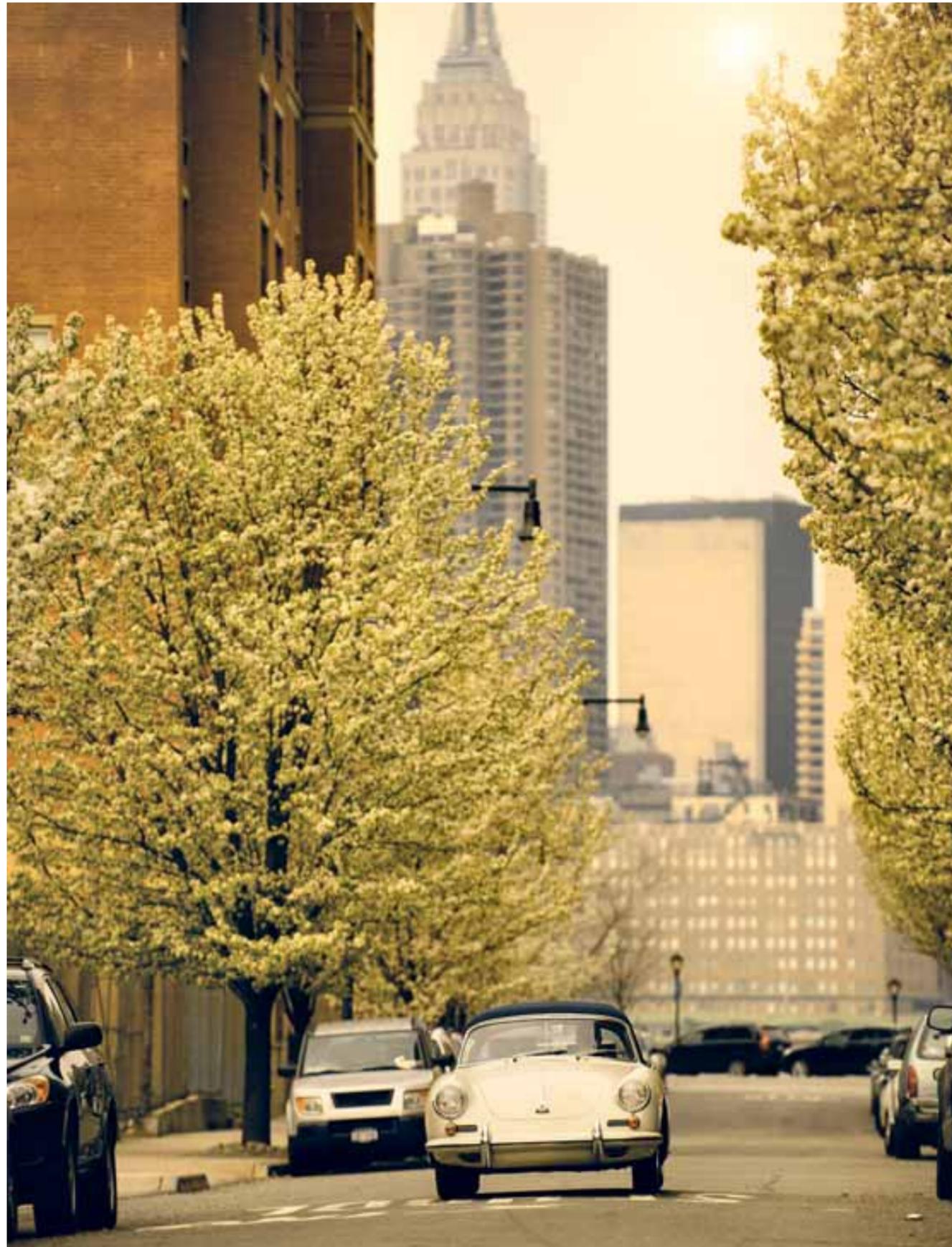




NEW IN NEW YORK

Porsche started its conquest of the United States with the 356 in 1950. We head to America to follow the trail of automotive pioneer Max Hoffman and Porsche sports cars. History comes alive from the East River to Park Avenue as the 356 arrives in New York once again.

By Elmar Brümmer **Photos by** Steffen Jahn



THE 356 IN NYC

Time machine: The sounds of the city on the outside, VHF radio on the inside

The sun rises, and the city that never sleeps starts shifting into high gear. Viewed from the old docks, the East River is a mirror in which the skyline of Manhattan can admire itself. The tops of the skyscrapers play with the shy morning sunlight, sending silver and gold rays toward Queens. Are they showing us the way, or just enticing us onward? This moment, at any rate, might be the one for that famous first line: O! say can you see ...

Even the parking attendant, who has this view on a daily basis, allows herself to be briefly enchanted by the magic of New York City, knowing that everything is becoming energized. But then she turns her attention to the car about to charge into this Sunday morning. The silence on this side of the river is now broken by the rhythm of four air-cooled cylinders. Forty honest horsepower from the 1950s. For a moment the Porsche 356 is permitted to enjoy the panorama from a front-row seat, to posture a little in front of the mighty loading cranes. Recently restored, the docks are witnesses of the bustling activity that used to take place here. The attendant might be viewing this car from “old Germany” as a visitor from a bygone era that has somehow lost its way, but that is not the case. The car belongs here every bit as much as the old harbor facilities. It has already been here, the first time a good sixty years ago. The 356 is reliving an essential part of its history, the launch of a huge success for Porsche when a crane lifted the first sports car from the belly

of a freighter in October of 1950. Rocking gently back and forth, it saw the light of the New World before descending to the solid ground of what today is known as Long Island City.



Welcome to America! Naturally, it would have to be this city in which the triumphal march of the 356 began. The automobile market in Germany was too small, and at DM 10,200, the Porsche was already at the high end of the price range. The only chance for what was still a small sports-car maker lay in exports. So Ferry Porsche and the North American automobile merchant Maximilian E. Hoffman met at the Paris Motor Show. A fateful encounter. As an importer of various European car makes, Hoffman commanded his own network of dealers on the East Coast of the United States, and possessed above all an unerring sense for the desires of the American upper class. He and Ferry Porsche soon signed a contract on the delivery of fifteen sports cars a year, of the type 356. When the first vehicles arrived in New York, Max Hoffman demonstrated his great talent for marketing. He hired independent race-car driver Briggs Cunningham, who would win his first races shortly thereafter—and he cleared space at his showroom on New York’s prestigious Park Avenue.

Thus, Manhattan marks both the start and the finish of our excursion to follow the trail of Max Hoffman and the first 356—and what a feeling it is! The novelist Colum McCann

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EAST RIVER

*What the skyline is for the island of Manhattan,
the Silvercup sign is for the east bank of the East River. The wholesale bakery
is no longer in operation; the building now houses film studios.*



QUEENSBORO BRIDGE

Construction of the enormous bridge at 59th Street began when its mile-long girders were laid 111 years ago. The lower level is 40 meters above the water.



Turnaround:
We can't stop time, but
we can turn it back



THE 356 IN NYC

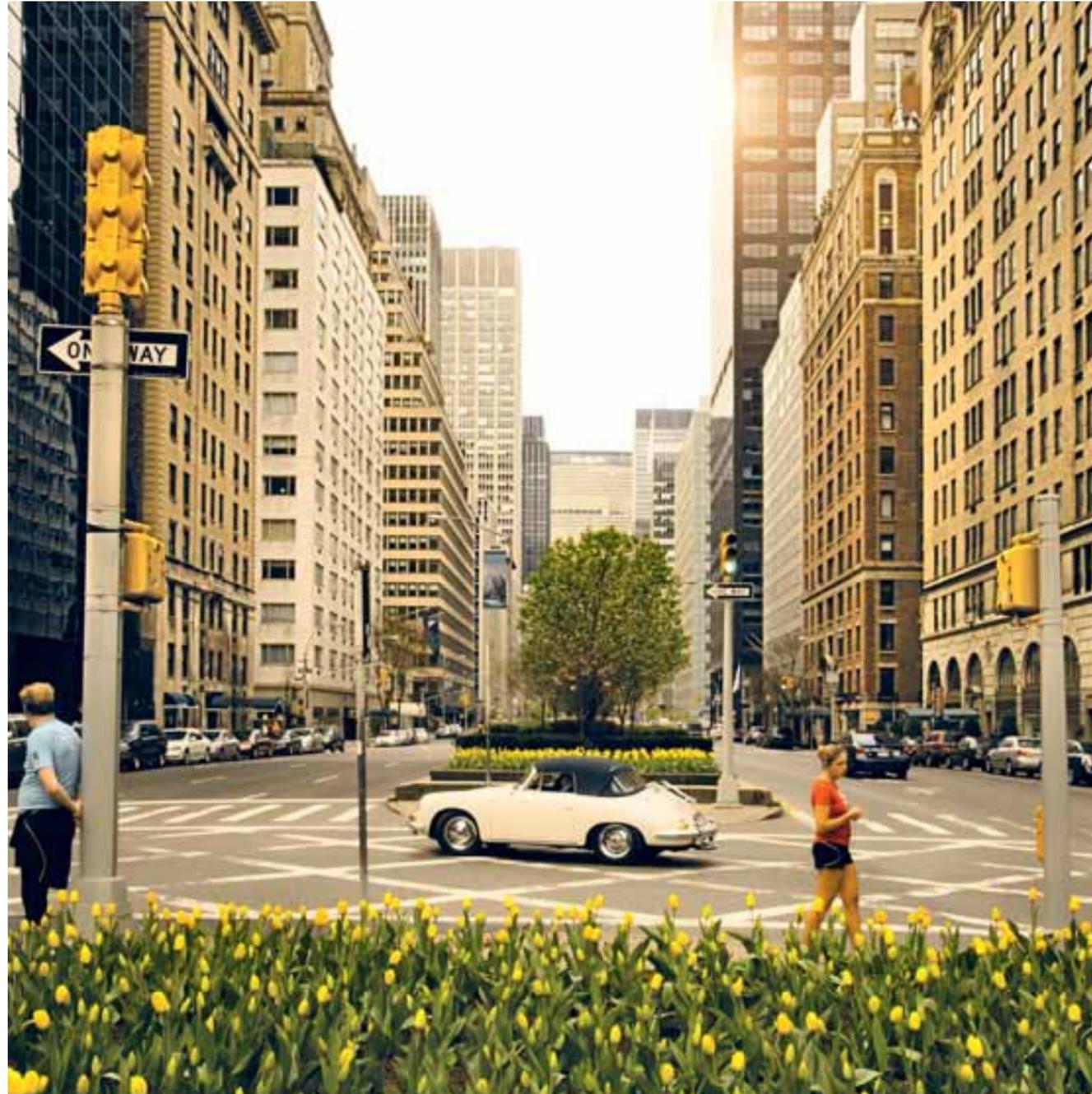
might serve as our GPS for this trip, when he wrote in *Let the Great World Spin* that everything in New York is somehow built on something else, nothing stands entirely alone, and everything new is as foreign as the old—yet nevertheless connected with it. Three-point-three miles driven in a time machine from Zuffenhausen—and with a powerful imagination. History is repeating itself.



The big city is so close, yet it is small-town America that remains on this side of the river. Even the asphalt on the streets is what we might call “historical.” The pendulum rear axle with its torsion bar springs pounds through many a pothole. The closer we get to the approach to the bridge, the more we are surrounded by daubs of sunflower yellow in the form of taxis eager to hit a hectic pace this early on a Sunday morning. We pass the taxi command center—drivers wanted! Yet the people standing in line for espresso and muffins at the Sweetleaf Coffee Shop are as unfazed as the 356 by this exaggerated sense of hustle. We also keep meeting bulky blue vans. They are supplying New York’s best restaurants with bread from the Tom Cat Bakery, located in the labyrinths we are traversing here behind the old docks. The most famous bakery, however, is the Silvercup, whose sign is still a landmark in this neighborhood that is slowly but surely becoming a sought-after part of town.

Melancholy can have something very euphoric about it. The wooden steering wheel takes a turn of 90 degrees, and the entrance to the Queensboro Bridge triggers a sublime feeling. The accelerating pulse of New York City can best be sensed on the bridges. This gigantic structure of interwoven steel beams could exert quite an intimidating effect on our 356, which is all of 1,300 millimeters (51 inches) high. But then again, this drive into history and emotion reveals a self-awareness steeled over decades. The car moves onto the upper level as if it were the most natural thing in the world. How could it not be the upper level? Now we are following not only Max Hoffman, but also the *Great Gatsby*: “Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world ... ‘Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge, ... anything at all ...’”

The driver rolls down the window, and the resonance of the big city fills the interior up to its fabric top with the soundtrack of a world metropolis. We see the city with the eyes of Max Hoffman whenever the imposing SUVs open up a view. For a moment our sports car is in danger of being swallowed up in the flow of traffic. But suddenly it re-



PARK AVENUE

Its name alone has a special resonance, and it boasts some of the most expensive real estate in North America. The 356 turns this intersection into an open-air showroom.

appears, in the pole position at the first traffic light on the Upper East Side. Feel New York City. Feel the 356. Feel the freedom. Feel this small but powerful urban adventure. Disengage, shift, disengage, shift: driving in the city means using all four limbs as body and car move to the rhythm of the currents of traffic. Restlessness rises, but also revs us up.



On the road with this original Porsche, the world becomes our stage, and we head toward Park Avenue. Here people have always sought what is special, and also have been willing to pay more for it. But they also demand quality, as well as the seal thereof. So it was here that the Porsche insignia was launched, now known around the world. It was first affixed to the steering wheel hub of a 356, in late 1952. Hoffman, a marketing specialist, wanted to convey the European origin and quality of cars from Zuffenhausen more clearly to American customers.

Park Avenue, which was home to both branches of the Hoffman Motor Car Corporation located between the intersections with 56th and 59th Streets, is a very special paved artery of life in New York. It is broader than its counterparts, and its two directions of traffic are separated by an imposing green island. Its real estate prices are unsurpassed, for, then

as now, living on Park Avenue means pure prestige. It's no coincidence that Porsche fan Tom Wolfe had the "Master of the Universe" reside here in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. When Hoffman took his drive in the 356 here, the famous Pan Am (now MetLife) Building didn't yet exist, but the Waldorf-Astoria hotel did. One of Porsche's slogans was "Update your passion," which the 356 certainly does as it dances across the avenues to the astonishment of the doormen who are more accustomed to churchgoers and day-trippers at this time of day. Our appearance is authentic, albeit for a Sunday drive in a different era. It's as if the 356 is seeking to test its effect once again. Retro in the metropolis. No other city lives so much in the future, while at the same time preserving its past and dwelling in the present. The "new" never leaves New York.

Hoffman's import company no longer exists, for the Austrian pioneer retired from the car business in 1975. We have arrived where everything started with him and with Porsche. Yellowing sales brochures feature the following slogan: "Years ahead in engineering – Miles ahead on the road." That is why this trip through time in fact has no end.

But following this drive into the heart of the city, we and the 356 can claim, in a slight modification of those T-shirts with the hearts, that "I drove New York." ●