

# INCREDIBLE INDIA PART II

BY JOHN MILLIKEN

PHOTOS BY JOHN & LESLIE MILLIKEN

It had been nearly three years since Leslie and I ventured to India. That visit, in mid-February 2020 was to judge the “21 Gun Salute Concours” in New Delhi. It is the largest car show in Asia, with a rally, tours and stays at magnificent royal palaces located south and west of Delhi, all spread over a period

of ten days. I wrote about that event in our *Side Mount Mirror*, issue 1 of 2020. You might recall that during that visit, COVID-19 elevated to worldwide concern and we departed only a few days before President Modi shut down all international transport. We had shipped our 1939 Buick Roadmaster Convertible Sedan to participate, however, its return shipment was cancelled and we did not see it again until the fall. The events in 2020 and 2023 were organized by Madan Mohan (its founder), a New Delhi entrepreneur with businesses related to travel, farming and restaurants. He is a very generous and gracious host >



Bollywood performance;  
(inset) 21 Gun Salute  
Concours program cover



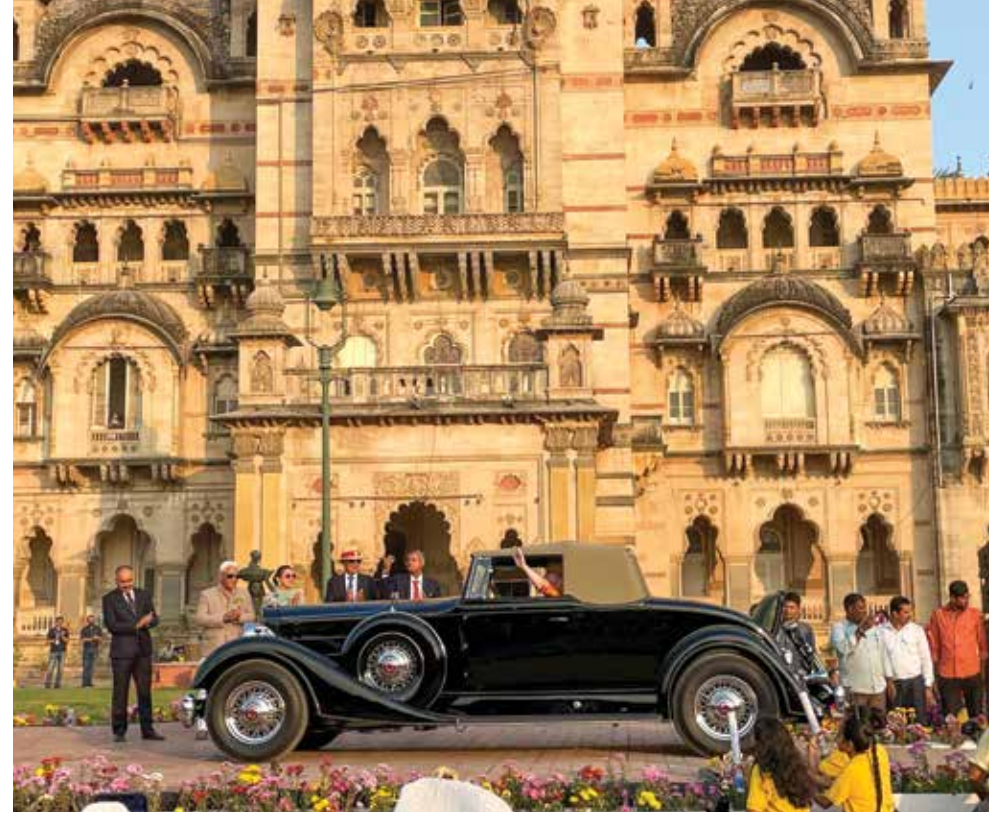
who also took great care of our Buick during its five-month absence.

This time the concours and subsequent tours took place in Vadodara, a city about 600 miles south of Delhi and a one-hour flight north of Mumbai. Vadodara is a large city, known among other things, for its silk sarees, worn by most women in India. This year the event was planned for early January with the concours scheduled from January 5th through the 8th. The venue selected was the spectacular Lakshmi Vilas Palace. This is the largest privately owned home in India, situated on 700 acres and said to be four times the size of Buckingham Palace. It is the official residence of the Maharaja of Vadodara of the Gaekwad Royal Family. The family once ruled the State of Vadodara and the lavish property still serves as the residence of the royal family.

Leslie and I departed LAX on New Year's Eve aboard an Emirates Airbus A380, a gorgeous aircraft reminiscent of the Boeing 747 of

*Photo above:  
Cars parked in  
front of the Palace.*

another era. It was a planned 16-hour flight to Dubai, followed by a transfer to Mumbai, another two-hour flight. I was not sure which direction our course would take us, over the Pacific, the Atlantic, or the polar route. However, at midnight I tuned in the flight tracker mode of the video screen and saw we were only 100 miles from the North Pole. HAPPY NEW YEAR! We arrived in Mumbai around 4 a.m. on Monday, January 2. Mumbai is 13-1/2 hours ahead of Los Angeles. It seems most arrivals must occur during that time period and it took us two hours to clear Indian Customs. We had booked the JW Marriott, just two miles



*Photos from top:  
Best of Show, 1934  
Packard 1107 Coupe  
Roadster; The Statue  
of Unity in Kevadia*

from the airport, for a two-night stay to get acclimated to the time difference. That turned out to be a great choice.

On the 4th we flew Indigo Air north to Vadodara where we would spend the next few days attending the concours, complete the judging duties, attend black tie dinners and outdoor evening events and enjoy copious amounts of food. Unfortunately Vadodara is a "dry" part of India, meaning no alcohol. As this situation was sure to cause "drama" for many of us, a special permit was obtained due to the fact that nearly all of the ICJAG judges were from different countries without this minor impediment to good times. The next day--tour day--most of the competing cars gathered on the grounds of Lakshmi Palace. It was announced that the guests could pick and choose any of the cars participating in the Rally. I immediately spotted a magnificent 1934 Packard Twelve 1107 Convertible Coupe, attended to by a handsome, tall, extremely well-spoken Indian man who invited me for the drive. His name was Kersi, and there's more about him later.

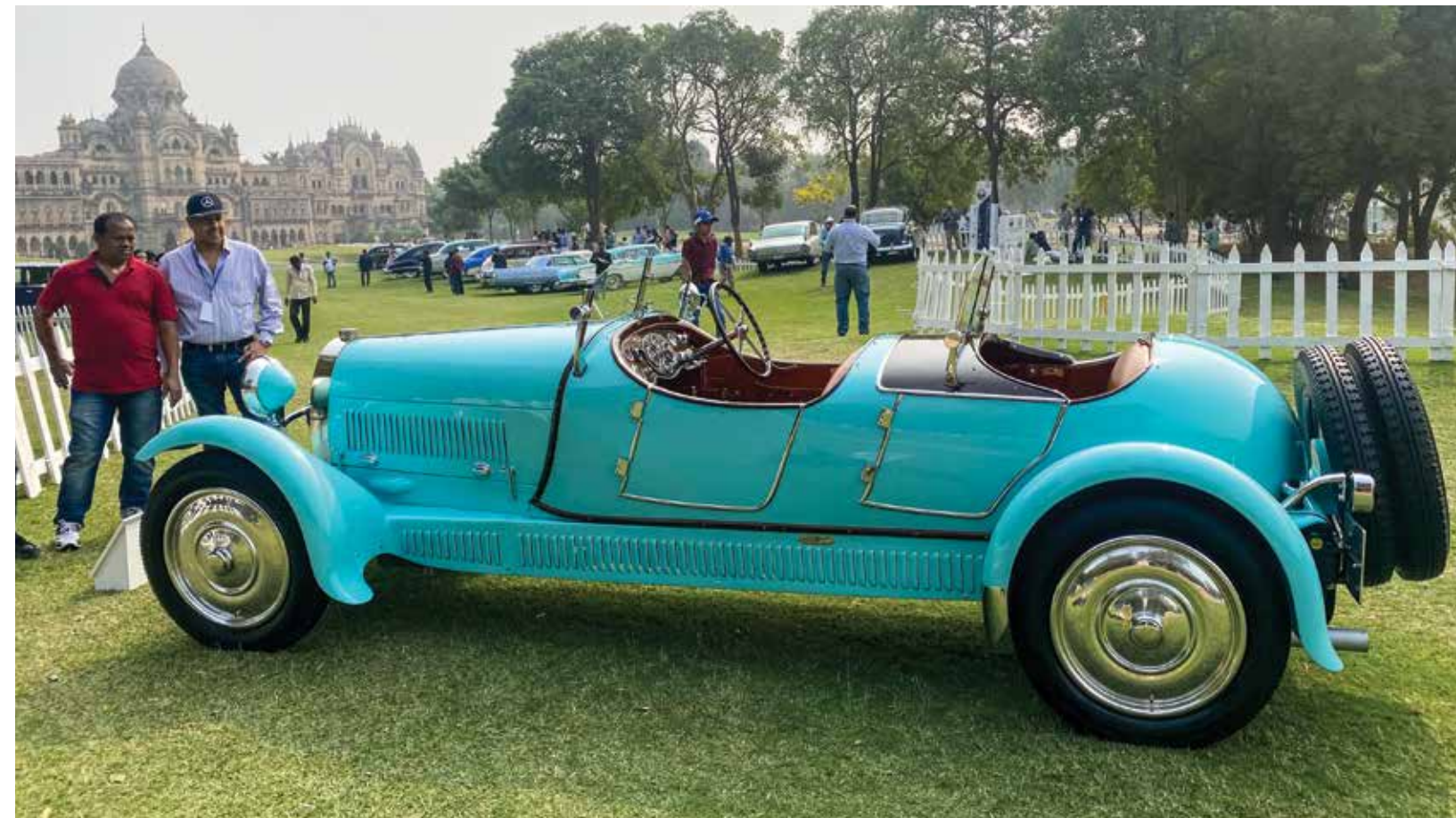
The tour was a distance of 90 km to the Statue of Unity. This was the season when farmers burn their fields in advance of starting new crops throughout the land, making for a massive haze. I mention this because nearing our destination we rounded a curve and I saw, through this haze, the most colossal and dramatic statue sighting I had ever seen. Sitting on a promontory point near the city of Kevadia, the Statue of Unity is the largest and tallest monument in the world. At 597 feet, it dwarfs our Statue of Liberty and is four times its size. It was built in 2013 as a tribute to India's first Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Patel, after gaining independence from Great Britain in 1947. That evening at the Palace we were treated to the annual Gaekwad Festival of Music and Arts. This included several famous Indian artists, poets and musicians to include several performances on the Sitar, a stringed instrument made famous in the 1960s in >



the U.S. by the Beatles, who introduced Ravi Shankar, then the most famous Sitar performer in that country.

The next day, the 6th, was the day of concours judging which took place on the golf course of the Palace. More than 120 vehicles were on exhibit, with classes for Maharaja cars, special classes including Rolls-Royce and Bentley, Pre- and Post-War American and European entries, Playboy cars and motorcycles. I was assigned to judge two classes: Pre-War American Open and Pre-War American Closed. I must say that the quality of restorations was much improved over the judged cars in 2020. Indian restorers are very much handicapped by a punitive 225% duty on imported cars and parts. As a result very few cars and quality parts make it into the country. Many cars chosen for restoration would likely be considered “too far gone” for restoration in the U.S. One example was a 1924 Dodge Touring car that was literally crane lifted off a cliff ledge it had plunged over many years ago. A book was printed showing the restoration of the car, with each page documenting its journey from rust bucket to the magnificent example before me. To my surprise the one thing that impressed me most was the chrome. It was the finest chrome plating I had ever seen. India does not have the EPA restrictions that are increasingly causing hardships for American restorers. For example, in California the Air Resources Board is now heavily regulating Hexavalent Chromium as a toxic air contaminant. This is the pollutant highlighted in the lawsuit that made Erin Brockovich famous. I see opportunity here for an entrepreneur in the chrome or shipping business.

While judging Pre-War American cars, I again encountered my new friend, Kersi, as he exhibited the aforementioned Packard from the collection of its owner, Mr. Gautam Hari Singhania, a Mumbai businessman. I judged that car against 12 others in that class. Amazingly there were three U.S.- made cars in that class I had never >



*Photos this page from top: The Palace golf course served as the setting for the concours; Black-Tie dinner; Leslie Milliken, Madan Mohan and Caroline Cassini.*

*Photos opposite page from top: 1934 Nash Ambassador 1290 Sedan, First-place Prewar American Closed; 1929 Bugatti Type 44 Dual-Cowl Tourer by Lavocat & Marsaud.*



seen: a 1928 Gardner Roadster, a gorgeous 1933 Studebaker President Convertible Sedan and in the Closed Class, a 1934 Nash Ambassador Eight Series 1290. My judging partners were Peter Larsen of Denmark, noted author of European cars including a just published book on Talbot-Lago automobiles. The other judge was Caroline Cassini, daughter of well-known collector Judge Joseph Cassini of New Jersey. She is also a new member of our Southern California Region and was featured in a recent *Side Mount Mirror* article about young judges. She now resides in Los Angeles works for the Broad Arrow auction group.

As the two-day judged event took place there were lots of colorful Bollywood-style performances on the huge stage where awards ceremony would take place. I had >



Photos opposite page from top: 1933 Studebaker Commander Convertible Sedan; 1914 Wolseley 24-30 Landaulette Winner of Herald class.

Photos this page from top: John Milliken, Mr. Singhania and Stuart Fields, CCCA member from Pennsylvania; 1929 Packard 640 Roadster.

## INCREDIBLE INDIA

time to wander the field on the second day. My favorite class to visit was the Veteran and the Edwardian class with several Maharaja of Baroda owned cars. My personal favorite of the entire show was a 1914 Wolseley 24/30 Landulette with open front and rear, reminding me of the private rail cars of the 1920s. As it turned out the 1934 Packard won the Best of Show award and that 1934 Nash and the Wolseley also won Special Awards. That evening at a wonderful Black-Tie reception in the Palace, I was approached by Mr. Singhanian, initially because he wanted to know more about his Packard. He was joined again by Kersi, whose full name is Kersasp Bastawala, who cultivates and manages the collection and is quite knowledgeable about American Classics. I had heard of Mr. Singhanian and that he owns the large fabric and textile company, Raymond Limited. We talked at length and at one point I asked what other businesses he had. He told me that he also was the largest producer of condoms in Asia. I told him of the irony that, only that morning the *Delhi Times* reported that India had just surpassed China as the most populous country in the world. I mentioned we would be in Mumbai for our last day in India. He invited us to see his very private collection there and would send a car for us at the hotel and also help us speed through immigration at the airport that night. He did not disappoint.

After several days touring various sanctuaries for wild donkey, birds and a Magnesium salt mine, just seven miles from the Pakistan border, we arrived back at the JW Marriott the morning of the 14th. As promised, a large SUV with driver picked us up for a 45-minute drive through the scenic parts of sprawling city and across the huge natural bay to an area known as "Billionaires Row." Mr. Singhanian's home is a 36-story building, with the top three floors serving as his residence and, get this, 12 floors exhibiting his fabulous collection of more than 220 cars, of which about 80% are Pre-War American marques. He



*Photos from top:  
1941 Cadillac  
60 Special;  
1928 Gardner  
85 Roadster*

greeted us upon arrival and turned us over to Kersi and another handler, Byron, for a two-hour tour of the collection, after which he invited us for an Italian lunch prepared in his quarters by his private chef. I did not take photos out of respect for his privacy, but it is the finest collection of Classic cars I have ever seen. Later that evening, another limousine picked us up and drove us to the airport where another of his employees sped us through ticketing and immigration check in just 20 minutes.

I hope that, in two years, I will again get a chance to judge the "21 Gun Salute," in a different part of India. If this inspires you to consider shipping a car to India for a life-changing experience, I will put you in touch with Madan Mohan for details. It is the generous and welcoming people of India, like Mr. Mohan, that make India "incredible". ●