

CLASSIC DRIVER

Champagne Tour by Jaguar XK-R

Lead

Rising before dawn on a cold day at the end of winter is never a nice prospect, writes Simon de Burton, so it was with some reluctance that I recently succumbed to the peeping of my alarm at 4 o'clock on a Monday morning in order to clamber into a Jaguar XK-R and heading off to a Mayfair gun shop.

Fear not. This wasn't the build-up to a ram-raid designed to secure armaments for underworld use – I was merely travelling to Holland and Holland's Bruton Street premises in order to rendezvous with an assortment of other equally bleary-eyed people (among them tennis player Annabel Croft and BRDC stalwart Maxwell Beaverbrook) who had also been tempted by the offer of a distinctly unusual road trip.

We would head down to Folkestone and load 10 XK-Rs onto a train that would take us *sous La Manche* before emerging at the other side in order to blast across northern France, arriving at Epernay in plenty of time for a snooze before a gourmet dinner at which we would become the first 'outsiders' to taste the latest vintage release from Pol Roger, famous for being the favourite champagne house of Sir Winston Churchill.







The following day, the cars would head for home and return triumphantly to Bruton Street, carrying the first magnums of 2002 vintage to enter the country. It was all rather romantic and exciting, a sort of mini Beaujolais Run with bubbles.

But in the event, what should have been a pleasurable, 200-mile jaunt on a crisp March morning turned into one of the most nerve-wracking drives I, and many of my companions, had ever experienced. Yes, it rained in that torrential way that is a speciality of northern France – the sort of rain that turned the Somme battlefields into a quagmire.

As London gallerist Richard Gauntlett, one of my fellow 'PoI Runners', put it: "It really is a strange sensation to have to commit to overtaking a lorry at 50mph, knowing you're going to be able to see nothing but a wall of water for three, extremely long, seconds..."





The persistent deluge, which was complemented by an average ambient temperature of two degrees (reduced further by wind chill) provided far from ideal conditions in which to enjoy the XK-R's magnificent supercharged V8 – but it did give us plenty of opportunity to praise the wonders of traction control and ABS and appreciate how tame the big cat can be when required.

Not far from Pol Roger HQ, the house's UK managing director Nick James – the proud owner of an immaculate '62 E-type – took us on a detour to the Epernay vineyards where we stoically stood in the bitter wind in order to learn that a single hectare of champagne grapes has a value of upwards of one million euros. Looking at the brutally pruned sticks of leafless vines that stood before us, it seemed hard to believe. But come September...

That evening, with the XK keys safely confiscated, we were treated to the far more interesting finished product in the form of an aperitif of the brut vintage 2002, followed by a decadent three further vintages (2000, 1999 and 1996) served with a remarkable four-course dinner in the Pol Roger chateau.





It all went down rather well, the high quality of the wines being proven the following morning by the universal absence of hangovers. Just as well, since the crux of the mission was now upon us – to travel to the Pol Roger 'caves' at the appropriately named *rue Henri le Large* and load up the vintage booty in its magnificent magnum form.

Before we did so, however, the brilliantly knowledgeable Patrice Noyelle, Pol Roger's 'President du directoire', took us on a fascinating tour of some of the kilometres of subterranean labyrinth where literally millions of bottles are left to mature to perfection in the sepulchral calm of the barrel-vaulted cellars, where they are skilfully and regularly 'riddled' to ensure that any sediment settles in the neck.

Then, with the chemistry lesson over and the XK-Rs packed, it was time to set a course north-northwest for the coast – on roads that, at last, were even drier than the champagne.





Pol Roger Brut Vintage 2002 costs around £60 per bottle or £130 per magnum. The entry-level, non-vintage Brut Reserve starts at around £32.

Photos: Jake Eastham

Gallery





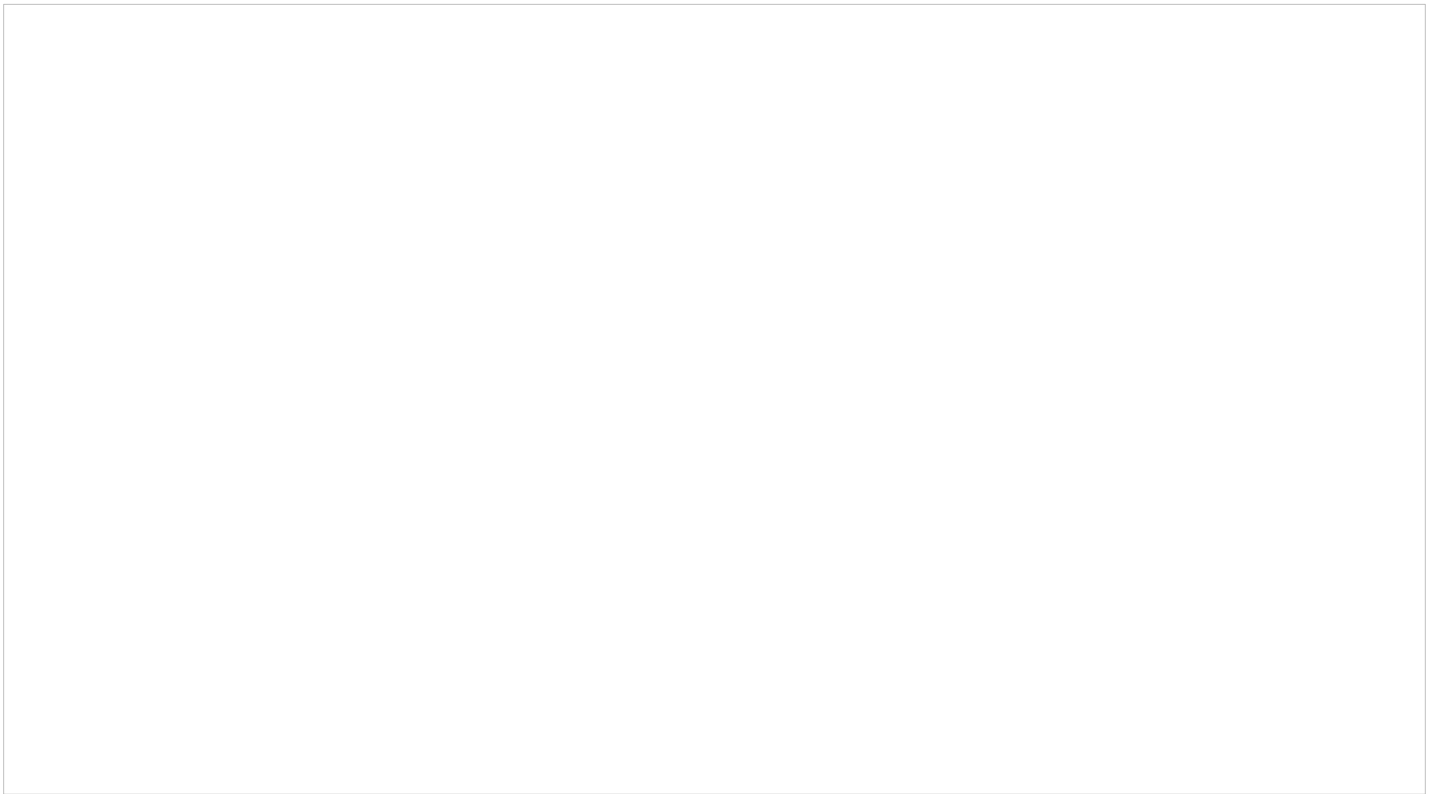












Source URL: <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/classic-life/champagne-tour-jaguar-xk-r>
© Classic Driver. All rights reserved.