

CLASSIC DRIVER

[This family got into their Mercedes G wagon and never looked back](#)

Lead

We're always on the lookout for interesting stories, be it a tip-off of an eccentric collector, or a friend-of-a-friend with the rarest of cars. In the case of designer Gabriele Demarin, a chance encounter through Instagram led us to him, and his country-crossing Mercedes-Benz 200GE...



If you, like us, have ever dreamt of putting the work laptop and phone on 'do not disturb' for a while, loading up the car with essential snacks and just enough clothing to last you a long weekend, before embarking on a road trip marked by a randomly placed pin in the map - this is the story for you. While most would seek adventure from the comfort of a cruise control-toting SUV or performance estate, Italian designer Gabriele Demarin, along with his partner and daughter have it all figured out, and their trusty 1987 Mercedes-Benz 200GE, complete with a 5-speed manual gearbox and double diff locks, of course. Their adventures have taken them to Iceland, Turkey, Bulgaria and many, many more. We just had to find out more...

"The 200GE is one of only 610 examples for the Italian market, when in the 1980s a special tax was levied on all cars above 2-litres. To solve this problem, which would have lowered sales, Mercedes took the 2.3 petrol 4-cylinder mounted on the 230GE and reduced its displacement to 2.0, bringing the engine to 108 hp and 165 Nm of torque, and introduced the 200GE to the Italian market."



Bought new in January 1987 in Varese, Northern Italy, this SWB G Wagon had been well-kept by two previous owners before Gabriele took possession of it and bringing his home in Lake Como. Sadly, whilst the car was bursting with charm, it had some flaws that needed addressing, as Gabriele explains, “The car was in very poor chassis condition when I bought it, the salt with which the roads are covered during the winter after 30 years had created a lot of rust in several places on the underbody and the lower part of the body panels. Despite this, I fell in love with the colour, the quietness of the engine and of course, the great fascination of the shape of a design myth.”

As a designer himself, Gabriele naturally fell in love with the 200GE’s boxy styling and effortless charm, despite fully understanding the amount of work it would need to be brought back to its former self. Undeterred, Gabriele bought it with his heart, without thinking too much about how much it would cost him to restore it, which he summarises in what is likely a very similar sentence to many classic car owners: “I made one of the biggest but most beautiful mistakes of my life.”



Restored during the Covid-19 pandemic, the G Wagon was treated to new suspension and chassis components, but crucially the mechanical parts and interior remained virtually unchanged, showcasing just how durable these off-roaders are. Despite being hell-bent on retaining the car’s originality, Gabriele wanted to add one must-have accessory. “Air conditioning! A very rare optional extra in period, and even more so in Italy, as it was an aftermarket part fitted by the brand Davia. With fitting, labour and part sourcing, a total of 3,500 euro was spent on it, and whilst its nothing like the modern units, in countries like Italy and driving with a little girl for hours during summertime, it’s worth every penny!”

As Gabriele and his family geared up for a summer adventure, everything was falling into place. The 200GE was looking better than ever, now boasting an ‘ASI-certified historic car with gold plate’, which in Italy is the most prestigious certification of originality in the world of classic cars, meaning it was time to put it to the test. “Despite the effort, the money spent and the joy of finally seeing the car in mint condition, my purchase was not made to put it in a shop window, but to bring it back to life and to experience wonderful adventures together with my family.”



The family embarked on an epic 7,000km journey with multiple sea crossings, as well as visiting Denmark and a short stop in the Faroe Islands. “We set off having only tested the tent and cooker once, and with practically no camper van customisation. We just tried to stow our luggage well so that we could always find everything quickly when we needed it. This lasted well for the first few days, then the car became a bazaar!”

As many driving enthusiasts have told us, Gabriele was blown away by Iceland’s immaculately maintained winding roads, helped too by beautiful landscapes with every corner. The country’s ever-changing scenery and fords allowed the G Wagon to showcase its off-road prowess, scaling desert terrain and crossing rivers with colourful mountains and incredible cliffs throughout the journey. “The Mercedes never had a problem, not even the slightest one, bringing us home safe and very proud to have accomplished a feat for which many had called us crazy.”



Like so many adventurers, the itch was there the following year. The wanderlusting family had a new destination in their sights: Istanbul. “The defined route went from Italy to Greece to Turkey and then back home through Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Croatia. The thrill of riding in our mythical G across the Galata Bridge with all the illuminated mosques around was very strong.” Gabriele and the car were slightly better prepared this time round, but the authenticity of the 200GE was still very much there – to the untrained eye, the only visual difference is the pop-up roof tent, and that’s just how they wanted it.

“I have always watched a lot of videos and photos of improvement done on 4x4s, but I wanted to keep the car completely original. Even on this trip, crossing so many countries, we saw the most incredible things and always met the most open-minded and kind people.”



After inspiring me and the entire Classic Driver office to pack only the essentials and hunt for the ideal country-crossing cruiser, I was intrigued to find out more about just why Gabriele opted for a G Wagon, where so many would go for a Defender or Land Cruiser. "Interesting one. I've never owned any Mercedes-Benz, nor does my family possess a history of ownership. Mercedes-Benz have always been a brand too luxurious and maybe also a bit too posh to be considered by my grandfather, my father and then therefore myself. But around 15 years ago, I started noticing the early G Wagons and I couldn't deny that I was really fascinated about the design of the car. It was rough, but non-basic, minimal, but not simple. All characteristics that cars like the Defender and Land Cruiser are without. Take the Defender for instance. A huge success, a car that everybody likes but in my personal and honest opinion, also a car that almost everybody could have designed. The G Wagon for me is different, there is something peculiar in the design but it's peculiar in a positive sense. It's like when you see a design that is nice but makes you stop for a second and think about it, as it's not exactly what you have been expecting."

As we all settle in for what is likely to be a chilly few months, I asked Gabriele what's next for his merry band of explorers, "I have a dream in the drawer that I hope to be able to realise. Soon, however, a little new member of the crew will be born and, surely, we will have to wait a couple of summers before any new adventures!"

To follow Gabriele's family adventures, [follow him on Instagram here.](#)

Photos by Gabriele Demarin

Gallery

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