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UNDER the hood

Malta's classic car scene and dazzling coastal roads make it a must-visit for petrolheads

Words: ALLY WYBREW

It's Sunday and Valletta's Republic Street is vibrating. Not with the clanging of church bells or the footfalls of *pastizzi*-munching tourists, but with the rumble of V8 engines emanating from Corvettes, Mustangs and Pontiacs lining up outside the crumbling columns of the Royal Opera House.

For some, the appearance of nearly 70 vintage American cars is an unexpected sight in the Maltese capital, a city famed for its maritime history and Baroque architecture.

'In the 70s, many Maltese people went to live in the US,' Jason Camilleri, president of the American Auto Club Malta, explains of the profusion of Stateside motors. 'Eventually they got older and moved back, bringing their automotive fanaticism with them.'

In 2026, the classic car scene in Malta is booming. As well as the annual Malta Classic event, which hosts a 'grand prix' of vintage vehicles in Malta's once-capital city of Mdina, the AACM hosts bimonthly meets across the islands for its 150 members.

The Maltese passion for 'muscle' extends to the quietest corners of the country; Jason estimates there are more classic American cars per square kilometre on Gozo than on the mainland. They're harder to spot though: Gozo's car owners keep their best kit under wraps.

'I like to take it out during the week when there's less traffic,' says Paul Falzon, owner of a pristine 1967 Mustang. 'I used to meet friends on the weekend, but I like to press the gas and there's a road to Dwejra which is good to drive along with fewer cars about.'

Born in New York to Maltese parents, Paul moved to Gozo 16 years ago then bought the

Clockwise from top: Onlookers at Malta Classic; a Jaguar E-Type Roadster rounds Malta's bends; a sidecar on display at Villa Bologna, an 18th-century Maltese country home



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Mustang at auction in 2017. Since then, he's rebuilt the engine, spruced up the carpets and given it a rust-resistant paint job.

The salty Mediterranean air is an abrasive environment for steel – as are Gozo's narrow streets and tight corners – which is why glimpsing Paul's nearly 60-year-old motor is an infrequent sight. What's more, most vintage cars here bear unique number plates restricting their mileage. Seeing one feels special. While his friends embark on days-long road trips to

Sweden to show off at Power Big Meet, Paul prefers to play it safe, staying on the island. There's a social pleasure in simply owning the car, though: friends come over, hang out in the garage and drink a few beers. 'That's enough,' Paul asserts. 'I don't have hobbies. I don't like football, anything like that. Just the cars.'

He's not alone. Joseph Xeureb owns a bright-red 1957 Thunderbird which hasn't seen the open road since October, despite flaunting a four-speed Mustang gearbox (his '*Fast and the Furious* upgrade'). Instead it hibernates behind unassuming garage doors in the hilltop town of Xaghra.

So next time you hear a rumble in Malta, look up – that flash of colour sparkling against the honey-coloured hillside might just be a vintage vehicle from all the way across the Atlantic.

