explained what had happened, handed the keys over, got our luggage and headed off for the shuttle to LAX. Thank heavens for insurance.



A quiet day on the Avenida Revolucion in Tijuana

The long flight home is over and we returned to cold rainy weather. All of a sudden the heat of southern Arizona is very welcoming.

We saw a lot, caught up with old friends at the National Meet and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. The US never disappoints.

L M Haime (WA Buicks)