

CLASSIC DRIVER

[We found happiness on the Bugatti Type 35's 100th anniversary tour](#)

Lead

If things don't work out as planned, our photo reporter Rémi Dargegen can be a grumpy fellow. But after driving all across France with 49 classic racecars during the 100th anniversary tour of the Bugatti Type 35, he simply couldn't stop smiling.



There's a documentary on Netflix about the so-called 'Blue Zones' - places all around the globe where people live extraordinarily long and vibrant lives, many of them turning 100 years and older. Is it the diet? The lifestyle? Or maybe the cars they drive? After last week's experience, we think that besides the Japanese island of Okinawa and the Sardinian mountains, one needs to add the village of Molsheim to the list of these mythical places of power and longevity. After all, it was a mass 100th birthday that was celebrated there this week - and many of the jubilarians proudly wore their ancient blue liveries to the occasion, turning the Alsace into a proper 'zone bleue'.



If you follow Classic Driver on Instagram, you will already know from our live coverage that we celebrated the centenary of the Bugatti Type 35, hailed as the essence of Ettore Bugatti's creations and one of the most important race cars of all times. The French Bugatti Club had invited its members to a 100th anniversary tour from Molsheim across the French countryside towards Lyon, where the Bugatti Type 35 had first caused waves a 100 years ago. But before we hop on board and join the noisy horde of vintage Bugatti race cars, let's take a moment and look back at the history of the Type 35.



When the Bugatti Type 35 launched in 1924, the fast, light and elegant race car immediately outclassed its competition - and rewrote the rulebook for motorsports for good. Conceived by the visionary artist and engineer Ettore Bugatti, the T35 introduced many technical innovations such as cast alloy wheels, integrally mounted drum brakes, a 2.0-litre in-line eight-cylinder, thin-wall 24-valve engine with a pioneering aluminium crankshaft and an aluminium alloy-panelled ellipsoid body that is considered to be a work of art.



“The Bugatti Type 35 was the world’s first purpose-designed and engineered race car”, explains Luigi Galli, heritage specialist at Bugatti. “Unlike everything that had gone before, it was not a road car modified for racing, although it also served as a very fine road car. The meticulous approach Ettore Bugatti took to the overall concept, and to every minute detail, resulted in a car that set previously inconceivable standards for design, engineering, materials, handling and performance. The Bugatti Type 35 gave birth to the Grand Prix era and forced other motor manufacturers to completely rethink their approach.” Defining its era and writing motorsport history, the Bugatti Type 35 secured more than 2,500 race victories during its active time. Hailed for its beauty, technical ingenuity and driving brilliance, the Type 35 is still central to the marque’s DNA, along with the Bugatti Atlantic and the Bugatti Royale.



On the first day, the participants in their 49 classic Bugattis – including 23 Type 35s and 12 other grand prix cars like the Type 37 and 51 – joined for at Chateau Saint-Jean, the historical home, family mansion and head offices of the Bugatti brand in Molsheim. “This is where it all began, so it was a very emotional moment”, reports Rémi Dargegen, who followed the tour for Classic Driver. “Seeing all the cars align in the morning light in front of the chateau, then start their engines and leave their home with a roar this morning was truly a sight and sound to behold. I felt blessed to be able to join this tour as a co-driver of one of the best Bugatti Type 35s in existence”. The car Rémi was riding in was a highly original, all matching numbers, still retaining its original naturally aspirated engine and body plus an amazing patina. Having been built in 1925 as one of the early cars, it still has the Grand Prix de Lyon body, making it the perfect car for this double anniversary tour.



Following an amazing selection of scenic country roads through Alsace and the Vosges mountains, the road book led the pack towards Mulhouse for a stopover at the Musée National de l’Automobile and the famous Schlumpf Collection with its impressive line-up of 450 automobiles, headlined by a Bugatti Royale. On the next day, the drivers hit the road again heading west, roaring through light rain towards the Musée de l’Aventure Peugeot in Sochaux. Greeted by Thierry Peugeot himself, the Bugatti drivers enjoyed a tour of the remarkable museum and its countless cars and stories. Did you know that in 1913 Ettore Bugatti himself designed a tiny car for Peugeot nicknamed Bébé? Reaching up to 60 kilometres per hour, it was advertised as costing less than a horse while replacing two. It sold more than 3000 times.



After the inspiring pit stop, the Bugattis kept driving south towards Malbuisson through the beautiful, bright green countryside towards. But at some point, the drivers in their open-top race cars and provisionally attached backpacks saw a wall of black clouds building up at the horizon - and soon they were hit by heavy rain. "At first I was swearing at the weather as the water was running down my back", recalls Rémi. "But after a few moments I realized that driving a pre-war grand prix car without mudguards or lights in the pouring rain is actually an amazing and very refreshing experience. You feel like a warrior defeating the elements, it's part of the fun! Now I love rain, believe it or not."



On the next day, the roadbook took the participants from Malbuisson towards Bourge en Bresse and La Tour de Salvagny. After a stop at the Renaissance-inspired Villa Palladienne in Syam and the medieval market halls of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne, where Rémi had the chance to photograph the Bugattis next to an ancient steam locomotive, an even more exceptional experience was waiting for our photo reporter: Rémi had the opportunity to fulfil a lifelong dream when he took over the wheel of the highly original 1925 Bugatti Type 35 he has been co-driving through sun and rain in the last days.



“What an amazing car. Once you get used to the inverted gearbox, it is nimble, fast, and great fun to drive. I was actually surprised that it brakes so well, that the steering is very sharp and precise. It’s quite demanding and you need to drive careful, but that’s part of it. That was definitely the highlight of the week.” And judging from his smile, he will not forget this experience anytime soon.



After a commemorative drive over the country roads that once formed the track for the Grand Prix de Lyon 1924, the Bugattis assembled in Brignais to celebrate the anniversary together with a handful of other race cars and their owners. Finally, the anniversary tour found its grand finale at Les Monts du Lyonnais overlooking the city of Lyon. “I had the pleasure to take over the steering wheel again and drove the final kilometres after Caroline Bugatti, her husband and their two daughters - what an honour!”



As we [already experienced at the International Bugatti Meeting in the South of France two years ago](#) vintage Bugatti owners are one big, friendly and fun-loving family. There is no pretentiousness, no showing off, no envy. And no matter how expensive some of the machines might be, it's all about enjoying them on the open road, sun or rain, just like they were intended.



"What makes the Bugatti Type 35 so special to me", says Rémi, "is that it is the archetype of the French race car. When I was a kid I had an image in my mind of a French race car" \ [page]

car that looked like a blue cigar. Since then, I am in love with the Grand Prix Bugattis, and the Type 35 is the greatest and most successful of them all. What a legend!”

Photos: Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver

Gallery

