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1954 SIATA 208 CS

1954 SIATA 208S Mexico Competition Berlinetta

- Ernie McAfee's intended entrant for the 1954 Carrera Panamericana
- One-off lightweight alloy competition Berlinetta
- The only coupé on the short-wheelbase spider chassis
- Period West Coast competition with McAfee and backer Bill Doheny
- Original matching number 2-litre V8, twin four-barrel Webers, 5-speed box, long-range fuel tank

This unique SIATA competition Berlinetta was commissioned by famed west coast racer and importer Ernie McAfee, with the backing of oilman sponsor Bill Doheny, for entry in the 1954 Carrera Panamericana.

Ernie McAfee had made a name for himself as a record-breaking hotrodder. The talented Kansas-born specialist was the main importer of Siatas to the US West Coast, with backers Tony Paravano and oil man Bill Doheny supporting the purchase of 25 Siatas to set up a dealership. After finishing 5th at the 1952 Carrera Panamericana behind only the works entries of Mercedes, Ferrari and Lancia, McAfee planned a 1953 bid with a Siata – the perfect advertisement for his fleet. Initially, he intended on taking BS537 but the factory felt it wouldn't be ready in time so he took a 208 Spider instead. Nicknamed "Holey Terror" thanks to McAfee's extreme weight saving methods, the Spider had an off near Oaxaca but both driver and car were fine. He joked to the Road and Track Reporter who was amongst the crowd "We're coming back next year but I might have to drill a few more holes!"

It was with the 1954 race in mind that 208 CS BS537 arrived in Long Beach Harbour. With its unique super lightweight berlinetta coachwork, chassis BS537 is the only 208S coupé on the short-wheelbase box section spider chassis. It sports an extra-long range riveted fuel tank, and its racing-spec 2-litre Fiat V-8 breathes through twin four-barrel Weber IF4C carbs.

Arriving just in time for a warm up race at the Palm Springs Road Races, McAfee and Bill Thomas came 5th. Two weeks later, it ran at the Orange Empire Sports Car races at March Air Reserve Base but it failed to finish and on the 19th of November, the Siata didn't cross the border for the Carrera.

The car was in fact prepared for the event, and McAfee's signature holes in the chassis are still evident. Whilst the reason for its cancelled entry has never been confirmed, Fiat's announcement of the end of 8V engine supply to Siata meant that there was little point in McAfee promoting the 208 any further. Back in McAfee's showroom, the Siata was pushed to the back of the store whilst Ernie focused on his thriving Ferrari business. Everything was going like a dream for popular McAfee with the powerful 121LM taking outright early wins in 1956, but in April the unforgiving tree-lined course at Pebble Beach ended in tragedy when McAfee missed a gear and slammed his Ferrari into a pine.

Distraught with the loss of his friend and partner, Dohney locked away the crashed Ferrari and the Siata coupe, occasionally taking the latter out for a run on Sunset Boulevard. After several approaches, Doheny sold it in 1958 to Wesley Belt, in whose ownership it remained for over twenty years. Raced several times at Palm Springs, Belt had plans for a power upgrade and body modifications but the more extensive work never went ahead. The Siata instead sat in bare-aluminium in the back of famed Indy race car fabricator Bob Carroll's workshop where it attracted the attention of many a local Art Centre student.

Discovered in 1982 in Belt's back yard, she was first restored by Tony Krivanek for owner Rick Cole, who reversed certain alterations to the coachwork and re-installed the original Fiat V8. Appearing at a variety of vintage events, the car was also reunited with its original engine during Cole's ownership, before sale to Nick Soprano. Acquired via Fiskens for the exceptional collection of its present European owner after its lengthy stay in California, Thomas Steinke of Steinke Sportwagenservice of Hamburg has completed works of scholastic detail, returning the SIATA to its 1954 Carrera livery.

Lightweight and superb to drive, BS537 is totally different from the handful of other 208S coupés constructed on the oval-tube chassis, with pop-up headlamps and other road trim not suitable for a purpose-built racer.

With her Carrera specification, this SIATA 208S is bound to be coveted for one of the world's outstanding collections – with her arresting appearance and racing bloodline, she is eligible for and will command attention at the very best concours and other events.

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