

The Ultimate Beta Test

By Graeme Hurst

Photography: © Felix Furtak and Graeme Hurst

Last month, Graeme Hurst covered club member and Lancia specialist Felix Furtak's incredible trans-Africa adventure at the wheel of his 1975 Lancia Beta. This month, he takes a look at the 'Lancia life' that followed after Felix elected to call Cape Town home shortly after that epic trip, a life that saw him become both a global name in the supply of Lancia parts and a local restoration expert.

GEARBOX for a Flaminia? Check. Door card for a Thema? Check. Windscreen for an Aurelia? Check. Workshop manual for a Lambda? Check. These are just some of the items that Lancia Auto SA's proprietor Felix Furtak can tick off in a stock take. Assuming of course he's got the time to do one with a near 13 000-strong list of parts for Lancias of just about every pre-96 model piled high to the rafters in his Cape Town workshop.

Based in a sleepy backstreet in the city's up-and-coming Woodstock, the business is a veritable treasure trove of parts and literature that's regarded as a Mecca for Lancia enthusiasts around the globe in need of parts or advice. 'We have sold



Felix at his desk. Factory parts microfiche system behind him.

around half that listing - many several times over since we began trading,' says Felix, a qualified electrical engineer who's been involved as a restorer, parts supplier

and, above all, an enthusiast of the Italian marque in Cape Town since 1995. That's when Felix returned to South Africa after shipping his Beta back to Germany following his epic overland journey.

In the four years before that, Felix was running his own Lancia repair and restoration business in the town of Feldrennach (near Karlsruhe). Life went smoothly until a local river burst its banks in May 1995 and flooded his workshop and cars. 'It was the first time it had happened in 100 years and on my birthday. In hindsight it was a bad omen,' recalls Felix who, just weeks later, faced eviction after a fallout with his landlady (who also happened to be his girlfriend's mother) over the use of an industrial oil heater. A planned move to new premises derailed when it transpired the new venue didn't have workshop rights. 'It all blew up and I had the sheriff of the court kicking me out of the old place while I was trying to run Lancia Auto SA from a phone booth. It was total stress.'

A notice of his landlady's

intention to attach his stock and cars galvanised him into action and so he gambled some rubber cheques (in the knowledge they would only likely be cashed when his account was flush) to buy a container to store his parts. But he still needed to get them out of the sheriff's reach. 'I had a customer who was in the transport business and he had a truck. He came at 2am in the snow and loaded the container and hid it in the Black Forest. All 25 tons of stuff and my three Lancias gone overnight.'

With no funds and nowhere to go, Felix had to think about how to start over and that's when he set his sights on the Mother City. 'When I made it to Cape Town after the trans-Africa trip, I was surprised that there was such an active Lancia community so I had a place to go where I knew people and could work.'

That was late 1995 and Felix arrived with R2 400 to his name: 'It was not much to start a new life,' he remarks.

He took a job at a local classic panel beater but got frustrated with the poor standards of work: 'I had to witness how reasonably original cars were wrecked by poor resprays and realised I couldn't be part and parcel of the destruction of old cars when my life was dedicated to their resurrection.'

Felix's despondency fuelled his desire to go on his own again and, after mulling it over one night in a Bree Street café, he placed a call to Germany to get the container (which included the Beta, Zagato, HF and the oil heater that caused the eviction) on to the high seas. It was the Beta's second trip to the tip of

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Feldrennach workshop flood.



Brochure collection



Felix in his parts store



Lancia model-specific factory tools



Workshop

Africa. The only problem was that Felix couldn't afford the transport fees for the container unless he unloaded it first. The shipping company said, first the money then the container, and Felix said, first the container then the money. Naturally they wouldn't relent and, desperate, Felix admits to... er... offering harbour security guards bottles of wine in exchange for nightly access to his container so he could raid his parts stash and raise the money for the shipping bill. 'My first sale was a spare Gamma engine to Vigliettis for R5 000!'

It was the Viglietti brothers and other Lancia enthusiasts, such as Johan du Toit and the late Peter Immelman who helped him to get established locally, something he's very grateful for. 'I started work in Johan du Toit's garage at his home before setting up in the late Russell Wolpe's workshop,' he relates. That was next door to his current Plein Street premises where Felix repaired and restored Lancias from all over South Africa for several years before his next phase in his Lancia activities: the closure of TAK Motors in 1997.

'Right-hand drive Lancia production stopped and TAK closed after the owner's son passed away,' explains Felix. Viglietti Motors bought up the Ferrari and Lancia stock but slowly reduced their involvement with the latter as, technically, Fausto Carello (a member of the Carello headlight family) had secured the rights to Lancia at the time, and so the parts were eventually offered to Felix. It's this stock, which came complete with a set of official Lancia IBM 400 tapes containing all the parts data, along with what's left of the 25 tons from the container, that formed the basis of his worldwide parts supply operation.

It's a supply that extends to copies of sales brochures and drawings of

factory tools; and it's all accessible across a range of technologies. Felix explains: 'Before 1980 it's in parts catalogues, from 1980 until '88 I have a complete microfiche catalogue while from '88 it's on CD which was very new at the time.'

All of that assists Felix, and his wife Khungeka, who works in the business, in providing an online service, with a customer base stretching from Mexico to Japan and dozens of countries in between.

Unsurprisingly, Felix has seen many of the country's Lancias come through his workshop, often in different hands. And often in amusing if tragic (for the car) circumstances, such as a Gamma that a local owner tried to sell to Vigliettis. 'They offered him R5 000 but he was so insulted that he gave it to a Catholic priest who married his daughter the next weekend. The priest ended up bringing it to me for work. Each time he paid with a cheque from the Catholic church and after R65 000 the car was okay but then the church started asking questions and he needed to sell the car to get the church's money back. I told him he'd got himself into a cul-de-sac: you can spend money on a Lancia but you will never get it back!'

That car wound up at a dealer and was sold to a Khayelitsha resident who pulled it to bits before it was left rotting in a driveway for ten years. Sadly, despite all the previous expenditure under Felix's care, it was only fit for scrap while another Gamma came to a near fiery end after a disgruntled customer set fire to Felix's workshop (but without realising that his car was parked behind the door inside!).

One of Felix's frustrations is that many local owners don't want to spend money on their cars or spend money in the wrong areas. One such example is a local architect who lavished cash on a leather interior for

his Fulvia but refused to entertain any suggestion to invest in the car's brakes. 'He told me that new brakes weren't necessary as the car was only for his wife,' Felix chuckles. 'Then a few weeks go by and I get a call from a panel beater saying he needs front beadings and headlights for a Fulvia...'

But not all of Lancia Auto SA's customer experiences are so fraught. Take a look at the company's website and you'll see photos of plenty of cars Felix has worked on. Lancias that are in the hands of enthusiasts who admire the cars' fine engineering and appreciate Felix's skills in keeping them alive. And

Felix is proud that those Lancia enthusiasts form a board church, such as the Monte Carlo owner from Orania. A highly-strung 1980s Italian sports car being enjoyed in South Africa's last whites-only outpost? It's about as farcical as some of the antics this Lancia fanatic has experienced in his lifelong passion for the marque...

THANKS TO:

Felix Furtak, Lancia Auto SA (+27 021 447 7616; felix@furtak.info; transafrica.lancia.cc) and Classic Car Africa (classiccarafrica.com) for permission to run this article.



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