

CLASSIC DRIVER

[A mere mortal's experience travelling 230km in a Bugatti Type 51, in the Alps, in the rain](#)

Lead

Experiencing the twisty mountain passes surrounding St Moritz is a once-in-a-lifetime moment for many car lovers, but when our Staff Editor Elliot Newton was given the chance to co-drive a pre-war Bugatti, he thought he was dreaming!



There are stories to tell the grandchildren, and then there are stories such as this one. A story full of ups and downs, water-logged cameras, missed turnings, camaraderie, and everything in between. We've seen epic road trips that span the world's greatest roads, but this is the story of how a fresh-faced Welshman found himself co-driving a multi-million-dollar Bugatti Type 51 during the Julius Bär Rallye at this year's Passione Engadina.

For me, simply being in St Moritz was an experience on its own. The long, winding train journey presented to me views I'd only ever seen in paintings or in movies. The jagged mountain edges and crystal-clear water seemed to only get more impressive the further we ascended, with St Moritz being the ultimate destination. As a car lover, the breath-taking location combined with the constant flurry of Italian classics makes it feel like a dreamland. I was already in heaven, but little did I know that this was only the beginning...



The Friday evening saw an introductory dinner at the fabulous Kulm Hotel and Country Club, where, after meeting with members of the Bugatti team, I was given a large book entitled 'Julius Bär Rallye Roadbook'. I skimmed through it and quickly realised this wasn't your average glossy magazine, it was full of key directions needed to complete the 200+ km Rallye. Luigi Galli, my driver, and Bugatti's heritage specialist, who I later named 'il Maestro', jokingly lent over to me and said, "Don't worry too much, we'll just follow Andy." Luigi was referring to legendary racer Andy Wallace, who is certainly no stranger to driving in anger.



I took the book back to my room and began flicking through the pages, trying desperately to understand what exactly was expected of me come 6 am the next morning. The abundance of symbols, distances, and timings were like another language to me, and with heavy rain forecast for almost the entirety of Saturday, it was safe to say I didn't have the easiest of sleeps that night.

Waking up early to the sound of torrential rain confirmed my anxieties, but what struck me was just how positive all the drivers were at breakfast, eager to get behind the wheel and start their adventure. The car Luigi and I would be driving was one of the jewels of the entire event, a Bugatti Type 51 Grand Prix, the car that superseded the iconic Type 35 and one of just 40 in existence. As we suited up in our period Bugatti overalls and wet-weather gear, I must admit I was terrified at what was to come, but once the engine fired up and we were amongst the roaring crowds of spectators as we left the garage heading towards the start line, the adrenaline kicked in and lasted the entire day.



We commenced at full speed, chasing two Type 35s along the public mountain passes towards La Rasiga. By this point, I'd quickly realised just how vital this map was, and could grasp where and when I'd need to direct Luigi, who was concentrating hard to keep the 51 afloat. A car with no seat belts, no doors, tyres narrower than most motorcycle rubber and an engine directly above your feet would be intimidating even on a hot summer's day, but with the rain seemingly falling sideways, it would take all of Luigi's experience with the Type 51 to keep it on the tarmac.



Once we had found our groove and settled into the 150 km first stint, we found ourselves surrounded by some fabulous company. The howls of V12 Ferraris would echo against the stone walls as we ascended toward the Stelvio Pass, one of the most iconic roads in the world. So far, the pre-war machine had been faultless, maintaining temperature and performance for over 80km of high-speed driving, but as we reached the inclines of Stevlio, we ran into some traffic who (and I probably would too) slowed to a crawl to capture the priceless array of cars in their mirror. The only issue was that the car was now becoming unbearably hot. As we reached what felt like the peak, the inevitable happened, Luigi went to grab second gear and the engine went silent, rolling to a halt on the outside of a blind corner. With the temperature gauge needle edging nearly 100 degrees, we hopped out and tried to push the car to safety, with many other competitors and holidaymakers rolling by.

A few passionate Italian phone calls later, Luigi explained that the Bugatti team in the support cars should be arriving soon. It would be a long, most likely more comfortable, but far less exciting ride back to St Moritz in the support car, I thought to myself, but Luigi hadn't given up just yet. Going through the pre-start checks, he asked if I could try and start it using the turn handle at the front. Sure enough, on the first spin, the car burst back into life. We leapt back into the car and got back on our way to the halfway point.



When we arrived at the midway point, we were greeted with joy and cheers from the other pre-war runners, many of whom had seen us stranded and assumed it was game over, but as we lined up to make the final leg back to St Moritz, we were more fired up than ever to make it home. The weather was on our side too, drying up with even a pinch of sun here and there, allowing Luigi to open up the Type 51 further, its double overhead cam straight-8 whirled like an old Swiss watch, and seemed to appreciate the spirited driving.



Our damp and exhausted bodies were given one last gift before the finish in the form of the Ofenpass, a dramatic ribbon of road that quite literally took my breath away. My eyes simply couldn't compute what I was seeing. As we neared the finish line, three things came to mind. The first was the sheer enormity of what we'd just completed, through challenging weather conditions and mechanical issues, even doing this event in a modern car would have been exhausting. I then began to think of the era in which this Type 51 was birthed, where during the early 1930s this was a regular occurrence for the bravest of racers. These cars were driven by true warriors who risked it all to experience the thrill of speed and excitement. Finally, I thought to myself how can I ever go back to driving my Abarth 595? I need to get myself one of these!



We made it across the line and greeted by Mr Passione himself - Paolo Spalluto. As we rolled into the garage at the Kulm Hotel, it was clear to see the joy and passion amongst all the 130+ entrants, all bonded by a connection based on classic cars and driving. As experiences go, this is one that I will never forget, most notably for the comment Luigi said to me as we were leaving the garage - "I'd actually only ever driven the car on a few short trips prior to this!"

Images by Elliot Newton & Giacomo Geroldi

Gallery

Source URL: <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/cars/a-mere-mortals-experience-travelling-230km-a-bugatti-type-51-alps-rain>
© Classic Driver. All rights reserved.