

## **BUICKS AT BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON USA 2007**

Alan and I decided almost at the last minute to attend the Buick National Meet at Bellevue, Washington state in the USA, to be held on 25 July through to 28 July 2007.

Part of the reason was the opportunity to look for a 1970 Skylark or clone to implant the engine from our 1970 Stage One. Some of the internet cars looked reasonable but Alan decided he didn't want to buy a car sight unseen.

We landed in Los Angeles on 10 July 2007 where it was about 38 ° C. Our new Buick Lacrosse was waiting at the rental firm and off we went, north towards Bakersfield. We had allowed a couple of weeks to meander towards the National Meet, keeping an eye out for a suitable car.

The first thing we did was shut the sunroof - this was the last thing you wanted on a hot day. The car was a V6 and was beautifully finished off with woodgrain trim and velour seats. Our Garmin Nuvi GPS was connected, this was to prove invaluable later in the trip.

Crossing Death Valley in the hottest month of the year probably wasn't too bright but it is certainly worth the drive for the scenery. The motel at Furnace Creek had a vacancy and we checked in and headed to the Corkscrew Saloon. At 9 pm returning to our room it was 120 ° F (the Yanks are still on this measurement for temperature).

Crossing into Nevada we drove to Las Vegas (meaning the "meadow"). Not having booked any accommodation we decided to wing it and just drive to the Imperial Palace on the strip where we had stayed previously. The rate for mid week was \$49 per night which was certainly acceptable.

The famous Auto Collection is situated in the Imperial Palace so we went for our usual browse amongst the Duesenbergs and other top of the wozza cars. They had a right hand drive Ford Falcon XB for \$29,000. All the cars there seem to be in mint condition and are sold on consignment. After wandering around looking at some lovely Buicks, we were on our way down the last ramp when - there it was - in all its glory, looking magnificent - just the car Alan was after. A 1972 GSX clone, or remake, as they are now called, in red and black.



Our new 1972 GSX

Horse trading commenced and a suitable price was agreed on. The result was that the car is now heading towards Fremantle.

This great stroke of luck meant we did not have to spend further time looking for a car and freed us up to wander up through Utah taking in Monument Valley (home of many a western movie), Canyonlands National Park, Arches National Park, Grand Teton and Yellowstone Parks in Wyoming and into Montana for a visit to the Little Bighorn Battlefield where Custer managed to get himself shortened by the Indians.



Monument Valley

We saw a car museum advertised at Deer Lodge in Montana. The museum was actually in an old prison and for an out-of-the way little town, the collection was amazing, especially the early Fords and Hupmobiles. My favourite was a white and yellow 1955 Buick Special. They also had a great collection of some fairly rare muscle cars. It never fails to amaze what you can come across in these little towns in the US.

Had a break in the middle of a hot afternoon at a rest site. A lady was selling flathead cherries which were delicious. Apparently they came from the Flathead Mountains where the Flathead Indians lived. The cherries seemed to be a normal shape, I don't know about the Indians.

We arrived across at Bellevue, Washington on 25 July 2007 after having driven 3,000 miles from Los Angeles. The 405 interstate which bypassed the venue was a madhouse with roadworks being done and enormous back ups of traffic for 10 – 20 kilometres.

The Hilton was the host hotel and everything was very efficiently organised. They had a huge parking area which was needed for the Buicks that were starting to pour in, some being driven and some being trailered and trucked in. Facilities were available for washing vehicles and the swap meet area which was undercover was rapidly filling up with vendors. The hospitality area of the hotel was abuzz as people were picking up their bags of T-shirts etc. Buick clothing, literature, umbrellas and all sorts of paraphernalia were also on sale.



A few of the 200 Buicks at Seattle

At the front of the hotel was parked a glossy black Buick Lacrosse sedan which looked really eye-catching. On the other side of the entrance were the SUVs - The big Buick Rainier, the medium Buick Rendezvous and the smaller Buick Escape. What a pity they aren't exported into Australia!

The first Aussie voice heard was that of Linda Hall from Queensland. We got together with Brian and Linda for a coffee and then drifted outside to watch an array of incredible Buicks pulling into the carpark. We then spotted the ubiquitous Ron Noonan and wife Beverley from Sydney. Ron can be counted to turn up at most Buick events, either in the US or back home. We were informed that another couple were here from Queensland, Doug and Kay Hawkins and also a couple from Tasmania.

Brian and Linda Hall had set up a desk in the hospitality area and put on a superb display, advertising the Queensland National Meet next year. There was a laptop where you could see lovely scenes of where the Queensland meet would be and loads of literature on the event. This was definitely a first class display and either Linda or Brian were always in attendance to field questions. I think the Americans would have been very impressed with the quality of the presentation. There always seemed to be lots of people at the desk so hopefully some of the effort will pay off.

The first afternoon saw an array of coaches to take people to the Museum of Flight. As you got on the coach you were handed a bottle of water. This was a great idea and was perpetuated throughout the various events of the meet. This Museum was absolutely awesome from flight simulators (a bit scary) to old films of early pilots and wartime dogfights and naturally a mind boggling array of aircraft.



Another Buick on display

The first evening was free so we had a great meal at the hotel restaurant with a good shiraz (almost on a par with an Aussie shiraz).

The next day saw us boarding coaches (we were glad we didn't have to drive on the infamous 405) on the way to the Le May Car Museum. Le May was reputed at one time to have the largest private collection in the world, with a rough count being 3,000 cars. We were divided into groups and were escorted through the various sheds and buildings. The amount of cars and their quality was almost too much to take in. A very tasty lunch of roasted meats, buns and salads and drinks was very welcoming. Also a good chance to chat to the Americans. When travelling on the coaches invariably a voice would ask - "Is that a down under accent I hear?" This was a good opportunity to get to know one another.

That evening there was an informal outing to a burger and root beer joint. I can't say root beer does much for me, but then the Yanks don't like Vegemite. The gathering of cars at this place seemed to be a regular event as there were Chevys, Pontiacs and Fords on display as well. It was a lovely warm evening and a great photo opportunity for patrons to get pictures of the Buicks as they drove in, especially the convertibles.

The next day we were coached into Seattle to the waterfront. There were other tours but neither of us wanted to visit the doll museum. We spent most of the day exploring the waterfront area with its wonderful array of shops and restaurants. A visit to the Pike Place market was an eye opener with its fish and produce market.

We hopped on our shuttle bus and visited the Space Needle. Luckily it was a clear day and you could see forever from the top. We had to queue for about an hour to catch the lift which was a real pain. The Americans seem very patient about this sort of thing, whereas we Aussies aren't used to queueing and there was much sighing and grumbling.

Back to the Hilton for a putting up of feet before heading out again for the evening cruise on Seattle Harbour. We had a great fish and chip dinner on the wharf with Carla and Chuck Russell who helped organise the National Meet. We had met them previously in Flint, Michigan in 2003 when they were part of a convoy driving across from Seattle. Stuart Syme (ex-president of our Club) had driven across in this convoy and has kept in touch with them.

The boat filled up and we took off on a perfect evening with a full moon and a great view of Mount Rainier. This mountain is about 14,000 feet high and is only visible about 90 days of the year so we felt especially lucky. We cruised around Blake Island and then headed back to the wharf. Another great opportunity to mingle with the other participants of the Meet.

On the way back in the coach, one of the blokes who is a member of the Riviera Owners Club told a story about visiting Las Vegas with about ten other blokes in their Rivs. They decided to stop at the Riviera Hotel on the strip and when they checked in, they said to the receptionist that they were members of the

Riviera Owners Group and expected to be well looked after. She naturally took it that they were owners of the hotel and they were given the best rooms and great discounts and everything laid on. He swore this was done in all innocence as they had their Riviera Owners jackets on and the Rivs were all parked outside.

Saturday was the judging day which seems to be a very important part of national meets in the US. The judges had a busy day and we socialised and took it easy, browsing through the swap meet area.

Talking to people about their cars seemed to take up much of the day. One bloke said that when he heard an Aussie accent "he just wanted to hug you". We both moved away a bit at that point. The Americans were devastated to hear of Steve Irwin's death, especially the young people. One chap said his daughter had wept for days. He asked could he buy an Aussie \$5 note for an American one, so we traded notes. This could have been a nice little earner.

Pre-dinner drinks were in the hospitality area with the Aussie contingent banding together to swap stories. Doug and Kay Hawkins from Queensland had bought five cars, three of them Buicks, so they had done very well.

The dinner was more formal than at Flint (mind you, any dinner would have been) and the tables were nicely laid with totem poles with a Buick emblem on them as the centrepiece. All the Aussies had to stand up and be applauded for the distance we had come from, Alan and I being the furthest away of the mob.

The judging of the cars and the results took up some considerable time as pictures of the cars were shown on a large screen. A talk was given by one of the suits from GM and various thanks were given to the Organising Committee who had done a flawless job.

We said our goodbyes and the next day headed off to Seatac Airport for our flight to New York. People leaving on the Buick Driving Enthusiasts tour were getting their cars ready for a two-week tour through Washington State.

We handed our Buick over at the airport with a minimum of fuss. We had thoroughly enjoyed the 2007 National Meet and the Buick owning people with whom you always have an affinity.

*L Haime (WA Buicks).*