



by Oliver Roberts

fuel for thought

Just an Illusion

There is a deep irony on display every day on our roads. Traffic jams, crowded parking lots and abundant petrol stations are all indicators that a car can no longer deliver on its promise of freedom

Despite working for a company that is unlikely to make the list of Top 100 Best Places To Work, or even the top 1 000, the dedicated employees of the Public Transport Users Association (PTUA) based in Victoria, Australia, recently achieved some merit by publishing a comprehensive study on how the motor car has taken away our freedom. They believe the scope associated with owning a car in the modern era is largely misplaced, compared to owning one in the 1950s when there were fewer around and people swore less.

Nowadays, the PTUA argues, traffic volumes, road rules, limited parking space and, of course, the cost of fuel, negate the chance for citizens to simply hit the open road whistling and wearing a Humphrey Bogart hat (like they did in the '50s). There are now too many other things, like the men on those chemist delivery bikes and people who were old enough to drive in the '50s, that get in the way of our progress.

After reading the study, I was startled to find

myself agreeing with something Australians have to say. A car's indispensability factor in our daily lives has created a paradox whereby they give us a certain freedom of choice, but we cannot choose not to have one.

With the rapid development of urban sprawl and its subsequent town planning, owning a car, on the whole, no longer means we get anywhere quicker than we would have by walking to the same destinations 50 years ago. "Those who buy a car don't take a deep breath and rejoice in extra hours of leisure, but they travel to more distant destinations," concedes Wolfgang Sachs in his book *Why Speed Matters*. "The powers of speed are converted not in less time on the road but in more kilometres. The time gained is reinvested into longer distances and, as time goes by, the spatial distribution of places changes and long distances become the norm. People still go to school, to work, to the cinema, but are obliged to travel longer routes. As a consequence, for instance, the average German citizen today travels 15 000km a year as opposed to only 2 000km in 1950."

However, I fear travelling longer distances is *not* the primary cause of our loss of freedom due

to the motor car. No, it's the short trips. Before there were cars, if you found out you'd run out of bread or milk at 6pm, you just accepted it and went on to enjoy an evening around the wireless with your pipe and sleeveless sweater. Now, there's no excuse if your wife/girlfriend/mother asks you to "just pop to the local for a few things". Then it happens all over again—the bad parking, having to avoid visual and audible contact with the car guard (twice) and returning home to scorn for your amateur choice of washing powder.

Another, more internecine way the car restricts your freedom of choice is that it's taken away your liberty to walk home alone in a sulk if you have an argument with your partner at a restaurant. In the olden days, once the spat reached its pitch, you could simply storm out dramatically and disappear for hours, gleefully leaving the other person to worry about whether you had been killed. The modern advent of a small, mobile bubble now means both parties have to sit in close proximity all the way home and endure a stubborn, dredging silence interspersed with heavy sighing. It spoils all the fun. □

What I drive: Kai Schmidt

Kai Schmidt by appointment, based in Parktown, Johannesburg and Franschhoek, Western Cape, has been designing jewellery for more than 10 years and is well known for immaculate attention to detail when creating superb pieces. style caught up with the man with the Midas touch in the Cape to find out what he drives

by Thomo Setshogo

What car do you drive? A 1977 silver 450 SLC Mercedes-Benz convertible.

What is the best feature of this car? The roaring and powerful V8 4.5-litre engine, as well as the solidity of the car. I also love the fact that I can take the roof off and drive it around the winelands, especially in the Franschhoek area where I can admire the beautiful views.

Is there anything you would change about the car? Nothing at all.

What was your first car? A 1959 180 diesel Mercedes-Benz. I'm an all-time classic Benz enthusiast.

What did you drive before you bought this car? It was a three-door

Mitsubishi Pajero, and in my opinion it is the best 4x4 ever.

What is your dream car? The Ford GT40 that the legendary racing driver Jacky Ickx drove to victory in the 1969 Le Mans 24-hour race.

What is the biggest speeding fine you have ever had? It was R500 for simultaneously not having my driver's licence with me and driving without a seatbelt – horrendous luck, but never again! What CD are you listening to at the moment in your car? I'm currently enjoying The Beatles' *Abbey Road* album, but I also like Rory Gallagher, Steely Dan and Oscar Peterson.

photography Paul Hofman

