

While not a sales success, this two-seater attained a degree of celebrity thanks to its starring role in a Hitchcock classic

••••• WORDS + PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD TRUESDELL



TO CATCH AN ALPINE

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COURTESY PARAMOUNT PICTURES CORPORATION

1955 SUNBEAM ALPINE

FOR MANY

auto enthusiasts, the prospect of owning a car featured in or similar to one featured in a blockbuster movie is difficult to pass up. And such cars run the gamut from an orange AMC Hornet hatchback found on your local Craigslist or on eBay, similar to the famous stunt car from 1974's "The Man with the Golden Gun," to a Silver Birch Aston Martin DB5 at a high-end auction, a car made famous 10 years earlier in "Goldfinger." Both are legitimate Bond cars, but the best Bittersweet Orange 1974 AMC Hornet hatchback on the planet won't set you back more than \$10,000, while the Aston Martin DB5, in the Silver Birch hue, if presented in concours-winning condition, will set you back well into the high six figures.

In between are hundreds of interesting cars that pay tribute to famous movie cars or are the documented cars from many film classics. How often at car shows do you see a Highland Green 1968 Mustang fastback, often displayed side by side with a sinister black 1968 Dodge Charger with a black vinyl top? Can you just imagine the pair passing the same Volkswagen Beetle, flying over the streets of San Francisco?

This is the story of one such movie homage car, a 1955 Sunbeam Alpine Series III roadster. If you are a fan of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, or if Grace Kelly is your idea of '50s cinematic elegance, this car will tick off all the important boxes. This Sapphire Blue Sunbeam Alpine is almost identical to the car in which Grace Kelly gave a white-knuckled Cary

Grant the ride of his life on the roads above Nice, France, in the master's 1955 classic, "To Catch a Thief."

In 1955, with World War II in the collective rearview mirror of most Americans, we were embarking on an unprecedented run of prosperity that, with the exception of a few speed bumps along the way, would run all the way to the end of the 1980s. And just 10 years after the end of the war, manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic were addressing these needs with a wide variety of two-seat sports cars. These cars included the obvious, such as Chevrolet's Corvette and Ford's Thunderbird, along with some lesser known vehicles such as the Anglo-American Nash-Healey and the Kaiser Darrin. From England came the Aston Martin, Austin-Healey, Jaguar, MG, and Triumph along with lesser cars like the AC and Swallow Doretti. From West Germany came the iconic, race-derived Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing and roadster, along with its little brother, the 190SL, with the BMW 507 appearing later in the decade. And let's not forget several open variants of the classic Porsche 356, especially in the guise of the bare-bones Speedster.

Lesser known among all these postwar sports cars was the 1953-1955 Sunbeam Alpine, an open car built off a platform shared with the existing Sunbeam-Talbot sedan. It was known in many quarters as the Talbot Alpine in an effort to distinguish it from the much better-known four-cylinder Alpine introduced in 1959, which later spawned the Ford-V-8-powered Sunbeam Tiger in 1964. But in reality, no one referred to it as a Talbot Alpine.

Initially, Sunbeam, like several other British manufacturers, hoped to span the gap between basic sports cars such as the MG TD that returning GIs brought back to the U.S. after the war, and more luxurious two-seaters such as the Jaguar XK 120. Jowett and Daimler saw the exact same opportunity. But in the end, Sunbeam, Jowett, and Daimler were not successful. This gap was ultimately filled by Austin (BMC) with the Austin-Healey 100 and Standard-Triumph with the TR2.

The means through which Sunbeam addressed this need came from George Hartwell, the Rootes distributor in Bournemouth. His experience with the marque dated back to 1949 when he drove for the works team that entered several postwar events, including that year's Monte Carlo Rally.



GRACE NEEDED
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ALMA SAW A
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IT IS THE POSTCARD VIEW OF MONACO THAT IS SUPPOSED TO CATCH THE AUDIENCE'S EYE. I, HOWEVER, WAS WATCHING THAT JAW-DROPPINGLY BEAUTIFUL CAR.

Starting in 1951, Hartwell modified the Sunbeam-Talbot's 2267cc engine with four carburetors to increase output. Ultimately this upgrade failed to make the grade, but later in the year Hartwell enjoyed more success with a supercharged engine installed in an open sports car featuring three-abreast seating and ran it in the 1951 MCC National Rally.

In the 1953 Alpine Rally, Sunbeam-Talbot entered two "Hartwell" Coupes. These cars were seen in several other events as noted by author ("Sunbeam-Talbot & Alpine in Detail") and Sunbeam-Talbot expert Anders Ditlev Clausager. What would ultimately become the limited-production, literally handbuilt 1953 Sunbeam Alpine Series I was derived from the 1952 Sunbeam-Talbot 90 drophead coupe. The Alpine was supposedly named by Norman Garrad of the Rootes' Competition Department, who was heavily involved in the Sunbeam-Talbot rally successes of the era. Others, including Clausager, attribute its naming to former Autocar journalist John Dugdale, who was working for the Rootes marketing group in the United States. "Bred in the Alps," owing to Sunbeam's rally success on the Continent, was the tag line, especially in the United States, where 961 of the original 1582 Series I and Series III (there was no Series II) Alpines were sold. Worldwide, it's believed that fewer than 200 Series I and Series III Alpines have survived.

The special Alpine bodies were produced by Mulliners of Bordesley Green in Birmingham, to be mounted on reinforced frames donated by the Sunbeam-Talbot 90 drophead coupe. In 1954, Mulliners was awarded the contract to supply Standard-Triumph to produce the bodies for TR2. Ultimately, it produced bodies for Standard-Triumph on an exclusive basis after the firm was absorbed by Standard-Triumph, leaving Rootes in a lurch, which probably contributed as much as slow sales to its being discontinued after the 1955 model years. It also didn't help that



ASK THE MAN WHO OWNS ONE

TOM HOLLAND, independent film producer and distributor, purchased this 1955 Sunbeam Alpine Series III previously restored by a marque expert. **WHY I LIKE IT:** "Because of its connection to a movie that had a profound effect on my own career as well as on my tastes as a car collector." **WHY IT'S COLLECTIBLE:** Its graceful styling and Grace Kelly connection to one of Alfred Hitchcock's best-known films, "To Catch a Thief" make this movie-car doppelganger particularly attractive. **RESTORING/MAINTAINING:** The Internet makes locating spares much easier than even a decade ago. Although more Alpines were originally sold in the U.S., as it shares many mechanical components with the Sunbeam-Talbot 90 sedan, many spares will be sourced from the UK. **BEWARE:** Because the Alpine has a separate frame, check for structural integrity and the absence of rust. Almost all the body sheetmetal is unique to the Alpine, not shared with a sedan counterpart, so it will be expensive and difficult to source or reproduce. **EXPECT TO PAY:** Concours ready, \$27,000; solid driver, \$15,200; tired runner, \$6600 (Source: Hagerty Price Guide) **JOIN THE CLUB:** Sunbeam Talbot Web Page sunbeamtalbot.info

OUR TAKE

THEN: "First of all, I wouldn't make the mistake of calling the Sunbeam Alpine a sports car, and I'm glad the builders (Sunbeam-Talbot, Ltd.) don't either—Walt Woron, *Motor Trend*, February 1954 **NOW:** An interesting, daring choice for a car with cinematic provenance. Because first-generation Sunbeam Alpines are virtually unknown on this side of the Atlantic, the best potential upside when selling a 1953-1955 Sunbeam Alpine will be realized by marketing the car beyond the U.S., especially to other British Commonwealth nations.

in the U.S. the Sunbeam Alpine carried a base price of \$2899, placing it closer to a Jaguar XK120 than an MG TD.

But when it came to its interior fittings, with its leather-trimmed seats and wool carpets, the Alpine had more in common with the higher-priced XK120. Yet, like contemporary cars that share platforms, the instrument panel was lifted mostly intact from the Sunbeam-Talbot sedan. The result was a degree of design conflict where it seemed the bean counters had the final say. (We try to imagine how much more sporting the Alpine might have been with white-on-black Smith gauges facing the driver.)

Before it introduced the Alpine at the New York auto show in 1953, Sunbeam embarked on a number of high-speed runs in Jabbeke, Belgium, a favorite location for British manufacturers to conduct high-speed runs of their most sporting offerings. For the Sunbeam Alpine, this included runs by Stirling Moss and Leslie Johnson, as well as Sheila Van Damm, a member of the Rootes



rally team. Van Damm turned in the best top speed, 120.135 mph, which at the time made her the fastest woman in Europe.

Given its short tenure on these shores, it isn't surprising that the Sunbeam Alpine wasn't tested by many U.S. publications. But one that did was Road & Track. It drew this conclusion:

"The shadow the Alpine has cast is a paradox, for it is the first, and a well-executed effort to capture the American market desiring a sports car that will not run in competition, but is designed to ride well, look good, cruise fast. Yet, other voices speak up, the Alpine has been entered in competition, has won rallies (including a win over the Austin-Healey team) and has even taken a few class wins in novice sports car events. But in theory—and practice—the 2.25-litre Alpine would be running in the 2000-3000cc class, a class that includes the 2.9 Ferrari, [and] the 2.5 Gordini. In the face of that, boosters of the Alpine-for-competition may back down a bit."

For film distributor Tom Holland, Road & Track's half-hearted endorsement means little. The Sunbeam Alpine left an indelible impression on the budding film buff when it had a starring role in Alfred Hitchcock's 1955 VistaVision masterpiece, "To Catch a Thief," driven by the unforgettable Grace Kelly with an extremely nervous Cary Grant in the passenger seat.

"I'll never forget the first time I saw 'To Catch a Thief,'" Holland tells *Motor Trend Classic* with a smile. "Grace Kelly and Cary Grant were the perfect '50s sophisticate couple; the French Riviera backdrop was breathtaking; and the intrigue of high-stakes jewel robberies from fancy hotels and chateaux were the icing on this Technicolor cake.

"But for me, the real star of the movie was the sexy blue sports car Grace Kelly drove at high speed along the steep corniches



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above the Mediterranean. Cary Grant played the nervous passenger, hiding both his fear of Grace's driving and his secret identity as the famous cat burglar John Robie. When Grace and Cary arrive at their romantic picnic rendezvous, it is the postcard view of Monaco that is supposed to catch the audience's eye. I, however, was watching that jaw-droppingly beautiful car. It was a sleek, baby-blue confection—the prettiest car I'd ever seen. But what was it? Ignoring the double-entendre dialogue, I strained my eyes hoping to catch a glimpse of the mystery car's badge or some other way to find out what this *tres chic* automobile was. All I knew was that I wanted one.

"It took me a long time in those pre-Internet days to find out that Grace Kelly's car was a first-generation Sunbeam Alpine roadster, made by England's Sunbeam-Talbot Company between 1953 and 1955. As the story goes, Hitchcock and his production team had yet to choose a car for Grace's character to drive in the pivotal chase scenes. Some had suggested a Jaguar, but a powerful car like that just didn't seem right for a delicate millionairess. Others mentioned popular sports cars of the day like the bulky Mercedes 190SL. Too German, they decided; and besides, the Nazis had occupied France just 10 years earlier. Ford's popular two-seat Thunderbird was ruled out as too American.

"Grace needed a cool-as-ice roadster, but the right choice couldn't be found. Then, shortly before production began, Hitch's wife Alma saw a magazine ad for a brand-new car called the Alpine. It simply breathed sex appeal, and it was perfect. Alma told her husband about the car, and the decision was made.

"The Rootes Group, which owned the Sunbeam marque, was eager to get some publicity for their new convertible, partially



female interest my little roadster gets. Many immediately get the movie connection.

“I’ve even chatted with several ladies who quote lines from ‘To Catch a Thief’ to me. Most embarrassing was a very pretty young woman who came to the Greystone show purposely to see my Alpine. Its upcoming appearance had been mentioned in an L.A. Times article. She asked if I was the owner and then blurted, ‘Would you like a leg or a breast?’, a bit of sexy dialogue Grace says to Cary in the movie as she’s serving him cold chicken and beer.

“I got the woman’s joke, but her boyfriend certainly didn’t. Let’s just say there were a few uncomfortable moments. Even folks who don’t know about the car’s film history stare in admiration. Most, including many car aficionados, have never seen one in the flesh. I have friends who own shiny Ferraris, beautiful Rolls Royces, and vintage Packards, but none gets the thumbs-up and smiles of delight I get when I drive my Alpine.

“Of course, the question I’m asked most often is, ‘Is that

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1955 SUNBEAM ALPINE SERIES III

SPECIFICATIONS
Engine 138.4-cu-in/2267cc
OHV I-4: 1x1-bbl Stromberg
Type D136 **Power and torque** 80 hp @ 4200 rpm, 124 lb-ft @ 1800 rpm
Drivetrain 4-speed manual with Laycock-de-Normanville overdrive, RWD **Brakes** front: drum, rear: drum
Suspension front: control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar, rear: Live axle, leaf springs **Dimensions** L: 168.3 in, W: 62.5 in, H: 57.8 in
Weight 3010 lb **Performance** 0-60 mph: 19.0 sec, quarter mile: 21.5 sec @ 64 mph (Road & Track, March 1954)
Price when new \$2899

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IT TOOK ITS APPEARANCE IN “TO CATCH A THIEF” FOR THE SUNBEAM ALPINE TO ACHIEVE A DEGREE OF CINEMATIC IMMORTALITY IN PLACE OF INTENDED SHOWROOM SUCCESS.



the car from the movie?’ I always explain that it’s an exact duplicate. I tell them the original is probably long gone. But it doesn’t seem to matter to them; you can see that dreamy look in their eyes. They picture themselves driving this sexy roadster along the Côte d’Azur, heading off to a secret rendezvous with Grace or Cary.”

Holland did let *Motor Trend Classic* get behind the wheel of his prized Alpine for the drive to one of our photo locations in the hills above Malibu, to simulate as best as possible the iconic shots from “To Catch a Thief.” (Tom’s daughter Emily stood in for Grace Kelly in several of the shots overlooking the Pacific Ocean.) And here, the Alpine was a very pleasant surprise. First, in spite of just 80 hp having to move 3000 pounds of car and 400 pounds of driver and passenger, the car felt quicker to 60 mph than the 19.2 seconds that Road & Track measured back in its March 1954 road test.

The transmission shifted with a sense of precision that was frankly unexpected from a car almost six decades old. More than that, the ride was very comfortable, soaking up a number of California’s notorious potholes with no ill effects. While the Alpine is sprung stiffer than its sedan counterpart, by contemporary standards, it’s softly suspended, in much the same way you would characterize the ride of a 1955 Ford Thunderbird.

With its ability to cruise all day at speeds approaching 80 mph (Road & Track attained a top speed of 87.5 mph, a far cry from the top speed attained by the specially prepped cars in Belgium almost a year earlier), it won’t take much prodding for us to ask Holland if we could borrow his Alpine for a trip up the California coast to Big Sur. With the top down, it’s a very compelling ride. Its elegant cool is so compelling that Holland explained that his Alpine recently took part in a photo shoot with Drew Barrymore for InStyle magazine.

Ultimately a car’s success is usually based on wins in competition, sales in the showroom, or a combination of both. In this regard, the final verdict on the 1953-1955 Sunbeam

Alpine is, at best, mixed. It enjoyed a degree of success on the international rally stage, especially with Moss behind the wheel. But sales success eluded the Sunbeam Alpine, especially in the U.S., its primary intended export market. It took its appearance in “To Catch a Thief” for the Sunbeam Alpine to achieve a degree of cinematic immortality in place of intended showroom success.

With its 2012 release on a high-definition Blu-ray disc, “To Catch a Thief” has been restored and presented in all of its VistaVision and Technicolor glory. And the disc includes among its special features a real treat for car buffs: an interactive travelogue allowing you to trace the routes of the movie’s critical scenes. This is in addition to a running commentary by noted Hitchcock film historian Drew Casper, a separate featurette on how Hitchcock skirted the era’s censorship code, and more than a half-dozen additional features and a stunning photo gallery.

The car used in filming has never been located. In 2003, the PBS show “History Detectives” tried to verify that an Alpine roadster owned by a private individual was the actual car used in that movie. As noted above, the car was shipped back from Monaco to the U.S. after its star turn in France, for use in front of a rear-projection screen for shots to be incorporation into the driving scenes. Since Paramount was able to provide “History Detectives” the car’s VIN, the car shown on the program was confirmed not to be the “To Catch a Thief” car. (The movie car is a Series I model, and as Holland’s Alpine is a Series III, there’s no way his is either.)

While his passion for his Sunbeam Alpine knows no bounds, Holland’s need to face the reality of being a parent means that this car will not remain in his garage forever. “With two high-school seniors, I have to start thinking about college for both, thus my being forced to consider selling my Alpine. It won’t be easy, but knowing the joy I’ve experienced owning the car, I’m comfortable with passing it on to someone who will enjoy it as much as I have.” ♦