

Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia Library

The Road to the Northern Lights in a Bentley R-type Chassis No. B 116TN

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A rugged Bentley amongst the rugged peaks of Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada.

Driving a 1953 Bentley R-type on a Sunday afternoon is enjoyable but taking one on an adventurous 6,500-mile journey from Northern California to near the Arctic Circle is really the experience of a lifetime. This trip took us through six States and three Canadian Provinces, going from the 38th parallel in California to the 62nd in Canada. We started in the vineyard covered hills of Sonoma and travelled to the rocky terrain of Yellowknife - the capital of the Northwest Territories of Canada during September 2-28, 1997. To tour any further north of Yellowknife you would need to use a seaplane, helicopter, dogsled or snowmobile.

The northern California regions of the Bentley Driver's Club and RROC were hosts for the tour. Only one car participated. This type of driving illustrates how Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars are the 'Best Cars in the World'. We drove the same Bentley standard steel saloon (1953 R-type B 116TN) that we had driven 7,000 miles to Alaska in May 1996.

Firstly, we'll look at general information, scenery, wildlife, weather, then we'll consider the driving and technical aspects.

The highlights of the journey included the Canadian Rockies, Banff National Park, Lake Louise, the Great Slave Lake in Canada's Northwest Territories, Alberta's agricultural Prairies, Glacier National Park in Montana, Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons of Wyoming. All of the scenery was a feast for the eyes and the heart.

Even though we were unable to participate in the Peking to Paris Motor Challenge on September 6 - October 18, 1997 (about 10,000 miles) we really enjoyed the Canadian Fall tour.



Canadian national and provincial flags salute B116TN at the border of British Columbia and Alberta on the Continental Divide near Banff.

Scenery

This 27-day tour was planned so we could see and experience the most scenic areas. We encountered almost every conceivable type of landscape and terrain. From the Mars-like terrain of Nevada to the frigid glaciers of the Columbia Icefield in Jasper National Park in Alberta. Our route covered everything, from the Canadian Rockies to the rich farmlands of Alberta to the majestic peaks of Glacier National Park. At the

62nd parallel in the Yellowknife area, the trees rapidly decrease to low bushes - the treeline is just north of Yellowknife. The Bentley took us First Class along the colorful aspen-lined roads which seemed to go on forever in the Northwest Territories to the curvy mountain by-ways past waterfalls, lakes, geysers, and hot springs in Yellowstone National Park. Wyoming.

While we were being mesmerized by all this natural beauty, the R-Type's 4½ litre engine was flawlessly purring along like a Rolls-Royce. Our trip was generally run at high elevations with numerous mountain passes in the 6,000-8,000-foot range. Places such as the Galena Summit (8,701 ft) in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho and Logan Pass (6,664 ft) in Montana were especially attractive.



Near Lake Louise, Alberta. A group of German tourists ignoring the breathtaking scenery to take in the beauty of British craftsmanship. Perhaps some of them were BMW executives.

Wildlife

The varied terrain was a wildlife watcher's paradise. The 44-year-old Bentley stopped many times along the roads so that we could watch the wildlife in its natural environment - bison, elk, foxes, coyote, and mountain goats. Seeing a black bear and her two cubs feeding in the lush grass along the side of the road made this journey all the more memorable. We also observed the starting of waterfowl and other bird migration to the south.

Weather

The R-type responded extremely well to a wide range of weather conditions (and so did we). from the extreme heat in California (96° F) to the cool (26° F) windy days in the Canadian Rockies. We experienced about four days of thunderstorms during the 27-day journey.

When we reached the "end of the road" in Yellowknife (Northwest Territories) we were treated to an atmospheric phenomenon known as the *aurora borealis* or Northern Lights. This spectacular display of veil-like sheets of light dancing across the night skies gave one goosebumps. This atmospheric show can be witnessed in the fall and winter only in the northern latitudes on clear nights.

At the 60th Parallel, where Alberta gives way to the Northwest Territories.



People and Museums

Meeting a lot of interesting people along the way was a highlight of the trip. Hearing their perspectives on things was a rich experience. Never knowing what the next day would bring is an exciting part of touring in a Bentley. Having plenty of free time to look and really listen to what surrounds you is a rare pleasure. We enjoyed the Canadian Indian villages and visiting other museums that displayed local heritage.

Driving and technical aspects

1. A properly maintained car is the key to fully enjoying your Bentley or Rolls-Royce car on long tours. This trip was an enjoyable and trouble-free 6,500 miles and the R-type performed superbly under all conditions. We highly recommend that you follow the service manual and use authentic Rolls-Royce parts so as to

maximise the enjoyment of driving your car. We did carry a few spares and tools but didn't need any of them on the 27-day trip.

2. Suspension: To enhance the ride, we suggest installing new front coil springs and that you re-arch the rear leaf springs if your car has not already been so treated. The new springs gave a tremendous improvement in smoothness and comfort, especially on unpaved, rough and curvy mountain roads. The ride is truly excellent and almost whisper quiet. By renewing the front and rear springs we increased ground clearance to about $5\frac{3}{4}$ ", an amount necessary on unpaved roads and in areas of major road construction.



Boarding the ferry to cross the Great McKenzie River, the largest arctic outlet of the Great Slave Lake near Fort Providence, Northwest Territories. There are no bridges but this crossing becomes an ice bridge during the winter months.

3. We used 3-M Automotive Aftermarket Division Scotchcal (paint protection film) to protect the paint from chipping the front fenders and headlights. It comes in 2-inch-wide strips (part no. is 84802) and 4 inch wide (part no. is 84804). This tape is clear and hardly visible. Most of the 150 miles of unpaved roads had loose gravel and debris.

4. Paint and chrome Protection: Prior to a long-distance trip protect your car with wax. Expect some rough weather and road conditions, such as unpaved roads, heavy rams, dusty and muddy areas. We have found that the complete line of Zymol products does a superb job in protecting your car's finish in rough driving conditions.

5. Windscreens: We did receive a couple of very small chips in the windscreen which can be expected on long road tours especially on unpaved roads. You should also inspect the condition of the windscreen seal prior to your trip to ensure there are no water leaks.



Where the buffalo roam. The Bentley in the bison sanctuary near Fort Providence and Edzo.

6. To improve the effectiveness of the car's heater we blocked about a third of the radiator shell, with a vinyl cover on cold mornings when the temperatures ranged from 26°F to 40°F . Then the engine temperature gauge was properly maintained at about 175°F - and warmer water was then channelled to the heater matrix.

7. Altimeter. Our highest elevation was 8,700 feet above sea level at which the car performed flawlessly. Its just nice to know your altitude. We found an accurate black and white altimeter that matched other dash instruments, and we installed it on the steering column.

Nothing can stop a Bentley ... except the flagman at a very remote road construction west of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.

8. Oil sump heater. We installed a 110 Volt electric heating unit on the engine sump; a non-original device but since the lowest temperature on the trip was about 26° F we didn't really need it. But you will want to use one if the temperature is about 10° F or less. Most lodging places in northern Canadian Provinces have outside electric outlets to plug in heater units.



Road Impression of the Bentley R-type

The R-type standard saloons are very rugged, dependable and a pure pleasure to drive, handling almost like a sports car. Their engine torque on steep mountains is more than adequate especially when fed through an excellent 4-speed manual gearbox. The engine power even at high elevations (6,000 - 8,700 feet) is hardly diminished.

Steve (left) and Stefan with B116TN returning to San Francisco along 'the loneliest highway in America', Highway 50 in Nevada between Salt Lake City and Reno.

The R-Type handles well on gravel roads and is very stable in wet conditions. They are comfortable and enjoyable cars for everyone. The excellent handling is also matched by the remarkable quality of the brakes. One should have no fear driving on steep mountain passes as long as the brake system is set up properly. The R-type is a superb and reliable car linked to what is essentially a pre-war body style.



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Conclusion

We hope that Club members will take the opportunity to enjoy the unique and beautiful part of the world driving your Rolls-Royce or Bentley in Canada. Please feel free to call Steve and Stefan Szabo (707) 938-2518 or Bob Nicholson at (415) 3468486 in California if you have any questions about our trip or long distance touring in your Rolls-Royce or Bentley.

Happy Trails.

Photographs by the Authors



Steve Szabo (left) and Bob Nicholson at Yellowknife (population 40,000) — 3,128 miles north of San Francisco and 'the end of the road'.