

DRIVING EXPERIENCES

Safety fast

A VINTAGE SUMMER IN FRANCE

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The car, a 1932 F type Magna 4 seater, bought the previous Easter, had a newly reconditioned engine but little more had been done to prepare for the expedition. Our belongings were in a large haversack strapped to the spare wheel mounted on the rear and in a wooden orange box which filled the fourth seat. Our goal was the Camargue, the marshy wilderness on the Southern French coast – it seemed like a good place to aim for.

It was about 10 am on a hot August morning in 1964. We had driven through the night after a pretty rough crossing stopping only for a few hours exhausted sleep on the roadside in Picardy.

started and we made our escape with shouts and whoops ringing in our ears.

Locals wouldn't credit the associations that their towns sometimes have for foreign tourists. As we drove through the stifling heat of Montelimar, I was expecting to come across a Hotel de Ville made out of my favourite chocolate centre – perhaps a triumphant civic statue built out of the sticky substance. As these absurd meanderings drifted through the mind, an odd lumpiness brought me back to reality. The cobbled road ahead was surely at fault, but why was the bumping so regular? A quick glance to the front offside wheel explained all. The tyre was splitting, allowing the inner tube

to emerge like a monstrous carbuncle. I gingerly slowed down watching with horror as it came to a head and burst with a rifle crack. Embarrassingly, the car slowly settled on to its deflated tyre and once again we discovered that there is nowhere to hide in an open sports car.

We had grown tired of mending punctures and the spare was flat. A tyre shop had to be found. Fortunately, there was one only a few hundred yards away.

We couldn't believe our luck at the immediate affirmative to our request for the metric equivalent of a 4.50 x 19 tyre. Our spirits sank when the mechanic returned with a three-ribbed tractor tyre. However, it would have to do. Our goal of the Camargue was beckoning – the sun was high – we had to move on. Almost immediately, a tram track caught the tyre's profile in its grip and I fought a battle to avoid a head-on collision with several angry French motorists. We just managed to



Port d'Envalira – the pass from France to Andorra.

avoid a confrontation and sped in a rather erratic fashion to Arles where we had our first encounter with mosquitoes. Any similarity between Arles and the Isle of Skye is minimal but mosquitoes help to bridge the gap. The only defence was total immersion in our thick zip-up sleeping bags. Arles in summer, as Van Gogh discovered, can drive you crazy with heat, so we moved on very quickly.

Pursued relentlessly through the Camargue by even more vicious strains of mosquito, we revised our intended goal and headed for Spain. In between us and Spain was the Pyrenees. We didn't know where to cross them but the thought of an extra badge proclaiming Andorra proudly stuck on the haversack strapped to the spare wheel finally decided the issue.

Climbing into the clouds, as we slowly wound our way up to the Port d'Envalira, gave us confidence in the M.G. She seemed to thrive on the tortuous bends. On the way up we met a large open vintage Volvo descending full of Scandinavian students. Our screams of mutual admiration and greeting echoed around the mountainside. At the top we parked in the mist



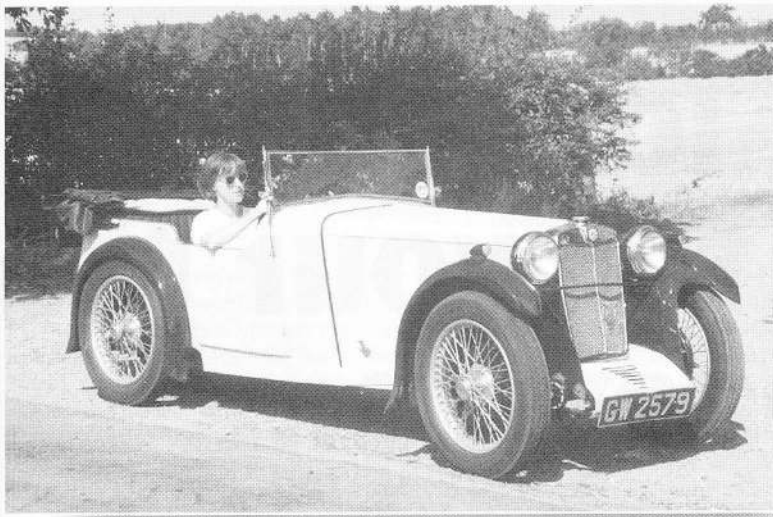
Andorra LaVella campsite, August 1964. Drying out after a deluge.

The engine sounded good and optimism was in the air. This was short-lived. As we descended a slow left hand bend into a small village passing a cafe full of lads having a morning drink, the engine cut out. They looked at the car quizzically: the sight of three pale and dishevelled Englishmen in a silently moving 30s M.G. was not part of their normal Saturday morning's entertainment. As we slowly drew to a halt, our minds were whirring trying to find reasons for the unexpected cutout. However, there wasn't much time to think, for in seconds we were surrounded by intrigued, enquiring faces. A lad called Jacques was pushed to the front of the little crowd. Our primitive French led us to understand that if anyone could solve the problem, Jacques could. To our amazement, within minutes he had! A loose lead from the distributor.

We shook hands – one hand passing a full packet of Capstan Full Strength – Jacques withdrew his hand in glee, throwing the packet in the air with a flourish. The car



Andorra August 1964



August '95

and gave the six cylinders a rest. Then it was down into the valley to find a campsite.

It is only with hindsight that I realise the effect we had on the main campsite at Andorra la Vella. The battered F type, the pre-war (to match the haversack) Cub Scout ridge tent, designed for two but stretched to house three large unkempt lads looked slightly odd even all those years ago. Perhaps it was because we were surrounded by 'big top' size frame tents expertly erected by well-washed Scandinavians.

However, such things meant little; there were more important things to occupy our minds. The

juke box had Manfred Mann's 'Doo Wah Diddy' hot from the UK, and unfulfilled wrangling over the campsite owner's daughter kept us there for three nights.

On the third day, we went to Spain for the afternoon, decided that it seemed a bit too far away from home at Lowestoft, and made our way back north determined to cheat the mosquitoes and to buy 'Doo Wah Diddy' just as soon as we could.

About half way home we reached a campsite just short of Chateauroux. Shortly after we arrived another interesting vehicle joined us on

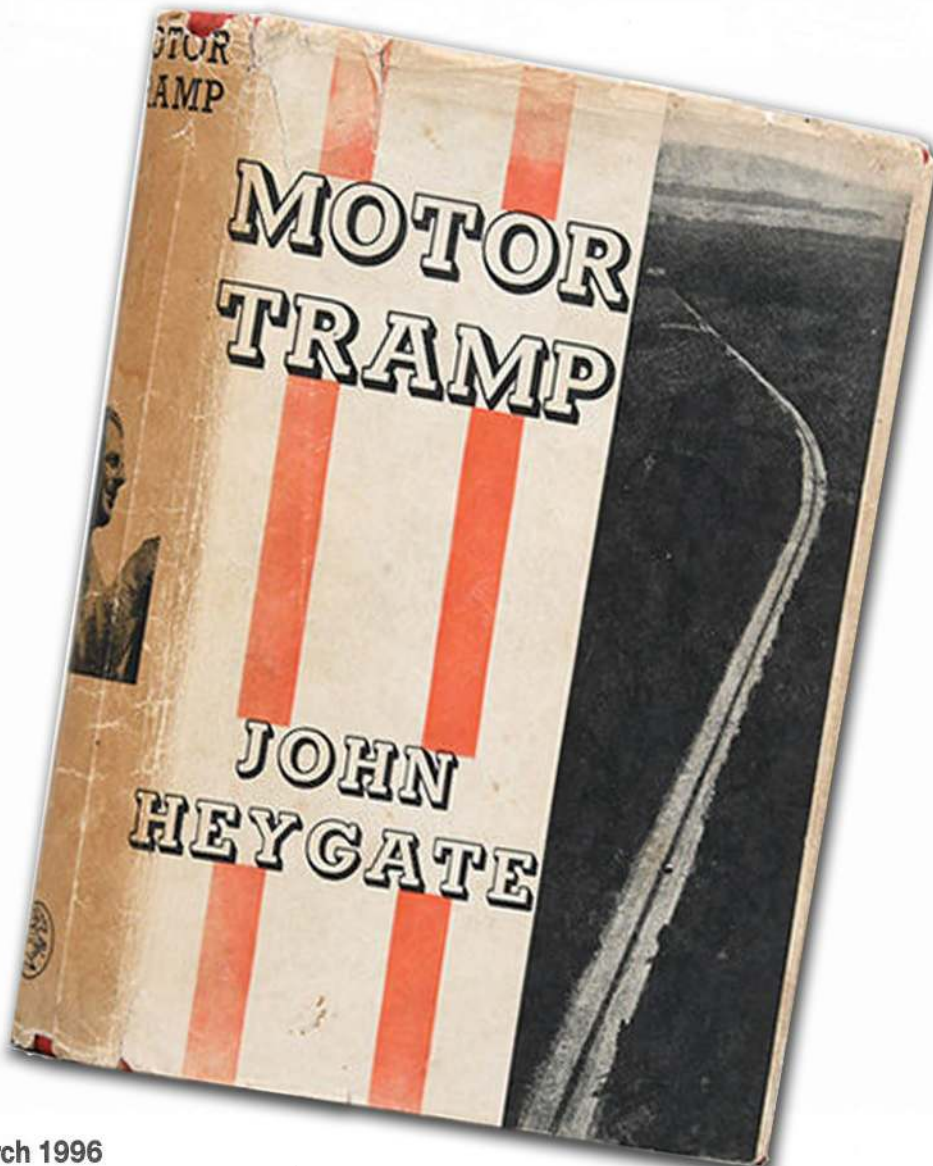
the site – an open Lea Frances. Swapping yarns and eyeing each other's machines, the owner beckoned us in a conspiratorial way. A sleeping bag lay across the back seat. Straining forward we watched as he slowly and triumphantly revealed a complete Bugatti engine rescued as he explained from some obscure and mouldering collection at a location he would not divulge.

Footnote or words of warning.

Few days were complete without a puncture. This was usually of the slow overnight sort; inconspicuous, devious and boring, rarely the dramatic blowout. Lateral thinking was stretched to the limit in repairing tubes and worn out tyres. On returning home, I showed Willy Arthur, our guru in the local garage the only tyre that hadn't punctured. With a slightly amused expression on his face he asked me if I knew what the letters HDV deeply etched into the wall of the tyre stood for. Surprised at this question, I explained that a mate had told me it stood for Heavy Duty Vehicle. I still wince and turn inwardly red when I remember his reaction to this. "This mate of yours named Steptoe by any chance? Them letters stands for Horse Drawn Vehicle!"

Taken off the road in 1968, the M.G. has emerged from its twenty-seven years hibernation and is now totally restored.

Shades of APW's and Andrew Robert's TC excursion to France, Spain and Andorra in 1965 – it is a great thing – youth, and not knowing what could go wrong – and not caring if it did! APW



F705

Motor Tramp
features a tour
of Europe in the
'30s in an F1.

**A good read if
you can find a
copy!**