



Above and right: When it comes to Porsche 356s, John Gregory's workshop/barn is something of an Aladdin's cave, with an amazing variety of types and models, some in mint condition, others in stages of damage or disrepair. Some belong to clients for Gregory's personal count now is only six, far short of his 17 peak.

Far right: John Gregory — Mr 356 — unbounded enthusiasm for the early Porsches.







## MR 356

Amongst Porsche 356 enthusiasts there's none more confirmed than John Gregory who has owned almost 70 of them.

"THE SPEEDSTER was an incredibly exciting car to drive in the 1950s. It was like a cross between an aircraft and a motorcycle and at high speed you certainly felt like you were flying.

"I just wanted to drive it every waking moment I could. Anywhere. It was like a drug. When there was a full moon you just wouldn't get me home. I'd just drive and drive until I was ready to drop. Then I'd get home in the early hours, grab a nap and I just couldn't wait to get behind the wheel again. There were times then when I'd be at the wheel of my first Speedster for 12 hours a day, seven days a week. And when I wasn't driving it, I had withdrawal symptoms and I became very hard to live with.

"I think I did 48,000 miles in that car in the first year I owned it — nearly 80,000 kilometres . . ."

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Wall-to-wall 356s. Apart from his cars, and others he's maintaining or repairing for clients, John Gregory has a mind-boggling cache of parts imported new or stripped from wrecks, from wheel nuts to complete engines.

JOHN GREGORY is more than just an enthusiast who has owned somewhere between 50 and 70 Porsches over the past 25 years. He is probably Australia's greatest practising authority on what he believes is the panacea to modern day motoring ills — the 356.

Gregory fell in love with a Porsche's slippery shape one day in 1956 when the marque's father in Australia — Norman Hamilton — pulled into his service station. Just as Hamilton had been enraptured at his first sight of a 356 coupe in the Austrian Alps some six years earlier, so John Gregory was love-struck.

Shortly afterwards, one of Hamilton's customers brought his early 356 coupe to John for service, and the more he looked into Porsches, the more he liked. The following year he bought a black Speedster off the showroom floor of Arthur Wylie Motors.

"It was a Super 75," John recalls, "with chrome wheels, and both a full and the half-tonneau cover which was then available. It looked magnificent and it really wasn't too expensive. About 2180 Pounds with all the extras, I believe."

In those days, Hamilton's service didn't have the reputation it enjoys today, largely because it was sub-let to other firms. Dissatisfied with what he was getting, John Gregory bought a workshop manual and began increasing his knowledge of the marque.

"I got back to the service station with the manual and then set about pulling every nut and bolt out of the car," he said. "I think I left only the wiring loom. I was fascinated. Those little cars were so ahead of their time you wouldn't believe it."

"Fast? They had an unexplained ability to maintain fantastic average speeds. As there weren't many police on the roads then you could travel all the time between 110 and 160 km/h."

"I used to be able to do Melbourne to

Sydney fairly comfortably in eight and half hours in that old Speedster. And many times I did Essendon to Albury in around two hours.

"But the incredible thing was that even at 160 km/h, I was still getting about 11.3 km/l (33 mpg)!"

At that stage Gregory's business, Carrera Motors, had grown to specialise in VW repairs and servicing. Of Lebanese descent and fluent in five languages, he had arrived in Australia in 1952 aged 19, following an apprenticeship with Ford overseas.

His first job here had been with Devon Motors working on Fiat, Simca and Alvis, mainly specialising in wheel and chassis alignment work. But after dabbling in a service station for a year, he had approached BP and opened his Essendon centre.

With Gregory's mounting interest in Porsches, culminating in the purchase of another (a cabriolet) from Wylie in 1959, Carrera Motors began to take in more and more Porsche repair work.

It was the same year that he approached Norman Hamilton and through him obtained an appointment from the Stuttgart works as an authorised repairer and service agent, a recognition he held until late 1975.

When the credit squeeze hit in the early 1960s, the motor trade stopped dead. Faced with minimum one-third cash deposits and none of the leasing or reliable finance facilities we have today, buyers stood back and business after business went to the wall.

In 1962, Carrera Motors took over much of the official service work for Norman Hamilton, handling new car preparation, after-sales and warranty work, while Norman and Alan struggled through the recession. Carrera Motors expanded to employ 15 men. Gregory meanwhile went from one Porsche to another, often owning more than one at a time.

In 1973 John Gregory and his brother

George dissolved the partnership they had established in 1956, and John took his repair equipment to form a new Porsche sub-agency and repair and service facility. But import restrictions struck soon afterwards, making trading very tight, with no cars to sell. And after two years John Gregory again took his equipment to a new factory he built at Mordialloc. He carried on with two employees mainly specialising in the service and maintenance of Porsche 911s until the strain of working 16 to 20 hours a day, six or seven days a week, became too much for him.

Several major operations later in June 1979, he simply closed the doors on his business, and moved with his cars, his parts and his specialised service tools, to a country retreat.

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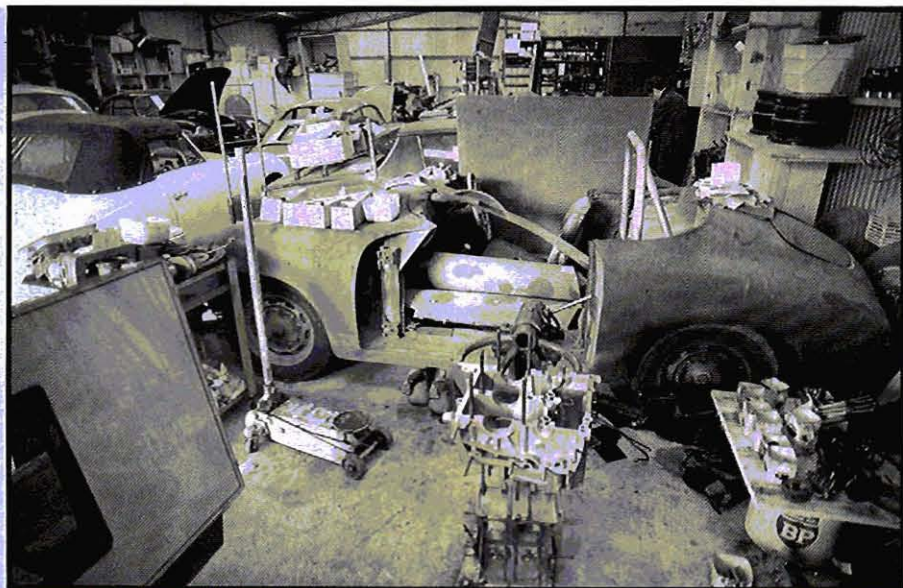
The billowing clouds opened like the vault of a volcano as I pointed the Speedster onto the broad, gently undulating plateau just north-east of Bacchus Marsh in Victoria. And as the winter's sun cascaded onto the winding ribbon of bitumen parting wild grassy fields, a lone wedge-tailed eagle soared majestically overhead. High country, Victorian style and close to heaven.

I checked the scrawled note on my lap as the Speedster swept and dived along the ridge road, with the rev counter flickering around '5', the icy wind whistling down my neck. A hedge, then a gate, next on the right and you'll see the big shed... A gaggle of 356s under an exposed carport. A squat, purposeful bright yellow 911 on the grass nearby. This had to be the place.

As I nosed the Speedster onto the concrete apron and the massive doors to the huge corrugated iron farm shed swung open, the years peeled back.

There ahead was a collection of Porsche 356 models, panels and parts,





like I have never seen. A Speedster, a convertible, several B coupes, a couple of Cs, a sprinkle of A models, and a lonely 914. Then down the back where the skylights showed that the concrete floor ended and the dirt began, an extraordinary collection of similar cars in various states of disrepair. Covered in rubble, tyres, trim parts, or sometimes just mooching dustily alone.

This is the world to which John Gregory has retreated since he abandoned the ulcers of day-to-day business. He has actually had the farm since 1969, although the brick house which now stands adjacent to the Porsche shed was only completed two years ago. He grazes a couple of racehorses there and spends three to four days a week on the property, alternating between there and his suburban Melbourne home.

Porsches now remain his consuming passion, but they are supplemented by other business interests in, of all things, a pizza shop, a rollerskating rink and his management and maintenance of a batch of Space Invaders and other electronic amusements.

Not all the cars in the shed are his. Gregory's personal peak of 17 Porsche 356s, which were once all housed in his Frankston workshop, has now dwindled to six, plus the 914 and a 2.4 911S taken out to 2.8 litres. The oldies include a Speedster in fully-dismantled sandblasted form, two cabriolets, a 356A with a sun roof, one late model twin-grille B coupe and "my little hot car", his 1960 B coupe. This is a fully lightened club racer with an 11.5 to 1 compression ratio, 1750 cm<sup>3</sup> engine, turning out around 105 kW.

John Gregory's collection of these now-rare cars began with an appreciation of their potential worth nearly 10 years ago. In 1973, he began buying 356s as prices hit rock bottom. That was the point when the cars were too old to be modern, but not yet old

enough to become classics.

"I was buying Speedsters for \$1600 then," he recalls. "I had five in 1973 and the most I paid was \$2000. I kept saying to friends — 'these little cars are going to be worth a fortune' — but no-one wanted them."

John Gregory has spent the years since scanning the papers and snapping up bargains. He's in a better position than most to assess the true worth of a car. Sometimes he has just gathered parts; sometimes whole cars in need of repairs. He has refurbished them from his extensive mechanical parts stock, repainted them, and sold them to eager buyers. Several of his collection are presently earmarked for this type of restoration and sale when he gets the time.

Sometimes he imports parts. A few years ago he landed 14 four-cylinder Porsche engines from the UK. There are shelves bulging with bits, and of course the wrecks out the back are parts bins in themselves.

"At any one time, I reckon I would have \$30,000 of 356 parts alone in stock," he says with conviction.

These days John Gregory still maintains Porsches — a mix of 356s and 911s. Customers are introduced by word of mouth recommendation. They usually deliver their cars for repair or service to Balaclava and John drives them the 100 km trip to the farm, repairs them there, and then returns them to Balaclava. As a result, the cache of rare Porsche parts is unseen by most of his clients. In fact only four or five have ever viewed the facility and its treasures.

John Gregory's plans are patently simple. He simply intends to continue repairing, maintaining, owning and racing Porsches.

And when John Gregory ultimately drives or services his last Porsche, he'll inevitably be remembered as he's known, with respect and appreciation, as...

"Mr 356".

