

"My knowledge of all things coconut was limited to my favorite island drink, the piña colada."

Cocomats, an Option by Mercedes-Benz

It was raining here in North Carolina last weekend, a rare occurrence these days in the dry Southeast. I decided to take advantage of this opportunity, so I poured myself a hot cup of Sumatra-Decaf, curled up in my favorite chair with my basset hound, Gabby, and reread from cover to cover one of my favorite books, *M-B's • Sonderausstattungen für PKW • Ausgabe B* (Special Equipments for Passenger Cars Edition B).

On page 38, my eye caught with interest the interior equipment option of *Kokomat-ten* (coco matting), as options listed for the 180b, 180Db, 190b, 190Db, 190SL, 220b, 220Sb, 220SEb, 300d, and 300SL. Wow! Be still my heart! Knowing the highest quality manufacturers of aftermarket cocomats are in Fort Mill, SC, about two hours from my home in Southern Pines, NC, I placed a call to the owner, Jeff Allwine of Natural Auto Products LLC, www.cocomat.com, to arrange a visit.

I arrived in Fort Mill the next day, to be welcomed by Jeff and his wife, Debbie. I was eager to learn more about the manufacturing process and why cocomats have been the floor cover of choice for all luxury vehicles over the years. My knowledge of all things coconut was limited to my favorite island drink, the piña colada.

Coco floor mats are made from a natural material, coco fiber (also known as coir). The coir is a natural fiber extracted from the protective husk of coconuts. The husks, separated from the nuts are seasoned in lagoons for periods up to ten months. Using wooden mallets, the local artisans convert the husk into the coco fiber. The fiber is transferred onto traditional spinning wheels, where it is spun into yarn. Once spun, the yarn is dyed and hand-woven into mats. Still practiced in Southern India, this process is all done with skills learned over generations.

Sisal is also used. Coco fibers come from the husks of coconuts. Sisal comes from the leaves of a plant. Natural Auto Products uses a combination of coco and sisal in many of their color combinations, just like the original cocomats did. As their name implies,

Natural Auto Products offers a full line of natural floor coverings including, in addition to the cocomat, sisal, wool, and sea grass mats, all of which are natural prod-

ucts. The cocomat is by far the most practical and constitutes the majority of their natural product business.

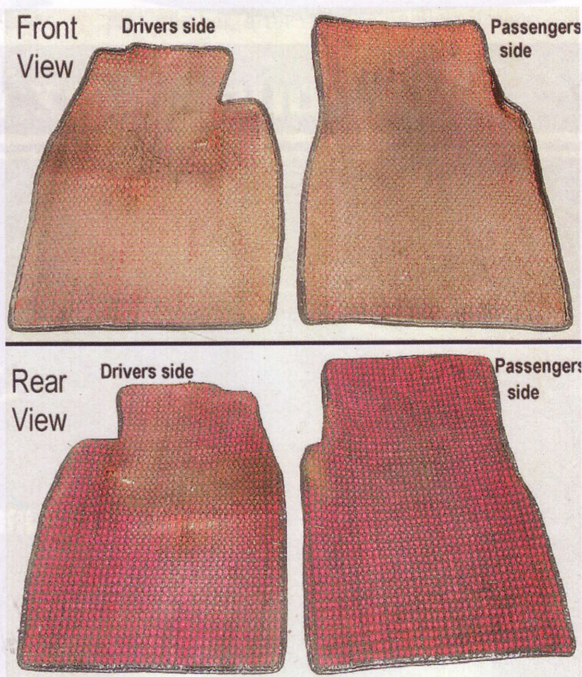
The original idea behind cocomats was



A rare copy of the original 1960 "options" catalog.



Jeff and Debbie Allwine, the Cocomasters.



A pair of original 1956 190SL cocomats.



The family business jewels; over 2500 vehicle patterns.



Table jig saw used to cut the cocomat to the appropriate pattern.

that they were used in cars before carpet, when there was only rubber on the floor. The coco material acted as a carpet but with the benefit that it allowed dirt and sand to filter through the coco material, so you did not see it on the top of the rubber floor matting. Porsche, VW, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Triumph, and many other European cars supplied this type of floor covering. Cocomats were a big hit in the '50s through the '70s, even after carpet was introduced. There were two main U.S. companies and one company in Germany supplying cocomats during the years when they were popular. The cocomats during this period did not include any rubber backing and their quality depended upon which manufacturer you bought them from. Porsche and Mercedes-Benz original sales stickers included cocomats from the factory. These were the highest quality and came from the German manufacturer. One of the U.S. manufacturers



Blue cocomats with white dots in Wisconsin Section member John Lewenauer's 1950SL.

was in Southern California and one was in Illinois, which later was sold and moved to Georgia. The German company mostly supplied the auto manufacturers and new car dealers. When the auto manufacturers stopped buying the mats, the manufacturing of that product line was stopped. During that period, and up to this day, all of the material for cocomats generally originates in Southern India. Jeff purchases his coco materials from this area of India, and the rubber backings from Thailand.

Cocomat benefits are threefold. Aesthetically they look attractive in various color combinations and add a high quality look and feel to an interior. Secondly, dirt will not remain on the surface, but fall through the matting onto the rubber backing. The result is an always fresh looking floor covering. To clean them you simply remove and shake out the cocomat. All this provides wear protection to your car's carpet or rubber mats.

Here's the process Jeff and Debbie use as they manufacture their high-quality cocomat. Each mat is handmade to order. I was shown this process by Jeff and Debbie working together to make up a custom set of cocomats. After an order is received, Jeff selects the correct mat color from his large material inventory. He then proceeds to cut a rough pattern and then backs the mat with its rubber base. The adding of the rubber backing is done in a temperature and humidity controlled room to insure uniform adhesion of the mat to the rubber backing. Jeff then selects the correct pattern from his rack of some 2,500 vehicle patterns, both classics and new models. Clearly, this pattern inventory represents the family business jewels. The pattern is placed on the cocomat and is cut precisely to shape by Jeff using a cleverly constructed table jig saw that utilizes air flow so the mat moves freely during the cutting process. The mat is then given to Debbie for her to add the hand-sewn binding. Heel pads are added, if requested, as a last step. Heel pads are installed on 99% of their orders.

All this is hand done by Natural Auto Products, and all is done with attention to detail and quality. Not unlike the process we go about in restoring our classic M-B's. And, no restored classic is complete without a few options. I can't think of a better look than "Kokomatten" to finish off the final details and, at the same time, protect our rubber floor mats. Here's a piña colada toast to the Allwines for keeping alive an original vintage option. At Mercedes-Benz standards to boot. Cheers! •