

CLASSIC DRIVER

Vendetta of the rally legends on the Tour de Corse Historique 2018

Lead

A hardcore competitive road rally held across arguably one of the most jaw-droppingly beautiful islands on the planet, the Tour de Corse Historique is every bit as spectacular as it is challenging for the 400-or-so drivers and co-drivers taking part...



Gazing out at the cobalt blue ocean from the Notre Dame de la Serra high in the mountainous region north-west of Corsica is an arresting and truly serene experience. That is until a whale-tailed Ford Escort zips past beneath you in the blink of an eye, the turbo whooshes and gunshot-like cracks from the exhaust momentarily shattering the silence.



Spanning four days and encompassing the island's diverse and breathtaking landscape, the Tour de Corse Historique sees 200 historic rally cars contest some of the most spectacular and challenging stages in the world, recalling the famous event's glory days in the 1970s and '1980s.



Unlike the modern Tour de Corse, the Historique's route traces virtually the entire island, beginning at Porto-Vecchio in the south-east and snaking north towards Bastia, before spearing west to Calvi and then back down towards Ajaccio. There are 15 special stages for the entrants to contest over the course of the four days, held both in the daytime and under the cover of darkness.



They range from short and technical sprints through dense forests to agonizingly long stretches across nose-bleedingly high mountain ranges resembling the Lunar surface. The famous Notre Dame de la Serra, for example, is over 42km long and as much of a mental battle for the drivers as it is a physical one for the cars. And the weather is every bit as unpredictable.

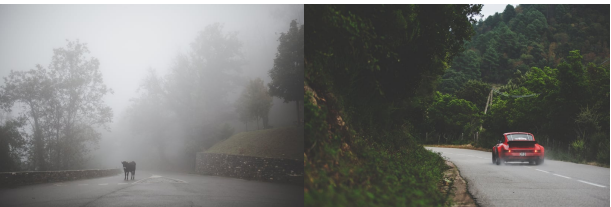


If the landscape and weather of Corsica appears to change at every turn (there was probably more rain than sunshine during the 2018 event), you can rely on one thing throughout: treacherously tight and twisty roads – the Tour de Corse didn't become known as 'The Rally of Ten Thousand Turns' for nothing.

If there's one man who understands the appeal and the challenge of this event, it's 'Mr. Tour de Corse' himself, Didier Auriol. The legendary French world rally champion claimed a staggering six wins in Corsica, the first of which, in 1988, was his maiden WRC victory.



To mark the 30th anniversary of the occasion, Auriol returned to the island to take part in the Tour de Corse Historique with the very Ford Sierra Cosworth he drove that year, plucked from his personal museum. Suffice to say, Auriol was granted a hero's welcome when he arrived at Porto-Vecchio ahead of the start.



"The Tour de Corse is a rally that's particular and unique for so many reasons," he told us. "The island is beautiful, the people are always very welcoming, and you really can't find asphalt roads like these anywhere else in the world." They say racing drivers never lose their competitive edge, and though Auriol's two-wheel-drive Sierra was not prepared to the same extent as the other *four*-wheel-drive frontrunners, it was clear to see he was the most comfortable driver out there - few broke as late or judged their angles of slip so precisely.



While the entry list was littered with veterans of both the original Tour de Corse and the Historique, not everybody is a professional. Entrants are divided into two categories, regularity and competition, and there's a great mix of abilities and cars.

From dinky Autobianchis and boisterous Abarths to barking Lancia Stratos', sleek Porsche 911s, and even an ex-Carlos Reutemann Peugeot 205 T16 from the infamous Group B era, the spread of cars means spectators of all ages can relate to something out on the stages. And because the Tour de Corse is a lesser-known event on the historic motorsport calendar, there's a friendliness and camaraderie between the drivers that are still very much alive.



It's definitely one of those events that once you get bitten, you can't help but return year after year. Edmond Simon, a former mechanic at Opel and Renault, has been coming to Corsica since 1969, formerly with the likes of Jean Ragnotti and Alain Oreille. "It's just a wonderful, old-school event," he told us. "When I used to come here with my Opel drivers, there were special stages 100km long - the average speeds were extraordinary, and we used to have to refuel halfway through!"

"Furthermore, the rally used to be held in November when there were chestnuts on the road. It was pure madness!" While Simon reckons the historic rally is a walk in the park compared to the original, at 80-years-old, the comparatively short days are more than enough for him.



Tour de Corse first-timer Pierre Novikoff is another driver who'll most definitely be returning to the island. "I feel like a child!" he exclaimed, his adrenalin levels clearly masking his exhaustion after contesting the punishing Notre Dame de la Serra in his charming Alfa Romeo 2000. "Physically, it's super exhausting but it's a fabulous event.

"The atmosphere is really warm and there's lots of sharing between the drivers and co-drivers, even the professionals. I love that the road sections are shorter than the special stages - you think you can relax for a moment after a long stage, but after 10km or so, you have to put your helmet back on! When it's narrow and there's no grip, you really learn how to drive. In the beginning, I felt drained by the pace and incredibly tense, but you have to forget that if you want to focus and be quicker. It's a proper rally and I'll come back and do it every year if I can!"



You'd be forgiven for thinking that, in this day and age, such an event held in such an unspoiled paradise would face opposition from the natives, but you'd be oh-so-wrong.

The Tour de Corse is engrained in the fabric of the island and the locals welcome both the contemporary and historic rallies with open arms and quintessentially Corsican hospitality.

We'll let Pierre-Manuel Jenot, who claimed a stunning overall victory in his Ford Escort RS MK2 together with his co-driver Slobodan Milosa Vljevic, have the final word... "Corsica has always held a mythical place in motorsport and the history of the Tour de Corse makes the Historique so successful.



"The island is an extraordinary playground for us and people in the cities, villages, restaurants, and hotels were so happy to see us and the cars. Motorsport is certainly not a taboo in Corsica." Book a flight, book a ferry, book a hotel, book anything - just make sure you're in Corsica for the next Tour de Corse Historique. It's simply magical!

Photos: Mathieu Bonnevie for Classic Driver © 2018

Gallery

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