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'Gum drop' cars visit to DC marks fall of Berlin Wall

Submitted on November 9, 2007 - 6:21pm. [Kellie Ell](#)

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Click on photo to enlarge or download: Thomas Boghardt, historian for the International Spy Museum, poses by a Trabant car. Boghardt, dressed in a typical border guard's uniform, said the cars were used by residents of East Berlin before Germany was reunified. – Photo by Kellie Ell

WASHINGTON - Chris Zbinden steers his miniature car down the streets of the Nation's Capital. The engine, also know by its owner as "the entertainment system," roars noisily in the cool autumn breeze, as it zips in between much larger vehicles. The Matchbox-like car is one of about 30 in the United States, shipped over from East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"This is kind of cool! Seeing the Capitol through the windshield of a

Communist car," Zbinden said excitedly.

Zbinden is one of eight other owners of Trabant cars who were cruising around Washington on Friday. The car collectors are members of the Trabant Club of America who drove down from Baltimore to honor the 18th anniversary of the fall of the wall Nov. 9, 1989.

In Socialist East Berlin, the cheap, simply designed Trabants were the only cars available. Later, the cars symbolized freedom as millions around the world watched East Berliners driving their undersized cars across the border to West Berlin.

The International Spy Museum honored the occasion and the unique mode of transportation by throwing a parade of the rare automobiles in front of the museum, complete with a German band.

The museum drew names every half hour, giving visitors a chance to take a ride in one of the cars.

Zbinden, a human resources representative from Harrisburg, Pa., bought a 1981 model a few years ago on eBay. After living in East Germany and the Czech Republic, he said he "always wanted one."

Dubbed one of the 50 worst cars ever by Time magazine, Zbinden drives his "quality" car to work, to the supermarket, anywhere, "at least three times a week," and he said he's found people posing by his car for photos more than once.

"They look like GUM DROP CARS!," 7-year-old Tayloranne Brown, of Los Angeles, screeched as she ran down the street in front of her parents.

Zbinden smiled.

"I love the way people look at this car. They just don't know what to think of it," he chuckled. "Mostly, they just look and laugh."

Despite, temperatures in the 40s and drizzly skies, a fair number of people showed up.



Click on photo to enlarge or download:

Chris Zbinden, of Harrisburg, Pa., drives lucky admirers around Washington Friday as part of a tribute to the Trabant car and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Zbinden said he has always had "an interest" in the cars and their culture. – Photo by Kellie Fil

"This is typical weather of East Berlin," said Thomas Boghardt, historian for the museum.

"Now you'll get full experience of what it was like to drive in one of these."

Boghardt, who was dressed in a traditional "Grenztruppen," or a border guard's uniform, said the cars are fun to ride in once or twice, but for anyone who had to ride in one every day it was a nightmare.

Getting above 40 mph requires some effort, and the body is made of plastic because the government in East Germany

... wanted to save steel, making

the car a virtual death trap in

an accident.

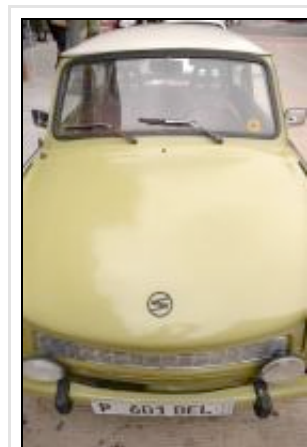
Boghardt said Germany briefly banned the car in the 1990s because it has no pollution control system and emits dangerous gases. Today, however, the car is popular among German college students who can "buy one for a few marks" and it doesn't use much gas.

Despite gaining freedom after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many residents on its eastern side felt a loss when western customs dominated.

"There was a certain nostalgia for the East," Boghardt said about preservation of the cars. "Certain feelings of pride. Not everything in East Germany was bad."

Zbinden is one of the loyal East German-culture lovers.

"This car is better than drugs," Zbinden said. "If you're pissed off, you just drive it for a few minutes and you're in a good mood again."



Click on photo to enlarge or download: The greenish-yellow Trabant was among one of several colors of cars at the Spy Museum celebration Friday. Other cars were gray, blue and white.-- Photo by Kellie Ell

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