

From Sea to Sky

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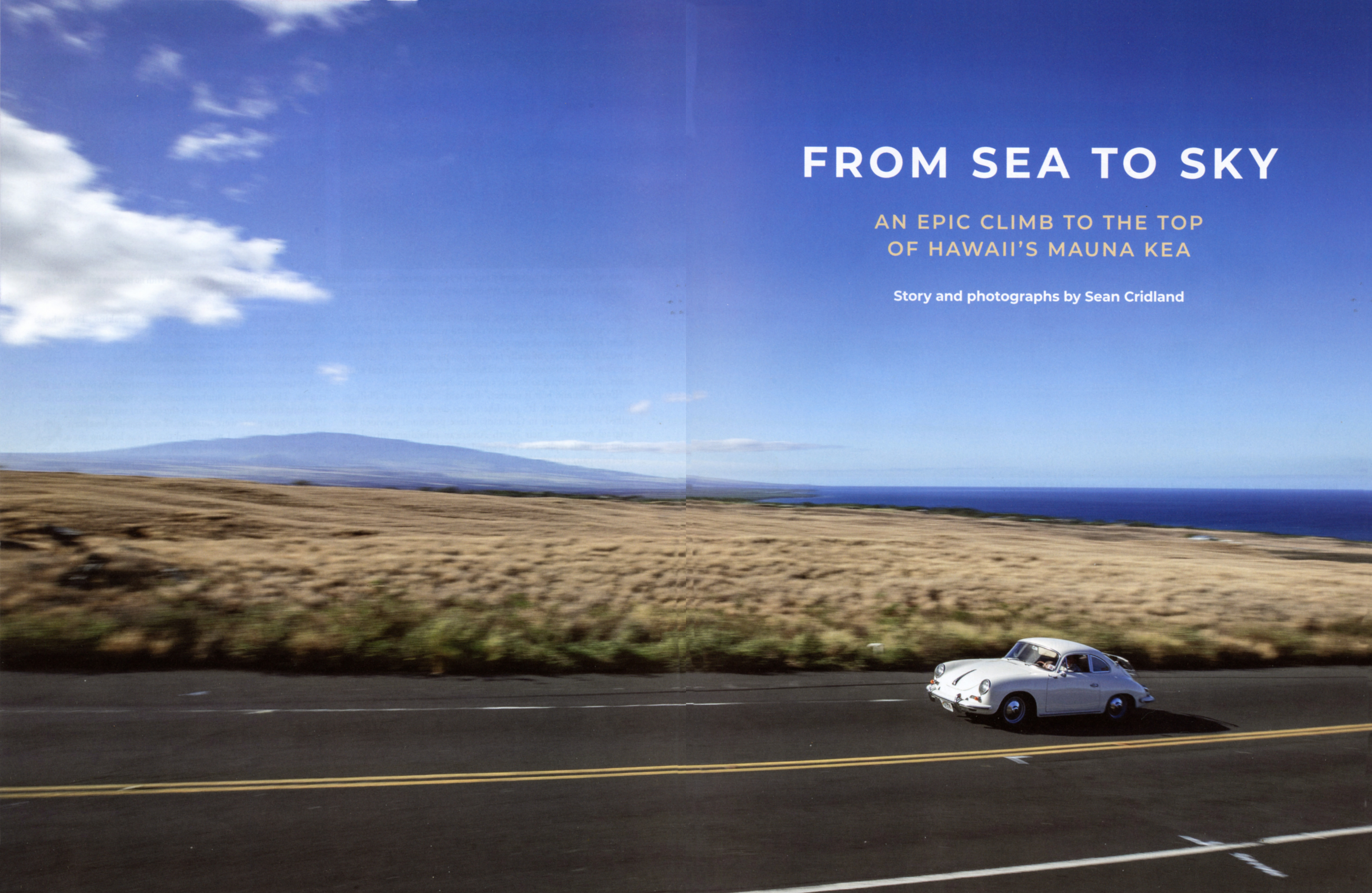
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FROM SEA TO SKY

AN EPIC CLIMB TO THE TOP
OF HAWAII'S MAUNA KEA

Story and photographs by Sean Cridland





Gallery owner Gunner Mench is very proud of his numbers-matching 1963 356 B Super.

Anyone who's met Gunner Mench knows he's been an avid enthusiast of the brand way back to his childhood. As much as his infectious personality shows his love for all things Porsche, consider that his home base is Hawaii's Big Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He is both equally close and dramatically distant from a plethora of Porsche events held on several continents. Yet, he manages to attend several each year.

As if to put an exclamation mark on that point, Mench keeps a Pink-Pig-liveried 951 on the west coast of the "48" (the island's term for the continental United States) so that he always has a Porsche to drive to Parade, the Los Angeles Lit Meet, Luftgekühlt, and the many other events he attends regularly. One can only imagine the air miles he collects.

Mench and wife Elli are the owners of Harbor Gallery in the small town of Kawaihae on the Kailua/Kona side of Hawaii, where they specialize in ceramics, dyed silk wall art, sculpture, and Koa wood art and furniture by local artisans. He has counted several celebrities among his clients, including comedian Garry Shandling before his untimely passing in March of 2016.

Gunner's lifelong enthusiasm for Porsche comes from his late father George Mench, who was born in Poland, then later moved to Germany where he grew his interest in photography into a profession. George emigrated to the United States in the 1950s, where the quality of his work earned him clients such as Porsche AG and the Hubert-Brundage era Brumos, doing both racing and commercial photography. Gunner and his brother, Charlie, often came along for the ride. As a result, Gunner is fluent in Polish,

German, and Porsche! Gunner and Charlie often appear in family photos with their dad and his 356.

Though not all of them are road-going, Mench counts 16 Porsches in his current stable. Among them is the Ivory 1963 356 B Super we're driving for this adventure. When new, it would have made 75 horsepower at sea level. Mensch is the fourth owner



Mench was initiated into the Porsche community as a young boy by his father, George.

This postcard, commissioned by Brumos founder Hubert Brundage, is just one example of George Mench's legendary photography.



and has had the car since 2012. Its original owner brought it to Kona from Southern California after finishing college in the late 1960s. It's an original numbers-matching car with current mileage of 137,659. Though it hasn't been dynoed, we're guessing that it now makes about 60 horsepower with new plugs and points and carburetor jets set properly.

The Climb Ahead

Today we join Mench for a motorized ascent of the largest mountain in the world, as measured from the sea floor. The 13,796-foot-high Mauna Kea is also the highest point in the Hawaiian Islands, so it's a journey that will test both man and car. We'll travel through several micro-climates and pass by several points of interest in contemporary, colonial, and pre-contact Hawaiian cultures.

Our trip starts at the Puako Boat Ramp on the Kailua/Kona side of the island. Puako was a fishing and salt-producing settlement

for centuries before the arrival of Captain James Cook in early 1779. Its name refers to the flower of the Kou tree. Its boat ramp is a launching point for many local small craft owners who go to sea for subsistence and sport fishing or whale watching. The morning we start our climb, there's only one vessel at the dock, loading up supplies for a multi-day adventure at sea between Big Island, Maui, and Lanai. Not only do we touch our feet and hands in the water, but Mench backs his 356 down to the water, dipping the rear wheels in the salty brine to commemorate the official start of our journey. From there, there's only one direction to go: up!

Heading up from the ramp, we turn left onto Highway 19, also known as the Mamalahoa Highway, a very well-maintained road that serves as one of the two highways of the Hawaiian Belt Road. This circles the 4,028-square-mile island, which is not quite twice as large as the state of Delaware. Besides being a major island byway, it's also famous for hosting the bicycle leg of

Comedian and Porsche enthusiast Garry Shandling, in the right seat, was a frequent visitor to Mench's Harbor Gallery.





Mench dipped the rear wheels into the sea to commemorate the start of the day's adventure.



Even on the sparsely inhabited Big Island, one occasionally sits in traffic jams...of up to 12 cars.

the legendary Iron Man Triathlon. It's smooth and well-paved, and its nice, wide shoulders make for easy cruising. We parallel the shore before making the turn onto the Saddle Highway, which crosses over to the Hilo side of the island. In only a few miles we've climbed well above the coast. The broad, blue Pacific dominates the horizon below.

A Stop in Waimea

Soon we arrive at the small, up-country, mid-island town of Waimea (meaning *red water* in Hawaiian), where Gunner and Elli make their home. At an altitude of 2,670 feet above sea level, it would seem as if we've already done a significant climb, but we still have 11,000 vertical feet to go! We top off our gas tank, then visit a locals' restaurant called Hawaiian Style Café, where Mench insists I sample the haupia (coconut pudding) pancakes, bacon, and



Built in the 1800s, Waimea's Ke Ola Mau Loa church remains in use and is one the Big Island's most photographed buildings.



The undulating, curvy roads of Hawaii's Big Island are pure joy for Porsche enthusiasts of any vintage.

locally grown and roasted coffee. They're as good as he promises. After taking in some flavorful sustenance, we're ready to continue on to the larger portion of our adventure—climbing toward the huge mountain whose mass dominates that side of the island.

From Waimea, we turn onto another arm of Highway 190, then onto the original Old Saddle Road, also known as Waiki'i Ranch Road, which is dotted with beautiful homes and farms. Lush and green, it feels as if we could be in coastal Oregon or even on a



backroad in New England. But as we climb, the vegetation gets sparser and the lava rock that makes up the island's foundation becomes more visible. The air cools, requiring a fleece or light jacket. It also becomes noticeably thinner, and shooting photos of our adventure becomes more of a chore.

We turn off the highway near Pu'u Huluhulu, a sacred volcanic cone sacred to the native Hawaiian people. It is also a common stop for tourists to pose for photos, with the summit of the big



Above left: Mench's 356 is no garage queen and has earned its patina with many excursions around the islands. **Above right:** After working our way up to 9,200 feet above sea level, we begin our final ascent.





Above left: Collectively, Mauna Kea is counted as one of the world's most powerful observatories. **Above right:** In shorts and t-shirt only hours before, Mench is bundled up at the summit of Mauna Kea.

mountain we're about to climb in the background. Traveling up the steeper Mauna Kea access road, we find our way to the park visitor's center at an altitude of 9,200 feet. The park rangers recommend to all visitors they stop for at least an hour to tour the cultural and scientific displays at the center and also to acclimate to the altitude or decide to go back down. Among our fellow visitors we notice we're not the only ones starting to feel the effects of altitude; we also notice several foreign languages being spoken, both European and Asian.

Heading to the Summit

After learning about the geologic history of the island and Mauna Kea's cultural significance to the Hawaiian people, we pick up a few souvenirs in the gift shop and then check our vital signs. Satisfied with our heart rates and breathing, we get back into the 356 and venture up the gravel road for the final 4,500 feet to the summit. Though rangers are typically posted to ensure that no one ventures past the visitor's center without all-wheel-drive, when we made the trip, there were only warning signs to restrain us.

There was another factor to consider, though.

Some experts say that a naturally aspirated internal combustion engine loses three percent of its power for every 1,000 feet of altitude gained. If we assume that Mensch's 60-year-old car was only making 60 of its original 75 horsepower at sea level, at 9,200 feet it was producing about 44 horsepower at our last stop. By the time we reach the summit, it would be down to about 35 horsepower, meaning Gunner could only count on first and second gear to provide enough RPMs to pull him to the top.

Though the roads are washboarded and dusty all the way up, they weren't as rugged as I expected and Mensch's 356 did admirably.

Watching him climb up above the clouds was reminiscent of the photos taken by Hans Truöl during some of the early 1950s European Treffens through the Alps. There's never any doubt that Gunner and the car will make it. After a few stops for photos, we find ourselves at the summit, remarkably only a few hours after leaving the sea. We pull into the parking lot that looks out at Maui, Lanai, Molokai, and Kaho'olawe, the no man's land that was used for decades as a bombing practice range. Beyond that are several million square miles of the Pacific Ocean stretching as far as one can see.

At nearly 14,000 feet the landscape is almost lunar in character, with very little growing except for lichen, mosses, and some wildflowers that have adapted over millennia to the extreme

climatic conditions. Otherwise, it's mostly rock, sky, and some snow drifts left over from the most recent storm. Several gleaming white domes house massive optical telescopes and a few huge radio telescopic dishes. Collectively, Mauna Kea hosts the world's largest astronomical observatory, with 12 telescopes covering various ranges of the electromagnetic spectrum, operated by astronomers from eleven countries.

We walk deliberately around the summit, breathing slowly and deeply. But we're feeling good so we take in the view, shoot several photos, visit one of the observatories, talk to a few tourists from Denmark, and congratulate ourselves and the little Porsche that came from two oceans and 60 years away. With big smiles on our faces, we descend back down to the warm, thick air of the coast with Mahalo (thankful gratitude) in our hearts, knowing our epic day was a Porsche-driving adventure few people will ever experience. It's a memory this writer will carry forever. **356**

