

CLASSIC DRIVER

The Ennstal-Classic was a glorious Alpine adventure

Lead

Last weekend, we joined Porsche Design and a raft of racing legends including Mark Webber and Hans-Joachim Stuck at the Ennstal-Classic in Austria, one of the most pleasurable and picturesque historic road rallies in the world. Suffice to say, it was a weekend to remember...



Could there be a more appropriate way of experiencing the accuracy and elegance of a new mechanical timepiece than with a regularity rally in the Austrian Alps comprising a mouth-watering selection of the world's most beautiful classic cars? Fortunately for us, Porsche Design had the exact same idea.

To celebrate the launch of its new 1919 Datetimer Ennstal Classic Special Edition, it invited us to the Ennstal-Classic, an event commonly considered the finest Alpine road rally in the historic motoring season. Conceived in 1993 by a small group of like-minded driving enthusiasts, the Ennstal-Classic has grown into a rally of serious prestige, attracting global motorsport royalty, the likes of which have included Sir Stirling Moss, Walter Röhrl, Sebastian Vettel, Rowan Atkinson, and Patrick Dempsey.



After hot-footing it from Zurich to Schloss Pichlarn (via Porsche Design's HQ in Zell am See) on Wednesday with [the new Porsche 911 Speedster](#), a thoroughly enjoyable evening was spent at a cocktail reception for participants in the rally. We had the distinct pleasure of joining the table of Dr Wolfgang Porsche himself and the five-times Le Mans winner and Porsche motorsport veteran Derek Bell and his son Sebastian.

The latter pairing was poised to compete in a 90-year-old Bentley Blower in this, the legendary British marque's centenary year. "This will be the fourth time I've entered the Ennstal-Classic with this magnificent Bentley and we'd really love to get the old girl to the end," Bell Snr told us. "Of course, we'll take the competition seriously but you have to treat this car with so much respect – the steering is so heavy that Sebastian has to help me turn the wheel, the brakes don't really work, and our feet are right next to a boiling engine that spits oil on your hands and legs at will. I have to admire the guys who drove these cars at Le Mans in the period. That said, it's such a privilege to be able to drive a piece of art that's such a major part of motorsport history at this wonderful event."



The action kicked off on Thursday morning with a 10-hour, 422km leg from Gröbming to Schladming, encompassing not only some of the most beautiful and enjoyable Alpine roads but also a number of thrilling hot laps at the Red Bull Ring in Spielberg. We joined Formula 1 veteran and World Endurance Championship winner Mark Webber in the snug cockpit of the Porsche Museum's stunning 356 Speedster 1600 S and played what turned out to be the vital role of co-driver.



Beneath deep blue skies and in searing 40-degree heat, we had a blast piloting the dainty Speedster through the forest and across the mountains, waving to the countless spectators who came out to cheer us on. Porsche Design is the Ennstal-Classics' official sponsor and timekeeper so naturally, we had to take the competition seriously. The eight stretches where we had to maintain an average speed were quite challenging, particularly at high altitude where the Porsche's small engine struggled to breathe, but Webber's skills came to the fore at the Red Bull Ring, where he drove like there was no tomorrow and overtook virtually all the rookies. "My first race at the Red Bull Ring was back in 2003 so it's fair to say I know the track very well," Webber explained. "Plus, the 356 is handling beautifully, even in this extreme heat." As day one ended (and despite a lengthy pit stop thanks to a hungry herd of cattle) we were looking good.



For the start of Friday's 450km leg, Webber was replaced in the Speedster by Rudi Lins, the Austrian racer who drove for the Works Porsche team in sports-car racing's most golden of eras in the late-1960s. Lins was a true gentleman and we spent an enjoyable morning attacking curves and reminiscing about the past, again in very warm temperatures. Who needs a roof when you've got an umbrella to protect you from the searing sunshine? After a brief lunch stop in Steyr, we then hopped in the tiny, tin-topped Porsche 356B 2000 GS Carrera 2 Dreikantschaber with the one and only Hans-Joachim 'Strietzel' Stuck for the afternoon stretch. From the off, the Formula 1 veteran and double Le Mans winner's ambition and skill became immediately apparent - he drove the wheels off the ultra-rare little Porsche. The challenging airfield section, in which we had to cross the 1.66km runway in a target time of 100sec was particularly enjoyable.



We were honoured when ‘Strietzel’ chose for us to join him for the third and final day of the Ennstal-Classic, which included a challenging hill climb and the Porsche Design Grand Prix in the centre of Gröbming. During a quiet spell, we dared to ask Stuck if he was having fun. “Can’t you see the smile on my face?!” he replied. “How could a day possibly get any better than this? We’re driving a fantastic car and having so much fun on these amazing roads. Furthermore, I have a great co-driver who’s doing a super job!

“It’s such a pleasure to drive this car, which is usually sitting in the Porsche Museum, here on these winding mountain roads. There’s no power steering, no PDK gearbox, no navigation, and definitely no air-conditioning. But this is what driving is all about – enjoying and feeling what the car is doing with your hands, feet and bottom. It’s just fantastic!”



The hill climb on the Stoderzinken pass truly was Alpine rallying at its finest. The target time from the bottom to the top was seven minutes and 21 seconds – it was a demanding target but fortunately Stuck still knows how to drive! A carnival-like atmosphere flooded the town of Gröbming, despite the torrential rain that made an abrupt but thankfully fleeting appearance. When the downpour subsided, there was a parade in which the myriad motorsport legends in attendance prowled the quaint Austrian streets in some of their old four-wheeled steeds. How cool is it to see Rudi Lins back in a Porsche 908/2 or Arturo Merzario’s signature Stetson poking out from the cockpit of a sultry Abarth 2000 Sport Prototipo?

The Ennstal-Classic 2019 culminated with the Porsche Design Grand Prix, an extremely complicated regularity section through the Gröbming’s centre. The target time in which to complete the 1.377km stage was two minutes and 50 seconds. Sounds easy, right? Wrong. Along the way, there were seven photo checkpoints that you had to pass at certain times.



In some sections, you had to speed up, while in others you had to slow down, so efficient communication between driver and co-driver was vital. For the amateurs, it proved particularly tricky, but for the professionals, they managed to finish the course within hundredths of a second – just extraordinary. In the end, we finished in 88th position, just one place behind the Bell family and their Bentley in 87th.

Overall, this year’s Ennstal-Classic proved to be an unforgettable experience, from the near-perfect weather and jaw-dropping vistas to the relaxed and friendly atmosphere,

the superbly selected route and, of course, the precious time in the company of some of motorsport's most famous personalities. Porsche Design and the guys from the Porsche Museum really took great care of us, so our heartiest thanks go to them.



It was really tough to return the gorgeous timepieces we'd adopted for the weekend – they performed impeccably and looked just right behind the wheel of Porsche's most beautiful classics. If the Ennstal-Classic is an event that until now has not been on your radar, we suggest you take note and keep an eye out for the dates for next year's edition. Seriously, what's not to love?

Photos: Mathieu Bonnevie for Classic Driver © 2019

Gallery

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