



THE GRAND TOUR MERCEDES- MAYBACH

Dr. Andrew Hildreth



Before JC – Jeremy Clarkson, not the other chap with the same initials – there was the Grand Tour. The route into Italy from the north, across the Alps, was once a rite of passage for 17th- and 18th-century European noblemen. Goethe, the German Romantic, described the Alps as casting their captive shadow. By the 19th century, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra saw mountain ascents as metaphors for confronting inner challenges and striving for greatness. With the invention of the motor car in the 20th century, these peaks remained a formidable test for both driver and machine. Which still holds true today.

At the invitation of Mercedes-Maybach, a group of us were set to embark on our own version of the Grand Tour. We followed a route originally taken by Dr Karl Schmid, an engineer and sales manager at Maybach-Motorenbau GmbH, who documented his honeymoon journey while driving a Maybach Type 22/70 hp W 3. His diary and photo album are preserved at the Museum of Historic Maybach Vehicles in Neumarkt, Bavaria.

According to the diary’s translation, their route took them from southern Germany by Lake Bodensee to Lago di Como in northern Italy. “Friedrichshafen, Geisslingen: Visited parents, [...] on the same day, traveled to Neuchâtel. Heavy traffic from Lake Biel. It was a lovely autumn day, the sky and lake were blue.” [...] “Along Lake Neuchâtel, Yverdon, Lausanne breakfast.” “[...] Continued to Villeneuve, Aigle, St. Maurice, Martigny. 60-metre-high waterfall, wet feet, cold. [...] To the Great St. Bernard: beautiful, wide, long ascending pass road, [...]” “[...] Continued around Lake Lugano and Chiasso and the wonderful Como, palm trees, magnificent location by the lake, grand hotels [...]”

Founded in 1909 by Wilhelm Maybach and his son Karl, the company originally built

engines for Zeppelin airships. These engines were designed to operate flawlessly over long distances and at high altitudes. In 1919, that engineering excellence was applied to terrestrial transport, and the company began building ultimate luxury automobiles.

Dr Schmid’s tour passes through some of Europe’s most spectacular scenery, from serene shoreline to mountainous terrain. Along the way it also takes in some of the grandest of Grand Dame hotels that are resident next to the lakes and act as an oasis for the road weary driver. They are, in essence, restored versions of the same hostelries that would have looked familiar to Dr and Mrs Schmid.

My weapon of choice to take on the Alps was the Mercedes-Maybach SL 680 Monogram, styled after the brand’s dramatic 6 Concept car. It features thrilling acceleration for alpine climbs, exceptional traction control for tight bends, and confident handling on descents. The SL 680 is Maybach’s first two-seater roadster and blends performance with exceptional luxury. The 4.0-litre V8 engine delivers around 585 horsepower through a nine-speed Speedshift gearbox, with paddle controls for manual driving. Exterior touches include a Maybach-patterned bonnet, chrome grille, and exclusive colour options: garnet red metallic or opalite white magno.

Inside the cabin, it’s the craftsmanship and comfort that set Maybach apart. It features exclusive nappa leather upholstery, with multicontour, climate-controlled seats in crystal white and floral stitching that hugs you through tight corners or autobahn sprints. There’s an energizing airflow system to keep you alert, and a heated steering wheel.

Much like the Zeppelin airships that once passed overhead, the appearance of a Maybach





car in remote alpine towns must have felt like an alien craft from the future. Today's Mercedes Maybach SL680 had a similar effect. The new styling, attention to detail that only a luxury car provides, and the sonorous sounds from the V8 engine, cause people to stop, smart phone in hand, to take pictures of the modern-day automotive equivalent.

Our journey began at the Riva Hotel in Konstanz, near Friedrichshafen – an art nouveau villa with an enviable location. It has been elegantly updated with floor-to-ceiling windows, a Michelin two-star restaurant, a spa and a lakeside bar.

From Friedrichshafen, the route climbs through vineyards of Süddeutschland into the Black Forest. The roads are narrow and rural, including agricultural machinery as a slow-moving hazard. The car, while not complaining at low speed, nonetheless feels like a caged beast that simply wants the freedom to run. Re-joining the autobahn did just that. Pressure on the accelerator, and with the ferrous engine roaring beneath the hood, the car eats up the mileage with ease. It is your adrenalin rush vindication of the quoted performance figures.

Crossing into Switzerland over the Rhine at Giebenach, the route follows the lakeside plains toward Geneva. Swiss speed limits kept the SL 680 humming along, conserving fuel and gliding toward the Beau-Rivage Palace in Lausanne, set on the edge of Lac Léman.

The Beau-Rivage, one of Switzerland's finest 19th-century hotels, has been tastefully restored and expanded. Its lakeside terrace, towering ceilings, and grand décor from yesteryear remain. After a full day on the road, a cold drink on the colonnaded balcony with a view of the lake is a well-earned reward.

The next morning brought the ascent into the Alps, following the lake and river valley until the road begins the climb to the Great St. Bernard Pass – the ridge between Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa. As Dr Schmid noted, it's "beautiful, wide, long ascending pass road." With Matt Monro crooning "On Days Like These" through the Burmester® 3D surround system, you start to wonder if the mafia are not waiting hidden in a mountain tunnel.

Even today, the road over the pass is demanding. Weather can shift without warning, turning sunshine into torrential downpours making driving conditions more challenging. The heavy rain turns the road into a potential skid pan, but the all-wheel drive makes sure the Maybach is a positive and poised experience.

Once past Ivrea, the road flattens toward Milan, followed by a short climb north to Lake Como delivering you to the imperious Villa d'Este. Built in the 16th century for Cardinal Tolomeo Gallio, it remains one of the world's grandest hostelrys. Dominating the shoreline, with palatial gardens and a maintained grandeur befitting a bygone age, it is a perfect place to rest and recoup. Relaxing at the tables by the water, the sound of waves gently lapping at the dock, it is idyllic, and as Dr Schmid described, a "magnificent location by the lake, grand hotels..."

I may not have discovered my inner Nietzschean resolve or Goethean inspiration in the mountains – the Maybach did most of the hard work – but I found a different kind of greatness in the joy of the drive. This Grand Tour proved that, with the right car, such a journey is one everyone should consider at least once in their life.

 @mercedesmaybach
mercedes-benz.com