

Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum offers living look at classic cars

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FAIRBANKS - Sleek, dynamic, grandiose, luxurious, unique, bold, grand, eye-catching ... these are but a few of the terms bandied by Wedgewood Resorts owner Tim Cerny when talking about the cars in his Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum. Cerny is excited, of course; practically giddy. Three years in the making, the museum has attracted thousands of visitors in its first year of operation.

Cerny's words are not simply accolades used to lure those visitors; they are appropriate for many of the 74 automobiles, which date between 1898 and 1938, that fill the museum. Bright and shiny in their restored states, each of these vehicles (50 or so are typically on display at one time) has a certain style representing its era.

Then, as now, car owners wanted a vehicle that provided function, but with nice form; they feature fixtures from the leather jumpseats, brass fixtures, wicker side baskets and rolling fenders of the early 1900 models to the massive grills, torpedo-shaped lights, gold-plated and chrome trim and dramatic design features of the 1930s — and almost everything conceivable in between. There are internal combustion cars, steam cars and even an electric car, what Cerny calls “the first hybrid.”

Following the vehicles chronologically it's easy to see how we got from the earliest horseless carriages that pattered along at eight miles per hour to what's on the roads today.

Yet this museum, which opens daily at 11 a.m. and remains open until 10 p.m. (except Friday and Saturday, 6 p.m. closing), is more than just a place to look at old cars — though that alone is something spectacular (another of Cerny's words). It is a place that takes into account automotive history in relation to automobile development through the years.

Cerny has filled the space with informative displays, actual working engines — including an early steam engine operating on compressed air

— and a working “repair center” where cars and engines will be taken apart, displayed and rebuilt to explain visually how it all comes together.

There is also vintage clothing showcased throughout the museum and displayed in an era-appropriate manner in cases or with the vehicles.

A complete list of cars can be found on the museum’s Web site, www.fountainheadhotels.com/auto/index.html.

Cerny also created an Alaska-specific section featuring vehicles that either operated in Alaska or are similar to ones known to “have made their way here.”

This includes a custom 1917 Ford Model T Snow Flyer — an early predecessor of the snowmachine with skis in the front and quad-rear wheel metal track-drive that could be converted back to a car in spring.

The museum’s latest addition - on loan from the University of Alaska Museum of the North - is the 1905 Bobby Sheldon car, also known as the “Skagway car.” This is the only vehicle ever designed and manufactured in Alaska.

It is a one-of-a-kind vehicle that utilized a two-stroke outboard engine and had a tiller instead of steering wheel. The story goes that Sheldon built it to impress a girl. (Ask one of the guides for the details.)

The importance of automobiles in Alaska is also highlighted on the museum’s walls, which are lined with more than 70 four-foot by 8-foot photos that tell the story of the trials and tribulations of the automobile in Alaska.

Cars are seen driving through rivers, deep puddles, muddy bogs, snow and ice; hauling wood and mining equipment; and traveling through frontier towns and over inhospitable mountain passes.

A number of the cars in the museum are the only known examples left in existence, including the 1920 Argonne Model D Roadster with its sweeping lines, orange and yellow paint and over-sized grille is the second to last manufactured and the only one surviving of the 24 ever produced. The 1921 Heine-Velox V-12 Victoria Touring car is one of only four in existence, and the sole Victoria model.

The 1898 Hay Hotchkiss Stanhope Phaeton is the earliest known American four-cylinder car still in existence, a prototype that never went into production.

“It puts a neat twist on things,” said Willie Vinton, museum manager and chief mechanic. “If you want to see those particular cars the only place in the world you can see them is in Fairbanks, Alaska.”

The museum is located at 212 Wedgewood Dr. Call 450-2100 or visit www.fountainheadhotels.com for more information.#