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# A Drive through Classic Americana in a Polestar 2



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The wind picked up. A dark funnel cloud loomed behind the flickering image of Jack Nicholson's face in *The Shining* before tearing through the screen and doing unconscionable damage to some lovely '70s pickup trucks. I flinched in my vegan-fabric seat and then flinched again as the Polestar 2's taillights inexplicably flashed. That had already earned me a visit from two of my neighbors at the Radium Drive-In asking me to please turn the lights off. I would have if I had known how. I felt extremely guilty about ruining *Twister* for them.

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At least I wasn't alone in disturbing the peace. Throughout the night, there were many headlight sweeps and key fob beeps. It's a problem, according to general manager Paul Hengehold. He's been at the Radium for five years and in the drive-in and swap-meet business for almost 50. "I just dealt with an email from some guy in a brand-new electric car who couldn't get his lights to turn off," said Hengehold. "He says, 'It's not all your fault, but I had a bad time. I'd like my

money back.' I'm thinking, 'Not all my fault?' It's not even 1 percent my fault.

Anyhow, I said he could have a free entrance to [Ghostbusters](#) later this month.

In these newer cars, you can't just click your key to the left and keep your radio

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The first drive-in theater is considered to be the work of Richard Hollingshead, who set up a screen in a Camden, New Jersey, parking lot in 1933. The idea was supposedly inspired by his mother, a large woman who didn't like—or fit in—movie-theater seats. The drive-in offered a more casual approach to moviegoing, no dressing up or shushing required. The idea behind other drive-in—and, later, drive-through—businesses was the same. Easy. Fast. Casual. Plenty of personal space. It was freeing in a time when people put on stockings and hats to go to the store. It felt space age in the '50s and '60s, surrounded by chrome and afterburner taillights. The future of cars was going to be swivel seats and fold-down cocktail tables. We would never want to get out.

By the '70s, Americans were less delighted with their cars, viewing them as hungry, deadly guzzlers belching lead, as tinny little boxes with uncomfortable back seats and chafing shoulder belts. The drive-through didn't get any less convenient, but it felt more like the past. [American Graffiti](#) did \$115 million at the box office in 1973 by wrapping itself in the warm memory of early-'60s car culture. Fast-food franchises popped up on every corner. Eventually, screens moved inside minivans and SUVs. Eating and watching movies in a vehicle became something you apologized for, something you did just to keep the kids quiet till you could get to your actual destination and finally, finally, get out of the car.

Then 2020 happened and suddenly doing something in public six feet away from others and while still wearing your sweatpants became necessary and much less shameful. Businesses began to advertise curbside pickup. Churches

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the cause of all this—with drive-through tests. The inside of the car seemed

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Still, there's something more *Snowpiercer* than Syd Mead about hiding from a virus in the filtered air of your Toyota Prius. Is it possible to recapture any of the original charm of a day spent driving through? Or is this simply pandemic-forced nostalgia? For kicks, we got the most modern car we could find, the electric Polestar 2, and mapped a journey through Greater Los Angeles in search of adventures that let us stay buckled up with the engine running—er, motor whirring.

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There are plenty of coffee chains with service windows, but we began our morning with something special. La Puente, California, is about 20 miles east of downtown L.A. and consists of about three square miles of one-story ranch houses and fast-food restaurants. Also within its borders is [the Donut Hole](#). You can't miss it. Two giant fiberglass donuts bookend a tunnel through a deep-fried temple. It's been there since 1968, and driving into its dark center is just as

much a thrill in the Polestar as it must have been in a Ford Country Squire—certainly less fummy.

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woman who obviously used to cashless donut-seeking tourists, waved us past and pointed around the corner to a bank. "They have a drive-through," she said, unprompted. On our second trip into the belly of the yeast, I scored a glazed twist and a donut with sky-blue frosting and a sour-straw rainbow on top. It was too cute to eat, so I just let it slide around in its little plastic case on the passenger's-side floorboard.

Drive-through options are everywhere. The most obvious are food related, but once you start looking for them, you'll be amazed at what you can do with a seatbelt on. No need, Jiffy Lube; not in this car. Maybe later, Snap-E Tacos. We weren't in danger of missing a special birthday, but drive-by parties are all the rage. And if we had more time and range, we could even go on safari. At [Virginia Safari Park](#), you can pet llamas from your car window. If you've ever wanted to get up close and personal with a grizzly or two, there's [Yellowstone Bear World](#) in Idaho. There were no bears at El Monte's [Driftwood Dairy](#), but a pigeon leaned over the rainbow-painted Googie arches to eye that donut through the Polestar's glass roof. Interested in something other than milk? California recently tweaked its liquor laws to allow drive-through cocktail pickup, but I'm on the clock and behind the wheel.

It would be poor reporting if we didn't hit a classic burger spot. The site of the original In-N-Out in Baldwin Park is memorialized with a replica drive-through, but it's not serving. There's the oldest remaining McDonald's, opened in 1953, in Downey, but to our surprise, it has always been just a walk-up stand, never a drive-through. Frisco's Carhop was under construction, presumably adding more hop, so our visions of paper-hatted servers on roller skates hooking a tray to the door of the Polestar were dashed. Finally, we hit Bob's Big Boy—a diner with Los Angeles history and worldwide franchises that offers carhop service—although rather than roller-skating delivery, we got a flustered-looking kid with a bag of hamburgers. "What kind of car is this?" he asked. Not a good one for eating hamburgers in, at least not if you want those highlighter-yellow seatbelts to stay clean.

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**Trending:** Best cheap and easy car upgrades | How to add Wireless CarPlay and Android Auto to your stop of the night: the movie. Tell someone you're going to a drive-in and they'll say, "They still have those?" They do! Nowhere near the more than 4000 outdoor theaters that dotted the U.S. in the '50s, but there are still about 300 drive-ins in this country with regular schedules. And with traditional movie houses largely shuttered, pop-up showings on temporary screens are adding to the outdoor viewing options. You'd think that with its 11.2-inch infotainment screen running the Android Automotive operating system, the Polestar could just play a movie for me, but it can't, for safety reasons, so that's how we ended up parked on a concrete hump, accidentally flashing our lights and ruining the moviegoing experience for others.



"This is honestly a huge thing," said [documentary filmmaker and drive-in historian](#) April Wright. "I was at a drive-in outside Buffalo, New York, last fall, and the owner said he has to have five or six people each night just helping people turn off their lights. The cars of the day are a factor to drive-in success. When drive-ins were first built, cars were huge. They had bench seats. It was really

easy to have a comfortable time." But then came bucket seats, which blocked the view for back-seat passengers. SUVs made matters worse, as no one could see over them. But at least "people can bring the whole family," said Wright.

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Vehicles of all kinds sat angled on the asphalt: big SUVs turned hatch-side toward the screen, pickup trucks with lounge chairs in the beds, a pointy C4 Corvette looking like an arrow among apples next to all the bubbly family cars. Stylewise, the winners of the night were the people who brought the vintage Volkswagen vans and the couple in the cherry-red '50s Chevy, but comfort-wise, the folks who came decked out for overlanding with a rooftop tent had the sweetest setup.

"That was a flop," Hengehold said when I told him which movie night I'd attended. "Maybe 200 cars? Now *Frozen*, that was a home run. *Shrek*? Grand slam. We've got *The Lion King* this Friday; been sold out for two and a half weeks. *Grease*? Sold out in mid-July. Brought it back and sold out both nights last weekend. We've got *Ratatouille* next month; already have 280 cars sold. Why pay me \$25 when you could watch it at home? People just want to get out. Families need to get out. It's very sad what's been going on, but it's really helped the drive-in business, for sure."

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With few new releases, classic movies are topping the charts. One July weekend, *The Empire Strikes Back*, playing at multiple drive-ins for its 40th anniversary, was the top-grossing film in the U.S. But even when we get back to normal, the drive-in offers some real perks over watching on your couch. It's great to sit in semi-privacy, chewing popcorn as loud as you want, talking when you feel like it, but still absorbing that group energy of being in a crowd—a collective gasp when a truck explodes or a relieved cheer when the dog is okay. We're social animals. It's good to see other people, even if it's through the car window. Just maybe learn how to turn off your lights.

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