



ZEN AND THE \$600 '63 BEETLE

Diary Of A Madman

Dear Lloyd,
It was good to hear from you. Yes, what you heard is true: I *did* buy a new Porsche. Well, sort of, anyway. What I actually have is a new Porsche *distributor*. I got it for my new car: a '63 VW Beetle. According to my VW repair bible, *How to Keep Your VW Alive: Step-By-Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot* (no nasty cracks, please), the Porsche-style mechanical advance distributor is supposed to be much better for my car than the standard equipment. And I figure that a twenty-odd year old car can use any

help it can get. So now I like to think of my new car as a Porsche—modified, of course, with a few VW parts.

What's the new Bug like, you're no doubt wondering? *Great*. You know how I've always loved those cars—there's just something special about them. And this one is no exception. It has that classic Beetle handling, it makes that same sturdy thud when you shut the doors—it even has that unique Beetle *smell* inside.

And it's in pretty good shape, too, considering that it's over twenty years old. (The engine—a rebuilt '62—is

even older.) Of course, there are some problems—a few bugs to be worked out, if you'll pardon the expression. I've had my share of trouble with it in the couple of months since I bought it—like the engine throwing a valve a few weeks ago—but you have to expect a few things to go wrong with a twenty year old, \$600.00 car, even a VW. My plan is to gradually put it back into like-new shape, doing repairs as needed and adding new parts step-by-step.

As you might imagine, many of my relatives and so-called friends made some snide and even downright *nasty*

By James W. Harris

Illustrations by Alan Huber

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1986/47

comments when they heard I was buying another Bug. Some of them, in fact, went into fits of laughter and dredged up memories of my previous misadventures with ancient VWs—like the time that '64 suddenly caught fire while I was driving and burned itself to a crisp; or like my ill-fated attempt to rebuild a blown VW engine in the basement. (That still brings back painful memories.) Will they never forget? Nor did I appreciate the fact that Mother, after her first look at my new car, began weeping and for the next three days dressed in mourning.

Some people just don't *understand* about VWs.

So what's it like to drive? Well, it's—interesting. I just got back from another business trip to Atlanta, a 250-mile round-trip. Describing that experience probably gives a better look at what it's like to drive my new Bug than anything else I can say.

Before I could leave town with any reasonable hope of returning, I had to have a few minor things done to the car. First was getting a set of retreads, since mine were worn down to the threads—the only thing separating me from a flat tire was road tar and the odd piece of chewing gum. After putting them on, though, the guy at the tire shop told me that he couldn't balance or align them (as he had promised) after all, because he didn't have proper tools for a car as old as mine. Since I had to leave in a couple of hours, I didn't have time to argue or take my business elsewhere. He did warn me not to drive out of town on unbalanced and unaligned tires, though. However, my old tires had been so bad that even the unbalanced retreads gave a vast improvement in handling. So I decided I could live with it a while.

Next I went to the K-Mart to have my transmission fluid replaced. The car had been refusing to shift from neutral into first gear for a few weeks—which makes for interesting driving, as you can imagine—and I was hoping that maybe this would take care of the problem. It seemed to, for a little while. But I discovered that the rubber boots around the transmission were so cracked that the fluid soon leaked out again, and the problem returned in a few minutes. There was no time to get the boots replaced. And the oil didn't seem to help my *other* transmission problem—continually popping out of fourth gear. So I figured I'd just have to put up with it all, somehow.

By now it was mid-afternoon, time to leave for Atlanta. I had hoped to buy a jack, but I didn't have time. Anyway, it didn't matter too much, since my spare was flat. Before leaving, I had one more task. I had to crawl under the car and disconnect the heater cable.

Why, you ask? Let me explain.

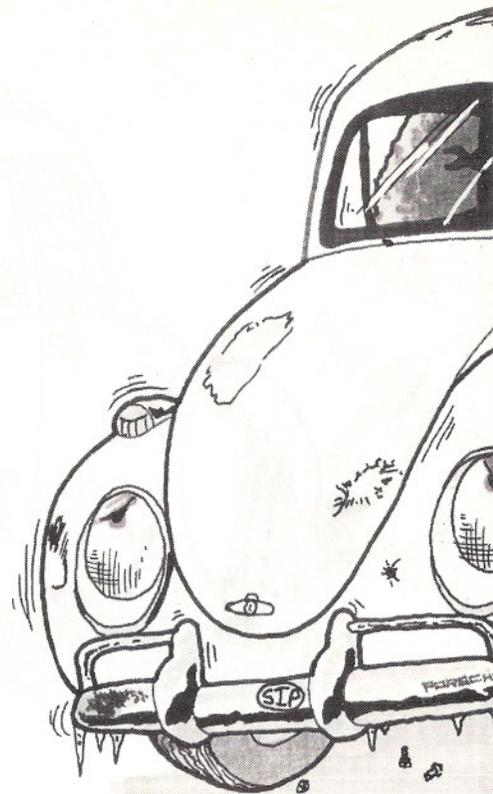
Last month I discovered that my heater cables were broken. I found this out one night returning from another out-of-town trip. It was twenty degrees or so that night, and since most of the rubber lining had long ago rotted away from around the doors and the trunk, cold air came rushing in through a million cracks and holes. Also, it came in through several holes rusted out in the floor, through the dashboard, and through the fusebox. (Now I know why the fusebox is supposed to have that little plastic cap.)

Lloyd, at 60 miles per hour that wind was *cold!* It must have been about twenty below in the car! I kept twisting and turning the heater knob, but nothing came out. By the time I got home, my legs were so stiff I had no feeling in them. I could hardly walk. I was worried about *frostbite*.

After that Arctic night, I took the car to the little tin shed owned by a man who does occasional repairs for me, and asked him to fix it.

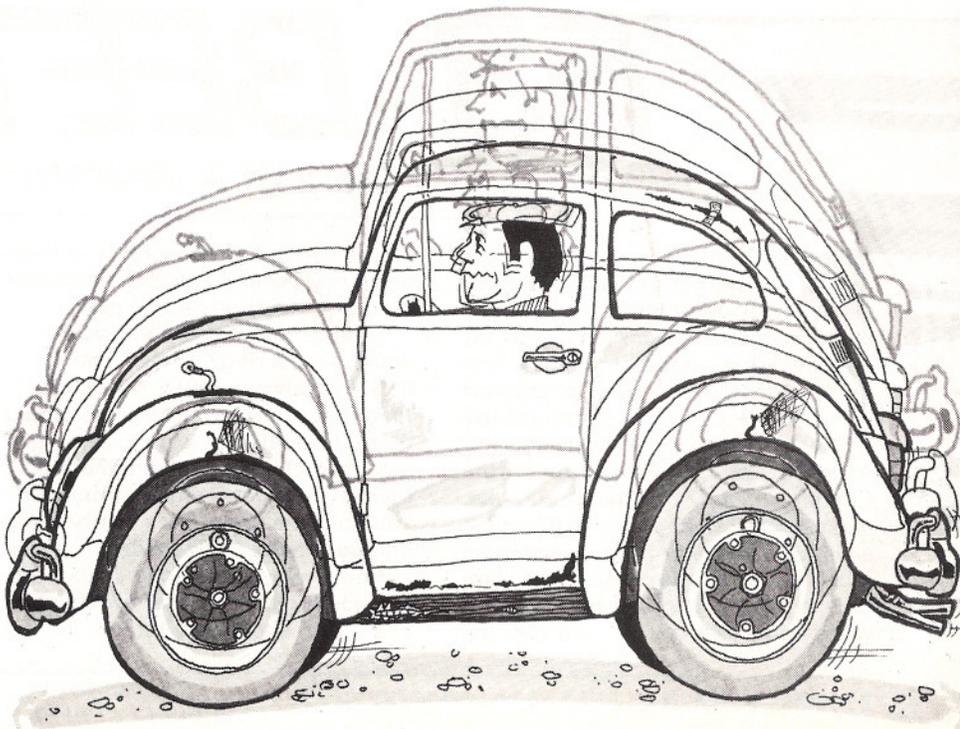
He fixed it, all right. A little later I took another trip to Atlanta. This time, it was a bright, warm, beautiful spring day. *Very* warm, I soon noticed. *Too* warm. I rolled the windows down and turned the little side windows towards me to bring in some outside air. It was *still* too hot. In fact, it was starting to feel like an *oven* inside that car.

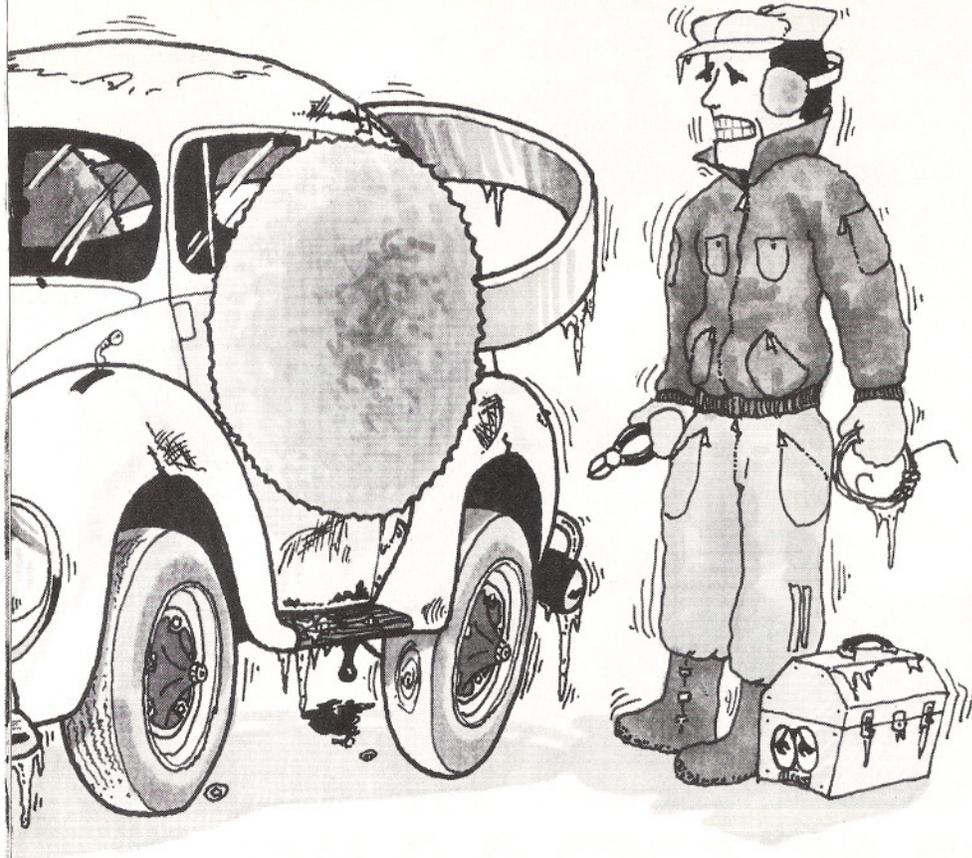
I noticed that hot air was *pouring* in through the heater vents. I tried to turn the heater off. No good. I played with the knob for several minutes, twisting it back and forth. Nothing. Hot air kept roaring out of the vents, and kept doing so for the entire trip. I survived by



taking off my shirt and frequently wiping myself with a damp towel.

After that trip I did a little exploring under the car, and learned that the heater cables had snapped, and that you could crawl under the car and wire the heater open—*wide* open—or shut with a couple of pieces of bailing wire. So you could either have no heat, or the





meant I had to take off my jacket and crawl under the car and reconnect the baling wire, with only a flashlight to guide my frigid, trembling fingers. I finally managed to get this done. Then I pulled the brick from under the back tires (my portable emergency brake), got the car rolling down the slant of the parking lot, and bump-started the engine. (I forgot to mention that I've been having starting problems, too.) A few kicks and coughs from the engine, and we were off.

A few miles down the road, though, and we were both freezing. There was still no heat coming out of the vents on Chuck's side, and frigid air was pouring in through all of the apparently thousands of cracks and holes I mentioned earlier. So finally we stopped, and once again I crawled under the car with the flashlight, and, with arctic blasts of freezing wind roaring over, around, and through me, I rehooked the baling wire. Meanwhile, Chuck stuffed my sleeping bag around the corners of the trunk, hoping to cut off some of the air coming in through there. (I always keep my sleeping bag—along with a complete tool kit, spare parts, signal light, extra food, a case of oil and other odds and ends—in the car. I figure it can't hurt.) He also stuffed newspapers over the holes in the floor. All this helped some. It was still a chilly ride, but it was tolerable.

All in all, the old car held up fine. We got back to Columbus around 7:30 a.m. (The trip took a little longer than expected—I was so sleepy that I probably covered a lot of extra miles weaving back and forth across the highway.) After dropping Chuck off, I made it home, sinking into a much-needed sleep.

That was yesterday. It's mid-afternoon now, and after I finish this

Continued on page 91



equivalent of a roaring bonfire—feast or famine, no middle ground. Someday, I decided, I will fix that. Someday.

Anyway, for this latest Atlanta trip the weather was a bit cool, but not uncomfortable. I decided to leave one side of the car's heater open, and one side shut. That seemed a reasonable compromise.

I picked up Chuck, who was going to Atlanta with me. He told me that yesterday, upon learning we'd be taking my new Bug, he had written his will. He said he wasn't leaving anything to me, but if I returned him alive and uninjured, he might change his mind. I in turn told him that if he didn't put too much pressure on the rust spots underneath his feet, he probably wouldn't fall through the floor to the highway below.

Before leaving, we had to rig up something to keep the transmission from popping out of fourth gear. At Chuck's suggestion, we tied a shoestring to the gearshift, then tied the string to a short spring, which we could then hook under the passenger seat, holding the gearstick in place in fourth. To downshift, I just had to tell Chuck to unhook the spring. Ingenious, no? It actually worked pretty well . . . considering.

The trip to Atlanta was (perhaps surprisingly) uneventful, except for the vague aura of suspense that hangs over any lengthy trip in a car that potentially might collapse at any moment. Chuck found a lot of amuse-

ment in playing with the horn. I probably should say a few words about that horn, by the way.

When I bought the car, I discovered that the horn—along with numerous other things—didn't work. So I asked the guy who works on my car—the genius who rigged up my fire/ice heater arrangement—to replace it. Well, he did put a new horn in. But he wasn't able to connect it with the horn button on the steering wheel, because *that* wasn't working either. So instead, he left a couple of feet of hot wire dangling out of my dashboard. In order to make the horn honk, I have to grab the wire and press the open end against bare metal on the dash. When I do this, sparks fly, an acrid burning stench fills the car, and the horn coughs out a feeble, anemic sound that's impossible to describe: "B-b-b-b-b-eeeeee-urrrp-p-p-p!" Unlike the cheery, familiar little VW honk, my horn makes a noise like a drunken lamb might make just before passing out after a night of revelry.

In Atlanta, after I had taken care of business, Chuck and I met some friends for a late supper. We didn't know just how late it would be, however. We talked for several hours, solving most of the world's problems, and finally left the restaurant around 4:30 a.m.

It had gotten really cold outside, and we decided it would be best to reconnect the other heater hose as well before starting the drive back. That

ZEN & THE \$600 BEETLE

letter to you I'm going into the back yard to do some work on the car. No major repairs or anything—just a few minor points, a few little things that need touching up. Like, on the way home from the grocery store a few hours ago, I bumped across a railroad track and the engine suddenly cut off. I got out and opened the hood, only to find that hitting the track had knocked the air cleaner off the carburetor and shaken the coil off the engine housing. I hooked 'em back up in a minute or so and was on my way. But I want to make those repairs a little more permanent. And there are a couple of other things I want to look at, too—like the left front turn signal (it doesn't work), the adjustment on the headlights (they shine up into the sky at weird angles, instead of onto the road—it looks like I'm giving ground signals to UFOs), the emergency brake, the non-emergency brakes (they're getting pretty mushy), the left rear wheel (it's making an awful racket), and so on. And I need to put a board under the battery, since it's almost rusted through the floorboard. Like I said, nothing major—just a few little things to touch up. I do wish I could figure out why I keep finding big chunks of metal in the oil after each oil change, though . . . that worries me a little.

I don't want you to think I'm driving some terrible wreck of a car or anything. It's actually not in bad shape—for a twenty-three year old, \$600.00 car, anyway. Just needs a bit of regular maintenance and TLC. And judicious doses of the Muir book.

Some Zen monks, I've heard, try to cultivate the view that every person and object you encounter should be regarded as a great Master who has a lesson to teach you. Thus, even the most aggravating and obnoxious people and situations you encounter become teachers of value.

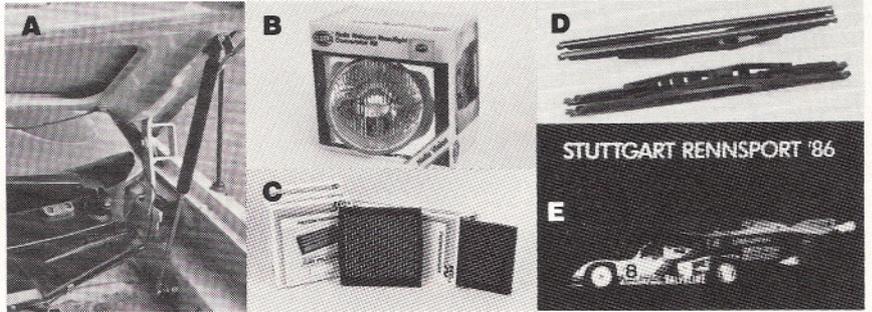
I like that idea. I'm trying to view my Bug as a Zen Master. During our time together I feel sure I will learn many things, not the least of which will be Volkswagen repair and maintenance. And, of course, patience.

I told Chuck about viewing my Bug as a great Zen Master. However, he wasn't impressed. "Whoever heard of a German Zen Master?" he snorted. "If you want a Zen car, get yourself a Japanese model—not a \$600.00 German wreck."

Zen Master Chuck is currently teaching me patience in dealing with sarcastic friends with no understanding of the beauty and style of the classic VW. 

Your friend,
Jim

PRICE SLASHING SALE



A. 924 HOOD KIT SPECIAL

Throw away your 924's annoying hood rod and convert to the 944's hi-tech German OEM hood shocks. We offer Weltmeister's complete and easy-to-mount kit. Fits all 1977½–82 Porsche 924 except the Turbo. (Earlier models can use the kit if you remount the charcoal canister.) Regularly \$59.95, now on sale for \$49.95 plus \$3.00 shipping.

B. HEAVENLY HELLA LIGHTS

In search of enlightenment? These bright white Hella quartz-halogen lamps let you see further, better and more safely, regardless of weather conditions. The standard by which other lamps are measured. They provide an enormous amount of light; you'll never overdrive your headlights again. All lights come with 55/60 watt bulbs. Please specify 6 or 12 volt. Sold for off-road use only. Regularly \$82.00/pair, now on sale for \$59.90/pair plus \$3.00 shipping.

C. K&N LIFETIME AIR FILTERS

These amazing K&N air filters often outlast the life of your engine. Simply clean the filter once a year with K&N cleaner and re-oil it with K&N oil. That's all there is to it! Besides longer filter life, independent laboratory tests confirm a flow rate increase of 21–28% over standard filters, giving you more power and a longer living engine. Available for: 911 1967–73 non-CIS, 914-6—\$23.95; 911 1973–83 CIS—\$39.95; 914-4 (except 1973 1.7) and all 924 (non-Turbo)—\$34.95. Please add \$3.00 shipping and specify year and model of Porsche.

D. DUAL GT WIPER SALE

Eliminate poor vision while you're driving in hazardous weather conditions. These dual GT wipers have twice the wiping power of regular blades and their integrated washer jets deliver windshield cleaner directly to the wiper area. You'll clean up on these prices! Regularly \$44.95, sale priced \$32.50 plus \$3.00 shipping. (Please specify year and model of Porsche.)

E. TIME'S UP!

This is the last chance to get your 1986 Stuttgart Rennsport calendar. Measuring a large 17 × 22 inches, this beautiful calendar contains 39 full-color photos of your favorite Porsches and looks great on any home or office wall. Stay up to date in style! Only \$10.95 plus \$2.00 shipping.

ASK FOR IT

This is the most asked-for catalog among Porsche owners. Some ask for it because of its great selection of premium-quality accessories, precision tune-up and rebuilding parts, and race-proven performance kits. Others appreciate our up-to-date technical information, money-saving Tech Tips and price-busting sales. Whatever your reason might be, Automotion Catalog #7 is yours for the asking. It's FREE with any purchase, or send \$4.00, refundable upon any later purchase.

Sale prices end February 28, 1986

AUTOMOTION®

3535-V Kifer Road • Santa Clara, CA 95051 • (408) 736-9020