

Rallye Round

At the fiftieth anniversary of the Rallye Des Alpes, the author enjoys the scenery—
and a new Wenger chronograph



BY AMOS SHEPARD

Your personal memory chip has only so much it can handle. At some point... you approach overload. The Rallye Des Alpes, I believe, is a case in point. It challenges you to remember more than you think you're capable of. It's that exciting.

As competitors, you're asked to calculate and measure an ocean of turns, stops and timings. As spectators in the cars, you combine those driving demands with a seemingly endless supply of continually escalating visual experiences. Visual experiences that include not just the

expected sight of stunning cars and breathtaking panoramas of alpine vistas, but comical and sometimes haunting ones as well: a wizard-like old man crossing a town square is waving and smiling knowingly at you as you speed through his village, little boys with blow-up floatable



More than 100 competitors gather in Geneva on a hot July day to start the Rallye Des Alpes. The author's 1962 Mini Cooper is visible in the center below.



swim suits want to have their picture taken next to your race car. It all wraps up in a pleasant haze of mental snapshots that leaves you smiling for quite some time.

This year marked the fiftieth anniversary of The Rallye Des Alpes, a race long considered one of the most prestigious rallies in Europe. It's a tradition that began almost a century ago and has been interrupted only by financial hardships, two world wars and the great depression. Today, the Rallye is vibrant, alive and well.

Race organizers in July welcomed to Geneva over one hundred of the world's finest classic automobiles and the teams that drive them. Unusually hot weather and clear skies were the order of the day and generally remained during the entire event. It was great beach and photo weather but was problematic

for vintage cars and steep mountain climbs. For this reason, many cars had to withdraw.

Regardless, this year's competition was extremely tight, and the top six cars jockeyed for first place on a daily basis.

Like last year, I teamed up with Guy Corcoran, director of marketing for Wenger North America, the lead sponsor for this event. Wenger crafts a handsome chronograph to commemorate the event and each race contestant receives one. No surprise that as aficionados of accuracy and detail, participants see the watches as prizes in themselves.

In the Mini

We chose the same car we raced before, a bright red 1962 Mini Cooper. And although we were scheduled to compete, we opted instead to follow competitors out each day around the scheduled course, stopping to take photos whenever a promising point-of-view presented itself. →



The technique proved to be, to our amazement, immensely rewarding. Not only did we get to experience the thrill of driving the course at race speed, the technique gave us the time to really enjoy and photograph some of the most spectacular sights, cars and panoramas in the world.

What provides those panoramas are the sixteen or so official mountain passes that the race course crosses, and countless other high mountain meadows, lush forest switchbacks and hard rocky roads that these old classics fight to master.



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The highest of the passes is the Col de l'Iseran, not far from Val D'Iserre in France. It's combination of tight and sweeping hairpin turns all with a backdrop of high craggy snow-dotted peaks. The vistas extend for miles down to the villages in the valleys below. The oldest of passes is the Col Du Grand St. Bernard, linking Switzerland and Italy. It dates back to 800 B.C. and the Bronze Age. Think of the history there.

And as you cross these passes, the names of the old villages you pass through change gradually as well. They go from French to German to Italian and back to French. Chaux Neuve becomes Petit Chaux and then to Moosalp and Untersbach.

They change to Giaglione and Molar. What ties all these people and places together, of course, is an incredible network of roads and mountain passes. It is also what ties together the Rallye Des Alpes and all who participate in it.

Geneva, Lausanne, Zermatt in Switzerland, St. Vincent, Torino in Italy and Cannes and Marseille in France were our stops along the way. Each has its own spe-

cial points of interest and, as is the custom of the Rallye, at each stop we stay at the best accommodations available.

Marseille sights

Marseille, the historic start/stop of early Rallye Des Alpes was, in fact, where we finished this fiftieth anniversary year. There, regardless of how anyone placed, all who participated were treated to the

At dinner, plans were made for 2007.



Palm Beach Sofitel Hotel and the luxury accommodations immediately adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea. At a gala dinner, toasts and presentations were made and the winners were duly recognized.

Third place went to the team of Chabbey and Matter from Zurich in car number 934, a 1964 Morgan Plus 4. The team of Phillips and

Davies, just eight points ahead, placed second in a 1926 Bentley number 927.

And first place kudos went to the father-and-son team from Belgium: Dirk and Nick van Praag in their beautiful and unusual bright blue Delahaye number 821.

After dinner, many took advantage of the warm summer evening

and met for cocktails and farewells on the patio. Anecdotes and business cards were exchanged, and plans made, no doubt, for next year's event, all under the watchful eye of the starlit Mediterranean. I doubt anyone present thought there might be a better place they could be. ☺

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