

CLASSIC DRIVER

Chasing down a storm of noise on the 2019 Tour Auto

Lead

Among the most epic and challenging historic road rallies in the world, the Tour Auto Optic 2000 rolled across France last week like thunder. Fortunately, our man Mathieu Bonnevie was in hot pursuit to ensure you didn't miss any of the heart-stopping action...



Five days, some 1,400 miles, four circuits, and 10 special stages – it's fair to say the Tour Auto is as gruelling for those taking part as it is spectacular to watch. The historic road rally was conceived by Patrick Peter in 1992 as a modern-day evocation of the original Tour de France Automobile, which ran in various guises between 1899 and 1986. And in the 26 years since, it's cemented its position on the events calendar and attracted thousands of the world's most desirable historic cars – and the very finest amateur and professional pilots to drive them.



This year's Tour Auto differed from the norm in that it deviated from its usual route from Paris to France's glitzy southern coast, instead remained in the rural and mountainous middle and north of the country. The circa-240 international entrants in 2019, driving a plethora of exceptional cars ranging from humble Minis to a flame-belching BMW M1 Procar, travelled between Paris and Deauville in Normandy via Dijon, Lyon, Vichy, and Tours. And in addition to traversing some of the most breathtaking and scenic roads France has to offer, the drivers also tackled famous racetracks including Dijon-Prenois, Magny-Cours, Charade, and Le Mans.



We've attended countless automotive events at the Grand Palais in Paris yet entering the vast and airy atrium never fails to leave us breathless, particularly when you're confronted with a multi-coloured sea of fabulous old cars. There was a real party atmosphere during Monday's preview and scrutineering day, which set the tone for the entire week. It was also a good chance for entrants, particularly those taking part in the Competition class rather than Regularity, to eye up their competition.



From seductive Alfa Romeos and seemingly endless rows of Porsche 911s in a multitude of liveries (how cool is the *Le Grand Bazar* RSR?) to gentlemanly and barge-like Jaguar Mark 2s and roty Shelby Cobras and Ford GT40s, there's truly something to suit every automotive taste in the Tour Auto. Which car you'd choose to enter, we assume, is entirely dependant on how badly you want to win – and how much discomfort you're willing to endure in the process.



Peter Auto always selects a theme for the Tour Auto and this year's was the forgotten English marques such as Austin-Healey and Frazer Nash. Needless to say, there were some delectable examples in attendance, the Frazer Nashes, in particular, proving very deft in the regularity trials.



Out on the road, there were a number of cars that quickly stood out for us, not least the full-fat Group 4 BMW M1 Procar of Nicolas Leroy-Fleuriot and Adrien Audibert and the shrieking Ford DFV-powered Ligier JS2, a Tour Auto regular. We're sure we wouldn't be alone in saying that James Cottingham and Andrew Smith's Carreras Columbia Cobra was the star of the show in 2019, not least because of the Latin spirit the duo brought in abundance – and despite the unrelenting mechanical gremlins they faced. It was so much fun to follow these guys throughout the week and we hope they return, next time with corresponding moustaches.



The sunshine and balmy temperatures of the Côte d’Azur might have been missed, but location-wise, this year’s Tour Auto served up so many treats. Take the Château de Chazeron in Auvergne, for example, one of a number of stunning lunch stops along the way, the art nouveau-style centre of Vichy, or the vibrant green wine region of Beaujolais. Mountains are always a staple of the Tour Auto, and while we didn’t make it to the Alps or the Pyrenees this year, it was incredible to experience Mont Pilat and Puy de Sancy by road.



On that note, we must mention the quite extraordinary weather we encountered throughout the week. The first two days from Paris to Lyon via Dijon felt like spring: foggy in the morning, but quickly turning bright and warm. But from then on out it was truly miserable: very cold, wet, and windy. In fact, as we were driving to Le Mans on Saturday, we heard that Dijon-Prenois, the circuit we’d been to three days earlier, was under a blanket of snow! As tough as the conditions were for us in the luxury of our modern BMW press car, it must have been a hell of a lot worse for the drivers themselves.



But that’s where the Tour Auto becomes so much more than the sum of its parts. It’s *all* about the atmosphere, whether you’re passing through towns lined with people who’ve come out to cheer the drivers on, in the grouping areas before the special stages, or the parc fermés at the end of the days. From the beginning to the end, it feels like there aren’t five minutes that go by before the entrants are once again greeted by enthusiastic onlookers. It’s so heartening to see such a great appetite for classic cars.



The camaraderie between the drivers, too, was a pleasure to witness. It's such an intense and exhausting rally, but despite their fatigue, they were only too happy to help each other out, be it with a simple bump start or an elusive spare part. A great number of the participants are Tour Auto veterans and are only too happy to see their old friends succeed. It's arguably the mechanics who are the true unsung heroes, though. These are old cars, after all, not used to travelling upwards of 300 miles a day, much of the time at full chat. The mechanics' jobs start when the drivers' finish at the end of the long days – it's not uncommon to see a gaggle of people beneath a car in the dead of night changing an engine or a gearbox.



After an intense week of competition, it was the Swiss duo of Raphaël Favaro Yves Badan in their little Lotus Elan 26R who crossed the finish line in windy Normandy as overall victors of the Tour Auto for the second year in succession. It was a hard-fought victory, however. The dice between the giant-killing Lotus and the much beefier Ford GT40 of Brits Chris Wilson and Nigel Williams in second was fascinating – on the special stages, the former was 20 seconds faster, while on the open circuits, the GT40 was ahead by some 40 seconds! Alas, a late 30-minute penalty put the GT40 out of contention. In the Regularity class, Eric Hamoniau and Edouard Lotthe took the victory in their stunning Ferrari 250 GT *Lusso*. A hearty congratulations to all the winners and a big thank you for making this year's Tour Auto so memorable. Until 2020!

Photos: Mathieu Bonnevie for Classic Driver © 2019

Gallery

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