

CLASSIC DRIVER

Historic Monte Carlo Rally 2011 - Ben Samuelson 'Has a Go'



The face of the man wearing an official red puffa jacket turned white and he started yammering in rapid-fire French at his cohorts, writes Ben Samuelson. After much Gallic gesticulating, he finally turned back to me. "M'sieu. You say that neither of you have ever done a rally before and now you tell us that you cannot fit your studded tyres for the Col de Turini? Something like 60 cars crashed on this night a year ago, and they had rather more experience and the correct tyres. Are you sure you don't want to sit this one out?"

This wasn't at all the way I imagined it when Trevor Chaytor-Norris, owner of Croft Circuit and Croft Engineering, phoned me up, asking if I wanted to 'have a go' at the historic Monte with him. Visions of pottering through some rather smart bits of the Cote d'Azur and the Alpes Maritimes in our best racing tweeds, impressing the locals with a spot of insouciant but jolly impressive car control before heading back to the hotel for tea and medals had been more the order of the day.

Sitting on the Eurostar and reading all the bumpf for the first time, imagine my horror at the discovery that the rally comprises 2000 miles in four days, and that the first leg was going to be 20 hours straight. Now I understood why all those pre-War chaps took a chauffeur. Sadly, there's not enough room for one in a TR3.



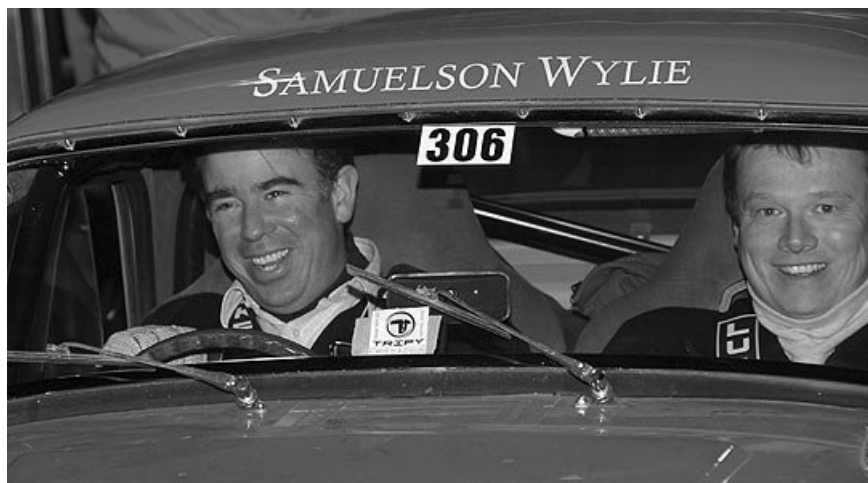
Still, one has to set an example to our European neighbours, so with a toast 'to the Monte, Sir', we knuckled down to route-planning and learning how one goes about this rallying lark.

Now this is where I should point out that, while Trevor and I had not taken the whole thing seriously before this point, we were saved by Croft Engineering boss Maurice Jennings, who had worked on numerous works Monte teams back in period (although which period I've not discovered, especially after suggestions that he worked for De Dion Bouton and Napier had been greeted with a rather robust response). He'd been slightly hindered by the late purchase of the car and our subsequent insistence on its spending more time being re-trimmed in corduroy than it had been under his team's spanners, but he knows what he's doing. The sensible option was to stop winding him up about who was going to press our dinner jackets and start listening to absolutely everything he had to say.

The next surprise was quite how enthusiastic the locals were about the event. Big crowds waved us away

from Reims on the Friday evening and the little TR was cheered on in virtually every village, even in the middle of the night, as we blatted down through France and up into the mountains. The size of the crowds might have had more to do with the likes of Jean Ragnotti, Eric Comas and Bruno Saby, who were also competing in what was the Monte's centenary year, but they made a great fuss of us, too. As the days and nights blended one into another, the welcome we received, the cups of coffee, pastries and even the occasional glass of wine (politely declined, of course), kept us going.

And it was really tough – surprisingly so – on both car and crew. The engineers had to dash ahead of us and our Lotus Elite-peddalling teammates on the larger roads, while we clattered up and down the mountains, on some really rough roads, and then we'd meet them in a layby, hoofing down a sandwich and a bottle of water while they screwed the cars back together. After one cart track had caused our speedo cable to break, we found ourselves doing our first ever regularity stages without a speedo or a trip, which was every bit as tricky as you might imagine. However, the car got fixed and, thanks to the expert tuition of the rest of our team, we actually started to make a decent fist of things, even finishing sixth equal out of 328 starters on one stage.



Unfortunately, the hammering the car taking was starting to take its toll – and the plucky TR was now sitting lower than desired. There was nothing that could be done in the time available to service, and there just wasn't room under the arches to fit the studded tyres, which brought us to our encounter with the red puffa jackets.

As it turned out, aside from the fact we are British and don't scare easily, we found other cars running without studded tyres and so we embarked on the final night section. We managed to get up the snowy side of the mountain, even overtaking a few cars in the process, and back down the icy other side without any inappropriate intimacy between sheet metal and tree. We eventually finished 149th overall, which wasn't a bad do for the most inexperienced crew in the second oldest car. It was completely a testament to the hard work of the Croft team. Would we do it again? Certainly – but only if we could bring along a chef to whip up the odd amuse-bouche at the stops. Besides, he'd keep our valet company...

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