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Going, going, sold! - A glimpse into world of car auctions

By Len Clarke

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CHIBA — The site is so vast that minibuses are being used to ferry people around. Rows of spotlessly clean cars, from Porsches to station wagons, stretch out in every direction. But this isn't a Disneyland parking lot: it's an auction. On this sprawling expanse of land in deepest Chiba, thousands of vehicles are sold each week — and Joe Public never gets a look-in.

Japan's car auctions are justifiably famous, yet even dedicated auto enthusiasts have probably never seen one with their own eyes. Entry is restricted to certified buyers, dealers and their guests, with members of the public strictly forbidden. So when we were offered a chance to tag along recently with veteran dealer Colin Shea, we couldn't resist.

To give an idea of the size of Japan's vehicular auction trade, the site we visited alone saw 12,062 vehicles go under the hammer, more than 6,500 of which wound up finding a buyer. There were six auctions of similar size being held throughout the country on the same day, making this seriously big business. Despite — or maybe because of — the economic downturn, auction sales average over 50,000 vehicles a week nationwide.

The action takes place inside two gigantic halls in the main building. Dealers place their bids using 1,200 computer terminals, and each car is up on the screen for about 20 seconds before the next one comes along. The entire process is conducted with an almost military precision.

So why buy through auction? The advantages are two-fold: prices are often much lower than you could expect from conventional dealers, and the selection is incredible. If you've ever wanted to own a car in Japan — and I mean practically any car — it will eventually come up at auction. As a member of the public, the process is simple: find a dealer you like, decide on the vehicle you want, and wait. If it's a popular model you're after, they're sold every day; for scarcer models, it can take a little longer.

We had been expecting row upon row of people-movers, but while there were certainly plenty of those, we also saw a variety of older and more unusual models. There were no fewer than 48 variants of Porsche 911 on offer. Other desirable drives included the Honda Odyssey, Lexus Harrier and Porsche Cayenne, with literally dozens of each being sold. In the exotics area, gems from Aston Martin, Bentley, Ferrari and Lamborghini sat alongside Rolls Royces, Nissan GT-Rs and coveted vintage cars.

In other words, the entire dealer network becomes the forecourt from which you choose. With space in Japan at a premium, most dealers, including Shea, use the auction as their showroom. Keep in mind that this is also where the dealers buy, and all cars are checked by an independent third party before going on the block.

Shea is one of a number of veteran foreign dealers in the auction trade who specialize in shipping cars to overseas markets, while also servicing expats living in Japan. He says that back in the day there was only a handful of foreigners doing this, but it's a different story now. While we queue up for lunch, we see people from at least a dozen different ethnicities waiting alongside us. And with bargains as good as these to be had, who can blame them?

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