

EXTREME SALEEN WEEKEND

STEVE SALEEN HANDS *MUSTANG ENTHUSIAST* THE KEYS TO HIS PERSONAL S281-E FOR A JOYRIDE TO PALM SPRINGS, WHERE OLD IS NEW AND GOOD AGAIN



Downtown Palm Springs



WITH THE ALL-NEW 2005 MUSTANG DUE SHORTLY, IT'S WORTH TAKING A LOOK AT THE MOST EXTREME FACTORY-BUILT MUSTANG CURRENTLY AVAILABLE THE SALEEN S281-E. THE "E" SIGNIFIES EXTREME AND FOR GOOD REASON. SO, WE SPENT A FEW DAYS BEHIND THE WHEEL OF STEVE SALEEN'S SCREAMING YELLOW S281-E, THE ULTIMATE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSTANG'S EVERGREEN FOX PLATFORM. SINCE ALMOST ALL OF US ARE TOO YOUNG TO HAVE BEEN DRIVING DURING THE ORIGINAL 1964-1974 MUSCLECAR ERA, THIS WAS OUR CHANCE TO DRIVE THE MOST MODERN INTERPRETATION OF THIS NOW CLASSIC FORMULA. AND GIVEN THE NATURE OF THE SALEEN OPERATION, ONE CAN THINK OF IT AS THE SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR TO THE HEYDAY OF SHELBY AMERICAN. CONSIDER THE S281-E AS THE GT-500 FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.

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Late January provided an excellent opportunity to sample the abilities of the Saleen S281-E, coming on the heels of a 2,000-mile road trip from Los Angeles to Moab and back in a 2004 Porsche Turbo Cabriolet. If two performance vehicles represented polar opposites, it's the Porsche and the S281-E. If one likens the Porsche to a surgeon's scalpel, then the S281-E could be considered the Stihl chainsaw in comparison. Both provide an at-the-edge driving experience; they just get there differently quite differently.

Logistics aside, upon returning from Moab, we left our yellow Turbo Cabriolet at the Saleen facility in Irvine, California, where we were handed the keys by Saleen PR rep John Dinkel to Steve Saleen's



personal ride. John gave us a comprehensive explanation of the S281-E's features and, more importantly, what to expect when mashing the right pedal to the floor. No torque steer, just raw, unadulterated power coming from a tweaked 445 horsepower version of Ford's proven 4.6-liter. The bump in power comes courtesy of a Saleen Series V screw-type intercooled supercharger producing 450 lb-ft of driveshaft twisting torque.

The E version of the 4.6 benefits from a Saleen forged steel crankshaft, Saleen forged steel connecting rods, Saleen forged aluminum pistons and aluminum heads with Saleen camshafts and superduty valve springs. The stock mass air sensor is replaced with a 90mm unit well matched to a 75mm throttlebody. Other changes from the stock 4.6-liter V-8 include a Saleen special inlet tube and manifold, a Saleen water-to-air intercooler with heat exchanger, and a Saleen performance dual-core radiator to keep operating temperatures under control. Other changes include the Saleen twin gauge pod, boost and air temperature, a Saleen cold air induction system and matched performance air filter, upgraded 42 lb/hr sequential fuel injectors fed by a high-flow fuel pump. Contrasting sharply with the boxer-inspired exhaust on the Porsche, the S281-E is classic American, the V-8's hot exhaust gases exiting through a Saleen performance center exhaust system providing a symphony every time the accelerator is applied, the engine more than willing to run right up to its 6,500 rpm redline.

If there's a weak link in the drivetrain, it's the heavy-duty six-speed manual transmission. After spending more than 2,000 miles with the Porsche, the Saleen quick-ratio six-speed felt truck-like in comparison (having driven a six-speed Dodge Ram SRT-10 just prior to the Porsche and S281-E, we can say that the comparison is valid). This is not to say that the transmission is bad. Far from it. It's just not as refined, overall, as the sweet box in the Porsche, quite possibly the best manual gearbox available in any car. Where the Porsche clicks into each gear with an unmatched degree of precision, the S281-E's shifter requires more of a wrestling-style approach.



1. The Orbit Inn, Palm Springs 2. Casa Laguna Inn, Orange County's only four-star B&B



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Conversely, this is a beefy box that can take almost any possible degree of abuse. Certainly it's well-matched to the engine and all-American in its execution.

After Dinkel's introduction to our next steed, we watched as the Porsche was tucked away inside the Saleen facility, certainly a visitor in an alien world, surrounded by a variety of Saleen products, other Saleen Mustangs, the new N20 Focus, and a just completed S7 awaiting final adjustments prior to delivery. Pulling out of the Saleen facility, we almost forgot about the low-hanging Saleen design urethane front fascia, hitting the brakes, connected to two-piece, 14-inch front rotors, avoiding christening the freshly painted underside of the bodywork. (A Saleen spokesperson told us that no matter how hard you try, it's inevitable that the underside will touch the pavement—the entrance to almost every driveway becomes an adventure and a leap of faith.)

From Irvine we headed east to Palm Springs, our destination being the deliciously retro Orbit In, a surviving icon of mid-century modernism. The route was California freeways choked with late Friday afternoon traffic, folks heading home for the weekend on CA-91 and Interstate 10. Our S281-E, with its fully integrated and color-keyed optional Anniversary Speedster Tonneau (2004 marks the 20th anniversary of the Saleen/Ford collaboration), drew admiring glances and thumbs up from drivers of every stripe, but especially from other late-model Mustang drivers. We arrived in Palm Springs as the sun was setting



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3. Two hot Mustangs ready for flight at the Palm Springs Air Museum 4. You can live it up like Frank, Dean and the boys in the Rat Pack suite

and checked into the Orbit In for the night, having been given the Rat Pack Suite, named after Frank Sinatra's posse who called Palm Springs home when not raising Cain in Las Vegas, about three hours away.

If your travels bring you to Palm Springs, the Orbit In Oasis, and its sister property, the Orbit In Hideaway, should be at the top of your list of places to stay, especially if you have a fondness of architecture from the 1945 to 1970 era. Each property is period correct, as we like to say. If either was a vintage car, they would be numbers-matching.

Featuring authentic furnishings from the likes of Eames Saarinen, Bertioia Nelson, Noguchi and Schultz, the retro-hip rooms are a great place to get away

from it all for a long weekend, with room rates starting at around \$200 per night—a small price to pay for staying in a 50-year-old time capsule. With mountain views from most rooms, a pool complete with a martini bar and rooms stocked with the latest conveniences, like high-speed Internet access, you can combine relaxation with work, yet be a short walk away from world-class shopping, tennis or, especially, golf.

The following morning we decided to exercise the S281-E on one of our favorite roads, CA-243 which rises out of the Coachella Valley from Banning up to the classic California mountain town of Idyllwild. The drive on a spectacular winter morning was a treat, working the six-speed box between second and

third gears, the exhaust note the perfect soundtrack as the S281-E made short work of the challenging switchbacks and off-camber sweepers as we climbed past 6,000 feet above sea level. While we didn't have the opportunity to get a top speed clocking, Saleen claims that 0 to 60 comes up in 4.5 seconds, with the quarter-mile benchmark clocking in at 12.5 seconds with a trap speed of 113 miles per hour, about the same numbers posted by the Porsche the previous week in Utah. As we said earlier, it's a different means to virtually the same end, enjoyable in an entirely different, typically American, way.

Returning to Palm Springs via CA-74, we stopped off at the Palm Springs Air Museum where the fates smiled on us, as there was a P-51 Mustang on display. After speaking with the museum's management, we were allowed to drive our S281-E around to the rear of the hanger, enabling us to photograph the legendary World War II fighter with the car that bears its name. Special thanks go out to Sharon Ross, the museum's Director of Sales, and Facilities Manager Tony Terrazas, for their help in arranging our photo shoot. The Palm Springs Air Museum is the home for an extensive collection of World War II-era aircraft, and, like the P-51 Mustang, most are in airworthy, flyable condition.

Cruising through downtown Palm Springs, we used the opportunity to take stock of the Saleen's interior. While the S291-E has all of the expected Saleen upgrades, there's no hiding the fact that the Mustang's interior is long overdue for a comprehensive upgrade. With the all-new Mustang coming in 2005, the Mustang's interior was left to languish; no fancy leather trim can conceal its fundamental deficiencies. The MACH 460 stereo with the in-dash six-disc CD changer did have the power to drive the speakers with the top down to a generally satisfying level even with the tonneau in place; thankfully it never rained over the four days.

Returning to the Orbit In Oasis in time to enjoy the early setting sun by the pool, martinis at hand, we felt that we were living the good life, circa 1959. The following morning we took off for the coast, avoiding the freeways, driving Hemet, Perris and Lake Elsinore, where we picked up CA-74, known locally as the Ortega Highway. Stop at the summit and pick up some fresh jerky to tide you over until dinner. The Ortega Highway, with

undulating pavement and several sharp turns, gave us ample opportunity to evaluate the S281-E's upgraded suspension that, while stiff, was not uncomfortable. Contributing to the excellent feedback provided by the suspension is the rolling stock; Saleen-designed 18-inch rims with Pirelli P Zero tires (9-inch wide wheels up front with 265/35ZR18s, 10-inch wide wheels in the rear with even beefier 295/35ZR18 gumballs). CA-74 runs almost to the coast in San Juan Capistrano, where it's possible to pickup CA-1 north, better known as the Pacific Coast Highway, or to the locals, PCH.

The trip up the coast, through some of the most expensive residential real estate to be found anywhere, is taken at a leisurely pace; our destination for the final night in Southern California would be the Casa Laguna Inn, Orange County's only four-star bed and breakfast. Where the Orbit In is decidedly mid-20th century in its execution, the Casa Laguna Inn has a classic turn-of-the-century look and appeal, with distinct Spanish influence. Situated on the east side of the PCH, it overlooks the Pacific Ocean, and the sunset that evening was truly spectacular. For dinner, ask your host when checking in for his recommendations. While Orange County is considered by epicureans as a culinary wasteland, Laguna Beach is populated by several exceptional eateries and bistros no matter what cuisine you prefer, you'll find it within a mile or two of the Casa Laguna Inn.

The following morning my significant other needed to get up to LAX to catch her flight back to Germany, so we got up early and photographed Jason Cenora's 2000 Mustang that was featured on the cover of the July

2004 issue of *Mustang Enthusiast*. Before heading north we stopped at the Crystal Cove Promenade, a strip mall that, each Saturday morning at sunrise, hosts an informal car show; everything from pre-war vintage vehicles to street rods, musclecars from the 1960s up to contemporary exotics, can be found. On this morning, a rare Porsche 959 supercar from the 1980s was the star attraction, parked side-by-side with a Ferrari F40. Best of all, racing legend Dan Gurney made an appearance.

If anything, our trip, which could be easily accomplished over a four-day weekend, gives a varied look at Southern California, avoiding many of the more notorious tourist attractions like Disneyland. In the loop that starts and ends at the Saleen facility in Irvine, we sampled some of the region's best roads, CA-243 and CA-74 in particular, giving us an ample opportunity to evaluate the S281-E's wide performance envelope. As modified Mustang's go, it was a singular experience. With a sticker price of \$65,078 before options like the tonneau cover and the special order paint, it provided a stark contrast to the Porsche costing twice as much. While lacking some of the refinement and finesse of its Teutonic adversary, it offered virtually all of the performance, handling and acceleration, wrapped in a distinctly All-American wrapper.

As is often said, there's no substitute for cubic inches, and the S281-E reinforces this axiom to the extreme, providing a level of fun that is hard to beat, at any price. The S281-E is a classic American muscle car of the first order, a throwback, if you will, to when V-8s ruled the American road. Great fun! ■



5. Saleen vs. Porsche. Which would you pick? For our money, it's the Saleen!