CLASSIC DRIVER

Kicking off the new season with motorsport mogul Patrick Peter

Lead
Before the lights go green at the first historic motorsport meeting of 2019 next weekend in Barcelona, we caught up with Patrick Peter, the boss of the event organiser Peter Auto, to find out what pulse-raising spectacles we've got to look forward to in the coming year…

"Twenty-nineteen is going to be a very good year for us," remarks Patrick Peter as we sit down beside an outrageous McLaren F1 GTR 'Longtail' on Peter Auto's Rétromobile 2019 stand. We've snatched some precious time with the boss in order to outline the coming historic motorsport season, which kicks off on 5 April with the Esprítu de Montjuic at the Circuit de Catalunya. "We're heading back to both Monza and Paul Ricard and, of course, we have the Tour Auto in April and Chantilly Arts & Elegance in June, which returns after a year off in 2018."

For over three decades, Peter has promoted motorsport events including the popular BPR Global GT Series and, of course, the modern interpretation of the Tour de France Automobile, which he started way back in 1992. Today, he is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in the historic motorsport world. His organisation Peter Auto will hold an impressive nine events this year, including road rallies such as the Tour Auto and the Rallye des Legendes, the spectacular automotive beauty pageant that is the Chantilly Arts & Elegance in June, and more conventional historic motorsport meetings such as the Spa- and Hungaroring-Classic.

With over 240 entrants from as far afield as Japan, driving a gloriously eclectic selection of classic racing cars, the Tour Auto is always among the most popular historic events of the year. In fact, Peter tells us that he's been inundated at Rétromobile by people trying to get on the entry list for this year's rally, who he's had to regrettably refuse. "The route will be different in 2019," he tells us. "Usually, we start in Paris and head either southeast or southwest but every 10 years we remain in the north of France. This year, we're heading from Paris to Deauville via Dijon, Vichy, Tours, and Lyon." Between some of the finest stretches of roads France has to offer, entrants will also tackle famous racetracks including Magny-Cours and Le Mans.

There's always a theme on the Tour Auto and this year's will be the forgotten English marques such as Frazer-Nash, Healey, Triumph, and Sunbeam. "We always try to attract the biggest range of cars, which isn't always easy. And while there's an eligibility list, if you came to me with something quirky such as a Borgward or a Ballot, I'd immediately say yes!" A certain Mr Vatanen is also confirmed for 2019.

Returning for the first time since 2017 is the Chantilly Arts & Elegance, which will be held on 30 June in the grounds of the majestic French stately house. Established in 2014, Chantilly has proved to be one of Europe's premier concours events, though because it was previously held in September, it always competed with a raft of other high-profile automotive events such as the Goodwood Revival and the Frankfurt Motor Show. As a result, it will now be held in June every other year, alternating with the biennual Le Mans Classic.

“I think Chantilly is one of the best concours in Europe,” Peter proudly exclaims. “And in 2019, we’ll have special features such as a homage to Bentley for its centenary, a class in the *Concours d’Etat* for cars designed by Marcello Gandini, and a celebration of the historic pre-War marque Ballot. Some six of the latter’s brutish cars will be present, including a very special example from the Miles Collier collection in America.” Chantilly also holds a *Concours d’Elegance* in its truest and original form: for contemporary concept cars that hint at the future of mobility. “We judge both the cars and the dress of the ladies who parade with them, just as it was in the past. It’s a very French tradition!”

In a bid to attract a younger audience, Chantilly will also play host to a mouth-watering selection of GT sports-racing cars from the 1990s and 2000s – think McLaren F1s, Porsche 993 GT2s, Dodge Vipers, and Maserati MC12s. “I was partly responsible for bringing these cars to the racetracks when we launched the BPR Global GT Series in 1994,” Peter recalls, fondly. “It was very successful then and I think that’s because the cars were familiar and of such high quality – take the McLaren F1, for example, which is today one of the most valuable cars in the world!”

The inclusion of the genre at Chantilly follows the explosion of the Endurance Racing Legends series, which Peter Auto hosted at its events in 2018 with dedicated high-speed parades. The demonstration at the Le Mans Classic, which featured almost 100 cars from raucous Saleen S7s to a Toyota GT-One, was probably our highlight of the year. For 2019, Peter Auto will stage three competitive races for these cars for the first time, at Barcelona, Spa, and Monza. “It wasn’t my first choice, as I wanted to stick with the parades. But we found out that the owners really want to race, so we’re proposing three races and two further demonstrations for 2019.

“We really want to retain the high-calibre cars, though, not because they’re expensive, but because difficult to mix valuable and less-valuable cars in a competitive environment – we won’t accept LMP2 cars, for example. We have a vast array of driver abilities, and we shouldn’t forget that the whole series is dedicated first and foremost to amateur drivers who are out to enjoy themselves at the wheel.”

The move is indicative of Peter Auto's willingness to react and evolve to changes in trends and appeal to a younger audience – something we're all in favour of here at Classic Driver. "It's really important to appeal to younger enthusiasts by mixing pre-War, post-War, and modern cars because I'm sure that many of them will not be at all familiar with the story of Ballot," concludes Peter. "We never feel like we've 'finished' an event. We need to change something each and every time because if you visit an event three times and it has the exact same programme, cars, and drivers each time, you'll probably stay at home for the next one."

We pose one more question to Peter before he's rushed off to his next appointment: what will Peter Auto look like in five years' time? "We finished 2018 with an experimental grid in Bahrain and everybody was very happy. I think the target for the following years is to organise an event in the Middle East. We want to increase the number of meetings in the summer, but also hold something during the winter break, and the climate of Bahrain would make it a great solution. Watch this space!"

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