

Born and raised in Iran, **Bruce Rajae** had seen the many older Mercedes-Benzes there in those pre-revolutionary times. Now living in California, he tells us why he found classic star models, especially his mouth watering 220S, such a tasty prospect

NICE ENOUGH TO EAT

IMAGES Richard Truesdell





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ABOVE INSET
Pontons pre-dated Mercs with standard-fit electric windows by three decades.

LEFT
Bruce's car is from 1958, the last full year of six-cylinder Pontons.

BELOW
One of the reasons he bought it was how well it had been looked after.



Let me introduce myself. My name is Behrouz Rajaei, but I also go by Bruce, which has made it easier for everyone. I was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1960 and raised there. I emigrated to the United States in 1978 and have lived in southern California ever since.

I have always had an interest in cars. When I was growing up in Tehran, Mercedes was a status symbol and had been the vehicle to own. Even though it was a long time ago I recall the 180 and 190 Pontons that were used for taxi services throughout the city, just as they were in Germany and Europe during the same era. To reduce pollution, the Pontons with the diesel engines were used for taxi services outside and between the cities. The city buses and coaches and large trucks were all built by Mercedes-Benz, some of which I believe were locally manufactured and still continue in use to this day.

I also recall, when I was approaching driving age in the late 1970s, that the Mercedes-Benz S-Classes were for the elite, wealthy Iranians, and later models were even used by and for the diplomats. I wouldn't say that they were as

common as the smaller, less luxurious Mercedes models, but you would see S-Classes on a regular basis because there was tremendous wealth in Iran at the time. And still there were many Mercedes taxis on the streets of Tehran at this time. I guess it had something to do with their legendary reliability and durability.

I'm sure that many readers seeing this will know that the Shah of Iran was a car enthusiast. His official car was a 600 Pullman Landaulet, almost always followed by 300SEs in official motorcades. This was before the Iranian Revolution in 1979, at a time when the Shah was a significant shareholder in Daimler-Benz.

Did you know that the development of the iconic *Geländewagen*, or G-Wagen, was the direct result of a 20,000-unit truck order from the Shah? This was a very lucrative deal for Mercedes-Benz at the time, and to fulfil this order it turned to what was then Steyr-Daimler-Puch in Austria. So the links between my home country and Mercedes-Benz are long and deep. Maybe if it wasn't for the Shah there might not have been a *Geländewagen*? We'll never know.



SPECIFICATIONS

Mercedes-Benz 220S (W180)

Engine M180 2,195cc 6-cyl
Power 105bhp@5,200rpm
Torque 127lb ft@3,500rpm
Transmission 4-speed manual
Weight 1,325kg
0-62mph 17sec
Top speed 100mph
Fuel consumption 26.4mpg
Years produced 1956-1959
Number built 55,268
All figures from Mercedes-Benz



Getting back to my final years in Iran, my father did not own a Mercedes, but my uncle did, and a few other family members also had them. My uncle's was a 1964 200 Fintail, which was the successor to the petrol four-cylinder Ponton.

Looking back, I always loved the look of the Ponton. I adored the S-Class models of the 1970s, too. I thought that the ribbed tail lights were cool, and learned much later they were designed to repel dirt. These cars were so big that you could get six adults and four kids in one, although of course there were not enough seat belts for everyone, and a roof rack was needed for all the belongings that

"THE OWNER OF 27 YEARS HAD PASSED AWAY AND HIS SON TOLD ME THAT THEY WOULD HAVE LOVED TO KEEP IT, BUT NONE OF THEM KNEW HOW TO DRIVE A 'STICK SHIFT'"

would not fit in the boot. These S-Class models were classy, luxurious, roomy, and had a great ride, yet were powerful enough to be able to accelerate effortlessly. They remain, to this day, exceptional cars, I believe.

In 1978, as Iran descended into the chaos of the Revolution, I came to the United States, and went to Glendora High School in Glendora, California. Then I attended Citrus College, and went on to Cal Poly in Pomona and received my civil engineering degree in 1985. I worked as a hydrology engineer for the County of San Bernardino for four years, but while I loved the job and the work I was doing, I could not see myself sitting behind a desk and not dealing with people every day. So, I started in commercial real estate and grew my knowledge and changed direction in my career. I currently manage my own real estate portfolio.

Over time I have owned a succession of Mercedes-Benzes. My first one was a 1984 190E. It was a lovely car, a great 'starter' Benz, also known as the 'poor man's Mercedes', and the forerunner of today's C-Class. I understand 190Es now have quite a following. Other Mercedes-Benzes I have owned over →

RIGHT
As the 220S model, its 2.2-litre engine is fuelled by twin Solex carburettors.



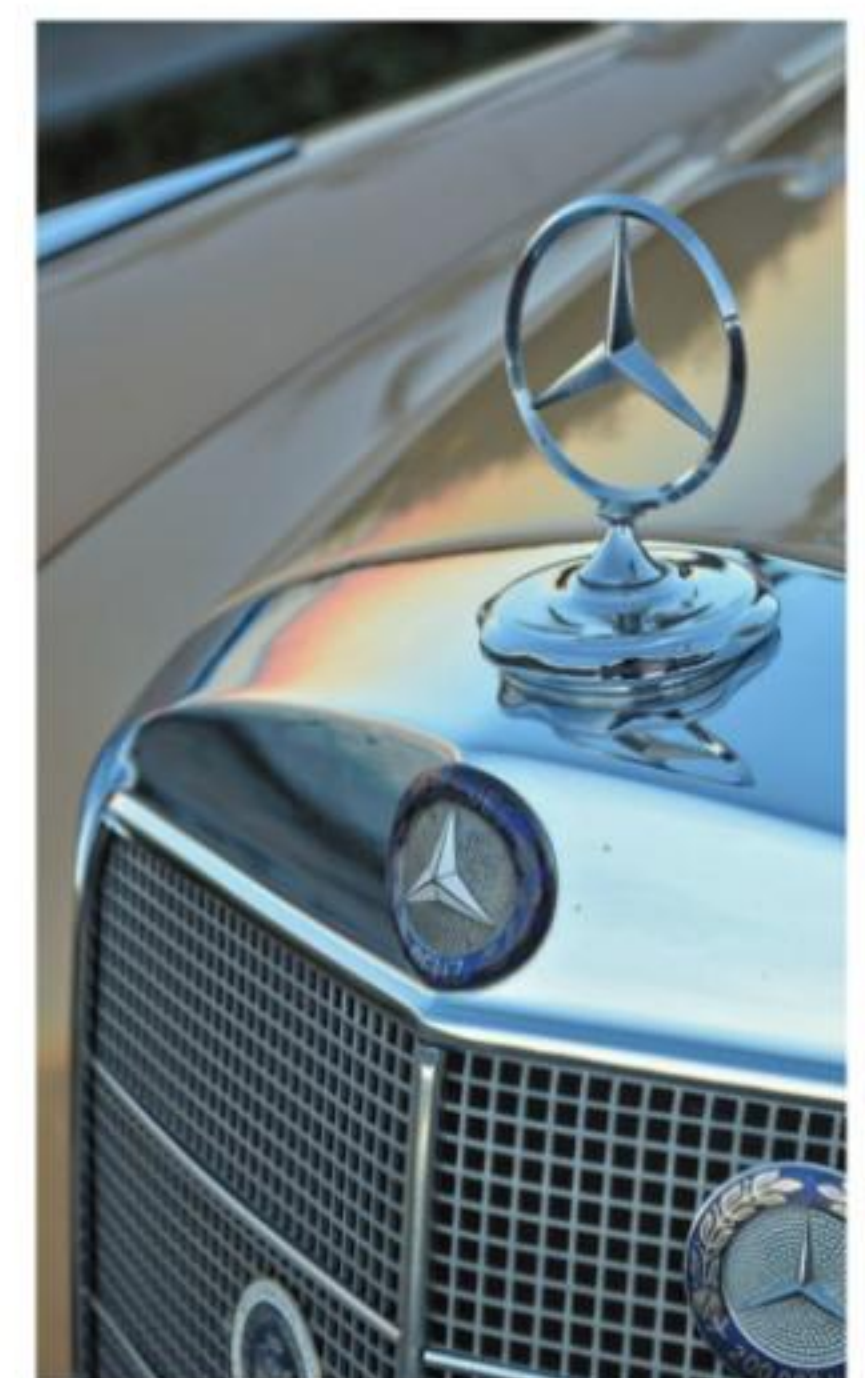
BELOW
The Ponton's horizontal strip speedometer is a delightful styling feature.

BELOW RIGHT
To sound the horn, you push the large chrome ring on the steering wheel.



LEFT
It's a simple dashboard, with no distractions and all you need in a classic.

BELOW
In the Ponton era, this badge radiated the Benz brand quality, Bruce feels.



⇒ the years include a 1970 W108 280SE, a 1987 124-series 300E, and a 1969 280SL Pagoda. My current daily driver is a 2011 Mercedes S550 which I love using. My other current classic Benz is a 1957 300 Adenauer, and I am hoping to add a couple more to my classic collection.

In 1990, I bought a 1959 Mercedes-Benz 180a from the original owner, and did a cosmetic restoration on it. After I got married, I gave it away, actually to my friend who also had lots of admiration for that model.

My second Ponton, the 1958 220S featured here, is a very special car, and I take it often to our local Saturday morning Cars and Coffee. I bought the car in 2016 from a family in Fresno, about five hours or 300 miles north from where I live in Orange County. The car was advertised on eBay. The owner of 27 years had just died, and his wife and son were selling it. The son, who is a doctor, told me that they would have loved to keep it because they had so many wonderful memories with that car, but none of them knew how to drive a car with a 'stick shift' manual gearbox. His wife and his son told me that this was her husband's love, and that they often drove it through the Grapevine, which is a steep and curvy road from the central valley to southern California, during which it was totally reliable.

This was his everyday car and he absolutely loved it. He was a true enthusiast, having all the manuals including the workshop manual, and the sale included many spare parts, as he did a lot of the maintenance and other work himself. It was in great shape overall, and all I really had to do immediately after the purchase was an engine tune-up. About a year ago, I had the transmission rebuilt, changed the engine mounts, and rectified some minor oil leaks.

There is one unusual aspect to my 220S, namely the factory-installed sunroof, which I don't think many had, and which makes my car very special. What also makes my car special is the way it drives, a lot of this due to how carefully it was maintained over the years by the previous owner. It feels very solid and handles extremely well, including through corners – you simply never feel as if you are driving a 61-year-old car. Overall it feels far more modern than the American cars I've driven from the 1950s, and I know this first hand as I also own a 1949 Plymouth convertible Special Deluxe.



TOP
The turn indicators on the wing are a detail adding to the Mercedes' sheer class.

TOP RIGHT
Bruce and his 220S are regulars at the Orange County Cars and Coffee.

ABOVE
Rear passengers rode in comfort; it was the S-Class Benz of the day, after all.

I truly love driving my Ponton. Every time I go out in it, which is usually at weekends, it attracts a lot of attention. Except for Cars and Coffee, I don't do shows, although I think that the car would have no issues for the long road trips needed to get to them. The most I usually do is an hour trip to Corona to my storage facility, although there was one trip when I drove it two hours from my home to Palm Springs and back, which was a lot of fun. Palm Springs is a very relaxed city with golf, and appreciation for art and classics. I drove it there on Highway 111, and it felt at home in Palm Springs because that city fits the Ponton's era and its classic heritage. There was no shortage of admirers and photographers there for the 220S, and needless to say it drove flawlessly and smoothly for the whole journey.

The Ponton demonstrates Mercedes' commitment during that time to quality and driver and passenger comfort. Looking at the car as others see it, I think the grille was and remains such an iconic symbol of the brand, and the sleek, long chrome

signal lights on the top of the front wings adds to the beautiful lines. And the ever so smooth sound of the doors closing was something that car enthusiasts have always talked about. The turn signal switch is on the horn chrome ring on the steering wheel, which is very cool.

But I feel that, unfortunately, for we owners of these cars, and fortunately for the individuals wanting to buy them, Pontons have not appreciated in value as they so deserve to. You can pick one up from \$15,000 [about £11,000] that needs love and attention, while double that amount gets a really nice example.

I think it is a very smart buy for someone seeking to experience driving a true work of art in automobile form. This Mercedes saloon, which was widely used all around the world, would accommodate large families with plenty of room for people and luggage. This makes it a great starter classic Mercedes, especially for a young enthusiast with a family.

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Mercedes-Benz 'Ponton'

It was the model that established Mercedes-Benz as a volume car manufacturer, Tim French explains

The so-called Ponton, launched in 1953 was the first 'modern' Mercedes of the post-war period. While Stuttgart's other models of the era followed the pre-war template of a separate chassis and bulbous wings, the newcomer feature a combined monocoque chassis and bodyshell, and was one of the early 'three-box' shapes. The Ponton name was coined by a motoring journalist of the time, who compared the detachable front subframe accommodating the engine and front suspension to a movable, military pontoon bridge.

The first models were the W120 four-cylinder 180 petrol and diesel 190. These were joined a year later in March 1954 by the W180 220a, with a six-cylinder 2.2-litre engine and 170mm stretched wheelbase, giving a longer nose section. It had added brightwork, too, and its position as Mercedes' top saloon (apart from the limited production 300 Adenauer) made it the S-Class of its day.

The 220a's straight-six engine with its single Solex carburettor produced 84bhp, and in 1956 it was replaced by the model Bruce owns, the 220S. This gained a second Solex and initially was good for 99bhp and 119lb ft of torque, although a year into production the M180 unit was tuned up to 105bhp/127lb ft.

Perhaps curiously, from a modern perspective, was the second model launched at the same time as the 220S, the 219, an economy model with the original 220a engine but a body length between that of the four-cylinder cars and the six, and with fewer fittings.

In late 1958, the year before the end of six-cylinder Ponton production, the W128 220SE was added to the range, identical to the 220S except with the engine fuel-injected to produce 113bhp/137lb ft. In production for just 10 months, 1974 were built, leaving the 220S easily the best selling model, with 55,268 delivered, followed by the 219 at 27,842 and the 220a at 25,937. The model series debuted Mercedes' first automatic transmission, the not entirely successful Hydramat introduced in 1957.

After the sixes were replaced by the W111 'Fintail' models in 1959, the four-cylinder Pontons were built for a further three years. Of the nearly 553,000 Pontons manufactured, a fifth were six-cylinder.



ABOVE
The six-cylinder, 2.2-litre cars arrived in March 1954.



LEFT
But the original Pontons were the four-pots of 1954.