

# Coast to Coast in a Classic Car

Bugeye Sprites and other small roadsters might not seem up to the task, but collectors with some time on their hands have eagerly made the trek.



In Death Valley, the Porsche and Jaguar that two brothers, Giles and Nick English, drove Across the country. Bremont Watch Company

By **Jim Motavalli**

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Austin-Healey's Mark I Sprite, a little racer known as a Bugeye, is perhaps not the first car you'd consider for a cross-country drive. For one thing, there's no trunk lid (access is from behind the seats), nor external door handles or actual glass windows — there are removable "side curtains" instead.

Under its hood is a tiny four-cylinder engine with all of 45 horsepower. Getting to 60 miles an hour takes about 20 seconds, and these British roadsters, built between early 1958 and late 1960 (48,987 were made), are not exactly known for reliability.

But their fun factor can't be measured, and Karen and Thomas Jeffrey Larrick of Mount Vernon, Wash., were recently at the Bugeye Guy restoration shop in Branford, Conn., taking delivery of their pale yellow 1958 Sprite, nicknamed Ducky. The couple were near the start of an epic journey — they planned to drive 4,000 miles home, on a route with many stopovers along the way.

David Silberkleit, the aforementioned Bugeye Guy, had made roughly 150 nonoriginal modifications meant to keep Ducky rolling toward Washington, including a Ford-sourced five-speed gearbox for more relaxed cruising, disc brakes all around, electronic ignition, an alternator and — crucially — a beefy aluminum radiator with six-bladed fan. Mr. Silberkleit said he planned "to sleep with my cellphone under my pillow" until the couple made it safely home.



Karen and Thomas Jeffrey Larrick with their Austin-Healey Sprite, modified for reliability, in Branford, Conn. Jim Motavalli

Sure, it's an adventure, but possibly a uniquely enjoyable one for classic car owners. For Tom Cotter, the host of the online show "[Barn Find Hunter](#)," slow-paced cross-country trips like this are all about "going through towns bypassed by the interstate highways, where you can smell the just-mowed grass, eat in little diners and stay in hotels built 100 years ago."

In 2017, Mr. Cotter experienced this firsthand, driving 3,700 miles in a 1926 Model T Ford — with some appropriate modifications, including electronic ignition, disc brakes and a period engine upgrade. The route followed [the old Lincoln Highway](#), one of the [first to link the East and West Coasts](#), when possible.

Many of Mr. Cotter's barn finds, all over the United States, were the reward for long-distance trips in his 1939 Ford Deluxe woody, a vehicle he found "resting against a barn" when he was 15. He paid \$300. Today, the Ford looks original but travels with many modern mechanical upgrades. A trip from Key West, Fla., to Fairbanks, Alaska, is on the horizon, and Mr. Cotter said he would like to do it in "some significant car."

Jonathan Klinger, vice president for car culture at Hagerty, the classic car specialist, agrees that seeking out the [blue highways](#) is part of the challenge — especially in cars that strain to reach 70 miles an hour.

"It's more the journey than the final destination," he said. "You figure out what attractions are along the way and connect the dots with secondary roads. In the end, it's a fantastic road trip, instead of 'Gosh, I'm so glad I'm here.'"



David Silberkleit, the Bugeye Guy, works on other cars, but these Sprites are the core of his business.  
Jim Motavalli

Mr. Larrick, a semiretired vocational rehabilitation director, budgeted at least 30 days for the couple's trip, with detours to visit attractions, friends and relatives. At home, he regularly drives his classics, which include a 1978 Citroën GS, a 1968 Saab 96 and a 2008 [Smart car](#).

"When I insured the Sprite, I told them I planned to drive it 15,000 to 25,000 miles annually," he said. "The Saab has been my daily driver."

The Bugeye Sprite (they're called "Frogeyes" in their native Britain) had been on Mr. Larrick's bucket list for 50 years, even though he has owned plenty of other British cars, including MGs, Jaguars and Triumphs.

Ray Kopczynski, a city councilor in Albany, Ore., also owns and regularly drives a Saab 96, a 1965 model with a two-stroke engine that requires oil to be mixed with the gasoline. In fact, he drove that car, towing a small trailer, all the way to Albany, N.Y., in July for the Saab Owners' Convention. (A sign he carried read, "Albany, OR to Albany, NY or BUST.") He left July 6 and, despite a few setbacks, completed his round trip on July 26.

In the process, Mr. Kopczynski lost more than 10 pounds (which he attributes to the extreme heat, the humidity and his skipping some meals) and suffered only one big breakdown — the exhaust came loose in Three Forks, Mont., during his return trip. He drove a lot of miles with the car making a tremendous racket before finding a willing welder relatively close to home in Lewiston, Idaho.

"Finally, I could hear myself think," he said.



Ray Kopczynski and his Saab 96 outward bound at Lolo Pass in the Bitterroot range of the northern Rocky Mountains. Ray Kopczynski

Mr. Kopczynski's wife chose to stay home, but Karen Larrick, a teacher and school librarian, elected to ride shotgun in the Bugeye. "It's awful cute and it smiles, so I'm good," she said.

The Larricks toured Mystic Aquarium, the Pez Visitor Center and the Thimble Islands, all in Connecticut, then went to Tamaqua, Pa., covering the first 398 miles on the odometer. The car performed well but, typically for the breed, leaked a little bit of oil.

"You're so close to the ground that 50 m.p.h. on the highway feels like speeding," Mr. Larrick said. "The speed limits in Pennsylvania are mostly 55, so I'm going at the same pace as the Corvettes."

Giles and Nick English, the founders of the Bremont Watch Company in England, made rather more rapid progress [across the United States in 2017](#), driving a 1973 Porsche 911T and a 1970 Jaguar E-Type. Giles English, who bought the 911 when he was 20 and has long known his late dad's E-Type, said they had flown the cars over from England.

"America is the most wonderful country, and the wonder of it is out of the cities," he said. "It was amazing driving a car I'd previously driven only in England."



Giles, left, and Nick English in Charleston, S.C., with their tour cars. Bremont Watch Company

The Porsche needed only a new starter motor on the trip, but the E-Type, while not using oil, had more difficulties, Mr. English said.

“We joke that it was made in America, because it has so many American-sourced parts on it now,” he said. “The clutch master cylinder failed in Memphis, where we visited Graceland. We put out a call on social media, and a lovely man took the necessary part off his own E-Type and delivered it to us the next morning.”

The pair took in much of the country on two separate visits, with the first one ending in Texas.

The Larricks reached home in Washington on Aug. 19, having traveled 4,001 miles, and experienced only minor mishaps. Mr. Larrick lost the turn-signal flashers, which meant he had to blink the lights by hand, and replaced a leaking rubber gasket with a piece cut from a tire. They got seriously wet on only one day.

On the trip, taken mostly on blue highways, the Bugeye was an intense object of curiosity — but only two people correctly identified it.

“When told that we were driving this tiny car across the country, people often said, ‘I wish I could do that,’” Mr. Larrick said. “But you could tell they were actually questioning our sanity.” Nevertheless, he said, he “had a lot of fun going slow” and would do it again.

Mr. Silberkleit, whose job title is Chief Frogeye Officer, has sold 323 of these early Sprites, and he said every one was different. Some customers want perfect concours restorations; others want upgraded hot rods. Most use their cars locally, within a 100-mile radius.

The Larricks bucked the trend.

“Their goal was reliability,” Mr. Silberkleit said.