

With Christmas fast approaching, Joint Clerks of the Course Keith Baud and Anthony Preston have just returned from their route survey in France. The quality of the roads, the beautiful scenery and the warm welcome they received heartened this well-travelled team. At one point, they found that they were 'literally' driving in the wheel tracks of history...



## **Deauville to Fontevraud** *Monday 18 September 2017*

Leaving the warm embrace of the Barrière L'Hôtel du Golf, the 1800-km Blue Train adventure starts with a blast around a terrific local race circuit. We then head south into the Normandy countryside on quiet country roads that are the hallmark of this week-long event.

Paying homage to Normandy's famous dairy heritage, we stop in Camembert, home of the famous cheese, for a quick coffee before the first regularity. After this, time has been built into the schedule for a brief visit to one of the many WWII memorials that litter the landscape.

It is then on to the picturesque stone village of Saint-Céneri-le-Gérei, deep in the Alpes Mancelles. Although not really Alps, the lanes in this hilly area will prove challenging enough before lunch overlooking the famous Le Mans circuit.

Enough of the original circuit remains for crews to see what it would have been like 'back in the day' before continuing on the afternoon journey south to the Loire Valley and our beds for the night literally in the Royal Abbey at Fontevraud.

Founded in 1101, Fontevraud is the largest abbey in France and is the last resting place of Henry II of England, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine and their son Richard the Lionheart. Entrants will have complete access to the abbey during their stay including an atmospheric dinner in the ancient cloisters. A magical end to the first day on the road...

## **Fontevraud to Vichy** *Tuesday 19 September 2017*

A day of surprises! The morning route across the Royal lands of Anjou is a much more pleasant and interesting drive than the maps suggests. Empty roads flow across a rolling landscape of wide fields, vast forests and big blue skies. This is a land of quiet charms; fairy-tale chateau raise their turrets above the trees, pretty stone villages slumber in the sun, and sturdy churches stand alone on hilltops.

Our planned lunch stop is at a private chateau surrounded by its own stunning race circuit before continuing east in the afternoon into more hilly terrain. The twisty roads here provide the first real driving challenge of the event before we slip into the spa town of Vichy, where we stay at the luxurious Celestins Spa Hôtel.



## **Vichy to Lyon** *Wednesday 20 September 2017*

Heading east out of Vichy, we climb into the hills of the Monts du Madeleine, a heavily wooded area with small stone villages clinging to the hill sides amongst the dark forests. It is then an easy run across the broad valley of the Allier before climbing again into the hills of the Beaujolais.

This area is a delight. On the western side the hills are a mixture of woodland and pasture, whilst on the eastern flank, overlooking the valley of the Saône, vineyards tumble down the hillsides above a collection of stone villages with names familiar to wine buffs; Pouilly, Fleurie, Morgon, Chiroubles to name but a few...

After lunch amongst these bucolic hills, the route takes in an interesting regularity before crossing the Saône valley towards Lyon and an afternoon stop at fascinating motor museum housed in an 18th Century Chateaux. With 150 vehicles on display, 21 of them unique in the world, it should make the perfect place to end the day before the final, relaxed run into France's second city.

The reception area at the overnight hotel will tell you that you are in another special place. This is the oldest part of Lyon and within walking distance are the Roman Amphitheatre and the magnificent Notre-Dame de Fourvière.

## **Lyon to L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue** **Thursday 21 September 2017**

An early start will be necessary to get on down the long road to Provence. However, once clear of Lyon and its suburbs, our route climbs the flanks of Mont Pilat, at about 1300m the highest point so far, to enter the Ardèche.

This region of remote, wooded hills and deep valleys hiding a maze of lanes has been beloved by rally drivers over the decades. After a morning workout on these famous roads, crews will be rewarded with a welcome lunch at an attractive *domaine* in the Rhône valley.

After crossing the mighty river itself we enter the Drôme, a landscape of sun-bleached hills, rocky outcrops, vineyards and your first lavender fields. Still undiscovered by many, the Drôme is how Provence used to be before mass tourism...

Looming ever large to the south are the barren slopes of Mont Ventoux, revered by cyclists and motoring enthusiasts alike. It is a stiff climb but the views from its 2000m high summit are staggering. On the descent, we came across an old barn that had recently been converted into an information centre for the Mont Ventoux hillclimb. Full of old photos and posters, it is a fascinating history of the French version of Pikes Peak and well worth a visit.

Having conquered the 'Giant of Provence', all that remains for the day is a short run across country through the vineyards of the Côtes du Ventoux to a welcome drink at the Domaine de la Petite Isle, our hotel for the night on the banks of the River Sorgue.

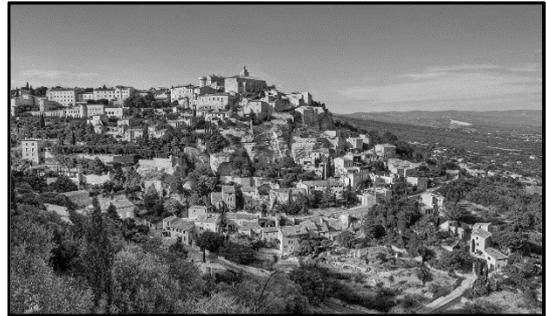
## **L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue to Cannes** **Friday 22 September 2017**

East of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, a string of photogenic Provençal villages are dotted along the northern flanks of the Luberon National Park. Surrounding them, ancient stone walls divide sun baked fields of olive groves and apricot orchards to form the iconic 'picture postcard' vistas that Provence is famous for.

Those in open cars will appreciate the aroma of herbs and lavender as they wind their way through the *garrigue* on the way to the morning coffee stop in a newly restored, wayside

auberge. A warm welcome is promised here, as *le patron* has his own 1964 Jaguar E-Type parked around the back...

Passing through the busy town of Manosque, we cross the River Durance to enter a landscape of vast lavender fields stretching to a horizon edged with the jagged peaks of the Alps. A short regularity precedes a run around the turquoise waters of the Lac-de-Sainte-Croix before the route starts the spectacular climb to lunch along the edge of the Grand Canyon du Verdon, the largest in Europe.



After lunch, the final sections on roads made famous by the Monte Carlo Rally will bring us to journey's end in Cannes - where Woolf Barnato started his legendary race 85 years ago.

Arrangements are well advanced for the *Grande Arrivée* on the famous *Croisette*, with a Gala Prizegiving in the Hotel Martinez to round off what will be a memorable week of motoring.

## **The Riviera Cup...**

Following numerous requests from owners of 1950s and early 1960s sports cars, we are now giving them the opportunity to enter next September's event. However, competitors in such cars will not be eligible for the overall Blue Train Challenge awards, but will instead compete for their own 'Riviera Cup'.

In keeping with the original Blue Train Challenge ethos, only limited entries are available for appropriate 'Riviera Sports Cars', manufactured between 1 January 1948 and 31 December 1962, which would have graced the French Routes Nationales on their way to the Côte d'Azur.

Although we are already amazed by the quality and variety of the Pre-1948 Vintage entries received so far for the main event, we believe that the addition of these 'Riviera Sports Cars' can only enhance the appeal of the Blue Train Challenge to competitor and onlooker alike.