



Cars, culture and camaraderie

Sam Price looks ahead to the 25th anniversary edition of the Tour Auto Optic 2000, a rally event that combines vintage motors and French culture over six days in April

Those with a penchant for vintage motors and the finer things in life should consider taking a trip to France in April to witness the Tour Auto Optic 2000, an event that is as unique as it is spectacular. The sight of retro sports cars roaring

along unspoiled French country roads provides a throwback to a golden era of rally driving and car manufacturing, and the Tour Auto, which celebrates its 25th year this spring, has something special lined up for the Silver Jubilee edition.

Regarded as 'a museum on wheels' by event organisers Peter Auto, the rally, which will take place from 19 to 24 April and is expected to attract over 100,000 spectators, recalls the romance of Europe's classic road races, and is preceded by a public exhibition of participating motors at the Grand Palais in Paris. Specifically, it is

Above: The 2015 edition of the Tour Auto Optic 2000 finished in the sun in the southern French resort of Biarritz, with Frederic Puren and Caroline Bertrand toasting victory in the weighted classification in their classic Porsche 356



a reincarnation of the Tour de France Automobile, which was the pre-eminent rally in France from 1951 until it ceased in the 1980s, only to be revived by purists in 1992 with the condition that only cars manufactured between 1951 and 1973 would be eligible to compete.

These collectors' items are becoming increasingly rare – the number of qualifying cars has been estimated at just 3,500 – but their owners are proud to be members of such an exclusive club, and travel from far and wide to embark upon the 2,000km journey from the north to the south of France. There will be roughly 230 crews (consisting of a driver and a navigator) taking part, and the anniversary event will feature some of the iconic cars that have helped forge the legend of the Tour, including the Ferrari 250 GT Berlinetta, the Matra MS650 and the Ligier JS2.

But these valuable motors can only partly explain the enduring popularity of the rally, which owes much to France's stunning landscape. Like the

Above right: Fans can enjoy an exhibition of participating cars, where they can view classics like the Matra MS650 (below) and the Shelby Cobra 289 (above left)

world's premier cycling event, the Tour de France, the Tour Auto modifies its route every year to take in different roads and cities as the teams navigate their way from Paris to the French Riviera. This year, the Tour will stop off in Beaune, Lyon, Valence and Marseille before finishing in Cannes – not that the drivers are simply there to soak in the French culture and cuisine.

The Tour remains fiercely competitive and demands skill and concentration from the drivers, who negotiate intense 12-hour days on the road as they compete for a range of prizes. These include the regularity competition, where teams score points for maintaining average speeds and completing timed sections along the open public roads, and the 'special stages', consisting of timed-stage categories, hill climbs and out-and-out races that are held on closed roads and prestigious French

circuits throughout the route, and where only the best and most daring drivers come out on top.

Legendary ex-Formula One circuits such as the Charade and Magny-Cours have played host to these battles in recent years, and the 2016 Tour will utilise the Circuit de Dijon-Prenois and the Paul Ricard Circuit, which hosted no fewer than 20 Grands Prix between them from 1971 to 1991.

If that's not enough to get petrolheads excited, the 25th

anniversary edition will – for the first time in the Tour's history – conclude with a night-time stage though the hinterland of the Côte d'Azur.

These different challenges present a stern examination for the field, which usually contains an eclectic mix of rally driving stars, eccentric car owners and celebrities, with ex-Formula One driver Jochen Mass, Duran Duran frontman Simon Le Bon and Austrian daredevil Felix Baumgartner among those who lined up for last year's race. The camaraderie between the drivers is part of the appeal, and so are the lunches dished up by Michelin-starred chefs at areas of historical interest en route; this year, lunch

will be served at the Abbey of Fontenay in Côte-d'Or, and the Château de Beauregard in the Loire Valley, among other venues of French heritage.

Not to be outdone, spectators flank the roads with their gourmet picnics and champagne as they watch cars of a bygone era whizz past, and those seeking to get a flavour of this year's race can choose to combine it with wine-tasting in Beaune, hiking in the Rhône-Alpes, or shopping in glitzy Cannes. The Tour Auto Optic 2000 is a truly unique event to be a part of and the 25th anniversary edition, with its thrilling route, retro circuits and night-time climax, may just be the most memorable one yet. peterauto.peter.fr/en

