

BEST OF BRITISH

Bling it up to speed.

There's no dime to waste in the Bentley Azure.

It's power-packed with every plaything that money, prestige and eleven cows can buy. Oh, the hide.

Words and photographs by Sam Tinson.





“TURN OFF THE engine and step outside the vehicle.” The state highway patrolman was not a happy bunny, and neither was I. Moments ago I'd been cruising California's Highway 101 in a Bentley Azure, top down, Springsteen on the radio and San Francisco on my mind. Now I was forced to watch my grovelling self reflected in a cop's mirrored Ray Bans as he threatened to throw me in jail and have \$650,000 of luxury convertible impounded. The tiny part of my brain that hadn't shrivelled in terror wondered where he'd find a tow truck big enough for the job.

It was all the car's fault. Bentley Azures are hand-built in England at the painstaking rate of around 400 per year. That makes a Mercedes S500 look like cheap mass-produced tat. The Bentley factory is a spotless, leather-scented wonderland where highly skilled craftsmen, like automotive Oompa Loompas, use very small tools to do very fiddly jobs, very slowly.

Among those jobs is the construction of the famous Bentley engine, a monumental 6.8-litre Twin Turbo V8 that harnesses 336kW of power and a staggering 875Nm of torque. For fans of pointless comparisons, that's like having two-and-a-half 7-Series BMWs under the bonnet. Or six Mini Coopers. In real terms, it means one prod of the hand-drilled alloy accelerator, and the whole world becomes a dwindling speck in your rear-view mirror.

In my case, that dwindling speck included a very pissed-off cop. When he told me how fast I'd been going I was gobsmacked. I remember a gentle surge of power away from the stop sign, but there had been no uncivilised burning of rubber — nothing as common as a

rorty engine note — to warn me I was over-egging the V8 pudding. Both turbos had fired up and were spinning like merry-go-rounds, and yet in the cabin there wasn't so much as a whistling air vent. And this in a convertible. What were Bentley trying to do, get us all arrested?

The fact is, Bentley are not in the business of building traffic-light dragsters. They know that those who can afford their cars are generally beyond having to prove their manhood with screaming revs and smoking tyres. But they also know that, deep down, the mega-rich are just as partial to Top Trumps performance specs as the rest of us. Which is why the Azure — despite weighing almost three tons and containing more wood panelling than Claridges Hotel in London — can waft you from standstill to 100km/h in under six seconds. Very, very quietly.

WHAT IT LACKS in noise, it makes up for in poise. The Azure is architectural in scale and styled like an art deco ocean liner. Unfortunately it corners like one too, thanks to a huge rear overhang which harks back to the Forties, when sweeping poor people off pavements was acceptable sport.

Inside, the profligacy continues, with acres of polished walnut and wall-to-wall Italian leather. Eleven cows go into making an Azure, and no doubt they queue up for the privilege. All the knobs and switches are solid metal (there is no place for plastic in a Bentley) including push-pull air-vent controls like the choke buttons on a WW2 fighter. It's this refusal to kowtow to modernity that lends the Azure its magic; while the rest of the automotive world scrabbles to keep up with fashion, Bentley doesn't feel the need.

So what of our friendly law enforcement officer? He let me off, thanks to some smooth-talking from a Bentley rep and some equally expert grovelling from GQ. Now, what would have happened if we'd really put our foot down. **GQ**

NEED TO KNOW >

Engine 6.8-litre Twin Turbo V8
Power 336 kW @ 4100rpm /
875Nm @ 1800rpm
Economy 19.5 litres/100km
Price \$649,000 +
Enquiries www.bentleymotors.com