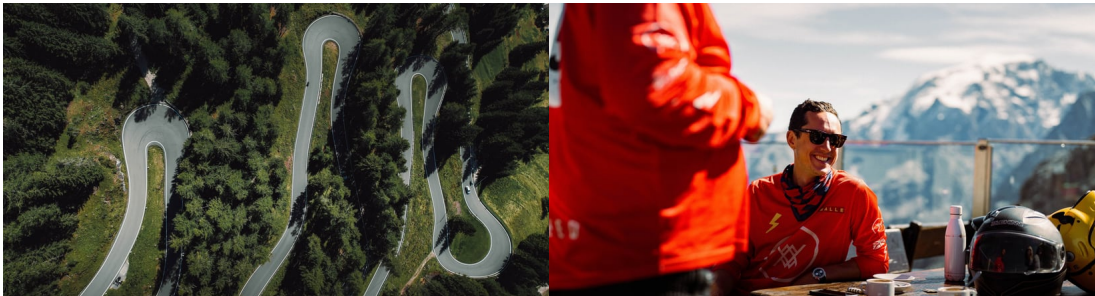


CLASSIC DRIVER

Three-wheeling to driving euphoria on this year's coolest road trip

Lead
In our feature story, Malle London's founder Robert Nightingale shares one of the more dramatic moments while tackling some of the world's greatest mountain passes, alongside dozens of motorcycles and two Morgan Super 3s. Take it away Robert!



We turned the corner and suddenly reached a massive old metal door, 10ft wide and 20ft high, that guarded an ominous opening to a tunnel that was carved out of the mountain top with the inscription 'General Berge 1892' chiseled into the granite rock beside it.

Up until this point the road had steadily progressed (or rather regressed) from smooth tarmac, to stone track and now to a gravelly mountain trail, with the road surface being washed away by the annual snow melt. We checked the timing and knew the Rally teams were departing Checkpoint 1, back down in the valley, in a matter of minutes. What should have taken us one hour was now nearing 3 and counting. We needed to press on to Checkpoint 2, going back was now not an option.



We parked bikes the gently on a thin sheet of ice that spread from the mountain door and walked the first few meters into the tunnel to understand the surface. A thicker layer of ice covered 10ft pot holes, some of the worst were well over a foot deep. The tunnel was pitch black, frozen, full of water, with a pin-prick of light at the other end, straight through from one side of the mountain to the other. We spun the bikes and the Super 3 around and then pressed on at constant speed, knees and elbows acting as shock absorbers, crashing through the ice. The sound of 3 high revving engines echoing and reverberating through the narrow tunnel created the deafening soundtrack to this wild moment.



You're never more aware of how relative time is, than when you're doing something technical, possibly dangerous, possibly a little foolish, that takes every ounce of concentration. After 20 minutes of careering through frozen water, we burst out of the other side of the mountain. Just as the sun was rising over the peaks and filling half of the valley 2000m beneath us with golden light, but leaving the other side in darkness. Not a sound, completely still, you could see for miles across the snow capped peaks and it was a serene moment of pure beauty, increased by the sudden freedom from the black tunnel, the four of us stood in silence for a minute or more, breathing it all in. Then we had to work out how to get down.



How did we find ourselves up here? Technically we weren't exactly lost, from the dot on the GPS, we knew on which side of the mountain we were, between France and Italy, we knew there was a main road down in the valley... somewhere down there! Over the last 3 years, since we first came up with the Mountain Rally idea, we'd ridden and explored as many roads across the Alps as possible, always searching for the ever elusive 'perfect route', or the greatest road. The perfect route is based on so many factors; corners, views, surface, speed, obstacles etc, but so often it's about the uniqueness and the desire to push boundaries. Pushing the machines and ourselves into truly diverse and unique landscapes, all within the parameters of the Rally time, setting lofty, yet achievable targets for the Rally teams and ultimately reaching our final destination: the

southernmost point in Monaco, down at the lowest point of the Rally at sea-level.



In our research, we had hundreds of possible Cols/Passes, peaks, valleys and tips from family, friends and digital research, stuck as Post-its on the master Rally map. The ‘Col de Parpaillon’ was one of them: we’d seen photos, the satellite images looked perfect and ticked all of the boxes. But it was the only mountain Pass we’d never been able to ride ourselves pre-event as it’s closed for most of the year. So, in preparation for future Mountain Rallies, we seized the opportunity. Two of us agreed to set out early before sunrise to scout it out and word reached the documentary team, who never want to be left behind and are always eager to ‘get the shot’. We left before dawn, four motorcycles and one Morgan Super 3, aiming for Checkpoint 2 on the 6th and final day of the Rally, before all of the Rally teams came through.

Looking down through the valley and the snaking path down the side of the mountain, it reminded me of a comment from a construction worker we’d met when we were trying to travel from the Swiss side of the Alps to the Italian side on the first research trip. A landslide had washed out one of the bridges and as we rode up to the rivers edge, an Italian guy in orange workwear came over and shouted “the mountains are alive!” The Alps are continuously moving, shifting, creaking, growing and collapsing. In the heart of the Alps, any movement in the mountains results in massive changes for us, such as a complete change in our immediate direction, the route, timing and planning.



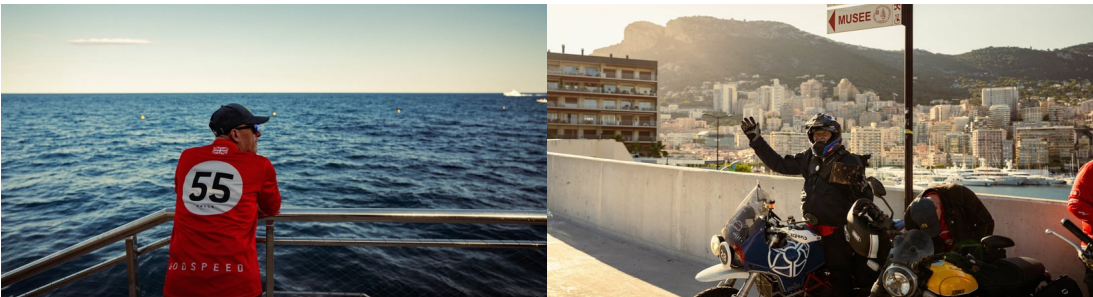
It was slow going down the other side of the mountain, at that point it was all about minimizing risk and taking each corner one by one, keeping your focus on the road ahead, letting the bike do the work. On two or more occasions, the shape of the road meant we had to physically lift the back of the Morgan Super 3 out of the snow-melt ditches and over some small granite boulders. Then it would happily carry on dancing down the mountain tracks, how amazing to see a 3 wheeled vehicle taking on a challenge like this, escorted by 4 out-riders.

Finally the surface started to improve. Little by little, the steep mountain trail became a track, just as we reached a small village with a group of old ladies chatting in the square, seemingly quite bemused by this pack of strange vehicles emerging from the top of the mountain. There was white line in the road and beyond that smooth tarmac; a real road lead down into the valley ahead and our team sped into the distance with a slight sense of relief.

As we reached the checkpoint on the Italian side, the Rally teams were only minutes behind us, arriving and visibly buzzing from the beautiful emerald blue views of the 'official' valley route, as it hugged the sides of the azure blue Lac de Serre-Poncon. In the valley it was 25C, warm sunshine, not a cloud in the sky - perfect riding conditions. Only we knew of the conditions on the 'other route' here, right across the top of the mountain, through ice, water and darkness. It certainly wasn't the perfect route and won't feature in future Mountain Rally planning, but getting lost with 4 friends at sunrise on the top of a mountainside was one of my favourite memories of the first Mountain Rally.



After a long wait at checkpoint 2, the teams had long since departed, but still 4 riders were missing from the Rally Time-Sheet. Then came the sound of engines, in the opposite direction, up on the hill side above us. As the last of the 4 riders rode in from the 'other route' on a classic 350 Enfield, grinning from ear to ear he took off his helmet, "well, that was terrifying" he laughed. 100 unique adventures all connected by the thread of a Rally route... with the occasional detour!



I'm not entirely sure why every time I return from a motorcycle adventure and someone asks 'How was it?' I immediately tell them about all of the times that I got lost, when things broke and when things really didn't go to plan. And usually they respond with 'and that's fun is it?' But it seems that the moments that really stick in the memory are when you suddenly realise you're on the side of a mountain, the weather is turning, no one knows you're there, you don't even know exactly where you are and you need to think fast, make good decisions and decide to press on or not. The challenging moments of real adventure are often adrenaline fueled, it's quite addictive. Better yet, to experience that moment with friends, to pull together as a team, to look after each other and overcome it together, that's what real motorcycle adventures are all about.

Photos by Tom Kahler

Gallery

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