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Driving from CT to West Coast in a classic sports car?
Yes, when it's this very rare model.

Ed Stannard of the Hartford Courant
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Dave Silberkleit, left, of BugEyeGuys in Branford, with T.J. Larrick and Larrick's 1958 Austin-Healey Sprite, known as a Bugeye.

T.J. Larrick is on his way home to Washington state, driving his 1958 Austin-Healey Sprite, lovingly known as a Bugeye for the headlights mounted on its hood.

It's his second trip from Branford, where he bought the car in 2021 from Dave Silberkleit of BugEyeGuys, who specializes in the British sports car that was only manufactured between 1958 and 1960.

It will take three to four weeks for Larrick to get home to Mount Vernon, Wash., in a car with no air conditioning, manual transmission, plastic side curtains instead of windows and analog everything.



T.J. Larrick, left, and Dave Silberkleit of BugEyeGuys in Branford, with Larrick's 1958 Austin-Healey Sprite, known as a Bugeye.

It's a journey of love for a classic sports car, but also for the open road. Larrick will avoid the highways whenever possible.

"I'm happy and I have a lot of fun," Larrick said before setting out last week. "The biggest thrill I get besides driving, because it's fun to drive, is I get these smiles from these little kids and they just grin ear to ear and it seems to make them happy, which makes my day and it makes me not think of aches and pains or something like that."

The Bugeye is the Austin-Healey Sprite Mark I. After 1960, "They came out with the improved Mark II, 'improved,' and unfortunately (with) the Mark II they kind of castrated it and took away its personality," Silberkleit said.



An Austin-Healey Sprite, known as a Bugeye. Contributed.

Larrick, 67, has Sprite No. 300 — Silberkleit owns No. 1 — and two other classic cars, a 1978 Citroën and a 1961 Lotus 7. He's had 38 cars in his lifetime and has small diecast models of 36 of them as a remembrance.

“The old cars have personality and style and they're also basic enough that an average garage (employee) can work on them and maintain them and that appeals to me,” he said.

“And when I'm driving my wife's car, you don't feel the road,” he said. “It's just transportation. While with these you feel the bumps, you feel the road, the curves and you become part of it. That is hard to accomplish with a modern car.”



Dave Silberkleit, left, of BugEyeGuys in Branford, with T.J. Larrick in the middle of BugEyeGuys' shop. Contributed.

Few of his cars have been American models. "I probably never liked the style of most American cars," Larrick said. "I mean, European and Asian cars seem to have personalities and style and I'd like my cars to say something about me. It's part of my personality."

Larrick is not a typical collector. He drives his cars. His Bugeye even has an egg-shaped dent in the front fender from a supermarket parking lot encounter, but he's not worried about it. He knows it can be hammered out.

"When I originally bought it, they had it for sale here," Larrick said. "And I've been always wanting a Bugeye. And I've been keeping track of Dave because he's got a great website."



Dave Silberkleit, left, of BugEyeGuys in Branford, with T.J. Larrick and Larrick's 1958 Austin-Healey Sprite, known as a Bugeye. Contributed.

“And then because I was driving cross-country with my wife, I wanted some modifications to make it a little bit more reliable and safe, because I use it as a daily driver now,” he said. “People think that’s crazy, but I have fun driving it.”

This trip will be easier than his first because Silberkleit has given Larrick’s Bugeye a bigger engine, upgraded brakes and a five-speed transmission.

“The car that I have was one of the first 500 they ever made and still had the original engine with matching numbers, which was important when you ever sell a classic car,” Larrick said. “But it was getting tired.

“And so I looked at the idea of getting the bigger engine that Austin-Healey made in the early sixties or rebuilding the original one, and the price was about the same,” he said. “So I still have the original engine in the garage because it’s important, but now I have twice as much power and so I can go up hills in third gear instead of up hills in first gear.”



An Austin-Healey Sprite, known as a Bugeye.

Larrick has no planned route home. He'll camp in national parks with his senior pass, his tent and supplies tucked in the boot (the trunk to Americans) that is only accessible from behind the seats.

The best part, though, will be driving over the open road, he said.

"I can go the speed limit and feel like I'm going 100 miles an hour and have a grin on my face and have fun going the speed limit," he said. "I mean, you don't have to go fast in these little cars."

BugEyeGuys, housed in a 1951 quonset hut in a residential section of Branford, "looks like just a car shop," Silberkleit said. "But it's really a national business, which is not what I expected was going to happen when I started. But there are more and more people as far away as — T.J. was about as far away from here as you can get."



Dave Silberkleit of BugEyeGuys in Branford, with Austin-Healey Sprite No. 1. Behind him is the Bugeye he had in high school.

The company ships about 100 classic European cars a year. He pointed to a 1971 Alfa Romeo, a 1967 Austin-Healey and a 1969 Saab. “Most of these old cars of that iteration, 50 years or older, are more like fun hobby cars. So sort of third garage bay cars for a nice day,” Silberkleit said.

And most of them are no longer popular with a young crowd that drives a Mazda Miata, a BMW convertible or a Porsche Boxster.

“These are all cars that are sort of creeping into that third garage space with modern technology and engineering,” Silberkleit said. “And there is a world from which T.J. and I both come, really a world of people who are really still very committed to this older technology of pure sports cars.”

The Bugeye cost \$1,800 in 1958, Silberkleit said. “The Bugeye Sprite is a very iconic sports car,” he said. “It’s kind of an origin car for many people who love cars today. So it’s pretty common for T.J. and for me and all of our customers to meet high-end car people who love cars, people who have big Porsche collections, people at car shows who are showing major cars ... because they started in this car.”

He said someone recently told him he’d never seen an analog odometer. “And that’s remarkable to me because, obviously, we grew up with analog, watching the numbers turn over and everything. So these are the things that are all very elemental to these old cars and the community of people who love them. And having some connection with your machinery.”