

BY PETE KERZEL

Photography By Kathy Bergren Smith

Classic CONNECTION



COMPUTER AGE, COLLECTORS DRIVE VINTAGE, EXOTIC VEHICLES THROUGH PORT

Shiny, one-of-a-kind creations worth six figures share terminal space with classic, decades-old jalopies. Long-neglected shells that were once vintage automobiles await transport, as do packages crammed full of mechanical bric-a-brac whose looks belie the fact that someone, somewhere is eagerly anticipating their arrival.

Think you need multinational status or a billion-dollar budget do business with the Port of Baltimore? Classic, exotic and vintage cars have revved up a niche market among regular Joes and Janes, many of them longtime area residents who didn't realize the Port could serve their transport needs.

From Orlando to Oslo, Fort Lauderdale to Frankfurt, Montreal to Madrid, or even Baltimore to Brugge. Regardless of what Rand McNally says about expedient routing, private vehicles bound for faraway destinations often pass through Maryland's Port of Baltimore.

"We're a mom-and-pop shop serving moms and pops," explains Vernon R. Martin, President of Strait Lines, the ocean intermediary for Seabridge International, Inc., a freight forwarder and customs broker with offices at Point Breeze.

Classic car aficionados may be a relatively small market, admits Mary Jane Norris, Regional Manager of Sales for the

Maryland Port Administration. But collectors are a tight-knit community who appreciate the customer-focused work ethic of Seabridge and other Port partners.

"We handle a huge variety of high-end automobiles, but when we work with companies importing or exporting classic automobiles for private parties, we're just as careful," she says. "Our International Longshoremen's Association workforce treats these cars like their own. The care and handling is exceptional."

It had better be, because there's a lot at stake.

Last year, Bethesda restaurateur and exotic car buff Boris Galitzin came to Hanover-based Ian International with a challenge: Arrange for the transport of his BMW M1 Twin Turbo Pro Car Wide Body (Le Mans) — one of only two in the world — from Essen, Germany.

"I'm a very picky car collector," he says. "I want to make sure the handling and storage are properly taken care of. We're talking about automobiles worth a lot of money — high six figures in this case. You don't want scratches, of course. You don't want any damage at all."

Galitzin was referred to Ian Lobas, the company's namesake and Logistics Analyst. It doesn't hurt that Lobas is a self-professed car nut with an attentive eye for detail and an intimate knowledge of the collector's world.

"I don't just like cars, I love cars," Lobas boasts. "I read the same magazines (the customers) do. I speak the same lingo they do. I know what they know. I'm one of them."

Galitzin entrusted his pride and joy to Lobas and Katy Musser, one of the company's import/export whizzes. It was packed in a container so that the vehicle wouldn't be subjected to ocean air or elements. Ian International arranged for customs and Environmental Protection Act clearances, and the M1 arrived stateside in about three weeks.

Because of the car's low ground clearance, Lobas built custom ramps to unload the vehicle safely from the container for storage in his warehouse. And when Galitzin's schedule complicated delivery — he went on vacation about the same time his M1 arrived — Lobas babysat it for two weeks, even hand-detailing the vehicle for its proud new owner.

"The idea is to create a comfort zone with the client, so they know you'll be taking care of their car like it was your own," Lobas says. "People know I'm going to treat it right."

The vintage market is a relatively new sideline for Ian International, though the company can ship any vehicle. Once Lobas placed a description and photos of his transaction with Galitzin on the company's Web site, business accelerated. Quotes are piled up on his desk, and where the company used to get one or two calls a week for import/export of classic cars, it now gets 50 or more.

Martin, whose company was founded in 1991 as a Baltimore-based receiving and forwarding agent, knows that technological improvements have increased business. Vintage and classic vehicles account for upwards of 10 percent of the 4,000 units he ships each year — even if he relies on an old-fashioned method of attracting new clients.



Vintage vehicles get special treatment at Strait Lines, the ocean intermediary for Seabridge International, and Ian International. Strait Lines' Vernon R. Martin (top) owns a restored 1958 Cadillac, while Ian's Ian Lobas (above) is an avowed auto aficionado.

"It's all word of mouth — we don't have to advertise," Martin says. "Brian tells Jim about a positive experience when he shipped a car through us. Jim tells Joe, and Joe tells John. We're very big into customer service and happy customers are the best advertising we can have."

Martin marvels at the way computers have increased his business, particular the advent of online auction sites such as eBay, which he says have revolutionized the privately owned vehicle shopping industry.

"eBay has been a big assistance," Martin says. "You get a guy in Helsinki who bids on and wins a '59 Cadillac, only the Cadillac he's buying is in Dallas. This collector hasn't a clue how to get the car from Dallas to Finland. Well, he starts researching and one of the first things he does is to talk to other collectors who do business on eBay and pretty soon he finds us. ... It's worldwide, and now there's nothing to stop people on different sides of the world from doing business with each other."

Martin says muscle cars from the Jan and Dean era of the 1960s are the current rage. Before that, it was classics from the 1950s, or elegant sedans from the 1930s and 1940s.

"So many cars that Americans want are in Europe and Asia, and so many cars that Europeans and Asians want are in America," Lobas points out. "It's the curiosity of the unknown, wanting

manufacturers ship their product as RO/RO. He tries to make sure buyers and sellers understand the diplomatic tangle of rules and regulations that must be followed to the letter. And he works with customers to find what best suits their needs.

Ross Marshall, a collector/dealer and proprietor of Knoxville, Tenn.-based Bentley Special, has been working with

1951 and a modern drive train utilizing General Motors components.

"When we have vehicles ready to ship — whether it's from Dusseldorf, Sydney or London — Vernon gets us the best price and gets it to us quickest," Marshall says. "He goes out of his way to do the little things, from introducing us to the Port personnel or working on the documentation. When parts come in, he's the one who calls me."

Satisfied customers, explains Martin, are worth the effort.

"Like all small businesses, we need to be flexible, adaptable," says Martin, who owns a restored 1968 Cadillac. "Being a small company, it's difficult to attract shippers like Ford, GM, Jaguar, Porsche, etc., so we target small to midsize companies who thrive on and demand excellent personal service. ...They appreciate that we're all about personal service. If we do it right the first time, they're our customer for life." 🌐

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Martin prefers treating imports and exports as RO/RO cargo, believing it to be safer than containerization — after all, he says, virtually all major auto

Martin for almost eight years. During the past year, Martin has been helping ship parts Marshall has acquired in his quest to build 1930 replica Bentleys, a \$150,000 per-unit investment that will utilize a chassis from between 1946 and

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