

La Carrera Mediterranea – April 2005

Jayne Wignall

Jayne reports on this latest pan European rally in which she handsomely obtained 1st overall with Kevin Savage and that saw husband Paul take 2nd overall.

Another new event hit the historic rallying calendar in April 2005 when organiser Bart Rietbergen took a select few enthusiasts on a truly memorable regularity rally around the Mediterranean, going to places that are not even on the map.

Starting at the outrageously extravagant Hotel Negresco on the sea front in Nice, the route crossed northern Italy then took an overnight boat to Split in Croatia before heading down the Dalmatian coast, into a piece of Bosnia-Herzegovina, then to Dubrovnik, on to Montenegro, Albania, northern Greece, another boat to southern Italy, then across to Sicily and finally Tunisia. After the prize giving, a 24hr boat trip took crews from Tunis back to Europe at Marseille. Total distance was some 6,500 km/4,000+ miles in 3 weeks.

The entry list was made up of mostly Dutch & English crews with the odd French, German and American/Argentinean. There were several mixed crews, not only couples but also father/son and mother/daughter. Most popular car was Mercedes, most unusual a 1954 Panhard Dyna Z1, most stunning a 1926 Bentley Speed Six.

Sector One - Nice to Greece 2,500km/1,562 miles in 7 days

Having left Nice in pouring rain, crews headed into classic rally territory in the mountains above San Remo where two snow blockages resulted in re-routes. Navigators were kept busy, playing with their GPS units in readiness for the next day. Already in trouble was the Tiger of John/Judy Catt with gearbox problems, the 300SL Mercedes of

and Bert Kersten who forgot to re-fuel his Bentley Speed Six. Despite having new rear springs fitted, our Tiger was already bottoming, causing damage to the rear exhaust while husband Paul's Porsche 911 was leaking oil from a gearbox seal.

More rain and snow in the Alpes Maritimes on Day 2 with two good regularities, one with a hidden slot onto gravel, and the other having to rely on satellite navigation made for an interesting day which started in Acqui Terme and finished in Bologna.

To escape the clutches of Bologna traffic, the rally left at 7a.m. to head for the Passo de Futa, one of the classic Mille Miglia sections made famous by Stirling Moss/Dennis Jenkinson back in the 1950's when they averaged 62mph from Firenze to Bologna. Fog and wet weather with mud slides and rock falls on gravel regularities made life interesting, with the sun finally making an appearance during the late afternoon.

After three hectic days crews boarded the ferry in Ancona for a meal and the night crossing to Split.

Day 4 took competitors from Split through Bosnia-Herzegovina to Dubrovnik. After exiting the docks the change in scenery was quite dramatic, with rock formations rising out of the Adriatic. The next regularity required careful navigation on Croatian maps through villages that did not appear to exist on the maps. A tight road section then followed to the start of the next regularity which caused more drama as penalties rose. Experience paid dividends with Jayne Wignall/Kevin Savage and Alastair Caldwell/Catriona Rings extending their lead and Paul Wignall/Fred Bent moving up from 5th to 3rd after visiting farm yards on Day 3.

Radar guns were a new toy with the police force so you had to be careful through the Croatian villages and small towns. Although the temperature and weather did improve during the day, the rain returned but visibility was reasonable so we were still able to enjoy the dramatic scenery en route to the overnight halt in the historic city of Dubrovnik, sometimes referred to as 'the pearl of the Adriatic', even if much of the city was destroyed during the civil war in the early 1990's.

Day 5 was a stunning day even though the weather was far from brilliant. The rally started from within the old city, an area normally restricted to pedestrians only. Competitors soon crossed the border into Montenegro. The difference in living standards was quite apparent, the scenery much rougher with black rocky outcrops. The route, understandably, took crews



onto wild unexplored, un-surfaced mountain roads for the competitive element, and thence down the awesome Kotor hairpins and stunning views. The next regularity, although short, included some tricky junctions which instigated some discussion at the hotel that night in Budva, as to whether the organisers had correctly defined the route. This hotel was rather basic, although quite adequate, being the best that Montenegro could offer.

Nobody will forget Day 6 which was unbelievable for several reasons. Crews headed inland for a regularity on roads with huge potholes large enough to swallow a car. The route then skirted round the capital city of Podgorica which was full of rubbish, slums and shacks. The next treat was crossing the border into Albania where living standards took another dive. With a history of invasion and annexation, Albania is the poorest country in Europe. It was not possible to run any competitive element through this country because bridges on many of the roads had been blown up during the war, thus most roads were dead ends. The roads that were open were in a dreadful state of dis-repair, being narrow, bumpy and full of huge pot-holes. Buildings were in a state of collapse, not necessarily due to the war but due to structural

The Germans have obviously found a market for their MOT failures. Another extraordinary experience that day was driving through Tirana. There were diesel fumes, dust, smog. All the cars were well dented, there were carts, cyclists and pedestrians all vying for position, it was total chaos with no obvious rules of the road, It was each for his own and survival of the fittest (or most brave, or most stupid). But it is wise to remember that most Albanians carry guns, so it is better not to be too pushy. Once in the sanctuary of the Sheraton Hotel, crews were able to off-load their luggage prior to having a police escort to a kart circuit on the outskirts of town. Here Paul Wignall spun on his first lap then incurred a 10 second line penalty on his second lap, handing fastest time to our Tiger.

The following day consisted of a series of time controls and passage checks because, believe it or not, the roads were even worse, and with no adequate maps available, the route had to be defined by tulip diagrams. This was a hard, demanding day, having to pick one's way at 10mph over the really bad sections. On the coastal road it seemed that the average Albanian makes his living by washing cars and selling



defects. It was quite unbelievable. Five years ago there were virtually no cars in this country yet now every car you see is a Mercedes, so presumably everyone is well off? Incorrect, as all these MB's would be thrown off any banger racing track.

wheel trims. The country is in dire need of refuse collectors and skilled builders, for example the designated café for lunch had fallen into the sea! Once into the hills, donkey-drawn carts became common, animal carcasses were hanging outside

people's 'homes', there were more collapsed buildings. What a way to live. Back on the coast road we drove past a fascinating submarine base before finally crossing the border into northern Greece. What a relief. Civilisation at last. In Ioannina the rally was welcomed with great Greek enthusiasm, drinks and plaques being handed out to all competitors.

A well deserved rest day followed, giving everybody an opportunity to either fettle their cars, get their washing done, or visit the locals sights.

At the end of this first Sector results showed that Alastair Caldwell/Catriona Rings were in 2nd position sandwiched between the two Wignalls with the Porsche 911 of Pit Lindner in 4th place.

The organisers had devised a clever system of penalties whereby at the end of each Sector competitors were awarded points; first place 30 points, second place 27 points, third 25 points etc. down to 10th place on 16 points. After the 3 Sectors, the crew with the most points would win the rally outright. Thus anybody who had a disastrous Sector, as often happens on such a long event, has a chance of redeeming themselves.

Sector Two – Ioannina, Greece to Toarmina, Sicily–1,580km/987 miles in 5 days

Immediately after the start of Day 8, a big surprise awaited the rally contingent as it moved into the mountains for a regularity on an old Acropolis rally stage when rain turned to snow. Rally director Bart Rietbergen had to drive his Landrover up and down the last 12km to the top of the pass to clear a track for the rally cars. Bert Kertsen/Han Brouwers who were completely open to the elements in their 1926 Bentley Speed Six were so cold and wet that they stripped off their clothes at the café control which thankfully had a roaring open fire where they were able to dry out. Highlights of the day were the Meteora monasteries around Kalambaka. These are cliff top monasteries dating from the 14th/15th centuries which were only accessible via removable ladders, and later by nets hung on the end of a rope and wound up by a windlass. Nowadays there are steps cut into the rock with bridges to allow less perilous access. At the overnight stop Kevin Savage had time to remove the spare fuel tank from the Tiger and fit some make-shift spring hangers to raise the rear suspension. By this time the new 'heavy duty' leaf springs which were fitted prior to the event had completely flattened out. He also replaced the exhaust rear mountings yet again.

Day 9 from Kalambaka to Delphi was the best day so far with blue skies, good sweeping tarmac roads, great scenery and, of course, no traffic. After Albania, this was sheer joy. Navigation became more difficult as crews had to interpret Latin and Greek signposts. Paul Wignall set the fastest time in his 911. A short sharp regularity through the olive groves created problems for even experienced navigators when the route was defined by a map stipulating 'use the shortest route'. The shortest route was actually up a very rough track which the organisers had not intended should be used.

During the morning of Day 10 competitors had time to visit the ancient sites in Delphi whilst others worked on their cars or drove to Itsea in search of garages to weld up exhausts etc. The afternoon was a transit section to get the rally to the ferry terminal to catch the night boat to the Italian port of Bari.

After breakfast on board, the rally re-started in Southern Italy with three regularities, some with code boards. The roads in southern Italy were much kinder on the cars, particularly the lower slung ones. The day finished in Cosenza at the incredible Hotel Executive, a 1980's time-warp. Quite an experience.

There were three regularities on Day 12 which saw crews leave southern Italy and take a short ferry crossing to finish this Sector in Sicily. There was a sting in the tail on the final regularity which had to be navigated entirely by GPS. Arthur and Sabine Valkieser in their little Panhard got confused by the many hairpin bends up a steep mountain side, retraced their steps and lost loads of time, dropping them from a creditable 3rd to 10th overall. Even without any navigational mistakes, it was still extremely difficult to maintain the 47kph/30mph average on very slippery, narrow and tight roads.

This relatively short Sector, from Greece to Sicily, was won by two crews with exactly the same penalties – Nigel/Paula Broderick in their 1965 Mercedes 300 SE Coupe and Paul/Fred in their 911. Their celebrations, however, were not as dramatic as a handful of other competitors who gate-crashed a beach party late that night. In the early hours they decided to high-jack a waterbike to take a short-cut across the bay back to the hotel. As it was only designed for two, it inevitably sank under the weight of five. They had to literally swim for their lives in cold water having lost shoes, wallets and mobile phones.

With penalties applied for the two Sectors,

amazingly the two Wignall crews tied for 1st overall. Quite an interesting situation. Third overall were the Brodericks whilst Caldwell/Rings occupied fourth, having only dropped one time control with their diff problem. This was surely a good reminder that you should never give up.

Rest Day in Taormina, Sicily. With a two night stay



at the fabulous Grand Hotel Atlantis Bay, crews were able to fettle their cars, play golf, relax by the pool (hot weather at last) or go sightseeing. The rear tyres on our Tiger were shredded down to the canvas after 3,150 miles, necessitating a search for replacements, as we were only carrying one spare wheel. Fortunately some used Pirellis were eventually found.

Sector Three – Sicily to Tunisia – 2,165km/1,350 miles in 6 days

The first regularity on the slopes of Mt. Etna, an active volcano, was extremely challenging. Snow at the road edges was covered in black dust, but at lower levels the scenery was truly wonderful with wild flowers and rolling hills, with controls located at hill top villages. The Brodericks unfortunately collided with an Italian Fiat who thought he could drive in the middle of the road. They lost a lot of time and plunged to the bottom of the results table.

Part of the route had to be cancelled due to huge cracks in the road surface. Collapsed roads were common-place in Sicily, just as collapsed buildings were common place in Albania. Crews were, however, still able to drive part of the famous Targa Florio road race circuit and visit the old pit buildings. That evening we boarded the night ferry to Tunis for a different challenge altogether – driving in the desert.

With the late arrival of the ferry into Tunis, the competitive element that day had to be abandoned. The re-start, assisted by the Motor Club of Tunisia, still took place in the centre of the capital city. Here the road surfaces resembled glass, even in the dry. With traffic-clogged roads and much horn-blowing, it was a relief to move into the countryside which was

much greener than expected. On the way the route passed the remains of the amazing Hadrian's Aqueduct which once took water from Mount Zaghouan to Carthage and was the longest such structure in the Roman Empire. This is the same Hadrian of 'Hadrian Wall' fame so he certainly got around.

Despite the lack of traffic, police were manning every roundabout and every junction, even in the middle of nowhere, so it was difficult to take a wrong turn. Crews were later to find out the necessity for having a police presence. In villages the national pastime appeared to be watching and waiting. The day's run ended in the city of Kairouan, the fourth most holy city in Islam.

Next day action started with a vengeance – a very difficult hill-climb up a steep, tight & twisty concrete road with sheer drops at the road edges and plenty of gravel strewn everywhere. Not for the faint-hearted. The agile Porsche 911 of Paul Wignall set quickest time ahead of our Tiger. The Moraults suffered an unfortunate incident when they left their 280SL at the back of the queue at the start of the hill-climb, only to witness the car rolling backwards down the steep hill. The car eventually came to an abrupt stop when it fell into a severe gully at the edge of the road. Fortunately the car had been well prepared, with a shield protecting the petrol tank, so damage was limited. The hydraulic handbrake was to blame for this incident. The first regularity of the day took place on narrow sandy tracks south of El Houareb where most crews met several donkey-drawn hay-carts moving in the opposite direction. This did not please the locals, nor the donkeys as they do not have a reverse gear, nor some competitors who lost a lot of time. There were also some very rough wash-outs to negotiate, causing problems for those in low slung cars. Other problems occurred in some of the more remote villages where young boys threw missiles at passing cars. Crowds of youngsters would play dare devil, standing across the road and only moving at the last moment. If they succeeded in stopping a competitor, they would attempt to take items out of open-topped cars. It now became

clear why the police were much in evidence. The regularity that afternoon took crews into a phosphate mining area and thence to a passage check at the deserted village of Mides which is perched on top of a rock, high above a gorge. The gorge has been used in several films including Star Wars. The day ended in the desert town of Tamerza where the hotel overlooked a dry river bed and a deserted village. Tamerza lies very close to the Algerian border and is right on the edge of the Sahara desert, but amazingly it still rained that night.

From Tamerza it was featureless desert terrain with dead straight roads to a control in the middle of nowhere with extremely basic facilities. A re-route, caused by too much muddy sand, created a flurry of activity amongst navigators. The competitive element took crews into a great salt-lake which was below sea level. Tensions grew as competitors had to rely on their GPS way-points, the organisers ensuring that some way points were up the wrong track by a few yards. This meant you had to drive off-track where momentum was important to prevent getting stuck. It was quite an amazing experience. The route then went into the tourist area around Douz where camels became the normal mode of transport. The accommodation that night in Matmata was the least hospitable of the rally, with crews favouring the chilly hotel courtyard late into the evening rather than venture into even chillier rooms that were more like prison cells.

The organisers had hinted that there would be sting in the tail on the last day. The initial regularity was fairly straightforward but the final competitive element was a 30km section on sandy tracks through plantations set at an average speed of 75kph/47mph. There were several intermediate timing points to create even more entertainment. In fact the section was closed to other traffic, with policemen stationed at most junctions, but this information had been kept secret. Again way-points had to be used, so navigators and drivers were kept very busy. Inevitably there were several incidents. Paul Wignall lost most of his engine oil when a crankshaft oil seal failed, but managed to hang on to 2nd place. We overshot a junction & nearly got stuck trying to regain the track, although the lost time was not enough to deny us **overall victory in our trusty Sunbeam Tiger. Thank you Kevin for your superb navigational and mechanical skills.**

The official finish ceremony was held in the amphitheatre at El Jem, once the site of gladiatorial contests where men and beasts fought to the bitter end. It is a truly stunning location. It must be mentioned that the Automobile Club of

Tunisia had excelled themselves in helping with Customs procedures, in organising police presence, in following the rally and helping stranded cars. It was an exceptional commitment.

La Carrera Mediterranea (re-named Mediterraina) had been a unique event. Over a period of three weeks we encountered every sort of weather, from rain to fog, from rain to snow, from rain to rain, from rain to sun; we encountered every sort of road, from good tarmac to bad gravel to enormous pot-holes to sandy tracks and wash-outs; encountering the affluent and the poorest of people; we stayed in the most luxurious and the most basic hotels; in fact we experienced another side of life. Bart Rietbergen and his team from Classic Events, together with Mark Appleton who set the route and carried out the race, had achieved the impossible. A magnificent achievement.

Facts & Figures on Tiger LPU 93C

The car was prepared & commissioned, as always, by Autotech of Thirsk. They have looked after the car since 1989. The engine, newly rebuilt by Dave Herning, performed faultlessly. Petrol consumption averaged 19.8 mpg. Oil consumption 1 litre per 1,500 miles. Water consumption nil - over some 4,500 miles. The gearbox occasionally slipped out of 3rd gear. The brake pads were switched inner-to-outer after 1,000 rally miles with replacement pads fitted after a further 2,150 miles. The only good thing about the Colway tyres (fitted for the first time) was that they were puncture-resistant. The rear tyres, though, were shredded down to the canvas after 3,150 miles and the front off-side tyre was illegal. We fitted our one & only spare to the front, and managed to source some used Pirellis in Sicily for the rear, hoping we wouldn't have any punctures, which we didn't. The manifold bolts worked their way loose and were lost. Our biggest problem was ground clearance. New 'heavy duty' rear springs were fitted before the event but unfortunately this actually lowered the suspension, not helped by having to carry a suitcase on the luggage rack and more luggage in the boot. We were consistently bottoming and the rear springs were completely flattened after 3,000 miles. The exhaust mountings were ripped off several times. We also persuaded the camera crew to take our luggage for which we were extremely grateful.

Jayne Wignall 30th June 2005