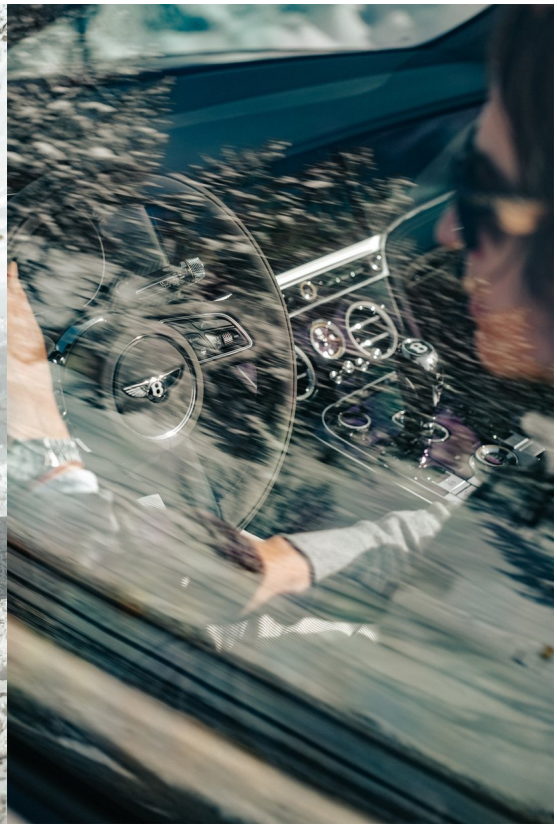
Tracing our own tyre tread to St. Moritz in a red Bentley Continental GTC

Lead
We like to make a habit of arriving at The ICE in St. Moritz in style, and what better car than a V8 Bentley Continental GTC S? It turns out, my colleagues had the exact same idea twelve years ago...



If you end up quoting yourself, does that make you an egotistical maniac or just a wise style icon who is simply strong in their convictions? Whatever the answer might be, we managed to accidentally quote ourselves, by recreating a journey from 12 years ago, when J.P. Rathgen and Jan Baedeker took a red, V8 Bentley Continental GTC to St. Moritz...

This wasn't planned in the slightest, but as coincidences go it couldn't have gone any better. As if being able to drive a brand-new Bentley Continental GTC on any road trip wasn't special enough, we were loaned this exquisite machine to act as our support vehicle during The ICE at St. Moritz. While already on the road, we discovered that the idea for this particular voyage wasn't at all that original. Many years ago, in 2012, my Classic Driver colleagues, had somehow executed almost exactly the same trip driving the previous generation of the GTC to the Engadine.

The coincidences don't stop there. The car was not only a droptop, but it was also red (albeit a different shade, Dragon Red instead of St. James Red like our current car), and the first Bentley Continental GTC of the VW era to be equipped with the more lightweight V8 as opposed to the W12, something it also shares with our present-day luxury barge. The difference? The flanks of our car are adorned by an "S" badge, signifying a sportier demeanour for this particular motor, just like the moniker "Speed" does for the

12-cylinder car. What this means is that not only does it burble gently upon start up, but that it also has plenty of potential, boasting 550 hp and 569 lb.ft (770 NM) of torque for effortless cross-continental jaunts. What’s worth mentioning is that the car from 12 years ago was definitely less powerful, with 50 hp and 87 lb.ft less than the current one. But that’s just evolution.

The state of tune of the 4-litre engine is also different. Peak power and torque arrive later for a slightly sportier experience. Although, the action starts as low as 2000 rpm; it is a grand tourer after all, so effortless cruising is a must. The gearbox is still an 8-speed, but now a fast dual clutch, which makes up in acceleration times for the fact that the current car is around 40kg heavier. 0-100 km/h takes just 4 seconds flat. The top speed? A “move out of the left lane on the German autobahn” appropriate 318 km/h. Although I am not entirely sure, while I blast down the road heading towards the Austrian border at a steady 200 km/h, if the winter tyres wouldn’t explode if I pushed this GT to that kind of a pace.

For now, I would say that weight is irrelevant. We slowly make our way through Germany, part of Austria and Switzerland, on our way from Munich to our final destination: the Suvretta House hotel in St. Moritz. The fat winter tyres and permanent four wheel drive (torque split 62% towards the rear) are doing a great job at making the car feel more agile and lighter than I thought possible in these conditions. The Bentley, even if it’s a soft top, is of course also whisper-quiet at speed, with the sport exhaust waking up only if you switch to ‘sport’ mode or press the throttle with vigour. In fact, even on a drizzly autobahn, the cabin was still quieter than most big sedans. In the Continental, you either talk without having to raise your voice, or you listen to the excellent Naim stereo. Mostly to bossa novas, so fitting to the Alpine scenery.

Last year, I partially covered the same road in another Bentley - the Bentayga S (you can read the review here) - and haven't been across the Julierpass since, so imagine my surprise when I find the Juliertheatrum tower gone, having been demolished last year. Without the obligatory photo-op, we descend onto the Silvaplana and head towards Suvretta.

"It's good to arrive in the right kind of car," I think to myself, "Even if it was a bit of a struggle to fit the big suitcase into the boot of the Conti," I continue as I watch the porters struggling to remove it. Boot space is the only disadvantage I could find compared to the regular coupé. It's just time for Suvretta's famous afternoon tea, so I go inside. Dusk falls as do the first snowflakes of what turned out to be a record-breaking snowstorm, the likes of which hadn't been seen in the region for 15 years.

The next day we wake up to a winter wonderland scene from a Coca-Cola commercial, or maybe we are stranded in a luxurious, Swiss version of Fargo? Time will tell. The fact is - the Engadine is partially closed-off from the outside world because of the snow, with only one pass remaining open. We decide to investigate and make our way up Bernina, only to discover that fat tires and a 2.3 tonne car are not the ideal combo for these conditions, even if I was already picturing myself snow-drifting the Bentley like a big Subaru Impreza. It has got plenty of traction until a certain point, but when it does break traction, it just goes. All for wheels with no grip, sliding towards whatever vector the laws of physics have determined.

However, for the next two days, it turns out to be the perfect St. Moritz runabout and taxi, as we give friends lifts to the different spin-off events held in lieu of cancelled concours. We also make a few discoveries along the way. It turns out you can fit two almost 2-metre-tall blokes in the back without taking the roof down. It’s uncomfortable and that’s not the right kind of first Bentley experience, but it works. Without the roof however, we can easily travel around town, while enjoying being ‘papped’. A red Continental GT, driving roofless in the snow with 4 people inside seems to make people happy. We get the thumbs up from many car spotters and a surprised look from one Rolls-Royce Cullinan driver. Oh well…

When it’s time to return the car to Munich on Monday after this prolonged weekend, we once again hit the now-cleared Julierpass. Roof down, airscarves and all heating equipment on, we speed uphill to the soundtrack of that magnificent V8 burble. The steering is nicely weighted and gives plenty of feel and, in sport mode, the Bentley becomes an opulent, but agile and competent big sports car once again.

In 2012 my colleagues wrote that their red Bentley “fulfils every possible requirement of a perfect winter sports car: it gets you to the destination safely and in style.” To this I have to add in 2024 that “ It can now also put a massive smile on your face”.

Photos by Anna Gańczarek-Rał and Błażej Żuławski

Gallery

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