

ALPINE



PASSES

The Swiss scenery is beautiful, but those nasty hairpin turns in the Rallye des Alpes mean eyes on the road

BY AMOS SHEPARD



Wenger Alpine Swiss Rallye chronographs retail for \$375.

Hannibal crossed the Alps in 218 B.C. and Roman legions did so repeatedly throughout early Western history. More recently, more than one hundred antique coupe and open-roadster sports cars crossed many of these same high mountain passes in July during the 2005 “Rallye Des Alpes Historique.”

I teamed with Guy Corcoran, marketing director for Wenger North America, to race in the Rallye. We jumped into a 1962 Mini Cooper emblazoned with a red Swiss Cross (used by Wenger on its products) and the number 940, and took off.

I was our car’s navigator, and it was the ride of my life.





The Rallye began in Geneva, and the drivers keep close tabs on their elapsed time to avoid penalties—especially if they arrive too early at checkpoints.

To assist with directions and timing, each car has a navigator armed with myriad timepieces. Drivers conscript friends, lovers, spouses and even entire families to help. Together they complete difficult and often obscure courses. For instance, directions are delineated in no less than four spiral-bound volumes and must be followed precisely. Many of the instructions are separated by only a split second and so the navigator must, with computer-like speed, 'decode' each instruction (a typical days' race has over 275 instructions). Then, with the skill of a seasoned psychiatrist, the navigator must impart this information to a driver who is already in a volatile state. His condition made so, no doubt, by normal race tension and any number of previously imparted instructions that were, quite possibly, botched.

The perilous relationship between driver and navigator quickly becomes apparent. I'm sure that teams that survive develop stronger relationships as a result.

Hairpin turns

The Rallye began near a park in Geneva. Over one hundred antique sports and road cars were driven or shipped from around the western hemisphere to participate. For six days these majestic reminders of a bygone era in car manufacturing, when success was measured in craftsmanship and detail, race over, around and through what may be the most spectacular race course in the world.

Many of the names are familiar: BMW, Jaguar, Alfa, Aston Martin and the like. Some are not: Lagonda, Delahaye and Invicta. Together, lined up at race start, their chrome fixtures were an inspirational sight. Alone, each car left a gate (in two-minute intervals) and began a crossing of historic and beautiful Alpine passes, panoramas and towns.

Elapsed time

On paper at least, the objectives are simple: complete the course in a specific amount of time by going a specific speed. Checkpoints along the way measure elapsed time for each vehicle. Penalty points are assigned to cars arriving at checkpoints late. Drivers trying to get ahead of the competition and arrive early earn triple penalty points.

Zero is a perfect score and even for the experienced it is at best elusive. For the nouveau dilettante it's practically impossible.

One pass, the Stelvio, is made up of fifty hairpin turns to the top (9,043 feet) and another fifty feet to get back down. It's just one of ten mountains the racing teams needed to negotiate to complete this exhilarating rally.

Luxury stays

To soothe nerves, repair cars and replenish souls, participants are treated to the best in lodging and accommodations. Luggage and belongings are transported from the previous night's stay to the next luxurious five-star resort and set-up in each guest's

room before their arrival. Brilliant! Geneva, Zermatt, St. Moritz, Compiglio, Ischgl and the fabulous Burgenstock Hotel are the stops along the way. Eight hours of racing, gourmet meals and international race camaraderie are *de rigueur*.

No less colorful than their cars,

drivers and crew form a fascinating lot. A doctor from South America, a lawyer from Europe and a scientist/entrepreneur from the U.K. compete. All are strong and competitive individuals brought together by a passion for motor sports and classic automobiles in particular. Two Frenchmen took away top honors in this year's race in a car that you might not expect to win. Marc Rinaldi with navigator Yves Noelanders piloted their 1962 Volvo 544 to first place. Second place went to last year's winners, Stephen and Alexia Schrauwen, from Belgium, driving a 1937 BMW roadster. Third place honors went to John Abel and Stephen Bradley, of the United Kingdom, in a 1924 Bentley. We placed fifty-ninth, not bad for first-timers.

Next year's "Rallye Des Alpes" celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Plans are to accent the Rallye's long and storied past. Like the early races, next year's Rallye will end in Marseilles, that infamous port city in the south of France, and be marked by special celebrations.

Whether you're a recent racing convert like myself, or a seasoned veteran with many races under your belt, I doubt this is one for which you'll want to call in sick. ⌚

Drivers and navigators study the convoluted route through villages and mountain passes.

