



Aviva Classic and Euroclassic

It sounded interesting: an advert in the Motoring section of the Daily Telegraph invited classic car owners to take part in the Norwich Union Classic event on 12th October 2008. As in previous years, this would start at 8 different locations around the country, and finish at Silverstone, where participants would be permitted to drive one (or two if you were lucky) laps of the full grand prix circuit.

I duly paid the modest entry fee and set off from Bath for Silverstone on the day in my 1964 Lusso with my son Daniel as my co-driver and navigator interpreting the road book (which he pronounced was much easier to follow than "those French ones"!). It was a misty start so we were unable to appreciate the fine views on offer, but the weather improved as the day went on, ending in bright sunshine. The organisers (the Motor Sports Association) had managed to find some uncluttered minor roads for us to enjoy, and we often found ourselves in convoy with other classics, such as Austin Healeys, MGs, Triumphs, Bentleys, TVRs and Allards. It must have been quite a sight for the residents of the many villages we passed through on the way to Silverstone.

Our first port of call was Prescott, where we were allowed to drive up the famous hill climb, albeit at a fairly sedate rate. We could have done it again but decided to press on, with our next stop being Broughton Castle, a moated manor house which even aroused the interest of my co-driver. Then on to the Heritage Motor Museum at Gaydon, which is well laid out and stuffed with exhibits (mainly Austin, Morris and MG models from the past). On our arrival at Silverstone we were presented with a medal, pen and keyring, and Daniel had great fun blasting round the circuit.

Memories of the event were still fresh in my mind when I received an e-mail drawing my attention to the 2009 MSA Euroclassic. This is a non-competitive event, now in its 17th year, which takes participants on a set route through different European countries, including race tracks and other places of interest on the way. As my Lusso is a left hand drive one and was not designed to be a race car (which has not stopped me taking part in the competition section of Tour Auto and other such events over the years!), and I don't have the patience required to do regularity events, this sounded just up my street.

The 2009 event was from Santander to Versailles from 7th to 11th September 2009, and started with an 18½ hour overnight ferry ride from Plymouth to Santander; fortunately the notorious Bay of Biscay was on its best behaviour and we reached dry land raring to go. So much so that we missed a key left hand turn and were 12km up a mountain pass before my co-driver (who shall remain nameless!) confessed that he thought we might have gone wrong.No problem, the view from the top was superb, we were able to coast back down to the bottom as we were getting low on petrol, and we then had a superb three course lunch in a meson including wine for 9 Euros each!

The route to Vitoria/Gasteis was lined with soaring mountains, both near and far, with picturesque villages nestling at their feet, but when we got there we spent a very frustrating hour trying to find the stadium where we were to be greeted by the mayor. We eventually gave up, concluding (correctly) that the greeting would have long since taken place and everyone moved on to Pamplona, our overnight halt. Luckily my co-pilote had brought his trusty satnav so we made good use of the autopista to get to Pamplona before the car park next to our hotel was completely deserted. Dinner that evening was the first real opportunity we had had to get to know some of our fellow participants, and it was clear



that the Lusso had attracted a lot of interest: out of 96 cars registered to take part in the Euroclassic, only 6 were Ferraris, with mine being the oldest by a couple of years. (This was still a much higher percentage than the 10 Ferraris out of 900 which took part in the UK Classic the previous October; what is it that makes Ferrari owners so reluctant to take part in such events, I wonder?). We found our fellow participants to be generally very sociable, and not at all averse to the odd glass of wine or six, although some of them were astonishingly devoid of any sartorial sophistication.....

It was the following morning that we had our first encounter with the stalwarts of Brit Assist, an organisation with its roots in the RAC and comprised of individuals with mechanical expertise who seem to spend their lives accompanying petrol heads like us on motor events, often enabling them to continue when they thought that all was lost. The Lusso would not start because the battery was not charging properly, and after much experimentation and head scratching, the problem was traced to the generator. A temporary solution was devised, our heater disconnected (essential given the warm weather), and we were off.

The organisers surpassed themselves with the route today, as they had somehow convinced the local authorities to let us take a minor road across the Pyrenees, even though it had been closed to "normal" traffic because road improvements were in progress. This resulted in spectacular views and serpentine roads lined by happily waving work crews who sometimes broke into applause at the sight of the Lusso! The route down the other side into France was a severe test of old-fashioned brakes. This proved to be too much for a 1969 Alfa Romeo 1750 GTV which came to rest upside down just off a hairpin bend, wedged at the top of a steep slope by bushes and a small tree. The occupants emerged unscathed but not fully aware of the narrow escape they had had. In the true spirit of such events, they continued to the end of the event in a hire car.

Our circuit for the day was Pau Arnos, a small but challenging track in the countryside, with the first two corners reminiscent of Druids at Brands Hatch. This provided one of the highlights of the entire trip for me and my co-driver when, at a cost of 100 Euros each, we were permitted to tear round the track in F3 cars for 5 laps or so, six at a time, with only the most cursory of briefings! It was a truly exhilarating experience to drive what felt like very grown up karts, although the sequential gearboxes took some getting used to, and it was oppressively hot in our driving suits. Making F3 cars available to the paying public was the idea of the hyper-active track manager Jean-Christophe Canavesio, who speaks five languages fluently and who joined us for dinner that evening at the Palais Beaumont, an elegant building overlooking the famous street circuit in Pau.

Our first objective the next day was Nogaro circuit. A lot of money has been spent since I was last there building a new pits and grandstand complex so that you no longer have to enter the track via a narrow tunnel and then wait in a cramped holding area. It has one of the longest straights of any circuit in Europe, so participants were able to test the upper rev and speedometer ranges of their steeds, not to mention their brakes. In particular the sight of Tom Dunstan skilfully guiding a green 5 litre Sunbeam Tiger round the track was guaranteed to bring a smile to anyone's face, especially my co-driver who was lucky enough to blag a ride with him. Next stop was a highly automated winery in the appropriately named town of Buzet, which produces 30 million bottles of wine a year and looks more like an oil refinery than a winery. We were taken on tour round the winery and presented with a presentation case containing two bottles of one of their red wines



together with two glasses to pour them into. We somehow found room in the Lusso for them.

Today saw a few off route excursions not foreseen in the road book, which together with petrol stops and lingering over coffee here and there meant that we kept coming upon the same cars, and passing them in a blaze of V12 fury. Reactions varied from imperious pointing ("get past me and out of my sight") to a hand cupped round the ear, to total indifference. One Bentley driver remarked ruefully at the end of the day that he had never been passed so many times by the same car!

Our overnight stop on day three was in Bordeaux, which I have previously only visited in the pouring rain. It looked altogether different in the sunshine, as if Bath had somehow merged with Paris, an architectural marvel on the banks of the Gironde. We were staying in the Regent, a first rate hotel overlooking a square frequented by a wide cross-section of the city's inhabitants (some of whom were not unattractive!), a great place to sit and have a beer or two. We walked down to the river and had a delicious dinner on its banks, then wandered back through its well regulated streets, absorbing the atmosphere. I was not surprised to learn that the whole city has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site (under the heading "Bordeaux, Port of the Moon"!), and it is certainly somewhere I would like to go back to.

Day 4 started with a 75 mile sprint to the village of Cognac, specifically the brandy house of Hennessy. Here we had a very informative tour of the workshops/museum on the other side of the Charente river before being allowed to taste a thimbleful of their Very Special (i.e. standard) brandy. After the by now customary push out of the car park (made easier for the pushers when I remembered to turn the ignition on!) we set off for Angouleme. The nearer we got to our lunch stop high up in the middle of the town, the more difficult it was to prevent the Lusso from stalling. This rather ruined our lap round the Les Remparts street circuit right behind the green Tiger (whose occupants very kindly got out to push us when we inevitably did stall).

About two miles from our less than memorable lunch venue the Lusso finally ground to a halt outside a Lidl's and resisted all efforts to restart it. The Brit Assist boys were soon on the scene and after charging our battery up off the fully operational one in their van, we were able to drive as far as a tyre and battery centre just up the road. There followed a severe test of my technical French as first a mechanic looked at the car's electrical system, followed by an automotive electrician. He gave the battery the last rites, and told us that the fault lay with the generator. Would we like him to direct us to someone who could fix it? Yes we would, and he could, but not before Monday (it was then Thursday), so we made do with a new battery. This gave the Lusso a new lease of life, and we sped up an N road clogged with lorries to our overnight stop, at the Futurescope complex outside Poitiers. This is the second time I have stayed here on a French tour, and I can only speculate that its main attraction to organisers of such events is its cheapness, as there is nothing else to recommend it.

What a nice change it made not to need a jump start! Our route on the last day took us through the picturesque town of Richelieu, where the famous cardinal came from, and to the archetypal French chateau of Azay-le-Rideau. We were served coffee and croissants in the main square of Richelieu by very English ladies and then had a stroll round the nearby gardens, which had been donated to the town by the University of Paris (not sure why they owned them in the first place!). We dallied even longer in Azay-le-Rideau,



wandering round both the inside and outside of the chateau and having a coffee in a restaurant opposite the ancient church. On setting off for the Le Mans Bugatti circuit, our last stop of the day, it soon became apparent that we needed fuel, however we had now reached the magic hour of midday when everything in provincial France closes down to enable the natives to enjoy a two hour lunch. We eventually decided that if you can't beat them, join them, and stopped for lunch ourselves in a nice little roadside bistro (having spotted several other participants' cars outside).

We reached the circuit as the MSA officials were preparing to go home and did 5 or 6 laps (although our visit was almost very short as I was caught out by the chicane on the main straight seconds after leaving the pits!). It's not a bad little circuit, but I'd MUCH have preferred even two laps of the full 24 Hours circuit! Our final blast up the A11/E50 into Versailles was enlivened by being asked by co-driver to slow down as we passed each participant so that he could photograph their cars! The Euroclassic ended outside the imposing Hotel de Ville of Versailles, where we were presented with engraved glass paper weights as a souvenir of our adventures. I was disgusted to learn that the champagne kindly provided by the mayor of Versailles (I presume?) had long since been guzzled by other participants, so we adjourned to our hotel next door, the luxurious Pullman, and made full use of the bar.

Dinner on the final night was in the Hotel de France, a 7 minute walk from the Pullman. The food was not brilliant but at least the wine was free and plentiful. There were a few silly awards to participants, and several more to the deserving volunteer officials, Brit Assist staff and the organiser in chief, Penny Deal. I have to admit to being disappointed that "the car the stewards would most like to take home with them" was the 1954 Jaguar XK150 rather than my Lusso, but there is no accounting for taste!

We managed to programme the satnav the next day to take us to Calais without going on any toll roads and had a wonderful drive along largely empty, often dead straight B, C and Z roads, stopping for lunch in another charming roadside bistro and only having to buy one more battery for the Lusso! By the time we had arrived at GTO Engineering near Reading, this too was beginning to expire.....

Having taken part in the Euroclassic I was entitled to participate gratis in the UK version, now called the Aviva MSA Classic, on the following Sunday 20th September. Happily GTO had fixed the battery problem by replacing the authentic period alternator with a modern Ford one (originality in a classic car has its limits!), so Daniel and I set off, this time from the Museum of Army Flying in Middle Wallop only slightly later than our allotted 8.30 start time. This time our route took us to the Williams F1 factory near Wantage, as well as the previous year's venues of Prescott and Gaydon, and Daniel again had immense fun carving up the other traffic on his two laps round the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit. As we pulled into the car parking area behind the pits which had been reserved for participants, the owner of the Euroclassic Bentley appeared at my window and said "well at least I wasn't passed by you again!"

I have already paid my deposit for next year's Euroclassic. Are there any other Ferrari owners out there who would like to give it a go??