

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

THE DE SOTO SUBURBAN SAFARIS

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*



Golden Eagle at the top of Du Toit's Kloof Pass in 1951

The end of World War II saw a tremendous spurt in international tourism as ships and aircraft were decommissioned and became available to ferry tourists around the world. South Africa, with its magnificent scenery, game reserves, glorious weather and relatively good roads, soon became a popular destination.

Springbok Safaris was launched when, with a lot of pluck and optimism, Bill Olds and his wife Zona used their army service gratuities to purchase a brand new 1947 De Soto Suburban nine-seater car. Their enterprise prospered and the couple were soon able to build up the business by buying more vehicles. Eventually they owned a fleet of ten nine-seater De Sotos, two seven-seater Chryslers, a Rolls-Royce, a Cadillac and several smaller 'Drive-Yourself' cars, mainly Austin A 40 Somersets. Later a few Mercedes-Benz saloons were tried; although their totally dust-proof bodies were appreciated, they were not all that successful as internal space was rather cramped and they required expensive spare parts.

As a young man during the early 1950s, Gordon Strauss served a long spell as a tour-guide driver and mechanic with Springbok Safaris,

before becoming one of South Africa's most knowledgeable vintage car enthusiasts. It is clear from his reminiscences that his love affair with motor vehicles stemmed from his incredible experiences with the De Soto Suburbans.

The De Sotos averaged 120 000 km per year and normally carried eight passengers, including the driver, with a mound of luggage in the waterproof slipcase on the roof and in the boot. They were quite a handful to drive, and with their almost four-metre wheelbases, steering which required nearly six turns from lock to lock, and drum brakes, their drivers felt an affinity with the captains of small boats. The two-range fluid drive gearboxes had to be treated with respect and needed careful warming up, but keeping to a maximum of 40 km/h in low range and 80 in high, they proved eminently reliable. The only modification to the cars was the fitting of 8-25 x 15 tyres in place of the standard 7-60 x 15 to cope with the heavy loads and rough roads, and for emergencies the company always had a reserve car ready to be rushed to any part of the country in a matter of hours.

The De Sotos did about 300 000 km before their first engine overhaul and were sold off at about 800 000 km.

With the exception of the new driver's car the *Swift*, the cars were all named after birds of prey, and Strauss was surprised how this gave each one its own particular character. His car was named *Condor*; and with his friend Jan de Villiers driving *Merlin*, they would set out on two-car sorties into the wildest parts of southern Africa.

From Johannesburg there were five-day tours of the Kruger National Park and ten-day runs to the Kruger Park, Swaziland,

Hluhluwe, Durban, and the Royal Natal National Park. Two-week tours went to Cape Town via Port Elizabeth and the Garden Route, and to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) via the Kruger Park.

Rhodesian tour routes varied with the season. Winter runs included the Wankie National Park, Victoria Falls and Livingstone. The Wankie Game Reserve, which covered an area of about 13 000 sq km, was teeming with wild life. One driver counted over 2 000 head of game during a 160 km run between two of the main camps. On leaving one of the camps in the reserve, visitors were issued with a map and had to declare their route to their destination. This information was sent to the next camp by radio, and should they fail to arrive by nightfall, a search party was sent out. Summer tours would cover the magnificent scenery of the eastern highlands, Christmas Pass, the Pungwe Falls and the Chimanimanni mountains. In those days there were petrol restrictions in Rhodesia, but he made many friends there and on one occasion managed to get through a 3 200 km tour on



Gordon Strauss with Golden Eagle



Condor and a striped acquaintance in the Livingstone Game Park

just 27 litres of (official) petrol.

In addition to these longer tours were the specials. The Kruger Park was always visited at Christmas and Easter with as many as ten cars and up to eighty people. The drivers had to do the catering to professional standards, one of them, Tom Donaldson, had been an army cook, and to watch him, in twenty minutes, fry five kilos of bacon and ten dozen eggs over an open fire with giant frying pans was quite an education.

The drivers needed keen spotting eyes for picking out game in the bush, to identify the animals and explain some of their peculiarities and habits. They also needed to adhere to fairly tight schedules, to carry a fair sum of money to pay for all the necessities during the trips, and to carry out running repairs on the cars. Troubles tended to come in series, often related to burst tyres, brake problems and broken springs. On one two-car tour they experienced two broken rear leaf springs and two front coils. On

another, because of faulty wheel alignment they blew tyres with monotonous regularity, and between the two cars, arrived home with patches on six tyres, showing canvas on eight, and one heavily gaitered spare. On one occasion the normally careful Jan de Villiers was seen sailing through a herd of cattle at speed. When he eventually came to a stop he whispered to Strauss that his brakes had failed completely. While De Villiers was describing the scenery to the tourists, Strauss crawled under the car to find that a newly-fitted exhaust had chafed through a brake pipe on the rear axle. After creeping to the next village on the handbrake, they managed to repair the damage in a local workshop. At the end of another tour, when Strauss was asked to justify the purchase of a new tyre he had to explain that a lion had chewed the tread off the old one! The more conscientious drivers washed their cars down after every muddy section, and dusted them inside and out every day

before loading the luggage. Many of them soldered little bathroom chains to the hubcaps as they had to pay for those that were lost.

Later, Strauss was promoted from his faithful *Condor* to *Golden Eagle*, the newest car in the firm and registered in Cape Town. He was delighted with her, but found that whenever she was left in the garage the other drivers would help themselves to better components like the carburettor, the much more comfortable front seat, or even wheels and tyres. Before each tour he had a frantic search to reclaim his unworn parts!

To Strauss' regret, as the popularity of the tours increased, transport arrangements started to change rapidly. A 60-seat coach carried as many passengers as seven safari cars and the running costs were far lower. Soon 18-seat and much larger luxury coaches started to supplant the De Sotos, which were sold off to become popular taxis. In 1957 Strauss' relationship with these distinctive

vehicles came to an end as the march of progress eventually overwhelmed the small safari touring companies. Springbok Safaris and Atlas Tours became Springbok Atlas Tours, and Transafrica Tours, which owned even more De Soto Suburbans, disappeared into one of the big industrial conglomerates.

Gordon Strauss' recollections of the tours never dimmed, they ranged from hilarious parties and glorious sunshine to pouring rain, freezing cold and the extrication of cars from thick, glutinous mud. Some of his reminiscences were extraordinary. He used to ask the question "Do you know that at full moon when the angle is just right on two or three nights in the year, a lunar rainbow appears over the Eastern Cataract of the Victoria Falls?" He would then continue "This quite ghostly apparition I reserved for particularly nice groups of tourists - a thrill they or I will never forget".

Resplendent in their dark brown livery, the De Soto Suburbans and the memories they created left an indelible impression in the minds of a great many South Africans and our international visitors.

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The Springbok Safaris contingent at Witbank, Christmas 1950. The second and fourth cars from the left are Chrysler seven-seaters

