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**Nicola and Pedro's Big
Adventure
Story/Photos by
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NICOLA AND PEDRO'S BIG ADVENTURE

Piloting a Pre-A from North Carolina to (and through) La Carrera Panamericana and back

By Sean Cridland

Photographs by Sean Cridland, La Carrera Panamericana and Nicola Venchierutti

For native Venetian Nicola Venchierutti and his 1953 Porsche 356, a trip to Mexico for the fabled La Carrera Panamericana in 2023 took a long, but ultimately interesting, route that included trips back and forth between two continents over several decades and a strong friendship with builder and driving partner, Pedro Campuzano. But in the end, it was all worth it. Theirs was an adventure of a lifetime.

Venchierutti grew up in one of the famous glass-producing families of Murano, Italy. As part of the international nature of the business, learning the languages of their global clientele was of utmost importance. Nicola's father spoke five languages fluently: Italian, German, French, English, and Spanish. As a teen Nicola was sent off to England, though that proved counterproductive when he found himself amongst too many people who spoke Italian.

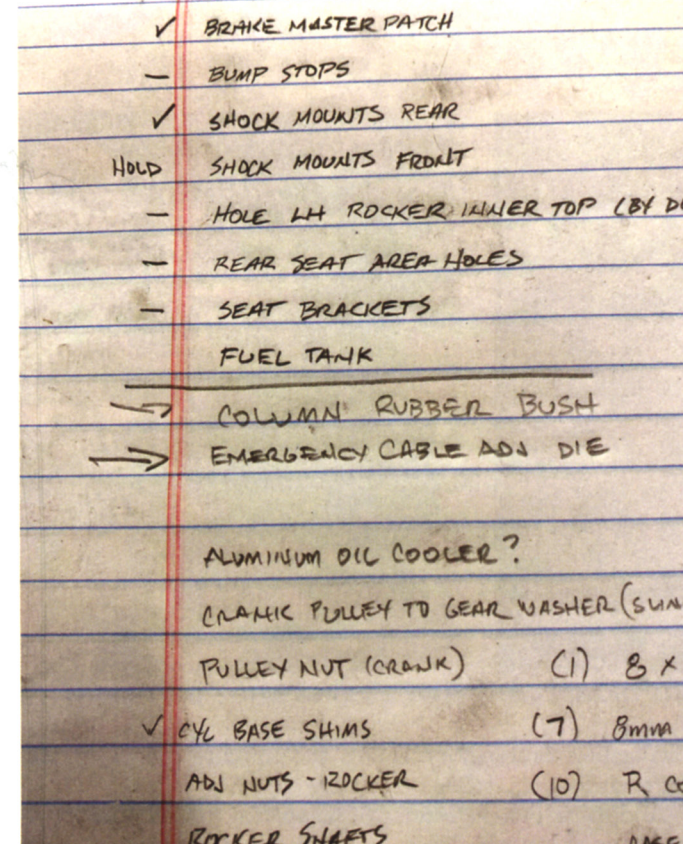
The following year, he moved to Southern California. Besides being immersed in the English language, Venchierutti enjoyed the SoCal car culture. He soon found himself in the car exporting business, with a special emphasis on 1960s and 1970s American muscle cars. His main customers? His friends back in Italy.

"Los Angeles was full of all the American cars my friends back home dreamed about, and in the 1980s and 1990s they were all so easy to find and inexpensive," Nicola said. "I made some good money and drove some nice cars when I was in school." One that he



Pedro Campuzano (left) and Nicola Venchierutti at Werks Reunion Amelia.

Above: Nicola Venchierutti's 1953 Pre-A.



Above left: This is just one of many lists Pedro and Nicola composed to ready the car for La Carrera. Above right: Campuzano welds up the car's roll cage.



kept for himself and that has become one of his prized possessions is a rare 1968 Mercury (Ford) pickup truck that he still owns.

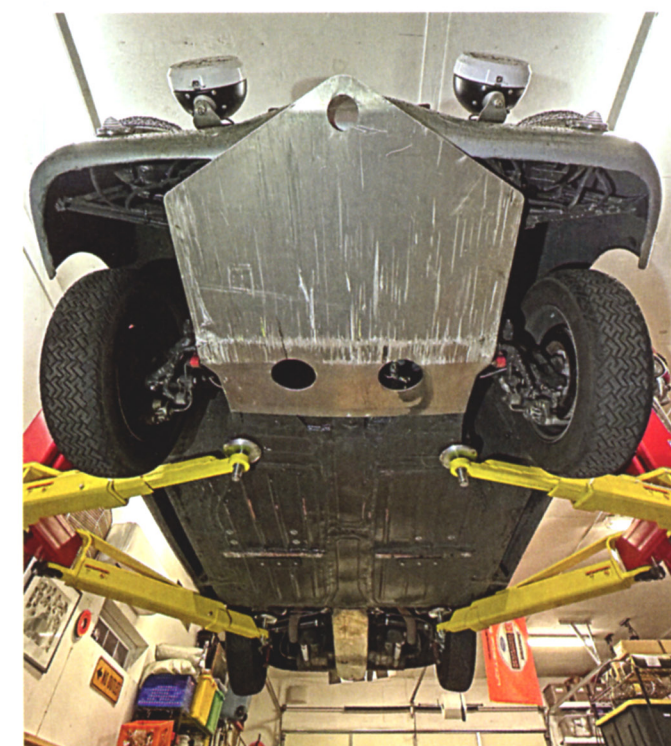
Though he wasn't interested in European cars initially, a friend back home asked him to keep an eye out for an early Porsche. Dutifully, he found a 1952 model that he acquired and sent back to Italy. That inspired him, and when he found a 1953 bent-window coupe, he decided to keep it for himself as a daily driver. When he finished school in Los Angeles, that car was shipped back to

Italy, where he kept it until he had enough money to have its first restoration done. The car was sent to Poland, where the work could be done at a fraction of the price it would have required in either the United States or Italy. The restoration consisted mostly of body and paint work, but it was good enough that it hasn't been redone since.

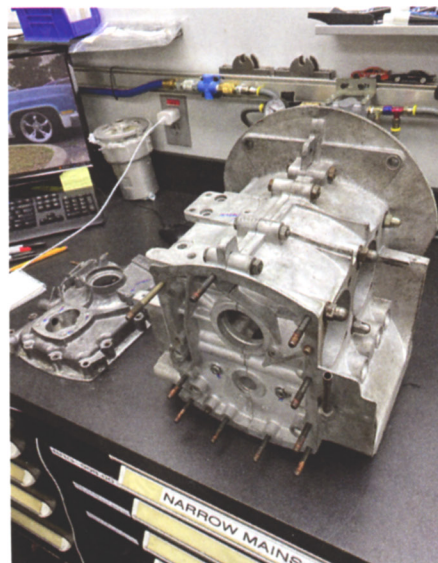
The car stayed in Europe for several years while Venchierutti worked in New York as a stockbroker and commodity trader. When he eventually tired of the big-city rat race, he found a new home near Charlotte, North Carolina, where he now works in the aerospace industry. Once settled, he sent for his prized 356 and began enjoying the Porsche community gatherings up and down the east coast. At one of those events, he met Pedro Campuzano through a mutual friend.

Campuzano has been in the automotive world, in one way or another, his entire life. His father ran an independent Porsche repair shop in Georgia, giving Pedro a strong understanding of all the air-cooled models. Campuzano built on that foundation by crewing for teams in national-level SCCA competition, in IMSA Camel Lights, in Formula Atlantic with Ralt America for four years, with the Newman-Haas Indycar team for 13 years, and with Joe Gibbs Racing for the last 17 years. Pedro spent much of that time traveling to races as a mechanic, but he now works full-time in the Gibbs shop, engineering, designing, and drawing parts for the race cars. On the side, he continues to work on his own and his friends' cars. Though he hasn't raced professionally, Campuzano grew up racing karts. He participated in an Elf drivers' school in France in the late 1980s and has raced his own 914 in many PCA autocrosses... just long enough to realize that, professionally, he'd be a better crew member than driver.

Sometime in 2021, while the two were talking about what kind of work would be necessary to bring Nicola's 1953 356 up to par, Venchierutti mentioned a dream he had of racing in the legendary Mexican open-road race, La Carrera Panamericana. Pedro was the perfect guy to make Nicola's dream come true.



The car's skid plate saw plenty of action—vivid evidence of its usefulness.



Campuzano's engine build, and transmission rebuild, followed the perfect recipe for reliability, getting the pair to and from the race with no troubles.

The conversation of what might be done to make the car run better on the street turned into a year-long project that included stripping the car mechanically and building a full-scale race car suitable for running the classic Mexican open-road race. As Pedro said, "Though the Polish shop did excellent bodywork, mechanically the car 'had issues.'"

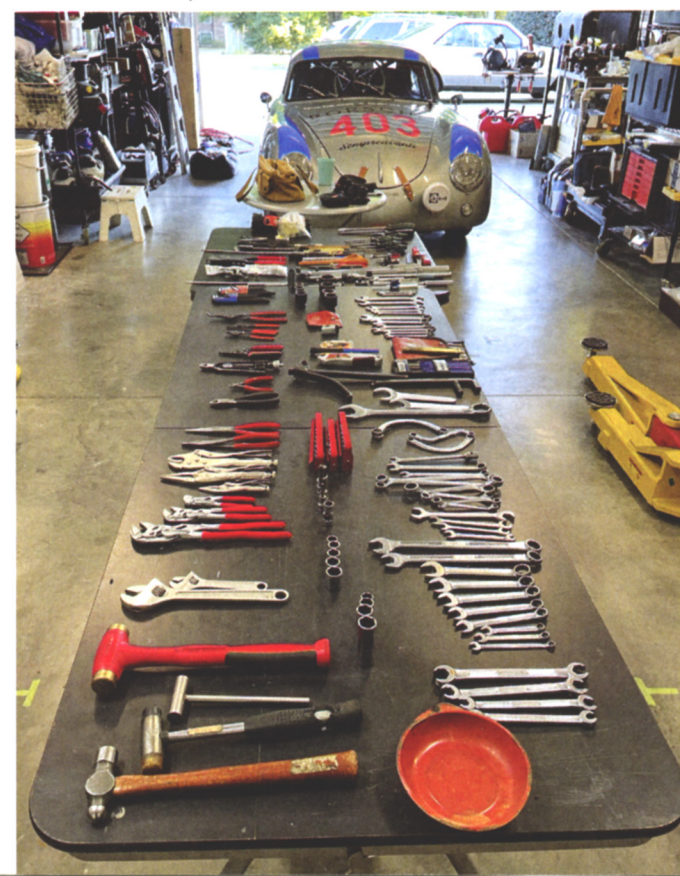
Rather than doing a few fixes to make the car more drivable, Campuzano dove into the competition and safety rules and requirements for the race and then began the job of dismantling all the mechanical components: everything from the fuel system to the suspension and brakes, the engine and transmission, and all the gauges and dash systems. From there, he began the work of

cataloguing, cleaning, machining, and replacing parts to get the car ready for the grueling race ahead.

Adding to the challenge, Nicola wanted to drive the car to and from the race and self-support during the event, a level of adventure that almost no other La Carrera teams have ever done. It was also a challenge Pedro had never faced in his professional competitive career. Those teams raced purpose-built cars carried in custom haulers; the actual racecars never had to deal with the rigors of a long trip to and from the event.

Adapting quickly, he looked at it as an endurance-race build: thinking about what kinds of things could happen on the highway or in the race, which parts would be most likely to wear

Below left: All these tools, plus parts and personal gear, went into the car for the entire trip. Below right: One of the team's first stops en route to Mexico was the Porsche Experience Center in Atlanta.



Above left: The long route to the starting line. Above right: Nicola chats with media covering the race.



or break, and what tools and parts would make the most sense to carry.

Even so, he and Nicola agreed: despite the new parts they would need to add to beef up the car, they wanted to keep the character of the car's Pre-A history. They were hoping to run the 2022 edition of the race, but with all the work Pedro had laid out, it wasn't possible. Rather than hurry the process, they settled on 2023 for their big adventure and racing debut.

Labor-wise, the first step was one of the most difficult for Campuzano: the roll cage. It needed to be safe enough for a race known for some very bad crashes, but it also needed to allow two people to have some comfort over three weeks of driving and racing—and Nicola and Pedro are not small people. Plus, it needed to leave room for approximately 600 pounds of tools, parts, and personal gear. The only thing they didn't carry on their trip down to Mexico was a second spare tire, which they shipped to Mexico with a fellow racer.

For the engine, transmission, suspension, and brakes, Campuzano worked to be sure that everything was strong, working efficiently, and reliable. When they started, the engine was a non-original 1500cc unit with a sticky transmission. The motor was set aside in favor of a purpose-built engine for the event. With a 1958 case, Pedro built up an engine of 1720cc using a 912 third piece with 36mm pump, 1962 heads, and Shasta pistons and cylinders. He also went through the entire transmission and all the other mechanical components. It was time-consuming, but the work paid off. They had no mechanical issues throughout their trip. The car's finishing touch was a Dwight Knowlton-designed graphic inspired by Porsche racing cars of the 1950s.

With everything back together and packed, it was time to set off. Their trip took them from Charlotte to Atlanta for a visit to the Porsche Experience Center, where they were warmly received. From there, they paid a visit to the Capital Porsche

More than just a race, La Carrera is a celebration of Mexican culture.





Above left: No matter where it went, the 356 brought lots of attention. **Above right:** A rare quiet time before the start of the day's stage.

dealership, which is owned by Pedro's brother-in-law. Their visit coincided with a new Porsche model launch, so they got lots of attention from the local Porsche community. From there it was on through New Orleans to San Antonio, then down through Laredo to Monterey, Mexico, and all the way to down to Veracruz for the start of the race. That alone would be enough adventure for most people driving in a 1953 Pre-A, but the fun was just beginning.

What Nicola and Pedro encountered in the race exceeded even their expectations. "We were expecting a vintage race, but many of the cars were more modern, very fast, and had full teams supporting them," Venchierutti said. The race went in seven stages. Starting in Heroica Veracruz, stages finished in Oaxaca, Mexico City, Querétaro, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosi, and finally in Monterey. None of the stages were easy, and all were much faster than Nicola expected.

An enthusiastic fan gets Nicola's autograph (below). At right, Nicola visits with some of the many schoolchildren who enjoyed the international atmosphere surrounding the race.



Many of the stages were held on precipitous mountain roads.

According to Venchierutti, "We had a hard time finishing in the allotted time on most of the stages." They also found that the race's rules surrounding mechanical issues didn't favor the preparation that Pedro did on Nicola's 356. There was no advantage to finishing all the stages intact, as they did. If a car would break down and couldn't finish a stage, it could still rejoin the next day and take results. The rules are designed more to keep competitors happy when they come from around the world to participate. Nicola and Pedro also expected to run in a class with other cars of the same vintage and period-correctness, but as it turned out, theirs was the oldest car in the class, by far. Nonetheless, they continued, and in the end they took second place in their class.

Their experience was much more than a race; it was an adventure of learning about the car, each other, their competitors, and the culture. Both Nicola and Pedro spoke excitedly about the people they met, the enthusiasm of the spectators, and the comments they got from fellow competitors and race officials about running a car so dear to the spirit of the original race.

But their adventure extended a week *beyond* the race. While many of the competitors' crews loaded up their cars and gear while they flew home, Nicola and Pedro still had another week of driving to go. But make it home they did, without a glitch.



Since their return to Charlotte, the car has featured in many local shows and national-level concours, and has taken prizes at both Rennsport Reunion and The Amelia concours held in early March of this year. Nicola plans to show the car several more times.

Would they do anything differently? Campuzano said he'd like to rework the engine to get another 20 horsepower. If they carried even 200 fewer pounds, that would be a good step up in performance. Neither he nor Nicola hope to be lightning fast, but with much of the race run at or above 5,000 feet of elevation, less weight could be a big help. When the car will go back into Pedro's shop to be readied for its next trip to Mexico, they're not ready to say. But they're already scheming. **356**



A satisfied team (above) and their reward for a job well done (right).

