

Cool Classics: Take a Trip Back in Time at Fairbanks' Newest Museum

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By Nancy DeWitt, Historian Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum

In a city known for its Gold-Rush history, summer Solstice celebrations and winter aurora displays, a most intriguing museum has burst onto the scene in Fairbanks, Alaska. The new Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum is the brainchild of Timothy Cerny, owner of several hotels and a commercial construction company in Fairbanks. Cerny built the 30,000 square-foot museum in part to create a "must-see" attraction that would entice customers to one of his hotels. More importantly, it fulfilled his dream of establishing a historically significant automobile collection that he could share with the public.

Cerny and his assist, Derik Price, began acquiring cars for the collection in early 2007. Their focus has been to find pre-1936 American cars that represent a significant or interesting development in automotive technology or design, or are very rare examples of their marquees. Presently there are 69 automobiles in the collection, of which 50 to 55 are on display at a time. These include early electric, steam and hybrid cars, a cyclecar, the oldest surviving 4-cylinder gasoline car built in America, a primitive moto-cycle and three racecars. The automobiles range from pre-1900 horseless carriages on up to elegant 1930s classics. The museum's 1898 Hay & Hotchkiss, 1903 Toledo gasoline car, 1906 Compound and 1920 Argonne are the only surviving examples known.

Most of the cars have been restored to their early glory and look like they just rolled off the showroom floor. But, these beauties are more than just eye candy. All but the most fragile cars are maintained in operating condition, and during the summer evenings at least one car takes a spin around Wedgewood Resort. "To be able to see these rare cars in the museum is great," says museum manager Willy Vinton, "but to see, hear and even smell them operate is priceless." Hotel guests flock to a car and whip out their cameras each time one pulls up in front of the hotel. "Some remember riding in a vintage car when they were young," says Vinton, "and they really get a kick out of seeing us drive up in an old Model T or Packard."

The world-class car collection isn't the only outstanding feature of the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum. During the design phase, Cerny and his staff had the great fortune to visit a number of other car museums around the country and talk to their staff. "A lot of folks gave us some wonderful advice, and we really learned what works and what doesn't in a car museum," he says. "Those visits greatly influenced the lighting and flooring we chose, how we laid out the cars and what information we put on our exhibit signs." Based on the flattering compliments penned in the visitor log this summer, their efforts have paid off well. "I found your museum to be the best done of any auto museum I have visited worldwide," noted one visitor from Las Vegas.

During their travels, Cerny and his crew also learned that they needed something other than great cars and a nice building to set their museum apart from others. "Alaska has an extremely rich and entertaining motoring history," he says, "so we decided to emphasize that throughout the museum." Nancy DeWitt, the museum's historian, spent hundreds of hours poring through old newspapers and photo archives from around Alaska to piece together the stories behind Alaska's first cars and pioneering motorists. More than 70 historic photographs, blown up to enormous size, adorn the museum walls. Many of the photos depict hardships, such as horrendous road conditions, horses pulling cars through glacial streams and below-freezing travel. "To see the challenges that Alaska's first motorists overcame is humbling," notes DeWitt. "It's also amazing to think that makes such as Thomas Flyer, Pope-Toledo, White and Pierce Great Arrow were bouncing around here well before the first Model T arrived."

Two original Fairbanks vehicles are on loan to the museum, including the first Dodge to be shipped to Fairbanks, and a 1910 Chalmers-Detroit that still participates in the annual Golden Days parade. A bizarre 1926 Fordson Snow Motor and a huge 1907 Fairbanks-Morse engine are displayed outside the museum. A replica of an old roadhouse that operated on the old Valdez-Fairbanks Trail sits along one wall. Here, visitors can don period clothing and have their photo taken in an old car parked in front of the roadhouse. “This has proved to be a huge hit with guests,” says Vinton. “The women especially love to put on the dusters and big hats for a photo.”

Speaking of period clothing, the museum has an impressive collection of vintage outfits on exhibit. “These are the result of advice from the ladies in our local car club,” says Barb Cerny, Tim’s wife and curator of the fashion collection. “Face it, most women get ‘old car overload’ well before the men do, so we were strongly encouraged to include period clothing displays to enhance the museum’s appeal to the ladies.” There are presently more than 100 antique dresses, cloaks, hats, shoes, corsets and related items in the collection. About 25 outfits are on display at a time, with the exhibits rotated several times throughout the year.

Other highlights in the museum include an active maintenance shop that can be viewed through large windows, a small gift shop and collections of spark plugs, radiators and early tires. Although the museum isn’t cluttered with artifacts, visitors should plan on devoting at least two to three hours to see everything. The facility is wheelchair-accessible, and wheelchairs may be borrowed for free.

Located at Wedgewood Resort, the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum is just one feature that makes this the most unique hotel in Fairbanks. The resort’s expansive campus includes breathtaking flower displays, an outdoor museum, the Alaska Bird Observatory, and a 75-acre nature preserve with almost two miles of easy walking trails. Families and extended-stay visitors will appreciate the option of staying in suites that have bedrooms, living areas and fully equipped kitchens. A seasonal restaurant is on-site, and in the summer you can catch the resort’s free trolley to various attractions around Fairbanks. All hotel guests receive half-price admission to the car museum.

For information about the museum, including hours of operation, blog updates and hotel information, visit www.fountainheadhotels.com, or contact Willy Vinton at (907) 450-2100, museum@fdifairbanks.com.