

VEHICLES

# The Grandest of Grand Tourers

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When star writer and luxury brand PR Caroline Phillips decided to forego her Mini Cooper and slip behind the wheel of a Bentley Mulsanne to drive 1868 miles, she had the trip of a lifetime...

This is the story of the Marquess, the Old Masters and the Bentley. The tale of my bravely blazing the trail for masterpieces by Van Dyck, Rubens and Murillo to be returned from Russia to Norfolk 234 years after Catherine the Great bought them in a sale that caused national outcry in Britain.

It's a story of me and my trusty Mulsanne intrepidly leading the way from the Hermitage State Museum, St Petersburg, across thousands of miles of frozen terrain to Houghton Hall, Norfolk – and there, in their original home, the grandest of stately piles, to await the arrival of the priceless collection of paintings that was originally housed there and belonged to Britain's first PM, Sir Robert Walpole. Except I cheated a little.

Reader, I had planned to do this long drive (1868 miles behind the wheel through Latvia, Lithuania etc). Honest. But then to circumvent a billion-hour wait at the Estonian border crossing, monotonous days of unspectacular scenery of the northern European plains and USSR-size piles of bureaucratic papers, I took the plane from St Petersburg and then drove from Heathrow to Houghton.

So instead this is now a far more thrilling story – about the car made in Heaven and finished off in Crewe: the Mulsanne. After all, who needs to read about endless roads, blizzards and Russian forests when you could be thinking about a vehicle with TVs in its headrests and veneer tables for champagne flutes?

So we can pass quickly over the W hotel in St Petersburg with its clientele of Russian twigs in spray-on dresses. There! Done. And gloss over the joys of that city's grand apricot palaces and orthodox churches by the frozen Neva River on which people were walking. We need also reflect only fleetingly on my private visit to the Hermitage – with its three million Michelangelos, Picassos etc. – a breathtaking place where it would take 11 years to see everything, spending just one minute before each exhibit.

Indeed, the only really important thing about St Petersburg was that I was chauffeured in a Mulsanne. Twice when we stopped in the city, passers-by gawped at and photographed our palace on wheels. You think it's cor! From the outside – well, you should be in here. I wanted to cry. It glides, it purrs and it smells so good I want to bottle it (leather and veneer); there are acres of seats – ones that massage/warm to perfection and probably serve vodka; vanity mirrors for applying that slick of Dior lipstick; soft-shut doors; and a Bentley designed phone. That's Russia done then.

We can also dispense hastily with British sights, including my stupendous private visit to the fine Palladian house that is Houghton. And forget my meeting with the 7th Marquess of Cholmondeley – its current occupant, the country's most important peer and who has secured 70 of Sir Robert Walpole's best pictures back from Russia. And disregard the William Kent décor there being returned to its splendid original 18th century specifications.

All that matters is that I drove to Norfolk in a Mulsanne. A motor that goes nought to seriously fast in a nanosecond; with suspension better than any bed; and boasting special specifications – like polished aluminium wheels (£13,410) and sunroof. When I rested a while, I had at my fingertips its bespoke silver tumblers and ashtrays. And a Naim for Bentley sound system. Quite some trip. But with this car, every journey is an event.

- "The Mulsanne's body has 5800 spot welds*
- "It takes 28 hours to build and test a Mulsanne engine.*
- "There are 24 wood pieces in a Mulsanne's interior*
- "The entire cabin is encased within a 'ring of wood' waist rail, with an unbroken panel of wood gracing the Mulsanne's dashboard.*
- "There are 486 leather parts totaling 26 square metres that constitute the Mulsanne interior.*
- "It takes 11 hours to upholster one Mulsanne seat, dependent on options. It takes 52 hours in total per car including the rear armrest.*
- "From start to finish over 170 hours go into the manufacture of the interior of a Mulsanne.*
- "It takes 12 hours to sand and polish the exterior surface of the Mulsanne to a mirror finish*
- "There are 11 coats of paint on one Mulsanne, sometimes 12 dependent on whether the customer chooses a pearlescent finish.*
- "It takes 5 hours to hand stitch a Mulsanne Steering Wheel*
- "There are 14 hides required for a Mulsanne Interior*
- "It takes 123 hours to cut, sew, build and upholster a Mulsanne.*

The exhibition Houghton Revisited runs from May 17 to September 29th: [houghtonhall.com/houghtonrevisited](http://houghtonhall.com/houghtonrevisited).

Otherwise catch the pictures when they're back at the State Hermitage Museum: [www.statehermitagemuseum.org](http://www.statehermitagemuseum.org).

Caroline Phillips [www.carolinephillips.net](http://www.carolinephillips.net) is an award-winning journalist and PR who specialises in luxury brands – from a company that offers only bespoke helicopter travel to The Lord Kenilworth and his splendid garden designs. She writes for the better nationals and glossier glossies – and has contributed to the Financial Times to Vanity Fair and is contributing editor to Spear's, among others.

Trending



**Bon Nevis**  
NOVEMBER 7, 2023



**The Vell Best**  
SEPTEMBER 12, 2023



**Heaven & Shell**  
SEPTEMBER 2, 2023



**Some Of Us Are Looking At Stars...**  
AUGUST 31, 2023



**Geode Catch**  
AUGUST 27, 2023

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