

The Car Fire, 1997

Our first VW Passat burned out on the Austrade between Turin and Milan on the Saturday 15th February 1997. Here is the account with pictures that I wrote at the time.

Scanned from a copy.

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To whom it may concern.

Motor car GAP XJ 13 completely burned out.

Here is a brief account of the destruction of our motor car in Italy.

On the 15th of February 1997, we were travelling back home to Garmisch-Partenkirchen from the French ski resort, Serre Chevalier (near Briançon) where we had been on holiday with part of our family. The shortest route home took us through Italy. The car was our own Volkswagen Passat, GAP XJ 13. At about 14.15 we were travelling in the middle lane on the Autostrade between Turin and Milan and I was driving. The weather was clear and bright and the traffic light.

Soon after we passed the 37 km mile post (from Turin) the engine lost power, as if the car was running out of petrol (it was not). I pulled over to the inside lane, hoping to get to the next emergency telephone, but there was a slight incline and I had to pull into the first available lay-by, opposite the 38 km milepost and just in front of the 87 km milepost from Milan. As we stopped we noticed smoke coming from around the bonnet; there was no indication of any problem from the warning lights in the car.

The smoke increased rapidly and the paint on the bonnet started to blister so we immediately got out and away from the car. One could now see small flames underneath the engine compartment. We returned cautiously to rescue our handbags and the car papers and were also able to get much of our luggage out of the boot. We could not empty it however because the fire was increasing in intensity. We retreated to the other end of the lay-by to what we hoped was a safe distance. There was now a lot of smoke blowing across the motorway.

We did not attempt to pass the burning car in order to get the SOS telephone which was ca 300 m further on. Instead we signalled to the passing traffic, some of which slowed. One car stopped on the other side and the driver indicated he would telephone the emergency services.

After about ten minutes, during which time the fire continued to intensify, a breakdown truck arrived followed by two police cars. The break down men attempted to tackle the fire with fire extinguishers. They beat it back sufficiently to enable them to get our coats and the picnic bag out of the car itself and our skis out of the boot. Then they too retreated to a safe distance. By this time another police car had arrived together with a further break down wagon. The traffic was guided into the outside lane and had to slow down and to stop because the visibility through the blowing smoke was almost nil. Then a fire engine arrived. After assessing the situation the fire brigade kept away from the blazing vehicle until the petrol tank exploded; then they extinguished the blaze. Everything was over in about 30 minutes; all that remained of the car was just a charred shell; everything combustible was gone.

The wreck was taken, together with us and our baggage to the nearby town of Santhià. Later after the details were sorted out, we were driven to Turin airport to collect a car, the hire of which had been arranged by the ADAC. We stayed overnight in Santhià to recover and returned home the next day to Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

It is doubtful if it will be possible to determine the cause of the fire definitely. However the fact that there was an initial loss of power, and that the fire continued to increase after the engine was switched off, suggests that the fuel line between the petrol tank and the engine had broken or become disconnected. The car, although eight years old, was still in good condition. It had been maintained regularly by the VW agent (Auto-Heitz in Garmisch-Partenkirchen) from whom we bought it new; the last complete service was carried out just two weeks (ca 950 km) before the incident.

As we and the maintenance men were able to get most of our baggage out of the car, the only things we lost, apart from the vehicle, were the many small things kept in the car itself. We were a bit shaken but quite unharmed; we count ourselves very fortunate.

Peter Borrell
19. February 1997

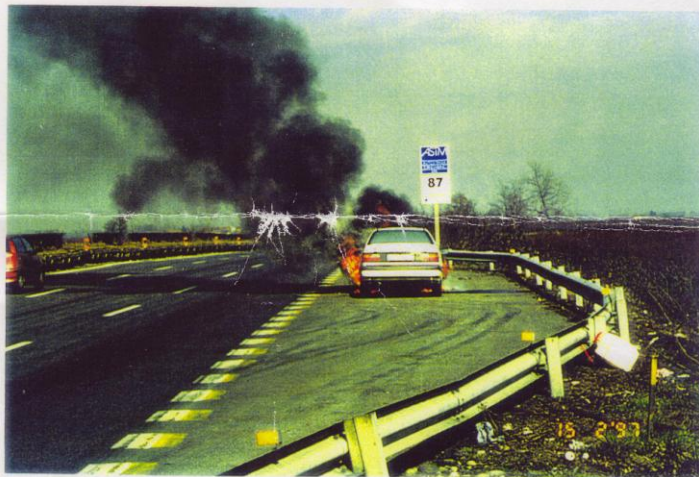
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Totalschaden an unserem PKW, VW Passat - GAP-XJ 13
Motor car GAP-XJ 13 completely burnt out

15.2.97



ca. 14:15



ca. 14:20



ca. 14:30

Peter Borrell

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Totalschaden an unserem PKW, VW Passat - GAP-XJ 13

15.2.97

Motor car GAP-XJ 13 completely burnt out



ca. 14:35



ca. 14:35



ca. 14:50

Peter Borrell