

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## Relive the highs and lows of classic car competition at Tour Auto 2023

### Lead

Home to a melting pot of the rarest classic cars and France's finest roads and race tracks, Tour Auto 2023 certainly was one for the ages – here's your in-depth look at the non-stop action!



Think of it as France's Mille Miglia, or Panamericana, a gruelling long-distance rally designed to push driver, co-driver, and car to their absolute limits. Now think of it being held back in 1899, when even the idea of an automobile was in its complete infancy. Back then, over a century ago, the event was known as the Tour de France Automobile. It may have changed slightly since those humble beginnings, but competitors in the Tour Auto 2023 do follow the same route as those pioneers way back when, and you'll be pleased to know it's one heck of a journey!





The event begins at France's beating heart, Paris. More specifically, the sensational Grand Palais Éphémère, providing the perfect backdrop for some of the world's finest classic cars to assemble, and for entrants and spectators to mingle. Hidden between a flurry of original Ford GT40s, Ferrari 250 Lussos and countless classic Porsches sits a glorious Zagato-bodied Alfa Romeo Giulia TZ, a car that is something of a rarity on concours lawns, let alone stickered-up and ready for the 2,000km journey. While drivers may be inclined to continue the French theme with a classic Renault or Citroën, the sheer variety of competition cars is truly a sight to behold, with all vehicular entrants required to be built between 1951 and 1973.



Just as the calm of the day before settles, the roaring storm of engines fires up ahead of the start, located at the castle of Vaux le Vicomte. As the flag drops, a total of 236 cars ready themselves to compete in the endurance event, some of which take the time to enjoy the scenery, others going hell-for-leather to come out victorious.



After completing their first special stage, the courageous drivers make their way to their first taste of circuit action, held at the iconic Dijon Prenois circuit. Well known to many of racing's elite, including France's hero, Alain Prost, this hilly racetrack isn't for the faint of heart. Thierry Boutsen and his co-driver Hervé Ordioni weren't intimidated by the tricky circuit, and claimed the first victory in the Competition category, driving the mighty #201 Shelby Cobra 289.



Just as the adrenaline wears off from the first day, the competitors leave the city of Beaune in the direction of Clermont Ferrand. The 395 kilometre journey is made somewhat easier by the effortlessly pretty villages along the way, before they eventually arrived at another racetrack, Bresse. After a brief lunch stop, two further special stages are completed amongst the renowned vineyards of the Côte Maconnaise, which saw French outfit Bertrand Penlae and Anne Penlae setting the fastest time in their 1965 Porsche 911 2.0L on the first stage. A monstrous Ferrari 512M driven by Mr John and his co-driver Sibel claim victory at the second stage, Côte Roannaise.



By day three, the unpredictable weather surrounding the landscape began to flex its muscles, but thankfully just before it did, drivers were treated to another fabulous French circuit. The Circuit de Charade was a spectator favourite, and provided some great battles, including one between Emile Breittmayer's Ford GT40 and Thierry Boutsen's Shelby Cobra. In the end, it was the Ford GT40 of Breittmayer that would come out on top and claim victory in the competition category. For the next stages, the aforementioned grey skies and rainfall began take part part in challenging the Tour Auto competitors. Pays de Montfaucon, a high-flying road stage with a distance of over 20km is one of the tour's most difficult, and even caught out some of the front runners. Thierry Boutsen, the undisputed leader of the standings since day one, had a dicey moment with the wall, destroying the right-front of the Cobra, retiring them from the competition. This unfortunate mishap would gift Sebastien Berchon in his 1963 Jaguar E-Type 3.8 #203 the lead, right before the weather conditions deteriorated further and the race management was forced to pause the event for the competition section over safety concerns.

As the kilometres ticked by, the competitors enjoyed superb panorama views on the Rhône valley, leading to the foothills of the Vercors for one final special stage for day three, which would once again see the weather take a turn for the worse, and bring a halt to racing over safety concerns again.



Day four would see the penultimate stage of the 2023 Tour Auto and lead the crews to Saint Nazaire le Désert for the first special stage. The small village of Drôme was a transition from the unpredictable stage of the previous day, while anticipation and excitement ramped up for the highlight of the entire tour for both fans and entrants, the journey to Circuit Paul Ricard and final circuit battle.



The grandstands were packed as the teams arrived at Paul Ricard, and were treated to some masterful driving, most notably from the Breitmayer/Thomas team and their Ford GT40, a strong performer of the tour, but especially when it came to the racetracks!



Despite the mighty effort from both Breitmayer and the GT40, it was some Good Old English metal that would claim the overall victory in the VHC Group Competition category, driven by Sébastien Berchon & Sébastien Bordier in a glorious 1963 Jaguar E-Type 3.8. The French pairing climbed to first place after a week of intense competition, but remained consistently fast throughout the event, all while fending off some much faster machinery.



As the celebrations ring out on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, we are blown away by just how much passion and enthusiasm this historic event holds. From plucky Mini Cooper S', to fire-breathing BMW M1 Procars, the joy of spirited driving is very much alive and kicking at Tour Auto.



While the dust settles on this event, the calendar shows no sign of slowing as Peter Auto prepare for their next outing, [Spa Classic](#) which takes place on thr 12th to 14th of May!

Photos: Nicolas Bremaud & Mathieu Bonnevie  
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