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Tour Auto 2011 – a personal account

02 June 2011 | Classic Driver



Last Saturday marked six weeks since the finish of the 20th running of the Tour Auto, writes Mark Donaldson. It was also the first time I had driven our steed since we dropped it with CARS UK in Biarritz, for return shipment to the UK, and what a pleasure it was to get back behind the wheel: I bloody love that car!

I had the immense pleasure of driving car number 271 on this year's incredible event. Our entry was a brutally menacing Group 4 Ferrari 365 GTB/4 Daytona that had just been fully event-prepared by BGMSport and returned to its '73 livery. The car's owner, Tom Shaughnessy from Southern California, had not even seen the car until five days before the Paris start and the event was to mark a number of firsts. Not only was it the first Tour Auto for the car and crew but it was also the first competitive motorsport event for Tom – quite a baptism of fire. Oh, and did I mention this was all happening during Tom's first ever trip to Europe...?



After cramming in numerous UK visits, last-minute checks and packing of the car, we set off for Paris early on Sunday 10 April. En route to the Eurotunnel we dropped in at JD Classics for a bacon butty and a chance to look around their superb premises. Once through the Eurotunnel, we cruised on to Paris and arrived in the now bug-splattered beast at the Place de la Concorde just as they were allowing the entrants into the Jardin des Tuileries.

The drive out of Paris at daybreak on the Tuesday had an air of 'Rendez-vous' about it and driving through the French capital surrounded by fellow competitors in some incredible machinery was quite a buzz. First stop was Montlhéry, where we had a timed stage before heading off to Le Mans for a race around the Bugatti circuit before our overnight stop at Poitiers.



Over the next four days we weaved our way south towards Biarritz via Objat, Bordeaux and Pau, and were able to sample some of the finest roads, circuits and indeed sights that we had ever encountered. While we were laughing and joking via intercom, the trusty car just kept thumping along, only ever needing to stop to tend to its greedy appetite for fuel. Our one minor drama was the clutch cable snapping on the stage before the 80km road section to Nogaro but, with so much torque, the Daytona was actually quite easy to drive with no clutch. A pair of D-clamps and some cable from the friendly GTO chaps, coupled with a very hands-on and capable car owner, meant we were able to make the race; but the focus from then on was keeping gearchanges to a minimum and cruising through to the finish.



This brief account does not do justice to the Tour Auto experience. It really was the chance of a lifetime and I remain extremely grateful for the opportunity. We started the event as two mates in an awesome car with an adventure ahead of us; we ended the event as lifelong friends, having been propelled along in an incredible vehicle that far belies its 40 years of age. The event organisers and indeed the French public deserve a huge amount of credit for being so accommodating and helpful along the whole route. If it is an event you aspire to, I highly recommend it and I, for one, hope to have the opportunity to return next year.

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