Detroit 2023 – famous for its automobile history and ‘Motown’ music – here’s how it looks today

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Lisa Stolarski of The Antique Touring Company, at the wheel of her splendid Model A Ford, outside the first Cadillac Building, on the site of Wilson Carriage Works, the first Ford workshop.

Guy Loveridge reports from his recent visit to the ‘Motor City’…

When car people thought of Detroit they used to think of the cradle of the American

automobile industry. They thought of Henry Ford, of Cadillac, of Lincoln and William Durant. They thought of the golden years of the motor car, of Ford's $5 day and the first mechanised production line. Every American automotive trope was rooted in the city on the banks of a Great Lake, where you go downtown, and Canada is literally just across the river, and you actually travel South to get there. It was the throbbing, pulsing heart of American automobilism and did as much as many and more than most to sustain the fight against the Axis powers during World War Two. Detroit was, right up into the 1970s, genuinely "Motor City" and no one could argue.

Unfortunately, not everything lasts, and with the oil crisis, and emission control, came redundancies and closures of plants. The city took a body blow and then came the American economic crisis of 2007, with the sub-prime mortgage disaster which slammed down on the city even more. This resulted, in 2013, in the entire city filing for bankruptcy with a debt of in excess of $13 billion and apparently no way, other than a "fire sale" at the Detroit Institute of Arts" to solve the problem. With poverty of course comes other issues such a social unrest and drug problems. Michigan had a big problem with Detroit, and they grew to be ashamed of both the city and the automobile industry which gave it birth.

"Crime, drugs, decay…take a bullet proof vest" were the warnings my friends gave me when I told them I was heading to Detroit. I had been invited to the Detroit Grand Prix. The Indy race was "back on the streets" for the first time in a decade and there seemed to be a buzz about the place. I ignored the most recent BB "doom and gloom" documentary with Ben Fogle and boarded my flight with optimism. This was NOT misplaced. From stepping off the aircraft at Detroit Municipal I was treated with friendly respect and polite curiosity. I was a guest of VisitDetroit.com and they had put together a wonderful package of places to go and things to see, and above all, they allowed me the time and space to get out of the hotel and wander the streets of the city, to talk to everyday folks who were going about their business.

I was out early some mornings, before 8am, and also out late in the evening, sometimes until almost midnight. I never felt unsafe. I admit I was only walking around the middle of the city but, I must be honest. It is an amazing city with a wonderful story to tell. During my

time, not only did I watch some pretty awesome racing, but also got to visit “Hits-Ville USA” – the home of Motown Records, where I genuinely bumped into Martha Reeves of Martha and the Vandellas, but I also checked out some of the astonishing architecture that the automobile built! The Fisher Building, Henry Ford’s Bank and others are truly breath-taking.

I immersed myself in car culture and visited the classic Detroit sites – The Ford plants, the Chrysler Factories, the first Cadillac building etc, but what is most surprising is that Detroit is still a little bit ashamed of the car, the Ford Highland Park facility, built in the early years of the 20th century, is still there, BUT – and this is almost criminal, it is NOT marked for its unique place in history! It is a concrete crushing plant now.



Ford Picquette Plant museum, the “Alphabet Collection” live here.

You have to go down the block and into a parking lot to see “Model T Plaza” for any reference to its past.


MODEL T
PLAZA
GLORY
SUPER MARKET
CSL Plasma
DTLR
Your Style
CUSTOM TEES FOR ALL EVENTS
kids
CITITRENDS
FASHION
MENS WEAR
SUITS & ALTERATIONS
Ashley Stewart
WOMAN
CAPTAIN JAY'S
FISH & CHICKEN
MODEL T
PLAZA

Model T Plaza!

Next to that lot, by a drive-in thrift store, is the world's first car sales showroom. Boarded up and redundant. Abandoned. Ford used to insist on paying in cash, so when he had thousands of workers at the plant, he built an under-ground narrow gauge railway from his pay office to his bank down the street! It's all still there, just unused, and unloved.

I was fortunate to be able to be given a bespoke Model A ford tour of the city and its great automotive sites by Lisa Stolarski of The Antique Touring Company. Lisa, a former business manager in the car world, pitched an idea for such a venture to an open competition. She did well and then, with a momentous leap of faith, backed her ideas and she and her husband decided to go for it! They now operate a trio of Model A Fords, a Phaeton, Saloon and "Woody" so can cater for up to 7 guests at a time and deal with all weathers.

Lisa is a friendly and hugely knowledgeable host, talking as she drives one through downtown and out to the various sites, be they open lots with barely the outline of a footprint, or a completely decaying and scheduled for demolition former factory. She will explain how apparent rivals lived side by side in leafy suburbs and how the industry was astonishingly incestuous with people joining up and then falling out, and also how it became a magnet for workers.

The industry had an appetite for labour that has led to an amazing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural mix today that has completely enriched the city. The labour force was drawn from across the nation and across the globe. Ford's $5 day was also cleverly structured. You got the industry standard $2:60 a day, BUT if you attended in a timely manner; were never late; did not misbehave or cause fights; went to Church on Sunday; took after hours classes in English if it were not your native tongue etc – your end of month bonus was a rounding up of that figure by $2:40 to give you the $5 a day. There was no shortage of willing takers at Ford's.

I was lucky to spend nearly four hours with Lisa and could have spent a whole lot more. They are an absolute MUST do if you are visiting the city. https://www.antiquetouring.com/

Interestingly whilst driving around with Lisa, even in the abandoned leafy suburbs there was only one “classic car” that was not being driven by Lisa, a 1953 Studebaker, sitting patiently in a back yard, hopefully for a restoration “one day”.

Detroit is waking back up to it past and learning to not only live with it but to embrace it and celebrate it. Post 2013 Detroit motor shows felt like the industry was there on sufferance. But into the 2020s and there is a genuine desire to make the city rise up once more. That the Grand Prix came back from out on Belle Isle and onto the streets was one sign of this; that the NFL draft will be happening there next year is another.

Walk into the General Motors Global HQ on the river side (photo below) and you will see examples of GM cars from the early years right up to hyper car and electric projects of today. This is no PR bluff, Detroit is on its way back and car nuts like me can only celebrate and enjoy the revival. I loved it so much; I am going back in August!



The original General Motors HQ building(s).