

Kropf's journey to StarFest 2018 and beyond.

Brett & Debra Kropf attended StarFest 2018 and wrote:

Mercedes-Benz Club of America (MBCA) hosted the week long StarFest 2018 in Birmingham Alabama very near Mercedes-Benz US International, Inc. (MBUSI)*. The event was filled with a variety of events to accommodate all types of MBCA members. From Museums to Rallies, and Race tracks to Off-Road adventures, each day was a combination of events with a culmination of a dinner to enjoy.

The event began on Tuesday May 15 and ended with dinner on Monday May 21 2018. There were varying fees for each event and each participant was able to pick and choose the events and days they wanted to attend. We had planned to arrive Thursday, but due to delayed parts arrival and final preparations to our 126,000 mile 2005 E55 AMG, we arrived on Friday morning and checked into the Hilton hotel.

Our MBUSI factory tour was scheduled for Friday afternoon and we were told at the beginning that we were among the first members to register almost a year prior. Those who registered later had tours earlier in the day and week. As we gathered, we learned more about the MBUSI factory (where our 2007 GL450 was built 11 years ago) and the extreme attention to detail that Mercedes-Benz puts into the process of building a vehicle, and care to create a campus for their employees that is top-notch, including childcare and separate fitness center for all employees of the factory. They have an open office floor plan and the President is right in the mix with staff. We were shuttled to the factory (also on the 966 acre site) in a Freightliner bus (which is also a Mercedes-Benz affiliate) and entered the precision world that makes Mercedes-Benz "The best or nothing". As we entered the enormous plant, we could see the attention to detail everywhere. The area where the food was created for workers to purchase was inviting and smelled amazing. When we entered the plant, we were to walk single file in only designated areas as not to interrupt the flow of progress that was to create C-Class vehicles from start to finish. Our guide Mason, is a MBCA director and has given many tours. His knowledge made the experience even that much more impressive. There were motorized robots on predetermined paths delivering parts and mail throughout the facility and there was the occasional worker on adult size tricycles with carts also moving about. The freshly painted chassis rolled by overhead as they proceeded for further assembly. As we walked and turned left and right, stopping at pre-designated stops, it was as if we were part of the process. Workers were assembling the vehicles with perfect precision and timing. We walked past the lines where dashboards and other interior components were being installed. Window glass and other components were inserted into painted doors which were then assembled to the matching color bodies in intricate synchronization. Engine and transmission drive trains were 'married' to their matching chassis close to the end.

Early in the body assembly area, there was lack of robotic activity due to a large fire at their magnesium product supplier. Magnesium strengthens aluminum components, but without the magnesium parts, no more vehicles could be created until the supply can be reestablished. We were witnessing the last day of the line in motion until the magnesium parts supply returns. Even with the slowdown of the robotic activity, the plant was still humming along and was very impressive. We enjoyed the tour so much, and it was something that will be remembered and discussed often when people inquire about our Mercedes-Benz vehicles, which happens often.

After our tour, we attended the Friday night reception at Mercedes-Benz of Birmingham (Irondale Campus). It was held as an elegant buffet within their very large and immaculate 20 bay Service area. It was difficult to believe that Benzes had been worked on in this room earlier that day. It was pristine and the dinner was perfection. More and more, it was becoming evident that attending this event not only aided in our learning more about the vehicles, but also about the other attendees who enjoyed their vehicles as much as we did.

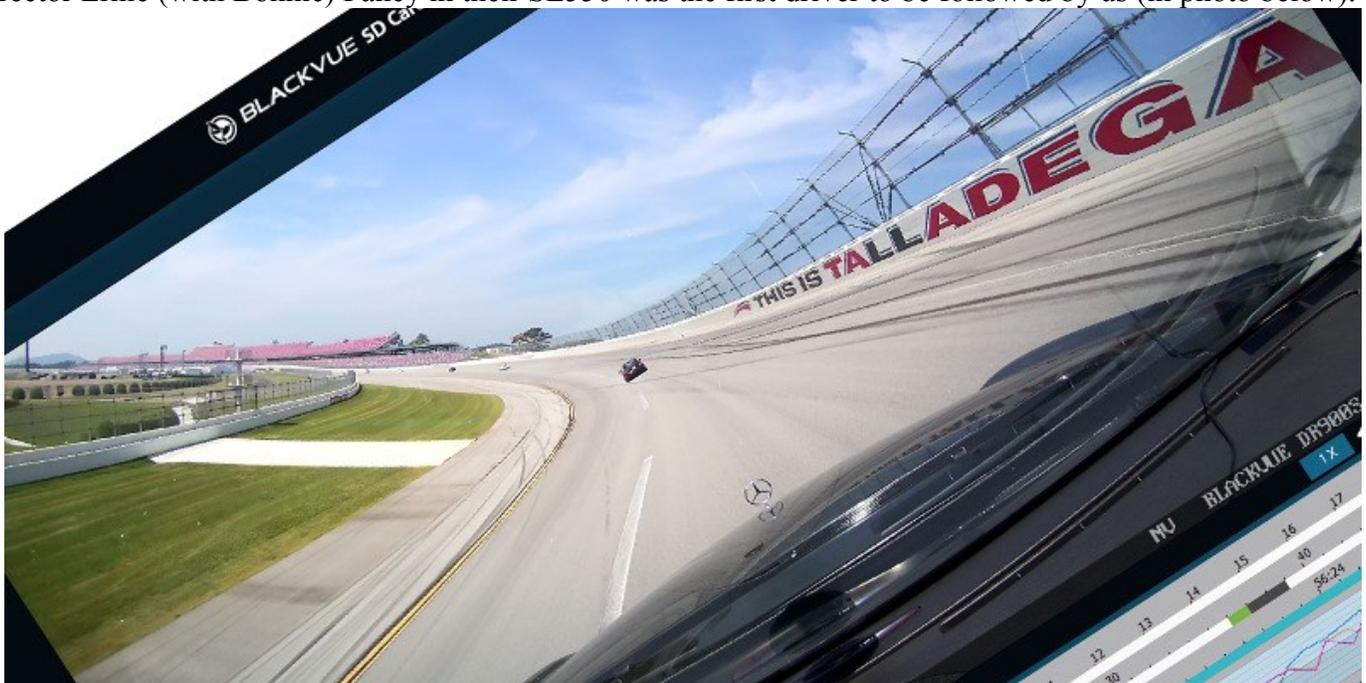
(Half of the dinner attendees are sitting in the other half of the shop past the center row of toolboxes.

To my MBCA-NEPA friends, that's Wesley in the bottom right.)



We were originally scheduled to attend the Concours event at the MBUSI plant on Saturday, but just weeks before, the AMG Private Lounge (a world wide organization of AMG owners) scheduled an afternoon event at Road Atlanta. While the track was 3 hours from Birmingham, it took us nearly 4 hours to get there, and only 2 hours to return (crossing the time-zone each way). This AMG event included a Meet & Greet with fellow AMG owners (some Brett knew from the forums), a Hot-Lap on Road Atlanta with an expert AMG Driving Academy trainer at the wheel of a C63 AMG, and a bit of personal track time driving another C63. For the Hot-Lap, we were provided full face helmets and held on tight! Amazingly, Debra held her phone camera to her helmet and got amazing video of the heart-pounding exhilarating experience! After our Hot-Lap, Brett then took the wheel of a C63 and ran through a short autocross track. An amazing experience worth the 6 hours of driving to and fro. Returning, at a Dunkin shop stop, we installed our brand-new BlackVue 4K Dashcam, and Debra got familiar with it by connecting her smartphone to it while Brett drove back to Birmingham Saturday evening.

Sunday morning, we awoke early to head to Talladega Superspeedway for the Autobahn Experience led by a pace-car with no passing. This track is known for its 33 degree banked turns and when the car reaches 110 mph, the driver can take hands off the wheel and the car stays centered on the track throughout the turn! About a dozen cars were in each grouping and the older or slower cars were grouped separately to allow for each car's ability or driver's comfort level. This was an awe inspiring experience! That first banked turn felt as if the car was going to take off like an airplane. The sky to the right made us feel airborne. As we came around the back turn, an American Flag was on a pole to the right, and the way the car approached it on the banked turn raised goose bumps down my arms and was a glorious sight to witness. We informed the drivers that were in front of our vehicle that we would be recording their laps with our new Dashcam, and our MBCA-HudMo Regional Director Ernie (with Bonnie) Fancy in their SL550 was the first driver to be followed by us (in photo below).



(Dashcam screen capture tilted 33° to present the perspective of the steep 33° banked turn.)

Everyone was so exhilarated that the conversations about the experience were as if we had all just tried out for our debut to be a professional race driver. But before the event proceeded, we were instructed on the rules, and it was mentioned that none here would be offered the chance to become a professional race driver, so just go out there and enjoy ourselves with no passing, and keeping a safe distance from the vehicle in front of us.

After the morning event, there was a break for lunch and we drove to a nearby restaurant with others that were at the track. We enjoyed some southern cooking with such choices as catfish, okra, mudpuppies, and hushpuppies with sweet tea or lemonade. It was scrumptious.

We returned to Talladega for the afternoon events that included timed Acceleration Runs through the wide pits lane, and Autocross. We choose the Acceleration Runs over the Autocross which were running in the same time frame. (Brett raced on 1/4 mile drag strips for years.) For the Acceleration Runs, only a driver with no passengers was allowed to be in the vehicle. These continued on throughout the afternoon. The runs resembled

a ¼ mile drag strip race, although each ran individually, and wasn't quite a quarter mile. The drivers were having a blast launching their cars to see how fast and controlled they could be in the short distance.

We regrouped again at the hotel for the Accel/Autocross Reception where we met and ate with more MBCA members from around the country. Awards were given for the Acceleration Runs based on car categories, and to Brett's amazement, he won a trophy without even realizing there was a competition. Everyone was cheering for each other and chatter was going on around the table as to who drove what vehicle. The Autocross scoring was not finished in time for the meal, and would be announced on Monday evening. It was another fun evening.



(Ed Bolian's Cannonball record-holding Mercedes-Benz CL55 AMG)

Monday was the Barber Course and the Off-Road event. Brett & I had business to attend to during the day, so did not attend either. In the evening though, we attended the final awards reception that featured Ed Bolian - who still holds the Cannonball Record of driving from NY City to LA in 28 hours 50 minutes driving a Mercedes CL55 Kompressor AMG rigged to the nines with speed trap defying electronics. He now does Memorial Cannonball type runs with police officers benefiting families of fallen police officers throughout the country. More details are easily found by searching 'Ed Bolian' on YouTube. During this dinner, the Autocross, Off-Road, and Rally winners were announced. Again, everyone was cheering on the winners and having a great time. As the evening ended with many new contacts made and friendships developed, we bade goodbye, and in the morning with a quick breakfast with some of the remaining attendees, we 'hit the road' with countless memories of once-in-a-lifetime adventures and new friendships with fellow Mercedes-Benz owners!

* MBUSI in Tuscaloosa County AL Facts & Figures:

MBUSI created a new corporate culture, based on teamwork and open communication. The combination of German & American team members, with experience from U.S. and Japanese automakers, as well as from Mercedes-Benz, made the “melting pot” in terms of its practices, procedures and corporate culture. Daimler AG invested over \$4.5 billion and continues to invest in MBUSI in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. MBUSI is responsible for more than 22,000 direct and indirect jobs in the region, and has an annual economic impact of more than \$1.5 billion. MBUSI is also the state’s largest exporter, with more than \$1 billion in exports each year to countries throughout the world. Besides body, paint and assembly shops, also located on the Tuscaloosa site are a comprehensive training facility, a visitor center, a childcare and a health and wellness center. The Mercedes-Benz Visitor Center, which houses entertaining exhibits detailing the history of Mercedes-Benz—including its products, technology, and commitment to safety—is open to the public. (Excerpts from <https://mbusi.com/about> & <https://mbusi.com/about/mbusi-corporate-info/facts-figures>)

While most StarFest 2018 attendees drove back home, Debra and I started a cross-country adventure that is still in progress. We toured Carlsbad Caverns in NM, visited my mother in Tucson AZ, and while heading to Grand Canyon South Rim, stopped for fuel in Flagstaff AZ. I there discovered that the E55 wouldn't accept fuel and the Check Engine light had come on! Checking for codes with my tiny OBD2 device and the Torque Ap on my phone, I found a P0453 Evaporative Emission Pressure Sensor fault. Debra found a M-B dealership a couple miles away, so I drove and found a brand-new dealership, Mercedes-Benz of Flagstaff. In their parking lot, I lifted the hot hood and was checking things when Pat, a Parts Advisor suggested that I get out of the hot sun and check it further in their enclosed Service entrance similar to Keeler Motor Car's. I drove it in, and James Hargan - Service Advisor took immediate interest in us and our AMG, and offered to bring it into their shop. I do nearly all of the mechanical work on our cars, but couldn't quickly find anything obvious, so consented to let them take it in. While the Tech Kelly was checking the car, many of the dealership personnel came by to meet us, and made us very welcome with drink and snacks, and WiFi for our phones and laptops. None there had attended StarFest 2018, but were very eager to hear of our Birmingham and Atlanta adventures 1,700 miles away. The Service Advisor let me enter the shop, and Kelly showed me what he was checking on. The 3 year old dealership had actually just moved into this new location from across town, and not all of their equipment and parts had been transferred yet, so they weren't able to determine the actual cause of the fault by closing time. I still had enough gas to get to Grand Canyon and back the next day, so I offered to take it as it was. We changed our schedule to stay over in Flagstaff for two nights, and could return for further diagnosis after Grand Canyon if necessary. James brought me an invoice totaling \$0.00 because they couldn't pin-point a fault. Utterly amazed, I gave a tip for Kelly, and thanked them for their efforts. Garrett in Sales, and AJ in Finance welcomed us to stay and use their facilities until they left for the evening.



Knowing that we're from the East Coast, and possibly never be back again, this is simply an amazingly friendly group of professionals exemplifying Gottlieb Daimler's motto "The best or nothing at all!"

The next two times refueling, I had to pump very slow, but since then, it's been accepting fuel as normal. Many of these W211 models have had fuel pump/senders under the rear seat that would crack and leak stinky gasoline fumes into the cabin. Many had complained to MBUSA for years, and in 2015, MBUSA extended the warranty for 15 years and my 2005 E55 had its complete fuel tank and pump & filters system replaced by Keeler Motors. I now recall that upon returning to Kingston after the repairs, I tried putting fuel in and the same event happened where I had to pump it very slowly. So I'll be contacting Keeler Motors when I return.

Debra was getting a pounding headache and felt nauseous, so we were kind of glad we were checking into a hotel for the night or two. While there and looking online, she found that these were symptoms of altitude sickness, and found that the suggested hot bath helped open the capillaries, and relieved the symptoms. While Brett had been to Grand Canyon multiple times, we didn't want to miss bringing Debra to this amazing natural wonder for her first time, and the next day we drove to the South Rim. Debra has vertigo issues and wasn't sure how well she could handle viewing the canyon from the rim. As the ground opened up before her she held tightly on to Brett until the unstable feeling of falling passed. Still, watching some of the daredevils walk right up to the edge and dangle their feet into the canyon was unnerving, but she persevered and for several hours we enjoyed the views, took many pictures, and stayed until the sunset. It was incredible and a memory she'll never forget. We returned to Flagstaff that night and filling our gas tank went well, so no need to return to the dealership the next day. Nevertheless, we had a nice second night of rest at the same friendly Choice hotel.

We drove through Las Vegas only long enough to meet with a friend from Pleasant Mount PA, and on to the road again to Reno. We drove on some of the most barren roads through desert and could see for miles, and the E55 AMG's Cruise Control was set at some rates never before set at, imagining Ed Bolian's Cannonball Run. Now night time, we decided to stop overnight in Tonopah NV at a rather economical hotel (as no way we were staying at the creepy Clown hotel, a smokey casino, or the brothel, and there wasn't much else to choose from). We checked out in the morning and noticed the Nevada Museum across the street. It was a mish-mosh of antique mining equipment, WW1 air force bomb testing artifacts including an RCA built camera guided glide bomb, and even a rickety horse drawn jail wagon. We didn't take the time to go inside as we wanted to get back on the road to our journey to Reno to visit Debra's eldest daughter and her husband.

We 'pit-stopped' in Fallon NV at a Jack-in-the-Box. As we walked back to the car, we heard a pop and hiss as we watch the car sink. Brett knew immediately that we had an Airmatic System failure and would likely need a tow. We checked our GPS and found we were only 60 miles from Reno. The next thought was: Wow! We're glad Brett upgraded our AAA from the standard 3 mile free tow to Plus which provides up to a 100 mile free tow. We called and a flatbed tow was scheduled. While we waited, the manager let us use an external outlet on the building for Brett's diagnostic computer. While the car's air suspension was at its bottom, Brett could still turn the steering wheel a half a turn before the tires rubbed against the fenders, so he jockeyed the car close to the building so he could use the computer plugged into their outlet. The bright sunlight made it very difficult to view the laptop screen, and he couldn't discover the actual problem in the bright sunlight before the AAA tow truck arrived. So Brett packed up the laptop and helped the driver Paul load the car, which was a real challenge as the car sat extremely low, but Paul had some nice planks to prevent anything from scraping. We were soon on our way to Reno. Paul grew up there and the tow ride was like being escorted by a private tour guide. He made the 60 miles fly by and we made a new friend. He unloaded the car in our Quality Inn hotel parking lot. We got checked in and Brett turned on the diagnostic laptop to hear only the hard drive screeching and see a blank screen. Using Craigslist, Brett located a hard drive locally but he didn't have the software backup with us.

He contacted a few of his MBWorld.org buddies and started to download the 35 GB Restore Software, and then discovered that our hotels WiFi was so pitiful that it would take more than a day to download. While fighting with this dilemma for a couple of days, and Debra having to use the lobby's wired network to work remotely, we decided on giving up on this hotel & trying to reload the software, or Brett repairing the Airmatic himself.

Brett visited the MBCA.org website to get some references from club members in the area. The Sierra Nevada section was having a picnic the next weekend, and the host's name Christy & Marcus Dodson's phone number was listed on a flier. Brett called for their recommendation of MB repair centers. There was an M-B dealership the other side of Reno, and a very good "Indi" (independent) MB shop 1.5 miles away. Brett spoke with the Indi owner Tony Willoughby who said if we could get the car to the shop within the hour, he would have his tech look at it before leaving for a long weekend. Another quick call to AAA and the E55 was flat bedded to Michel Bros., Ltd.. ("German Car Specialists", "Specializing in Mercedes-Benz") The tech Steve soon discovered that the Airmatic compressor wasn't strong enough to complete the tests. Tony let me order a new compressor from FCP Euro (that provides Lifetime warranty on all parts they sell), and I had it drop shipped to Michel Bros. for

Monday morning. The owner had Chance drive me back to the hotel at no charge. Stuck in Reno now for at least Friday-Monday, we reserved a rental car and the hotel shuttle drove us to the Reno airport to pick it up. We loaded the rental car with our belongings and checked out, and drove to our second hotel in Reno that had very good WiFi. We got some sightseeing around Lake Tahoe, Reno, and Pyramid Lake via the Hertz rental car.

Monday mid morning, we got a call from the shop saying the new Airmatic compressor allowed the test to complete, but the left front Air Strut was leaking enough to wear out a pump, and needed replacement. His supplier could have a new Arnott Lifetime Warranty Air Strut delivered the next morning. We approved the repair and Tuesday early afternoon, we received a call that the repairs were completed. We both drove over to the shop apprehensive about the bill because Brett usually does his own repairs, and we were from out of town and feared being 'taken'. This was not the case as the labor rate was less than most Mercedes-Benz dealerships, and Tony, the owner went above and beyond to make us feel welcome and allow Brett to be involved, although he knew that we were still more than 2000 miles from home.

We headed to our hotel for the last night of our unplanned 12 day extended stay in Reno that included some unexpected sightseeing of Reno, Lake Tahoe, Virginia City, Pyramid Lake, and some more fun family time. As we were packing in the evening, Debra tripped over the desk chair in the hotel room. After a night of little sleep, she feared that she may have broken something. After checking out, we visited Renown Urgent Care, and her fears were confirmed as the X-Rays showed she had broken her foot at the fifth metatarsal. The doctor prescribed crutches and a boot. Brett said that with no room in the car, he'd be her 'crutch', and we left the office with Debra in a boot. (We often said that we were so long in Reno, that they 'gave her the boot'.)

We drove to the Nevada/Utah border, and noticed what looked like chunks of snow in our next hotel's parking lot. Upon returning to park the car, we realized that these were chunks of white salt from some vehicles that had been on the Great Salt Lake for races. The next morning, we got a better look at the area, and met some drivers (some from other countries) that were in a coast-to-coast road rally passing through.

As we were entering Salt Lake City, we were in the center of 3 lanes on a 6 lane divided highway in thick traffic with no where else to go, and we hit a jaw jarring pothole. We stopped shortly thereafter for a meal, and as we exited the parking lot, we noticed the front tires were scrubbing on tight turns. We soon passed a new style Mercedes-Benz dealer and shortly thereafter realized the rubbing was severe. Pulling over to examine the vehicle, Brett noticed that the front right tire was extremely toed in. Having some tools, he decided to move the tie-rod end out about a half an inch to get the wheel pointing straight again, but wondered what was broken or bent. We contacted that dealership, but it was near closing time, and the shop would open at 7 AM. I grabbed a Star Magazine to lookup the local MBCA Club(s) to hopefully find a nearby Benz DIYer, but could only leave voicemails on the phone numbers I could find. We called some hotels and found that all of the nearby hotels were booked due to numerous weekend events. Not wanting to chance greater damage by driving farther, we decided to drive to the dealership and make further plans from there. We found a 24 hour Walmart next door and drove over to snooze for the night so we could be first in line at the dealership in the morning.

At 7 AM, we pulled up to the Mercedes-Benz of Draper UT service entrance and it opened right up for us. The Service Advisor - Taylor Bice took us right in. He had heard about our problem from the sales team the night before and was ready to help. They put their top tech - Dan Johnson, on it with decades of expertise (and he had once owned an E55 AMG). We waited in the gorgeous customer lounge with excellent WiFi, beverages, a wide variety of breakfast items, and treats. We learned that this was a another brand new dealership location and they had their open house celebration scheduled for the following Monday.

While this and other dealerships have seen the Star Magazine, many don't realize it is a publication of Mercedes-Benz Club of America. No one here knew much of MBCA, so we elaborated and they were very interested. We spoke of our experiences at StarFest (the major MBCA event) and we were treated nearly like celebrities.

Before long, the Service Advisor Taylor was showing Brett that the front right Spindle was bent from the pothole, but not in stock. They offered to do an alignment which should get it close enough to drive the couple thousand miles back home without delaying us longer waiting for parts. They invited us to stay at the dealership even after the work was complete as we had some remote computer clients to help before heading on the road again. We also talked to other service customers about the many benefits of being a MBCA member. It was especially nice to get 10% discount on the service for being a MBCA member (but you usually do have to ask for it).

(On to Helper UT, Moab, Grand Junction, Colorado Canyons, Garden of the gods, and the final trip home.)