

2017, Italian Lakes and Passes

30th August – 12th September 2017

September 2017 we utilised the channel tunnel for the first time in the 981, negotiating the entrance to carriages emphasised the increased size of later Boxster but despite initial concerns, we were soon safely on board. Within a comparatively short time driving through France, we arrived at our hotel in the town of Wisques.



Although this tour was themed around the Italian lakes and passes, we had added days at both the official start and finish days to spend time in the Flanders battlefields and the Somme regions, as after considerable research through historical archives we had been able to locate where a grand uncle, killed in March 1917 was buried and added this to our route.

We would be the first family members ever to visit his grave so in this, the centennial year, it was very important to us.

Our first full day included a visit to Ypres where by fortunate coincidence, a new peel of bells was being delivered to St George's Memorial Church. Cast at the bell foundry of John Taylor & Co of Loughborough, they had made their way across the English channel on vehicles from WW1, along with members of the transportation crew in period uniform. They were initially on display outside the famous Cloth Hall before the difficult installation into the church.



St George's, new church bells

In Ypres we visited the Menin gate memorial (Menenpoort), designed by architect Sir Reginald Blomfield and completed in 1927. The gate is located at the eastern exit of the town and marks the starting point for one of the main roads out of the town that led so many Allied soldiers to the front line with some 300,000 being killed in the Ypres Salient. Getting back on the road and passing through the memorial we made



our way to 'Hellfire Corner', now a roundabout it was also a major junction in the First World War. The main supplies for the British Army in this sector passed along the road from Ypres to Menin (Menen). German guns were trained upon it so that movement through this junction was perilous, making it the most dangerous place in the sector.

Our next destination was the Hooze crater cemetery and museum. On 19 July 1915 the allied forces detonated a explosive charge of 1,700 kilograms in a tunnel that had been dug by the special tunnelling companies of the Royal Engineers. Immediately after the explosion the allies swarmed the crater in order to

consolidate their advance. Later it was referred to as 'the Hooze Crater' a reference to the nearby village and Chateau that was razed to the ground.

We continued on the Menin Road to the town of the same name, leaving the battlefields behind, through increasingly scenic countryside, firstly to Dinant and then on to the Belgian city of Spa, famous for its racing circuit, on to our hotel accomodation for the night.



Colour matching at the Nürburgring

On our advance, the second day we entered Germany arriving at another famous racing circuit, the Nordschleife – Nürburgring. Unfortunately the ring was closed but we had time for a happy snap at the circuit before making our way through the picturesque Moselle valley and then on to the Rhine valley. Taking a break at the Loreley rock where we purchased some local wines, thankful for the extra luggage space of the Boxster.

Our route continued through the vineyards and hop fields to our hotel in Bad Durkheim where we joined the rest of the group. The tour to the Italian lakes and mountains comprised ten cars, some of party we had met before plus a few new faces on this excursion.

The first day together concentrated on putting some distance into the journey, crossing the border to Austria, we negotiate the Fern pass with a stop to view the Zugspitze, (Germany's highest mountain) before heading to our hotel in Sölden.

Moving on towards Austria required an early start. Shortly after leaving the hotel we approached the Timmelsjoch pass, where the weather had deteriorated significantly with considerable ice on the road and light snow showers.

After a photographic opportunity and chance to discuss our options, we continued to the entry gate where we were informed by the toll booth operators, that the worst of the



Roof down for the Timmelsjoch pass, naturally!

weather had cleared and the route was passable with care. Considering the vehicles involved on the tour were predominantly rear wheel drive, all fitted with summer tyres their assurances were comforting.

True to their word, the weather did continue to improve as we travelled into Italy and two hours later we had begun the ascent of the Stelvio pass.

Being a Sunday the road was incredibly busy, with it's continuous chicanes the cyclists and motorcycles, campers and cars made the journey to the summit tedious, but still breathtaking. The slow pace gave us time to appreciate the views and the multitude of switchback turns, before taking a well earned rest in the restaurants at the peak.



Welcome break at the Stelvio summit

With still a long journey ahead, we left the madness that is Stelvio, descending towards Bormio. We weren't finished with passes however, after following the Valfurva, our route took us to the little known Gavia Pass.

In total contrast to the popular Stelvio, this route was devoid of traffic and unspoilt, possibly not as dramatic, however but the majestic beauty of the snow covered mountains and remoteness of the location more than made up for the earlier hustle and bustle.

We rolled out of the mountains into verdant countryside of the Parco dell'Adamello and eventually to our hotel at the Northern tip of Lake Garda at Riva del Garda.



The unspoilt Passo di Gavia



Keeping up appearances

We left Desenzano on a short drive to the Mille Miglia museum on the outskirts of Brescia which has a very interesting collection of vehicles and somewhat suprisingly, an area of the museum dedicated to the Beatles.

After a photo shoot and a coffee at the Mille Miglia tavern, we set off for Bergamo, passing through San Pelligrino on our way to the summit of the Passo San Marco and a late lunch stop. Back on the road and our next lake, arriving on the Northern edge Lake Como before driving down the West side to Gravedona and our shoreline accomodation.



A comic moment with a cool Fiat

The following morning we embarked on a pass frenzy, with a glorious drive through the vast wilderness of the “Ente Parco Nazionale della Val Grande,” before crossing the border into Switzerland. Here we have a scenic drive heading for the Simplon pass and a brief stop for photographs.

We are back into the twisties, with in swift succession - the Nufenen, San Gottard, Furka and Grimsel passes. We paused at the summit of the San Gottard pass to take in the stunning surroundings, and again for a break at the famous Belvedere hotel. This hotel was featured in the Bond film “Goldfinger” and is located just after the summit of the Furka pass. We met up with a group of touring cars from the UK, taking part in “The Fireball Rally”, including a Jaguar from our ‘gods own county’, who were supporting the Yorkshire childrens centre.

We continued to our next hotel also on Lake Garda, via a drive to Sirmione. Heavy traffic meant a stop start journey for close to forty kilometres but it proved worthwhile as we enjoyed exploring the very popular pedestrianised town. Then onto our next hotel at Desenzano located on the Southern shores of Lake Garda, where we had two nights accomodation. The following morning we had a free day, which for some meant an early run to the car wash as, by then, we had accumulated a significant layer of filth. There was also opportunity to enjoy the lake, both by boat and gently strolling around the lakeside bars and eateries enjoying a break from driving.



Posing at the Mille Miglia museum

With only eighty five miles to travel that day, our route followed a lakeshore drive around Lake Como, before moving inland to find Lago di Lugano. Shortly afterwards we crossed the border into Switzerland and Lugano itself.

Returning to Italy, we headed westbound until we reached Lago di Maggiore, where we took time out for lunch, and a photograph stop at Laveno. Our group of cars met with appreciation from the enthusiastic Italians and we would often end up with additional cars tagging onto our party, waves and horn tooting being common.

The rest of our route continued to follow the Maggiore lakeshore around the Southernmost edge before reaching our hotel in Stresa in early afternoon.



Porsches in the passes



A small section of Schlumpf racing cars

Our hotel that night was in Mulhouse, and had been chosen for its proximity to the incredible Schlumpf museum, “Cité de l'Automobile” which houses around five hundred cars from ninety eight manufacturers, including a huge collection of Bugattis. On a damp overcast morning it was a superb way to pass some time and in reality a full day would be more desirable to do the collection justice.

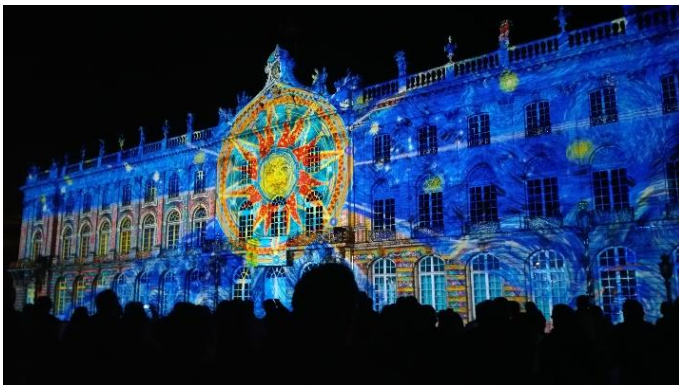
The historical collection of all types of motoring excellence has many exhibits that would challenge all but the most avid enthusiasts to recognise and name.

Leaving Mulhouse, we entered the Vosges mountain range. Our next stop was at the “Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf”, a strategic location where the French and Germans fought for control of the mountain peak, during the First World War throughout 1915. The casualties numbered 30,000 near Hartmannswillerkopf, with the majority of deaths suffered by the French. The cemetery is a chilling reminder of the madness of war.

Onwards to the “Grand Ballon”, the highest mountain of the Vosges which has the distinction of being the coldest and windiest point in Alsace. The wind would have been useful on such a misty overcast day, but sadly for us it was calm. We stopped briefly along with a group of touring Corvette owners before deciding the visibility was too poor and set off to our next overnight stop which was in Nancy.



The twisty bits



Son et lumiere on the Hotel de Ville

We would be bidding farewell to the group after this stop in Nancy, as our journey would take us to more WW1 battlefields and cemeteries in our quest to visit our long lost family member.

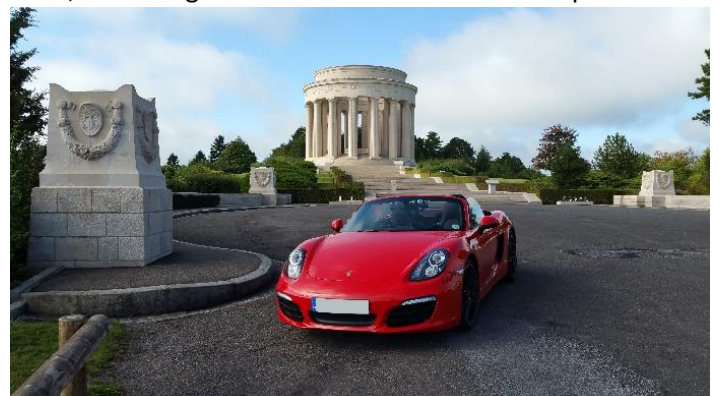
In the evening we walked the short distance into town for a group meal at the fabulous Café du Commerce, ideally located on the beautiful Place Stanislas.

Following a superb dinner we were all amazed by a magical “Son et lumiere” performance, exhibited on the facades of the buildings surrounding the square.

Despite parting from the other tour members, we continued to follow their route for some time, and an hour into the drive we arrived at the American memorial, “Butte de Montsec” located at the top of a hill dominating the local scenery, is a monument commemorating the offensive carried out by the American army on the salient of Saint-Mihiel in the late autumn of 1918 . The monument, was erected with in the centre, a viewing table on which is carved a map in bronze depicting the battlefield .

During the WW2, the site was used by the German army for strategic surveillance, it was extensively damaged during the allied assault to capture it, later repaired and returned to original condition, it was classified as a historic monument in 1975.

Our journey continued through France to the region of Champagne and Épernay, and an overnight stay allowed us time to explore the town and take a tour of the Mercier caves for a drop of their finest fizz.



Butte de Montsec American memorial



Welsh memorial

One hundred miles later we were deep in the Somme, our first stop was at the 38th Welsh Division memorial. Erected in 1987 it was created by Welsh sculptor David Petersen. Featuring a Welsh red dragon on top of a three-metre stone plinth, facing the wood Mametz, the scene of fierce fighting where the Welsh Division lost approximately 4,000 men, killed or wounded in the engagement. The carnage being so severe they would not be used in a massed attack again for over a year.

Our next point of interest was the “Lochnagar crater” the result of a mine, south of the village of La Boisselle, filled with an explosives charge by the Tunnelling Companies of the Royal Engineers. The mine was dug under a German field fortification known as Schwabenhöhe (Swabian Height). The British had named the mine after Lochnagar Street, the trench from which the gallery was driven. It was detonated at 7:28 a.m. on 1 July 1916 and left a crater 30 metres deep and 100 metres wide. The crater was captured and held by British troops and remains preserved as a crater to this day.

Our next destination was the Sir Edwin Lutyens designed “Thiepval Memorial” for the over seventy thousand missing British and

South African servicemen who died in the Battles of the Somme of the First World War between 1915 and 1918, with no known grave. Thiepval has been described as "the greatest executed British work of monumental architecture of the twentieth century".

A short drive then to the Beaumont-Hamel memorial dedicated to the commemoration of Newfoundland forces members who were killed during World War I. The 74-acre battlefield park encompasses the grounds over which the Newfoundland Regiment made their unsuccessful attack on 1 July 1916. It was the regiment's first major engagement, during the assault which only lasted thirty minutes, the regiment was all but wiped out. The site was purchased in 1921 by the people of Newfoundland and is the largest battalion memorial on the Western Front. It is also the largest area of the Somme battlefield that has been preserved with trench lines.



Thiepval Memorial



Our final stop and most personal one was the Foncquevillers Military Cemetery, another designed by English architect Sir Reginald Blomfield and located to the northeast of village of Foncquevillers.

The cemetery contains the remains of 657 military personnel and one French civilian who died in the postwar period. Some 648 interments are Allied personnel of the First World War, of which 595 are identified, one being our relative, John, James, O'Brien. He was a driver with the Royal Field Artillery died on the 15th March 1917, of gunshot wounds.

We were pleased to have found him and respect his sacrifice along with all the others who died so that we might have better lives.

We paused to visit several further memorials and cemeteries. It is difficult to pass through this region without noticing how many there are, the nature of static warfare in the trenches and the impossible task of repatriating the dead highlights the ghastly cost of this war.

