





On 14 June 1897, Barney Barnato was drowned at sea en route to England. The record books show that the cockney, who made a fortune in the South African diamond mines, committed suicide, but legend says he was pushed. Murdered or not, Barney's death was to have a dramatic impact not just on South Africa, but on the future of one of Britain's most prestigious car companies ... Bentley.

Accompanying Barney on the ocean liner was his 2 year-old son, Woolf, who inherited his father's millions. Thirty-one years later, Woolf would win Le Mans for Bentley, a feat he repeated in 1929 and 1930. The son and heir was the archetypal playboy Bentley Boy, but he was also Chairman of the company. In 1926, his investment had rescued Bentley, and he would continue to pour huge sums into his pet project until it was sold to Rolls-Royce in 1931.

Today, Barnato's open cast mine, known as the "big hole", can still be seen in the town of Kimberley, South Africa. Were it not for this ugly crevasse, Bentley might not exist, which is why I've travelled 3000 miles to pay my respects. For the next two days, we'll be touring the area in a modern Continental GT, the car that Barney might have been driving, had he been around today.

The 350 mile drive from Johannesburg to Kimberley has been hugely

instructive. South Africa's biggest city is now an ugly hotbed of racial and economic tension. The ghost of apartheid, coupled with a huge disparity between rich and poor, has created a culture of violence. Car-jacking is rife but, perversely, a Continental GT is too expensive and too conspicuous to be a target ... or so I'm told.

To leave the city limits, though, is to discover a different South Africa. The barren, dusty landscape can have changed little since Barney arrived here in 1873, armed with £50 and a box of cheap cigars. He joined his brother Harry in a comedy duo, performing Shakespeare in a cockney accent, before diamonds caught their eye. But where Barney travelled on dirt tracks by horse and cart, we journey by W12 on a Tarmac highway.

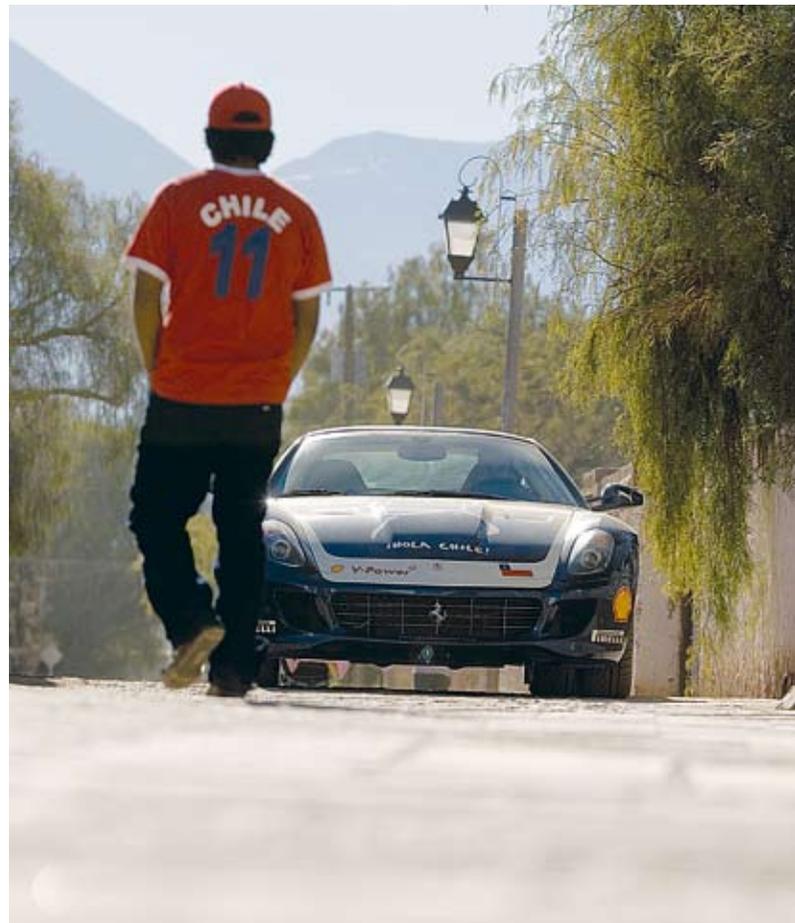
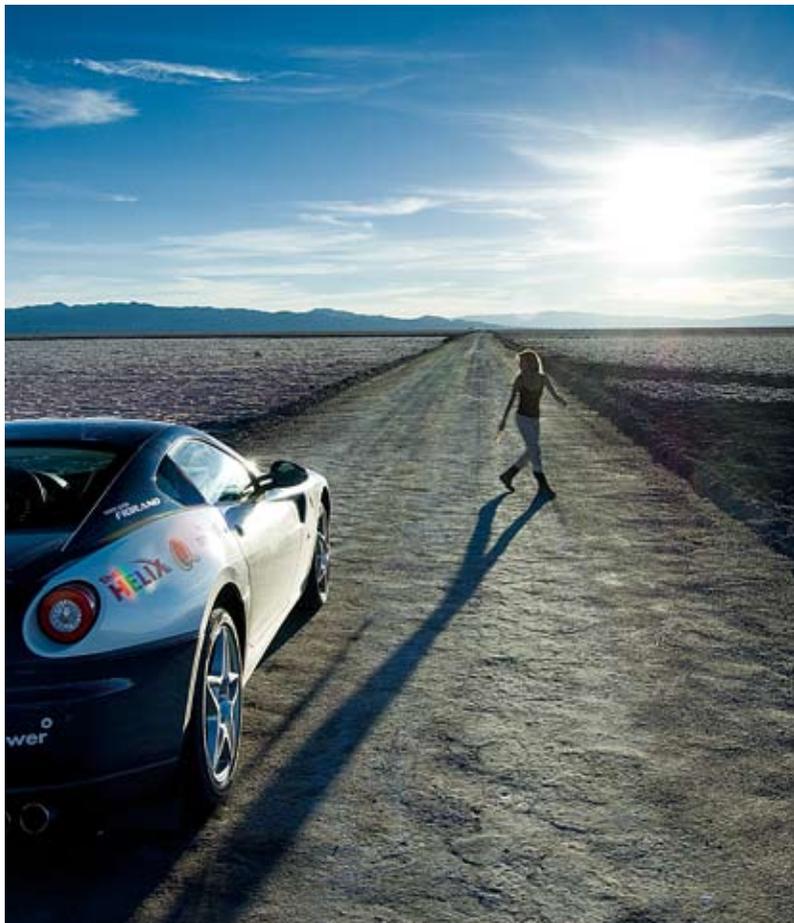
The roads - straight, fast and sparsely populated - could have been designed for the Continental GT. Too often in Europe a grand tour means cruising from one traffic jam to the next, but in South Africa you really can average big speeds. We cruised at 100mph on the run from Johannesburg, conscious that we were using only half the Bentley's potential. The Conti really is a proper GT - it's difficult to think of another coupé that's such a capable, comfortable tool. A journey that would have taken Barney at least a week, took us five hours.

Diamonds were first discovered in Kimberley in 1866 and, by the 1880s,

‘The SLR’s performance can encourage delirium.’







Taking a break on the Atacama Salt Flats in northern Chile; the 599 is automotive art

