



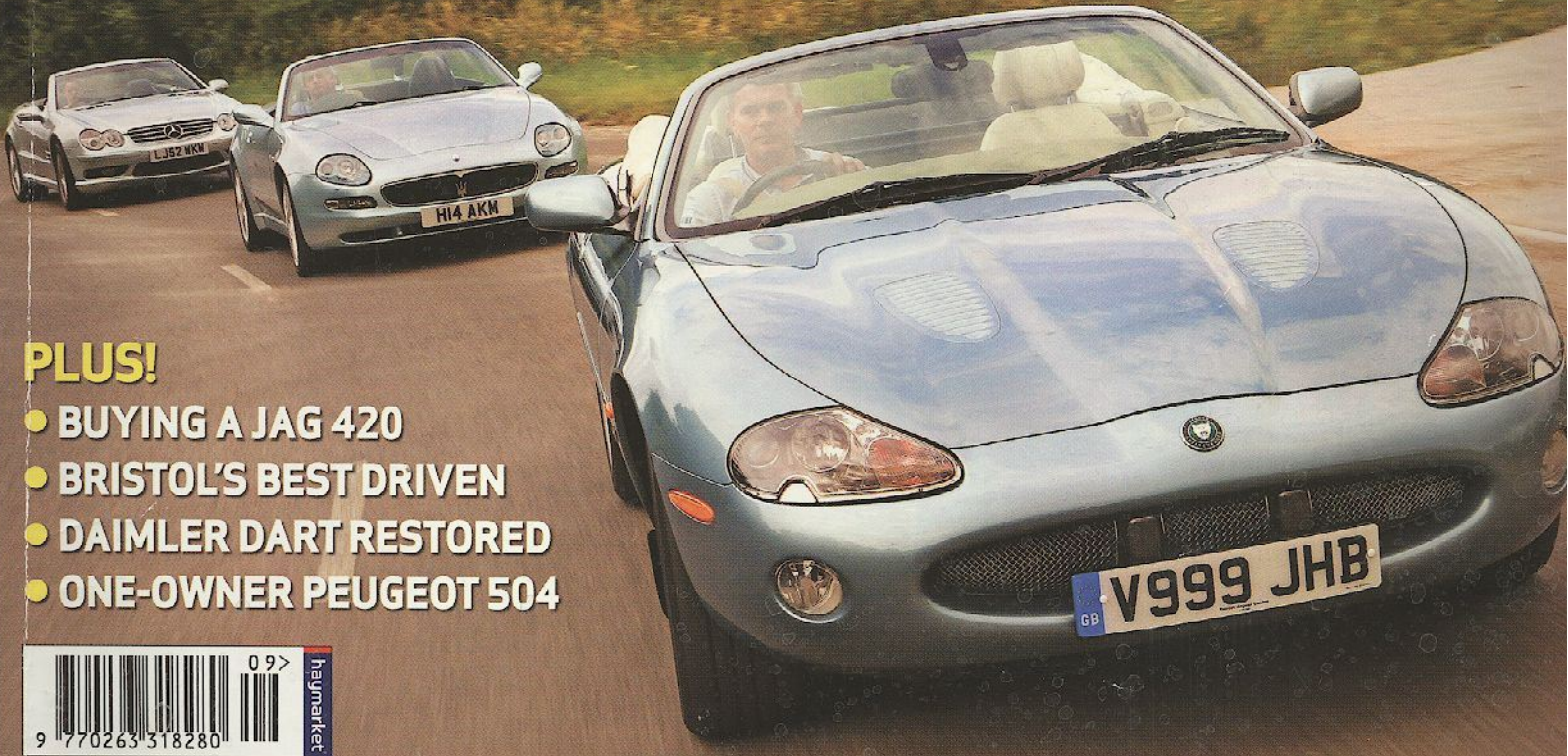
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La 504 familiare

This magnificently restored Peugeot has been in the same family since new. Having seen it in the metal, **Malcolm Thorne** understands why

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER





By their very nature, company cars are often hard-driven hacks that find themselves enduring a life of misuse and abuse before being consigned to a pile-'em-high auction house and adopting the role of cheap smokers. Think of an ex-company car, and it's unlikely that something as effortlessly sophisticated or beautifully presented as this Peugeot 504 Cabriolet would spring to mind. And yet that's exactly how this delightful French drophead began its life.

"Back in 1978, my father Pierre moved from Canada to Paris," recalls its owner, Christian Salbaing. "He was offered a company car and was thinking about a Peugeot 604, which was the range-topping model at the time and the sort of thing an executive might be expected to drive. But when he told me, I asked why he wanted such a large saloon and suggested instead that he should get a 504 Cabriolet – he had long been a fan of open-top models, having owned a 1957 Chevy Bel Air and an Oldsmobile 88 convertible as well as a Ford Sunliner when I was growing up in Montreal. Bearing in mind that temperatures can drop to -20°C during the Canadian winter, owning a convertible there is not something you enter into lightly, so he was obviously a fan."

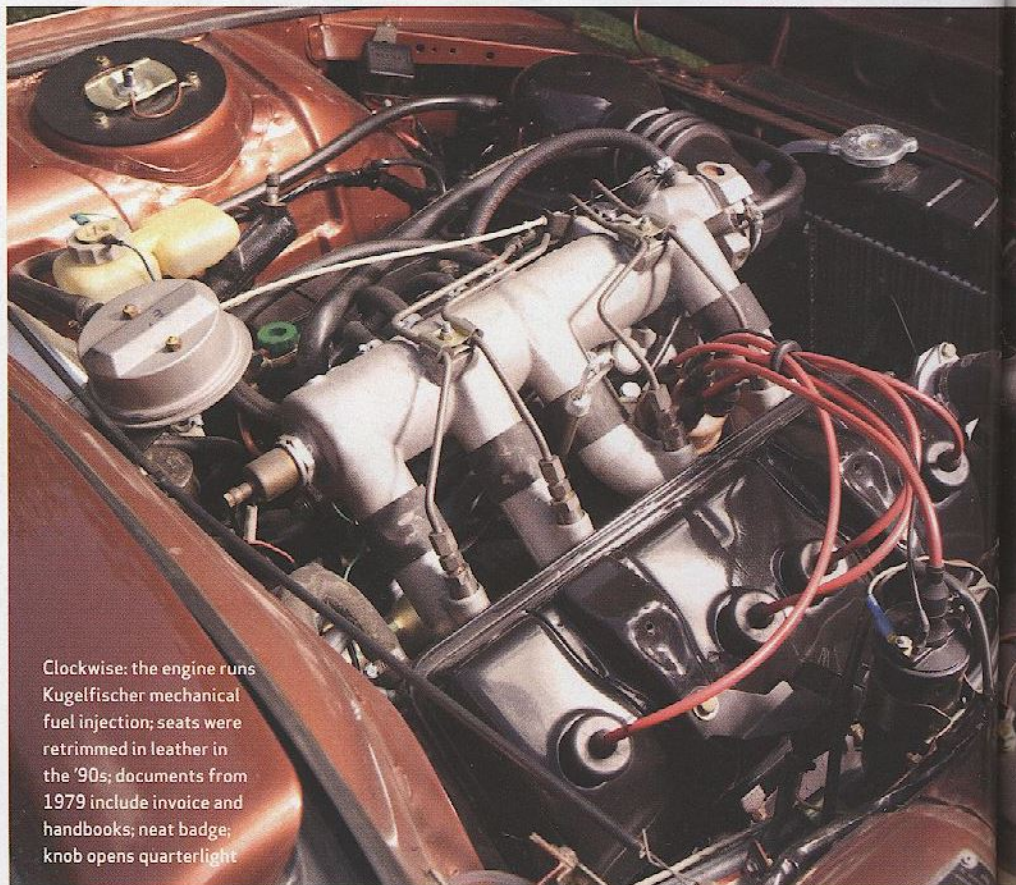
Salbaing Snr clearly took heed of his son's idea, because shortly afterwards he ordered a brand new Brun Acajou (Mahogany Brown) 504 Cabriolet from Luchard Automobiles in Paris, taking delivery of the car on 6 April 1979. The Peugeot led something of a charmed life, being kept garaged at Salbaing's flat near Les Invalides in Paris and rarely venturing out into the cut-and-thrust traffic of the French capital: "He usually walked to his office, so the Peugeot was used mostly at the weekend to tour the countryside around Paris or the Normandy coast."

Salbaing Jnr rarely drove the 504 himself at that time because he owned a much sportier Alfa Spider, but his siblings often took the wheel of the French drophead: "During the mid-'80s, my elder brother François took it up to The Netherlands with his girlfriend and her boxer dog. I also remember that in around 1986 my younger brother Patrick took it down to the Côte d'Azur with his girlfriend. That should have been the perfect holiday – it was certainly the right car for the south of France – but, having parked it on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, they somehow managed to lock the keys in the boot. They tried everything to get into the car, but to no avail. In the end a local 'locksmith' had to prise open the bootlid with a crowbar. The panel was subsequently repaired, but for the next 20 years it never quite aligned properly."

When Salbaing Snr retired in 1989, the Peugeot was a decade old and so, in spite of having covered just 40,000km or so, as far as the company accountants were concerned it had depreciated to such an extent that it was worthless. As a result, the firm offered him the option to retain it. "I had moved from Hong Kong to Paris in 1987," recalls Christian today, "and had just purchased a small house in Normandy, about 100km from Paris. My father had helped with the move and often came to visit in the 504 and, because it would not have been possible to export the European-specification car to Canada, he decided to leave it with me."

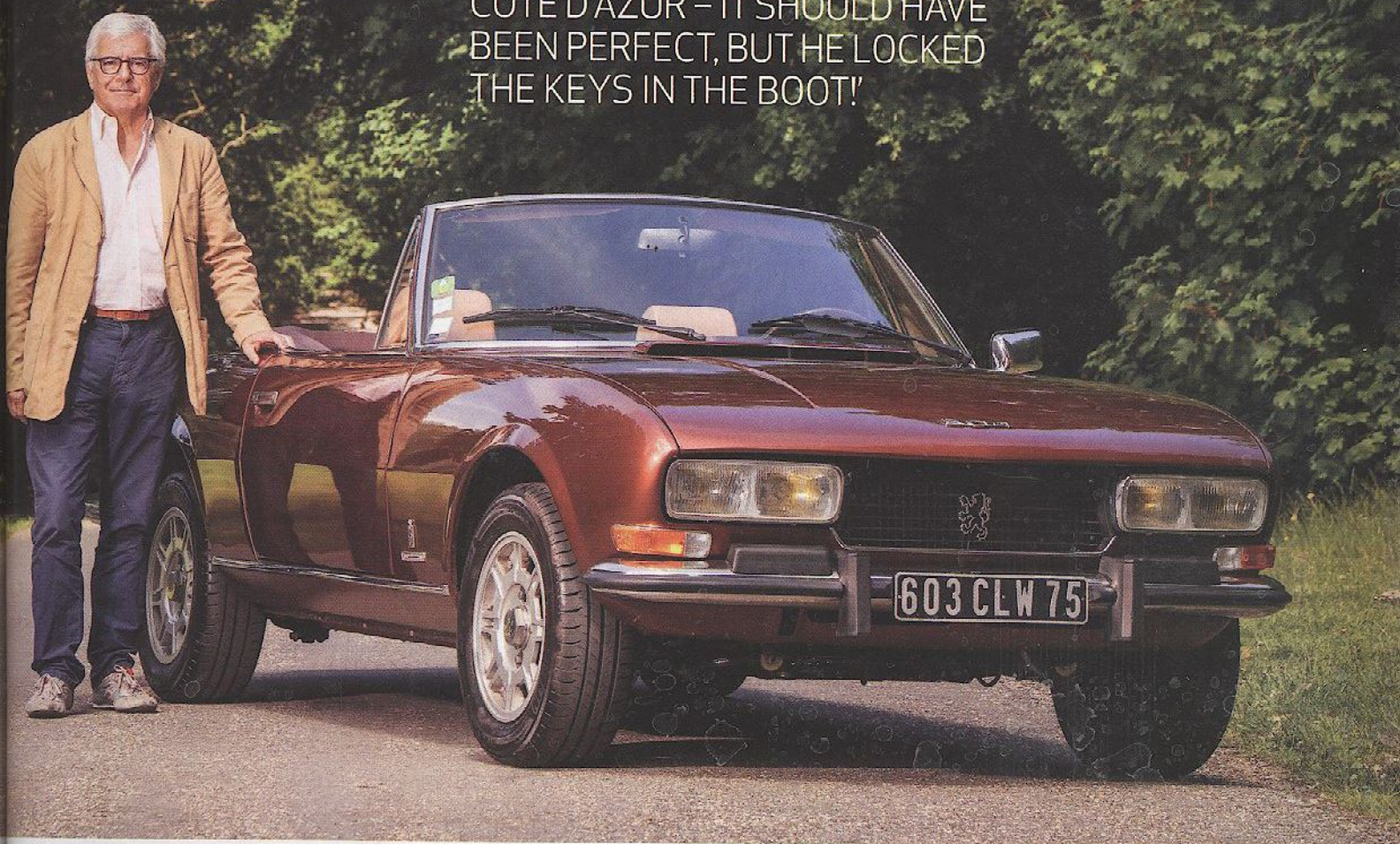
Salbaing Jnr briefly used the Peugeot as a daily driver but, not wishing to add too much to the mileage, he eventually decided to keep it in

Clockwise, from below: Christian Salbaing with the car shortly after taking custodianship; the duo today; the owner's son, William, aged two in 1992



Clockwise: the engine runs Kugelfischer mechanical fuel injection; seats were retrimmed in leather in the '90s; documents from 1979 include invoice and handbooks; neat badge; knob opens quarterlight

'MY BROTHER TOOK IT TO THE CÔTE D'AZUR – IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN PERFECT, BUT HE LOCKED THE KEYS IN THE BOOT!



the barn at his Normandy retreat. It was used at weekends or for the occasional trip to visit friends in south-western France, and during the winter it always covered at least 20-30km each month to avoid the risk of anything seizing up. "In 1995, my father returned to Europe on holiday and I decided that it would be fun to take him and my five-year-old son William to Gascony to see the places where Dad was born and educated," he recalls. "By then, the car was showing its age, so I had a fair amount of work done at a local garage to ensure that it was up to the trip, including tending to a leaking head gasket as well as new rear dampers and some paint. Apart from that, the car had been pretty much carefree – not something I could say about newer cars I've owned in the interim.

"By 2000, the hood was in a shoddy state and a friend who I'd met while working in Hong Kong in the '80s, who had retired to Gascony, recommended a leather- and car-restoration specialist, Monsieur Coudert, who is based in Condom. I had the vinyl interior retrimmed in leather and a new canvas soft-top fitted. Monsieur Coudert did a beautiful job of the interior, and it survives to this day."

The boot, which had caused so much trouble for Salbaing's brother Patrick, came back to haunt Christian in 2003: "I had my keys stolen at Malpensa airport in Italy. Try as I might, I couldn't find a replacement for the boot key anywhere, so for three years I couldn't open it. Eventually, I saw an advert on eBay – a guy in

Australia, of all places, was advertising keys for classic Italian cars. The 504's body is by Pininfarina, so I got in touch and asked him whether he could supply one. He said yes, so I sent him the money. I didn't really expect much from the deal, but it was only AU\$20 so there wasn't much to lose. In any case, two weeks later four keys arrived in the post; I rushed straight down to the barn and the boot popped open for the first time in three years. It was fantastic!"

In spite of enjoying a quiet life, by 2012 the car was suffering from numerous oil leaks, the suspension was getting loose and the lower body on the driver's side was starting to bubble in places, so Salbaing decided that the time had come for a thorough rebuild: "I found several reputable garages in France and Belgium, but eventually turned to Peter Stark at Pichler Classic Car Centre near Gstaad in Switzerland. I also own an American-market 1989 Mercedes 560SL, and when I got that I had it restored and converted to European specification by Peter. He did such a fantastic job, I decided to offer him the task of rebuilding the 504. His daily diet is Ferraris, Porsches, Bentleys and racing cars that are worth 50 or 100 times more than the 504, but he said that he had never done a Peugeot before and that it would be fun to learn."

The Cabriolet was stripped to a bare shell, and fortunately it wasn't too bad in terms of rust: "The 504 is almost legendary for its robustness, but while the engine and running gear are shared with the saloon and pick-up, the Pininfarina

body is less durable. I'd rarely driven it in winter, though, so it had been spared the worst ravages from the salt and snow. There was some rust at the base of the front wings, a notorious rot spot, and the inside of the fuel tank was corroded, but the car really wasn't in bad shape."

The brief was that the finished car should be as good as new, and that goal has been achieved with remarkable success. Look at period photographs of the family enjoying the Peugeot, and you could be forgiven for thinking that they were taken yesterday – the car appears barely to have changed. "The most obvious difference is the wheels," points out the owner. "Originally it was on 14in steels with chromed hubcaps, but I replaced those with a set of alloys in 2013. Visually, they are identical to the type fitted to V6s, but they are actually from a later 505 – the 504 had metric wheels and Michelin TRXs, which are hugely expensive, whereas the 505 had 15in rims, which gives a wider and less-costly choice of tyres. The only other aesthetic difference is that the sills have been painted to match the rest of body. Originally they were black, but we decided that the car looked better with them finished in brown.

"The toughest task as far as the restoration is concerned was finding quality replacement or new-old-stock parts," says Salbaing. "German-based French parts specialist Der Franzose was particularly helpful, and whatever Peter could not find he made from scratch. That was the case for the plastic surround for the heater controls.



Peter and his father are real artisans, so I don't think they were stumped by anything that the car threw at them during the restoration."

Today, the finished car is testament not only to the work carried out during the rebuild, but also to the soundness of the original concept. The latest generation of Peugeots might have been blighted by styling that is best described as 'challenging', but the 504 is an achingly handsome device, the Pininfarina lines seductive and sophisticated – especially when finished in this car's subtle and discreet metallic hue.

Details such as the yellow driving lamps add a refreshing touch of Gallic authenticity: when the law stipulating that French-registered cars should sport mandatory yellow headlamps was repealed in the '90s, this peculiarity vanished almost overnight, and today is a rare sight on French roads. Alas, the period-correct Paris registration will soon be lost, however. "I am updating the address on the registration document," says Salbaing, "and unfortunately that means that a new-style number will be issued to replace the old one." It will be easy to forgive such a minor anachronism, though, because despite its relatively humble underpinnings this is a car that really makes you look good.

It makes you feel good, too. Settle into the cossetting leather interior, and the mundane stresses of day-to-day life slip away. The four-cylinder power unit might not have the cachet of the 'Douvrin' V6, but the fuel-injected 1971cc motor is a willing performer, its 106bhp perfectly

matched to the Cabriolet's wafting nature. Forget about pushing it to the limit, this is a cruiser, a car that soothes rather than goads.

With its nicely weighted, power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering and slick gearchange, the 504 feels more '80s than '70s, an accomplished device that requires no acclimatisation before joining the ebb and flow of 21st-century traffic. For a car that was launched nigh-on 50 years ago, the Cabriolet more than copes with the rigours of modern motoring. And don't just take my word for it: a few months before our shoot, Salbaing undertook his longest journey to date in the Pininfarina drophead – an epic 600-mile transcontinental dash from Stark's workshop in Switzerland, via Normandy, to London.

"The car performed faultlessly," he recounts, "although unfortunately it rained for much of the journey. It has none of the convenience of modern cars – air-con, soundproofing etc – but it is a fantastic thing to drive in a leisurely way on French *routes départementales*, with the top down to enjoy the smell of flowers and fields."

After almost four decades years in the family, what's next for the Peugeot? "It won't be coming onto the market any time soon," says Salbaing. "My kids have already struck a deal between themselves: William has got his eye on the 560SL, and the 504 Cabriolet will eventually go to my daughter, Olivia – although she will need to pass her driving test if she wants to make use of it! They still have to decide the fate of my Porsche 911, though..."

From top: alloys have replaced original steels; lion adorns the grille and two-spoke wheel; old-style Paris numberplates a neat touch, but will have to be replaced; subtle colour suits Pininfarina lines

