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The Grand Tour: Cruising our 968 through Pennsylvania's Slate Belt

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This tree-lined section of Route 115 leads to the source of half the country's slate: the Blue Mountains.

"Bear-leader? You're looking at him," I said, slamming the door shut.

It was another back-door Grand Tour, and my woman was asking where our chaperon was.

"Look," I said, sweeping my arms downward, "the patches on these 27-year-old Levis belie my aristocratic roots ... you're in the best of hands."

During the mid-1600s, it was a customary rite of passage for a young man — usually an aristocratic Englishman — to finish his studies with a hiatus through Europe; this was the Grand Tour. The purpose of this trip was to enrich the tourist with culture through art, music and literature, and a stroke of mannerisms and customs of the countries visited.

France, Italy and Greece were high on the itinerary for the obvious reasons — the latter two being the cradle of Western civilization and crucial to classical training. The bear-leader ensured the young man didn't waste himself in temptations of opiates, drink and debauchery.

Sliding into the 968, kiss, clutch, first gear — we blasted westward in search of culture.

No interstates, turnpikes or Garden State Parkways; our plan was open knit to stop, slow down or pull into anything of interest on the unofficial byways of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Unlike the 17th-century version of a Grand Tour where cities like Paris, Rome or Vienna were compulsory destinations for cultural drunkenness, ours was more of the "tapas en un pueblo" varietal. These unpublished towns held their own kind of culture, and the decapitated 968 would get us there.

Routes 22, 31 and 46 squeezed us out into Pennsylvania's wilds. And while these are the most common roads we take to westerly unknowns, there's always a surprise worth dropping the revs for. Rack and Roll Billiard's ape-man shooting cue on the side of the road was one — New Jersey's eccentricities are legendary.



The bunny-eared ape-man shooting cue on the side of the road.

Revvng on through the frontier town of Belvidere, New Jersey, a narrow 15 mph bridge over the Delaware linked us to Pennsylvania. The idea was to roll northwestward toward the Blue Ridge Flea Market in Saylorsburg — the long way. We veered off the Martins Creek Belvidere Highway on one of the two-lane capillaries snaking through Northampton County's farm lands. Any one of these would pump us into Pennsylvania's Slate Belt.

Koehler, Miller and Jacktown Road; if you wanted to get a crash course on the origins of your market's produce, egg and dairy stock, these roads delivered. These weren't fast roads, rather rough double-lined ribbons laid across a patchwork of some of the richest hues of greens you'd ever seen. They had gentle dips and inclines, and the odd sharp lefts and rights offering some of the best views of the landscape.

If you stopped and stared off in the distance, you'd swear it was exactly like looking off into sea. When the winds stirred the crops into gentle waves, it soothed the mind like a lullaby.

We encountered not a single car in either direction, which was perfect because finding a shoulder was a problem to stop and shoot some film. We simply stopped, aimed and shot. 400-some-odd years ago, the well-off traveled by coach. We had the privilege to have a panoramic view and 3.0-liter torque so well-mannered that even the cows barely noticed the frog-eyed wedge slipping past.



Break time at a farm on Jacktown Road.

A one-way Main Street led us to Bangor. This town was settled by slate impresario Robert Jones around 1760. Jones emigrated from Bangor, Wales, bringing with him not only the ambition to propel the slate industry, but also the Welsh charm the borough possesses to this day. Stone walls, rectangular gardens, the odd architectonic line and the narrow chicane connecting North and South Main Street offer sublime examples.

Market Street becomes Route 512 with a speed limit that denied third gear approaching the dog leg into Pen Argyl. Cornish for mountain ("Pen") clay/slate ("Argyl"), this 1.4-square-mile borough incorporated in 1882 was home to Welsh and Cornish emigrant slate miners — it's also where the original blond bombshell Jayne Mansfield is buried; the heart-shaped tombstone can be seen from Middletown Road.

Pen Argyl evaporates into haze as Wind Gap widens ahead. We skirt the last of the Slate Belt towns digging the spurs toward Route 115 North toward Saylorsburg. A section of road where perfectly-spaced trees lined the shoulder like those you'd find on a country road in Belgium or France signaled we were close. While it took nearly twice as long to get here, the views and state of mind were a worthwhile sacrifice.



A mural of Eastern Pennsylvania's industrial and agricultural might.

A few hours of traipsing through dirt aisles revealed quality art, domestic and industrial antiques, produce and ephemera from locals; this isn't the typical junk market akin to peeling the roof off a dollar store. These wares and those who peddle them paint a watercolor of the craftsmen, laborers and captains of a once fruitful industrial Lehigh Valley. There was more to be learned here in an afternoon chatting with sons and daughters of English, German and Italian ancestry whose sweat enriched the earth than a semester in history.

Hunger encouraged a twist of the key and a boot-full of first gear back onto 115. There was a lot of discussion between the din of buffeting air and 3,000 revs about what we'd learned back there. Looking toward the right at the Blue Mountains that once offered its slate in exchange for hard labor and sometimes life, a deeper appreciation of the towns we'd left behind was cast.

A few miles down the Delaware's left bank was the Riegelsville Inn. The slow and slightly technical ride up roads suited best for farm machinery was rewarded with a brisk clip down Route 611. Second and third gear exchanged passes with a quartet of big bores. This cultured Porsche was best suited for such a tour, provoking a more stealth jaunt than the hooligan of a

911 we ripped through here with last. Time seemed to slip by faster yet quieter.

It was there, sitting on the front porch of the 134-year-old inn that this cultural excursion continued where we left off. Across the river lied our home state connected by a masterpiece by John Roebling, Brooklyn Bridge's designer.

But here, behind us, were tables with plates of exquisitely prepared food made by locals who continue the tradition of using the bounty of their own farms like generations before them. There's a cultural richness in this country like no other despite our youth — and we didn't have to fly across oceans to sample a different rhythm.

The experience, like the art that hangs on the walls, was singular.



One of the many canvases adorning the Riegelsville Inn's walls.



The search for culture continues.

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About the Author



A dyed-in-the wool, air-cooled 911 junkie, Pablo Deferrari doesn't discriminate against other Porsches. Want further proof? He's in love with Porsche's early water-cooled models and is dedicated to the celebration of the 924, 928, 944 and 968 series. Pablo is one car away from having all four of these models in his own collection: the 924.

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