

AS I DROVE OUT ONE DAY.....

(Apologies to Laurie Lee)

A few years after leaving Chailey, and a three-year stint at Treloar College in Hampshire, I again met up with Brian Scott with whom I had been a friend at 'The Mill on the Hill'.

We chatted about trips, went camping a few times and, slowly, an idea formed in our minds. Why not a 'trip by trike' to those alluring beaches in the south of France? Hot, sunny days, strange food, wine and, oh yes, the chance of bumping into Bridget Bardot! But the distance of 6 – 700 miles from our homes in a bumpy, smoky trike, driving on the 'wrong' side of the road, and not a word of French between us was somewhat daunting. No, it was scary!



In the end we did it the easy way.

We took Brian's Tippen and my Harper to Calais, where we loaded them onto the Car Transporters. The French Railway workers had seen nothing like the trikes before, and asked us to drive them aboard.

The Car Sleeper train took us overnight to Lyon, from where we drove off on our great adventure, planning to camp en route. Our journey was to take us through beautiful, inspiring, and sometimes-breathless scenery, thoughts of which remain with me today.

We spent our first night en route to the western Alps, over which we planned to pass into Italy. Well, how were we to know they were 3 – 4,000 feet: they did not look very high on the map! It was here that we discovered that continental campsites are 'different' from their counterparts in the UK. The toilets are porcelain 'hole in the ground' and, if I wanted to do anything other than pee, were physically impossible for me to use. Consequently, I did not vacate myself until we discovered a civilised loo some four days later at a petrol station in Italy!

Our ascent of the Col du Mont Cenis went with little difficulty, passing pretty villages, great scenery, and the rusting remains of wrecked cars that had either collided with other vehicles or had just gone over the edge. Who knows, but it made for interesting thoughts as we proceeded, our little Villiers 197 cc engines pushing us relentlessly upwards.

The summit gave glorious views of the region, the most wonderful freshest of air that we had ever breathed, but not a thought of the drama that was about to unfold.

Travelling up a Mountain is one thing, but coming down is another kettle of fish. Coming from a country with few mountains, just some hills of various heights, we were unaware that there is a simple rule for mountain driving which, having learnt the hard way, I now apply faithfully on my many trips to France and Switzerland.

The descent of the Col du Mont Cenis went well at first, easily negotiating any hairpin bends, noting with interest the sensibly placed sand filled run offs, and viewing the unfolding panorama of the valley below into which we headed. As we descended the trikes appeared to be approaching the bends at slightly higher speed than the previous one, and it was getting more and more difficult to take the curve. Fortunately, the bends became fewer but the road was steeper and, on a fairly straight stretch the Italian border post appeared ahead. It was now we discovered our problem! Our brakes were so hot from the descent that we could not stop at the frontier, the startled faces of the Carabinieri appearing in our rear view mirrors as we sped through customs, eventually stopping about 500 metres down the road. We turned about and slowly drove back to the frontier, expecting to be strongly admonished by a group of irate Italian officials.

They saw the funny side of it and waved us on. The rule of mountain driving? Always descend in the same gear as you ascend which in today's vehicles is very much easier than in those of the 60's!

We were due to meet with friends in Turin, but failed to make ourselves understood (despite speaking ever louder in English) nor understand instructions to the central railway terminus, our planned meeting place. So, onwards to Milan where we had tea with a beautiful Italian girl and her family whom I had met in Lourdes on one of Dr. Strodes HCPT pilgrimages.

We eventually reached the Mediterranean at Santa Margareta, where we were able to view the bronzed beauties adorning the beaches. Everything 2 young English lads on holiday could wish for. If only we could have spoken Italian!

Our plan was to travel along the Med, through Monaco to Marseilles, and thence back to Lyon for the car-sleeper train home. I say planned, but I was hospitalised in Frejus following a severe asthma attack. The French health system turned out to be an education with great food, the odd glass of wine, and nurses leaning over you wearing nothing but their white coats – and, of course, their underwear. Well, it was the middle of summer, and they had to keep cool! All credit to the hospital administrators, in that they contacted the local Consul and ensured that all treatment was taken care of at no cost to myself.

Would I do it again? If I was 20 years old again, definitely! It was my real introduction to travelling in Europe and, in particular France, a country that I have come to know and love so much, in which I travel regularly.

Perhaps the passing years have glamorised the adventure somewhat, but one grasps the opportunity when the moment arises. For us the challenge was there and we gladly set off on the trip. We had great fun, saw wonderful sights, ate great food and met interesting fellow campers. I don't think we will ever forget.

Peter Sedgwick

