

Anniversaries in Monte Carlo

It took some time to begin European excursions in our convertibles, although we are keen travellers and have enjoyed road trips around the world, it was 2014 before we took the plunge to cross the channel. The first drive marked the celebration of two anniversaries, these were for our car club and marque we drive. A group of twelve cars set off through France towards Monte Carlo.

This was to be a trip of almost 2000 miles which would take nine days, the route had been calculated to avoid motorways where possible, driving long distances through rural France is very pleasant and although the journey would take a little longer, the opportunity to explore the French countryside more than made up for the delay. Certain considerations have to be made, foremost are observing for speed limits and keeping an eye out for enforcement officers and making sure we had full fuel for driving on Sundays as many petrol stations away from motorways and cities are closed.



Monte Carlo or bust



Col de Galibier overview

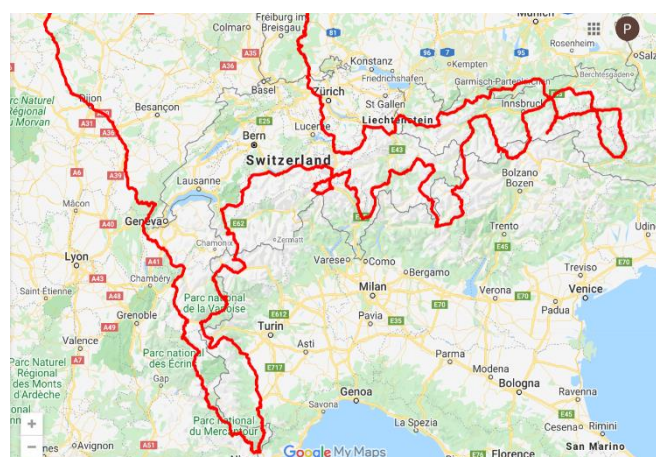
Our initial overnight halt in France was at the Hotel Golf & Spa de la Foret d'Orient, Rouilly-Sacey, Swallows nesting in the eaves greeted us and in the morning the frog chorus from the golf course provided the soundtrack for breakfast. A lakeside hotel in Annecy the following night before we headed to the glorious roads of the Monte Carlo rally with the highlight being the Col de Galibier which on the 22nd June had just been cleared of snow and repaired following landslip, briefly crossing into Italy and a welcome gelato before arriving in Menton, our base for three days. The hotel was conveniently close to Monte Carlo, just a short train journey into the famous principality, or to Italy should you decide to head East.

Despite the extended stay in Menton there was driving to be enjoyed, a circular tour taking in the Col De Turini was followed by an evening blast into Monaco to drive the formula one circuit, we returned the following day by train and spent some time taking in the sights and experiences we all know so well from the races.

Leaving Menton and being on the French riviera we took the opportunity to drive the Corniche to our next stop in St Maxime, a short ferry hop from St-Tropez. Our homeward journey started with a scenic route to our lakeside accomodation in Aix-les-Bains then on to Chalons and from there back to the channel crossing.



Juan Manuel Fangio Memorial



The "Best Alpine Route"

We realised that driving the mountain passes were special experiences, the "Col's" and other high mountain roads are addictive, we immediately set about planning for further trips to the mountains using our Satellite Navigation program, we were able to explore the options for combining as many highlights as possible into a "**Best Alpine route.**"

This would be quite a trek of three thousand miles, incorporating many of the classic mountain passes including: Col de Galibier, Col de L'Iséran, Fluela, Gavia and Furka, Grimsel passes, the Grossglockner, Passo Stelvio, Timmelsjoch and many more, however our plans were to change.

Escort services



The benefits of travelling on an organised driving tour appealed to us, the advantage of having someone select suitable accommodation, provide road books with pre-planned sat-nav routes and licensed walkie talkie radios makes the experience much more relaxing, with this in mind we decided to undertake a fully escorted event in 2015 courtesy of the same company who had provided our Monte Carlo package.

Under the title of "The Italian Job", the route would follow in the tyre tracks of the three Minis that feature in the 1969 film featuring Michael Caine and his cohorts.

We joined our fellow travellers at the Channel tunnel, a good mix of manufacturers making forming our group of fifteen including a modern mini Cooper S, dressed in "Italian Job" decals. Following introductions we set off for the first leg which would take us to the historic French town of Laon with a brief pause at the old race circuit at Gueux before continuing to the overnight stop at Troyes.



The pits at the Reims-Gueux circuit

Our organisers had researched many of the key locations which were included on our route, suddenly being on an escorted tour took on a new dimension, the two way radios allowed our guides to provide a running commentary during our travels.



Summit of the St Bernard Pass

A day of stunning driving day beginning with the climb of the Grand St Bernard Pass, stopping at the famous "Miura Harpin".

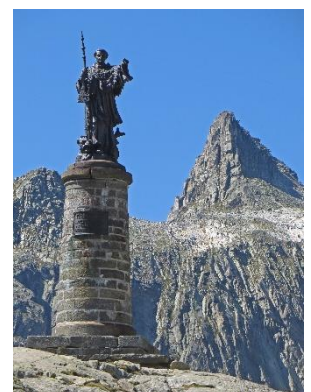
Once we reached Val d'Aosta we visited more of the locations from the film, beginning with a beautiful road on the edge of the Parco Nazionale Del Gran Paradiso where the Mafia stopped the cars before pushing them over the edge of the gorge.

Along this same road we saw the location of the scene known as the "fast cars scene" in which the E-Types race along the valley, someone set the mood for the drive with Matt Monro "On days like these" played over our two way radios and we dreamt we in another world before coming back to earth and heading to our hotel in Aosta.

The following morning we set off on one of the driving highlights of the Tour, along a dead-end valley used for the "cliffhanger" ending to the film where the coach is left balanced on the edge of the mountain road.

This area of Gran Paradiso National Park is exceedingly beautiful offering great driving on a road built for hydro electric dams that supply Turin, the lakeside scenery and stunning welcome if somewhat basic amenities at the end of the road.

Once we had returned to the start of the valley we headed to the outskirts of Turin climbing to the summit of the Colline du Superga for some excellent views over the city and a visit to the Basilica.



Statue of Saint Bernard



Lingotto rooftop circuit and Agnelli gallery

On our journey into the city we passed more film locations including the futuristic rooftop of the Torino Palavela indoor arena where the Minis played hide and seek with the local Policia and the weir crossing on the Stura di Lanzo where the police chase came to a soggy end.

We continued our journey through the suburbs of Turin onto our hotel for the next four nights, the stunning Lingotto, a former FIAT factory that is now a splendid hotel and shopping centre with great facilities and still features the rooftop test track circuit which we were fortunate to visit although only on foot and the futuristic Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli art gallery.

This hotel is located right next to a station for the efficient Turin metro which offers access to the historic city centre in 10 minutes and our extended stay allowed time to explore Turin on foot where we took the opportunity to visit the Italian National Car Museum and the FCA (Fiat and Chrysler Automobiles) Heritage Hub.

Bidding farewell to Turin we had a truly spectacular drive across the Col du Lautaret, the Col du Galibier and the Col de Telegraphe and a mid-day break. After lunch we took a short but spectacular climb to the summit of the Col de la Croix de Fer before descending to join the main road to our hotel at Aix-Les-Bains.

Our journey home took us through the Jura region before joining the motorway to the famous Burgundy wine town of Nuits-Saint-Georges and then a scenic route through the vineyards of Burgundy passing through the renowned villages of Vosne-Romanee, Vougeot, Chambolle-Musigny, Gevrey-Chambertin, Brochon and Fixin to return to Laon for our final group meal before making the dash to the port and home.



"On days like these"



A Cayman special at the Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile

Travelling on an organised tour as part of a group may not be to everyone's taste, we appreciate the amount of effort that goes into compiling a good itinerary, securing hotels that can accommodate a group of car enthusiasts and providing safe parking for exotic cars which itself is not straightforward.

There is a social element to joining a group of like minded people, usually several evening group meals are arranged, during the driving days there are always plenty of stops with chances to talk. The two way radios are extremely beneficial in breaking the ice, providing a commentary and aiding travel of the group by providing information on road conditions and traffic. There are times when the group splinters

off, some locations may offer a greater interest and the luxury of having a pre-programmed route is the ability to rejoin either on the road or at the hotel that evening. A smaller group or individuals have greater options for sight seeing and this is recognised by our organisers, should someone however become unwittingly detached in traffic the radios or mobile phones allow for reassurance for all parties.

We have found a common bond between enthusiastic owners of all types of cars, there is a spirit of camaraderie on the road and we have made friendships with many travellers. Repeat tourists are common, we ourselves have taken part in six tours with the same organiser, we were due to venture out twice this year but due to the restrictions these have been postponed. I will add details of some of our drives in another post if people are interested.