

I have been asked to try and connect some ramblings about our recent trip to Italy and Switzerland, so here goes.

The plan was for myself and Peter Owen in my TR6 and Andrew and Ann Lord in Andrew's MGB Roadster to undertake a petrol-head's holiday driving to Italy via the Stelvio pass, visiting the Mille Miglia museum in Brescia, spend a few days at Lake Como, and then return via as many Swiss alpine passes as we could fit in to the Alsace area of France where we would visit the French National Motor Museum (formerly the Schlumpf Collection) at Mulhouse.

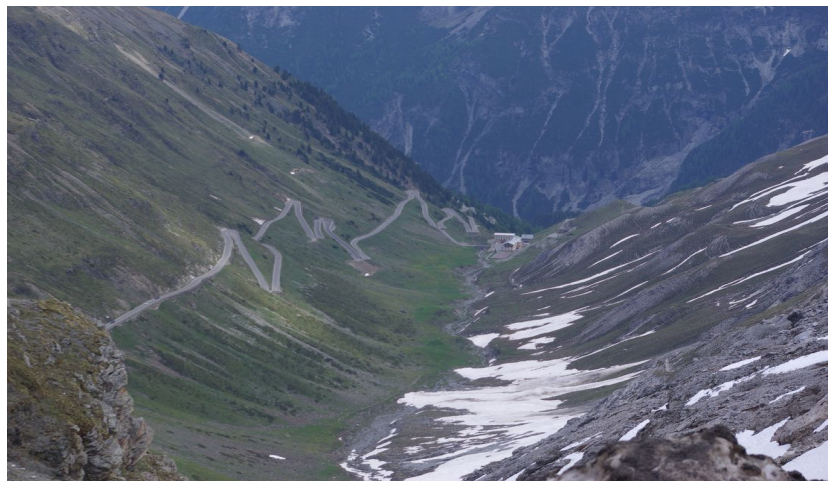
The plan started to unravel on the first day after we disembarked from the Hull-Zeebrugge ferry. We had booked our first night's hotel at Konstanz on Lake Constance on the German /Swiss border, a 450 mile drive from the ferry. A goodly distance in a classic, but do-able since the ferry disgorges at 8.30a.m. On a good day.

Unfortunately the weather gods dictated the roughest North Sea crossing the crew could remember for an awfully long time, and we were not spat out until 11.30a.m. Suddenly we had a challenge on our hands. Well two, actually, the first being keeping our breakfast down.

Fortunately the cars were up to the job and with comfort stops every couple of hours or so, we motored down through Luxembourg into Germany and made our hotel by around 7.30, having rung ahead to warn of our late arrival, the only problem being my overdrive's reluctance to stay engaged.

The next day we had allowed a much more leisurely schedule to our next hotel in Malles Venosta in Italy (about 150 miles), so we had time to have a good look around Konstanz in the morning. Lake Constance is a really beautiful spot, and Konstanz is directly opposite Friedrichshafen on the opposite bank where they used to make Zeppelins in the dim and distant. It turns out not so dim and distant as we spent half an hour watching an airship circulating above us.

An afternoon's drive saw us at our second night hotel at Malles Venosta, a real alpine setting. All the surrounding peaks had snow on their tops. We had chosen to stop at Malles because of its proximity to the start of the Stelvio Pass, the *raison d'etre* of the holiday, and day three saw us commencing the ascent. The Stelvio is one of the roads that was regularly used on rallies in the fifties and sixties, when it must have been a real challenge. The road is wider now than it was then and has a better surface, but is still real thrill to drive. The summit is over 9000ft above sea level, which is almost three times the height of anything in the UK, and travelling from North to South, as we were, is the steepest direction, with 48 hairpins on the way up, and 27 on the way down.



Picture above looking back down after we reached the top.



Pictures below taken by Fotostelvio.com on the way up.



The top of the Stelvio is a busy place, not from the number of cars but the incredible number of bikes. Not just motorbikes, but the britches-arse steam powered variety. How long it takes to ascend the Stelvio on a pedal cycle I've no idea, but I don't think it would be the work of a moment.





The descent of the Stelvio deposits you in Bormio, which is the take-off point for the Gavia Pass, another old rally route. The Gavia is not as well used as the Stelvio, which is just as well as it is a much narrower road, particularly the South side, where there are sections where it is not possible for two cars to pass each other. This can be quite invigorating if you have to back up knowing that six inches the wrong way could result in you taking a short cut to the bottom.



Top of the Gavia.

With the Gavia out of the way a two hour drive saw us with the cars safely ensconced in the garage of our hotel in Brescia, where they were to stay for the next three days. Brescia is a much bigger place than we had expected, and has an excellent underground Metro system and cheap taxis, a combination of which the next day took us to the Mille Miglia museum. (Brescia is where the Mille Miglia race, a thousand miles round Italy, used to start and finish until it was stopped in the 1950's). Whilst not the largest motor museum I have ever seen, there are some quality exhibits in a superb setting, the building having originally been a monastery.



That bloke on the right is normal height, those petrol pumps really are ten feet tall!

A superb Aston Martin

The England under-twenties Rugby Union team were staying in our hotel and were due to play Wales on the Saturday night. However after various attempts to get tickets proved unsuccessful we settled for spending Saturday night in the centre of Brescia. It turned out there was an open air Van Morrison concert in the main square, so we found a restaurant with tables outside in the next street and listened to Van Morrison for free whilst we had our meal. Well, you didn't expect us to pay, did you? When we got back to the hotel later

on we discovered that England had beaten Wales without our assistance anyway. After a couple of days R & R it was time to move on to Lake Como, where we had another three night stop planned. The obvious route to Lake Como as selected by TomTom is on main roads and motorways. As motorways were not our preferred route we got the map out to look for alternatives. A route over a pass called Croce di Domini presented itself, so off we toddled, to the accompaniment of incessant "turn around when possible"s from TomTom. We soon found ourselves climbing through some spectacular scenery on a well surfaced road right into the middle of nowhere.



Well above the tree line here!

Imagine our surprise when we rounded a corner to find the tarmac suddenly stopped and the road became unmade. If you thought that the only thing that can be described as unmade is a bed, then you should have seen this road. We thought "we've come too far now to turn back, so lets go on and see what happens"

TomTom said " Idiot! I told you to turn around!"

We now found we were travelling in an impenetrable dust cloud, but were cheered up somewhat by the sight of the occasional vehicle going the other way, which suggested they must have come from somewhere. We just hoped it wasn't a big tuning circle at the top! Eventually we conquered the summit and started descending, and after about five miles of unsurfaced road we joined a main road at a cafe surrounded by motorbikes.

"RELIEF" is the word we were searching for, and not just bladder relief either!

I think it would be fair to say that if we had known beforehand the road was unsurfaced we would have found an alternative, but since it all turned out alright in the end it now gets filed in the "wouldn't have missed that far the world" file.



Looking back up what we've just come down





Hanging out with the bikers



Got my shiny chrome wires covered in dust  
Most distasteful!

After this the rest of the run to Lake Como was a bit of an anticlimax and we reached our next hotel in Domaso at the top end of Lake Como without incident.

The hotel was absolutely superb and we soon set about exploring the area (looking for bars), had a cracking nosh in the nearest restaurant, and installed ourselves in a lakeside bar. It was at this point that the sky started to darken, and within half an hour we were being treated to the most spectacular display of thunder and lightning I have ever seen, the whole sky lighting up against the backdrop of the alps. Fabulous! Except that we were going to get wet walking back to the hotel. I asked the girl behind the bar if she could get us a taxi, only to be told there were no taxis in the village. However, ten minutes later she returned to say she had found us a taxi. She'd only had a word with one of the local lads sitting at another table, and he piled us into his Punto and ran us back to our digs. Where else would that happen?



Imagine this in a thunderstorm. (Sorry I didn't have my camera with me that night! )

The next day we spent ambling ( walking would be putting it too strongly ), and the day after we spent on the water using the excellent steamer service to visit some of the other towns further down the lake. We even sailed on a boat named " In a Minute Oh".



A boat named "In a Minute Oh".

Not a snake in the grass, a snake in the water

Our next three night stop was at Andermatt in Switzerland, about a hundred mile drive, which we accessed via the St.Gotthard Pass, another with spectacular views. When you descend the pass the first place you come to is Andermatt, and both the pass and Andermatt have now been bypassed by the St.Gotthard Tunnel, a 23Km long hole under the Alps. When it comes to choosing between driving over a spectacular alpine pass and driving through a 23Km long hole in the ground, give me the pass every time. The reason for picking Andermatt as a base was to do a circuit of passes. Andermatt is located at the bottom righthand corner of a rectangle of roads formed by the Furka Pass along the bottom, the Grimsel Pass up the lefthand side and the Susten Pass along the top side. The whole circuit is about 150 miles, a perfect days outing. The Susten Pass road ends at a place called Wassen, from where you return to Andermatt down the righthand side of the rectangle down the main road A2/E35. Would you believe that all three passes were open, but the main road was closed due to a landslide! So we had a brilliant day over the three passes but when we got to Wassen the only way back to Andermatt unless we retraced our steps was to join the motorway through the 23km hole in the ground to the South side of the St. Gotthard and return over the pass to Andermatt. So our three pass circuit became a four pass circuit (or was it a faux pas – sorry). I can only say that in an open car the tunnel is one of the most unpleasant experiences I can imagine. The heat and the noise are unbelievable and the end cannot come soon enough.



Andermatt



View from Grimselpass





Stopped on Grimselpass whilst abseiling workmen clear a rockfall

After our three nights in Andermatt it was time to start heading back towards the ferry via the Alsace. A comfortable days drive across Switzerland saw us at our hotel in Mittelwihr a few miles outside Colmar for our last two nights. The reason for picking this place was to enable wine purchasing at Beblenheim where we tasted and bought some of the wonderful Cremant D'Alsace, which I personally think is nicer than champagne at about a third of the price. I had my luggage in a Bootbag which so far had remained in the boot, but now was relocated onto the boot lid thus releasing space in the boot for the cases of wine. The next day we spent at the French National Motor Museum in Mulhouse (formerly the Schlumpf Collection), which was a cracking finish to the trip.



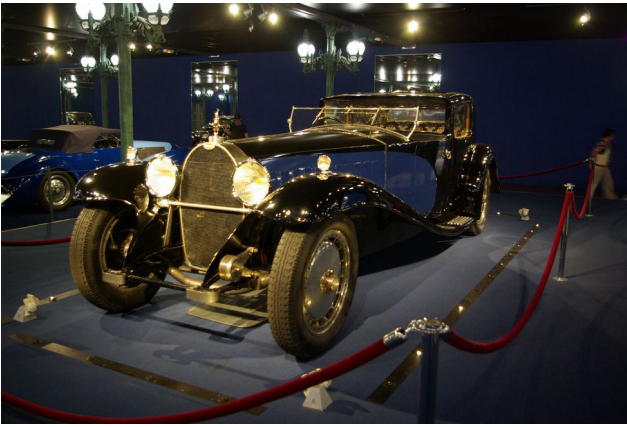
Beblenheim



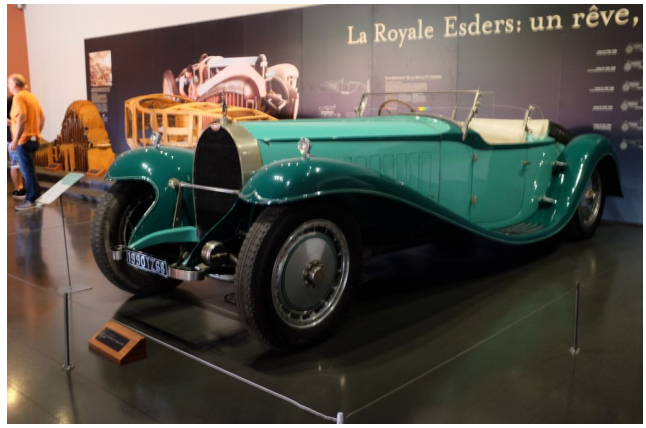
The vast expanse of the museum

Bugatti Royale





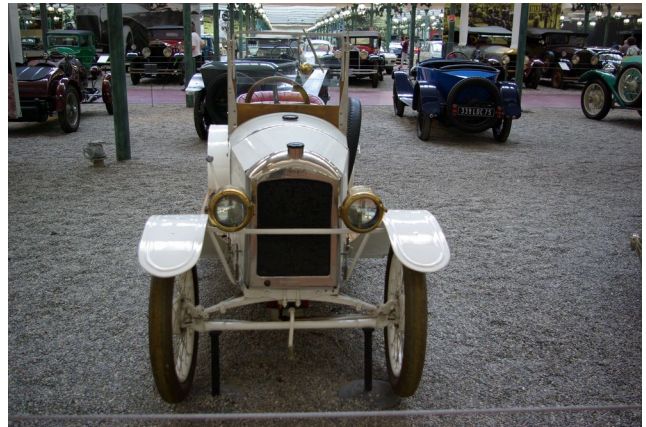
Another Bugatti Royale



And another. Sick o' seein'em!



Audi? Can that be an oil leak?



I think they've had this one in a vice

Finally it was time for the blast back to Zeebrugge and the ferry home, which was fortunately a much smoother crossing than the outward trip.  
All in all a brilliant two weeks which was thoroughly enjoyed by all four of us.  
Roll on the next one!

Deryck