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LA DOLCE CORSA

For those of us who enjoy owning classic Porsches, spending a few days driving through the French Alps in the early part of the summer comes pretty close to heaven. The Coupe des Alpes is an absolute must on any petrolhead's bucket list.

Words: Thomas Seydoux

Photos: Philippe Fugier

Welcome to the Coupe des Alpes Rally. If you remember the opening scene of the original *Italian Job* movie, it's very much the same thing. Without the interruption of the bulldozer inside the tunnel, the ride goes on for a couple days until you've reached the French Riviera. Fortunately, you don't need to own a Miura, as any pre-1986 classic is welcome. As often in historic rallies, Porsche, in a variety of models, dominates a field of about 220 entries.

The Coupe des Alpes Rally was originally part of the European Rally Championship in the 1960s, and many famous drivers such as Stirling Moss, Paddy Hopkirk and Vic Elford took part, and won. Revived 25 years ago by ex-rally driver Hervé Charbonneaux, the rally is run entirely on open roads without speed or regularity trials, so you can drive at your own pace the entire time, following the road book from Evian to Cannes.

Over a period of three days, cars and drivers tackle no fewer than 20 mountain passes, including the Col de la Bonette and l'Izoard (2715 metres and 2361 metres above sea level, respectively).

The modern format makes it accessible to a wide range of classic cars and drivers looking to enjoy the roads, whether as their first ever rally or as veterans (several participants are on their 10th year or more in a row). Without a challenge, why bother you may ask? Well, for some it's an opportunity to bond with their cars and drive them as they were intended. For others, getting their engines to complete a 600-mile mountain run is a challenge in itself!

But all participants will most certainly agree that the Alps provide unbelievably beautiful vistas and, with very little traffic in June, sharing mountain roads almost exclusively with other classics remains a cherished opportunity nowadays. Last but not least, the feeling of 'getting away from it all' is simply unparalleled.

A few years ago, we decided to group our friends into a team, and Ecurie Lyford was born. Participating as a team permits you to obtain dedicated hotels, dinner tables, drive together and, of course, exchange cars. Just as importantly, it binds together the driving experience with the friendship, creating a unique atmosphere of nostalgia and free spirits, a reminder of what we all felt like as kids playing together on school holidays.

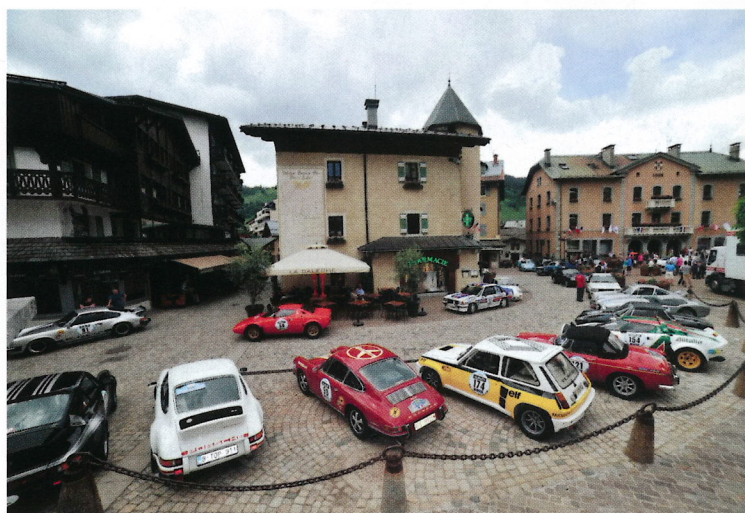
On the eve of the rally, members gathered at the Hotel Verniaz in Evian. In the true spirit of the Sixties, team polo shirts, car stickers, as well as various vintage trinkets, were given to the pilot and co-pilot of each car, uniting us for a few days as Lyford members. It may seem trivial but it contributes to the nostalgia and plunges every one of us immediately into the spirit of the period.

After checking the oil level, tyre pressures and fuel, and installing the rally plates and numbers, we all met for dinner, most of us not having had the chance to see each other since the previous year. Anxious and excited at the same time, we eventually got to sleep knowing we would share many stories together over the next few days.

Our team comprised a wide range of early 911s, from 1965 to a 1986 Turbo, with pretty much everything in between, including a 356 Beutler and a soft-window 912. This allowed us to compare cars and exchange drivers to experience first hand the pros and cons of each model. Although we were all impressed by the Turbo's performance, everyone agreed that the 'long hoods' (pre-1974 911s) were best suited for the event, combining driver involvement and good performance.

Eric, proud owner of a 2.4T and the 1986 Turbo, explains his preference for the earlier model: 'The rewards of driving a 2.4T are not told by the speedometer – you have to look elsewhere. You get your kicks by mastering the vagueness of the long-throw gear lever, by carefully balancing pressure





on the brakes and throttle, by working the steering wheel smoothly – and by the most basic achievements, like getting the crude heater system to warm the cabin in the early hours of the morning when surrounded by snowy mountains! When going through villages, school kids cheer you on from the confines of their school yard, clearly impressed by its vivid green colour and the sound of its engine.'

The 1968 g11S driven by Robin and Lionel seemed best suited for the enthusiast driver as summarised perfectly in a period review: 'The 2.0-litre engine of the Porsche g11S is in essence a wild beast only to be tamed by the most

Alpine scenery is breathtaking – as was the array of cars taking part. Porsches were plentiful, but other entries included Lancia Stratos and Renault Turbo 2. The Porsches proved to be the perfect cars for the mountain roads

mountain roads. Coming out of hairpins, we'd have loved to have some more power, but when driven smoothly it still rewarded the driver convincingly.

The car however had another significant asset: the Targa roof and its 'soft' rear window. The Alps in an open car is altogether another experience. Your senses react differently

“ The Coupe des Alpes was originally part of the European Rally Championship in the 1960s... ”

experienced drivers. For others who may not have the required skills, the level of performance on the road is such that it will only provoke fear.'

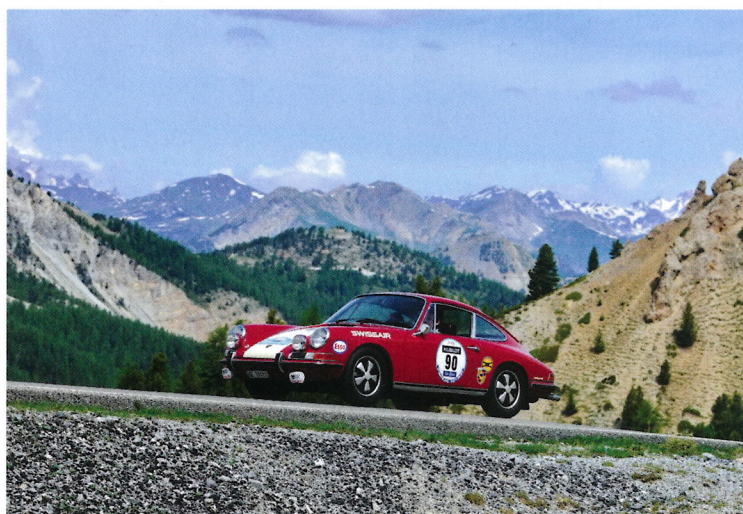
A wild horse that can be scary at times, but one you can't help wanting to ride over and over again: 'It was difficult to keep the car in the correct rev band, and its short chassis combined with the engine hanging in the rear meant that no driving error went unnoticed! Although you could literally sense fear in the car at times, our rally in the 2.0-litre g11S was an absolute thrill,' concluded Robin.

For those who prefer a more relaxing experience, the g12 offered a great compromise. The g12 may not be as powerful as its six-cylinder sibling, but its engine is indestructible, and can be pushed pretty hard all day long without reservations. The car had the optional five-speed gearbox, and the torque at low revs was well-suited for

to the environment; the mountains, the smells of the fields and the forests, and even the light levels feel different in a Targa, providing a oneness with your surroundings that can't be matched in a closed car.

Fanny and Thomas, driving an unrestored 1965 g11, discovered the shortcomings of using a car that has now become highly collectable: 'There was a drawback, however: the car's originality made it difficult to be driven in anger. Sure, the car should remain on the road and be used the way Porsche intended, but unmolested 1965 g11s are rare, most of them having been raced, restored, or both. Although cars are meant to be driven, we did feel the weight of its originality, and had to drive sensibly even when we would have wanted to push on a little more...'

The Ecurie Lyford is fortunate enough to include some much-needed variety thanks to the presence of other great



models, such as a Mercedes Pagoda, De Tomaso Mangusta, Jaguar E-type roadster and an Alfa Romeo Montreal. Against a backdrop of g11s and g12s, these period grand tourers offered serious alternatives and plenty of fun, as well. If Porsche is often considered a benchmark of reliability and overall efficiency, these other brands' trump cards are their exotic design and bucket-loads of character.

The Coupe des Alpes gave us some interesting insights. The convertibles put a permanent grin on their passengers' faces, and were greatly admired for their elegant design. Their overall performance measured well throughout the rally, even though raw speed is rarely a priority in open cars.

The Mangusta was very quick when not plagued by fouled plug issues. Giorgetto Giugiaro, its designer, certainly knew how to draw attention: each time the 'gullwing' engine lids were opened, the De Tomaso always attracted a sizeable crowd. Over the years, owner Henrique has learned to master its reliability issues with utmost persistence, patience and loving care, spending equal time behind the wheel as in the engine bay! The rally without the Mangusta, and its most devoted owner, simply wouldn't be the same.

In its bright orange livery, the Alfa Romeo was sublime. The Montreal has huge character, and its Marcelo Gandini design, with its numerous cues borrowed from the Miura, has

From Beutler-Porsche (above left) to De Tomaso Mangusta (top left), the event attracts all. Ecurie Lyford team consisted of a variety of cars, but Porsche predominate

aged well. In the hands of our very elegant Italian teammate, Massimo, they formed the perfect pair. The Montreal did experience brake problems, however, mainly due to Massimo's efforts in demonstrating that an elegant design doesn't have to come at the expense of some serious performance. By the time they reached Cannes, car and driver had proved their point in great style.

Each of these cars oozed personality and presence, bonding perfectly with their respective owners, while offering the rest of us some serious competition on the road. Upon arrival on the Mediterranean shore, prizes were given to the biggest teams during the closing dinner in Cannes, providing an additional reason (if needed) to celebrate as a team.

This year, all 16 of our cars reached the chequered flag safely, allowing Ecurie Lyford to win the overall team prize, as well as the Mountain Trophy. If you're looking for a new opportunity to bond with your g11, the Coupe des Alpes is not to be missed! **CP**

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