

CLASSIC DRIVER

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Lead

Five days, 2,200km, three circuits, and 10 special stages — the Tour Auto is arguably the most sensational historic road rally in the world, encompassing some of the best driving roads France has to offer and attracting an unrivalled roster of cars. So, here it is — the 2018 Tour Auto, day by day...

Here we go



Conceived in 1992 as a modern-day evocation of the original Tour de France Automobile, which ran in various guises between 1899 and 1986, the Tour Auto Optic 2000 kicks off in Paris this week. And we'll be bringing you all the highlights, as over 240 historic sports cars — ranging from humble Minis to snarling BMW 3.0 CSL 'Batmobiles' — contest the epic journey from Paris to Nice, visiting Besançon, Megève, Avignon, and Aix-en-Provence along the way. While our photographer Rob Cooper is following the event, [Rémi Dargegen will take part as a competitor for the first time](#), from behind the wheel of a delectable (and particularly noisy) Abarth Simca 2Mila.

Sunday



As we watched in awe as the Grand Palais slowly filled with cars on Sunday, we couldn't decide if it was the unseasonal heat wave causing our knees to tremble and brows to sweat or simply the selection of exotic metal forming in front of our eyes. Initial highlights included a genuine Shelby Cobra Daytona Coupe, a rorty Lancia Stratos Group IV, a particularly cool rally-prepared Citroën SM, and, of course, 1 MUF — the Ford GT40 of James Cottingham and Andrew Smith's Scuderia Bear outfit that claimed such a dominant victory in last year's event. To them and the rest of the competitors, including a raft of Classic Driver dealers, there's only one thing to say: Godspeed...

Monday



Monday of the Tour Auto is the first chance to see all the cars meticulously and thematically assembled in the Grand Palais — a venue that we don't think can be beaten when it comes to displaying old cars. Of course, the 'preview' day also provides time for scrutineering and allows competitors to make final preparations ahead of the off. Take Classic Driver dealer Dylan Miles (pictured above), for example, carefully applying a roundel to his Jaguar Mk4. It's quite clear at this stage who's 'in it to win it' and who's

simply looking forward to a wonderful week of driving. Would you suffer the 30-degree heat from the tiny cockpit of a Lancia Stratos or rather waft along in a spacious and comfortable Ford Galaxy? T-minus one day until the start...

Tuesday



After leaving the echoing rasps of 240 historic race cars at the Grand Palais before dawn, we headed straight for the Eiffel Tower to wait for the first batch of competitors. As they passed, their machines drenched in the early morning light, the enthusiastic throttle blips and barking overruns no doubt helped the city wake up. From Paris, the route headed south to Château de Courances for the 'official' start to the Tour Auto. As we entered the estate, cars were still arriving in drips and drabs, while earlier batches were already leaving. The sun-dappled château, surrounded by the world's finest old cars, was wonderful. But, while we could have stayed there all day, it was onwards to Dijon-Prenois, the first of three circuits this week, and the first chance for competitors to really open the taps. Highlights over the rest of the day included neck-snapping Ford GT40s and the Ligier JS2 howling through quaint French villages — there's no other way to describe the Tour Auto than ridiculously brilliant.

Wednesday



Arguably the most special moments of the Tour Auto are the early morning starts, such as today's in Besançon, where the cars were bathed in the day's first sunlight, condensation clinging to windcreens and mist emanating from exhausts. Passing through small villages, such as Ornans, the occasional drone of a peppy engine interrupted villagers quietly strolling to the boulangerie, but none failed to smile. And at other locations on route, people were even sat on chairs, eating cheese and drinking wine as they watched the cars rumble past. Circuit de Bresse was the first stop of the day — a fast circuit with complex turns, more suited to the thunderous Ford GT40s than the wallowing BMW 2002 Turbos. Later, on the Col de Aravis, we climbed above the humidity and into the snow-laden mountains, before arriving in the ski town of Megève. The surrounding mountain peaks provided the perfect backdrop as drivers and support crews checked their cars over, making any necessary repairs. If all was well, a cold beer or two might have been swigged!

Thursday





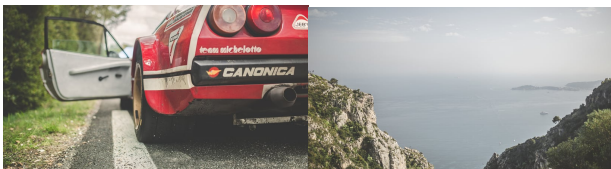
In a bid to get ahead of the pack, we left Megève extra early. While the weather was overcast, the snow-capped mountains in the background more than made up for it. On a particularly twisty pass between Clelles and Châtillon-en-Diois, we came across a number of competitors having an impromptu picnic, including a trio of Porsche 911s, an Autobianchi A112 Abarth, and 1 MUF, the leading Ford GT40 of James Cottingham and Andrew Smith. We asked them if they'd follow us back down the hill, which was sensational. The day's special stage in Saint-Nazaire-le-Désert had a definite air of the Mille Miglia about it — pops and bangs from the cars reverberated around a central courtyard in a quaint historic town, as they navigated tight and twisty uphill streets laden with window shutters. It was such a spectacle that we decided to largely skip the day's closed-circuit session at the Circuit de Lédénon. We're sure it was worth it.

Friday



As we headed south from Avignon to Aix-en-Provence, the landscape changed — we were now in wine country. Following the morning's special stage at La Gabelle, we enjoyed a well-deserved déjeuner in the gorgeous town of Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume, with its medieval convent's grounds providing early arrivals with some much-needed shade to cool down their cars. After lunch, we made a dash to Paul Ricard, where the glorious sunshine gave way for cooler, overcast conditions — more conducive for going hell-for-leather in an old car. At Parc Fermé in Aix-en-Provence in the evening, we spotted a Porsche 911 RS and a Ferrari 275 GTB being offloaded from a lorry. Remember, 2,000km is a long way, and it's perhaps a sensible choice for those who want to ensure they make it to the finish line. As has been the case the entire week, the sprawling crowds of enthusiasts and mere passers-by were great, jumping at the chance to meet the drivers and get up close and personal with the cars. The best thing is that there's still one more day to go — to Nice!

Saturday



While we couldn't help but feel sad that the final leg was upon us, the prospect of another full day of driving, from Aix-en-Provence to Nice, soon changed that. After a brief stop in the bustling town of Fayence (any excuse to witness the world's greatest mobile car park), we headed the short distance south to the special stage at Pays de Fayence, where the locals were somewhat perturbed by the closure of the road. But despite their huffs and puffs, the drivers gave it their all on the downhill section.

We would've loved to have made it to the Chateau de Taulane for lunch, but we wanted to get to Nice ahead of the first arrivals at the finish line. The crowds were fantastic, with their whoops and hollers indicating when a car was about to roll down the red carpet. As they arrived at the finish line, bottles of Champagne were handed through windows, received with ear-to-ear smiles and hearty handshakes. After leading for the entire event, unfortunately, 1 MUF, the Ford GT40 of James Cottingham and Andrew Smith, lost a gear on the penultimate stage and had to retire. We're sad that it's over, but what a week it's been. Remember, these old warhorses have driven hundreds of kilometres in anger each day, including special stages and on circuits. That's a mean feat for any car, never mind some as old as 1951. To Peter Auto and the rest of the organisers, we can only say thank you and see you next year...

Photos and text: Rob Cooper for Classic Driver © 2018

Gallery

