

John Dixon's 1997 R-REC Euro Rally to St MORITZ.

I had not been to Switzerland since 1957/8 so the 1997 R-REC Euro Rally at St Moritz seemed a good reason to go again. Whilst Eri Helliger's package appealed, I really could not afford it, nor did anyone want to come with me, nor did I want to return the same way as going out, and I wanted to visit the Dolomites and climb some mountains (in the car!). On 31 August I was at the President's Picnic at Blenheim Oxon. Many of my R-R friends were saying to each other "See you in St Moritz next week!". So I thought why not? So I decided to make my own way there with Magnificent Magdalena, my 1927 20 hp Park Ward limousine Rolls-Royce, chassis GUJ27 and 1967 15' Safari caravan.

Preparation and planning is key for a trouble-free foreign trip. So I oiled the car chassis, removed the radiator and flushed it out, checked the caravan chassis for any sign of cracks, pumped up all the tyres, checked the lights, lit the fridge, got a gas bottle refill, stocked up with food, clothes etc, connected up the van and I was off.

I find motorways very noisy, boring or frustrating and so I use quiet minor roads as much as possible. I also try to go a different route from before. A couple of times I sensed a slight clutch slip on full power in third gear on the M20 hills, so tried not to use full power again. I had checked the clutch plates in April when I took the engine out to fit a set of new +060 pistons, so I thought this a bit odd. I left Dover an hour before Eri's party from England, without seeing any of them.

From Calais I headed down the peaceful "D" roads towards Arras.

After diversions for roadworks I came across both the main French and German cemeteries from WW I. The drab German crosses were in stark contrast to the straight lines of white slabs of the French, which produced fascinating curves on the gently undulating ground.



In champagne country near Epernay it had got dark without my finding a campsite. In one village there was an unmarked raised pedestrian crossing which I hit at the 50 kph speed limit. I had almost stopped before the caravan wheels hit it, but the impact broke two leaves in a front spring. I did not notice until checking the car over for the MOT 9 months later!! I covered the cracks with grease and the tester did not notice. I found somewhere quiet to park up for the night. The next day my route avoided all motorways past Rheims and Besançon and I found a

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campsite close to the Swiss border. I decided to try out the mains feature of my new fridge, but this coincided with the total failure of the camp lights, so I reverted to gas.

In Berne all the road signs sent you to the motorways. Nothing for Lucerne by the old road. In the end I had to join the motorway for Thun and at last there was a sign for Lucerne. We bypassed Zurich, but I noticed the R-R agency and they duly waved when I gave them a dose of the klaxon. I expect they were a bit surprised to see me heading for the mountains!

The route through northern Switzerland had taken longer than I expected so I stopped short of the Julier pass on the Thursday. In the morning I found that the Lenzerheide road was unexpectedly closed to trailers so I took the alternative via Thusis only to find the same sign both there and for the Julier. This time there was no feasible alternative so I looked the other way and headed up the pass!

Although I had removed the radiator the week before and thoroughly cleaned it out and fitted a bypass tube from the bottom hose to the rear water jacket, the flow of water from the bottom of



the radiator was insufficient to prevent boiling when dragging over 3 tons in bottom gear up long 1 in 8 hills. The water pump was also leaking and I'd forgotten to pack my water pump grease and the head was still leaking at the rear as it had done for the last 18,000 miles. So I used a couple of gallons of water and just had enough power to make it up the steepest bits. I kept thinking the clutch was slipping but the stench I kept getting was the brake linings of cars descending! Their discs glowed in the dull light!

The descent to St Moritz was much steeper and narrower than I remembered it from 1957, when I had taken a diversion just to climb the pass and then return to St Moritz to head west from there. I remembered thundering down the beautifully surfaced road (unusual in 1957) at 50 mph on my fully laden Vespa, only slowing marginally for the well engineered bends. Somehow it just did not seem the same road with the old R-R and caravan! I arrived at the Suvretta Hotel (the Euro Rally HQ) at lunchtime and stayed chatting with friends for a couple of hours before heading for the campsite nearby.

I removed the radiator and flushed it out upside down with a powerful hose and put it back and then adjusted the tappets some of which had tightened up over the 1000 miles of the last week.

In the morning I headed for the Albula Pass expecting to have missed the first few cars, which were setting off from the Suvretta hotel at 30 second intervals, oldest first. We sailed up to the

top with the radiator shutters virtually closed and the temperature on 70 all the way! I parked just before the top and was wondering if the drive had been cancelled because of the deteriorating weather when the old Ghosts and Twentys started to come up. It was a grand sight. The sound of the old 1908 car was magnificent and the power of the Phantoms was really impressive. I was just heading off back down the mountain to have a good laugh at Ben Grew who I'd been told was stuck with lack of power. However my "good intentions" of offering to tow him were thwarted when he appeared chugging and spitting to the top. 66H9 not Ben himself!



At the bottom of the pass I saw the 1914 40/50 15YB stopped with the Else's Twenty (GKM30). The Ghost had a puncture and no spare wheel. The outer steel rim for the American wooden wheels had moved and damaged the valve. I supplied the trolley jack to make the car safe, a compressor, mat and some tools while David Else helped the owner diagnose the problem and get a new tube in. This took two hours in the pouring rain. We checked the other bolts on the wheels and found most were not tight, one shearing

without too much pressure. At Davos a check showed that the rim had moved again so the car had to be left in Davos to be repaired. In Davos we were directed to a car park on the outskirts of the town, miles from a restaurant, shop or anything and it was pouring. Water started to come through GUJ27's fragile roof, so I covered it with a ground sheet, moved the rear seat and cushions right forward and decided to sit it out until the rain stopped. But after a pretty miserable 2 hours all the other R-R's had gone and the wind had blown the cover off the rear, letting water in like Niagara. So I removed the cover and headed up the Flüela Pass in the pouring rain and mist. I soon got back to St Moritz, put the cover back on and dried the car out as much as I could in the rain.

On the Sunday morning I was up early, washing and ventilating the car in the sunshine, with all the seats, carpets etc spread around. By 11.30 the car was presentable so I headed for the Suvretta Hotel and parked in a space amongst the twentys. There was not an owner in sight, apart from a few packing their cars and leaving. I chatted with many members of the public who had come to see the cars. At 1.30 I found out that everyone was stuffing their guts at a fantastic BBQ at the other side of the hotel, so I went and said hello to some friends for a few minutes. I arranged to join the Grews and a few others the next morning for a drive to Italy. The sight and wonderful smells of the food was sheer agony, so I went back to the campsite and to get ready for a drive.

At 3pm I set off for the Stelvio, going over the Bernina, to Italy for the Livigno, d'Eira and Foscagno passes. Magnificent Magdalena just



sailed up the Magnificent Stelvio in the evening light to 2757m. (See the photo in my album.)



We descended the Umbrail into Switzerland as night fell and stopped for dinner (for me!) and returned to St Moritz over the Ofen Pass in the dark. Seven major passes and 120 miles.

On the Monday morning I was a bit late getting to the Suvretta House and there was no sign of the Essex lot or their cars so I headed for Chiavenna to try to catch them up. I stopped for a photo and they came by - Ben's twenty, a PI and two Clouds of the 60's (see B225/63). I caught them up and

took videos of them descending the Maloja Pass. We stopped for a drink and then followed Ben through the old narrow streets of the pedestrianised part of Chiavenna. The locals did not seem to mind. Ben did not see the signs prohibiting motor vehicles and we ignored them and just followed! The whole town seemed to come out to see the cars until they (the people!) all vanished at siesta time. I set off for the Gavia while the rest went to lunch.



GUJ27 above the Splügen Pass 2113m Italy/Switzerland Sep 1997

At the foot of the Splügen Pass I changed plans and headed up this narrow but beautifully engineered pass in brilliant sunshine. After a beer and a snack at the top I returned down to Lake Como and then a long drive along to the foot of the Gavia. The sign at the bottom (see my album via members register) warns of the difficult and dangerous road ahead 16% up a narrow rough gravel track with occasional passing places. Thick fog obliterated the view over the unguarded side all the way until after the road

widened and was tarmacked five miles further on. I only met two other cars, one of which objected to backing a metre into a passing place while I was going up the steepest bit. He soon moved though when he could see I was not going to stop! The three-hour diversion up the Splügen ruined my schedule so that it was nearly dark when I got to the top of the Gavia.



I knew the Swiss frontier closed at 10pm and there were three more passes to climb. I reckoned there was just time. The road signs around Livigno were not too good so several times I had to guess which way to go. Once I had decided on this route there was no alternative. All my calculations meant I would arrive at the frontier at 10 pm, which I did but the

Italians told me the frontier was already closed. So I said *grazia* and *arriverderci* and continued. The Swiss border post was another 8 km and when I got there it was deserted. There was just room to get round the barriers so I drove through and over the Bernina Pass to St Moritz. It had been freezing at St Moritz in the morning so I didn't fancy being stuck at the top of a mountain in no-man's land for 8 hours!

I had two easy days in St Moritz. I oiled Magdalena's chassis and removed and filed the handbrake pawl to fit the ratchet. This had been built up by welding and filing 30 years ago, but the handbrake had suddenly started to jump off. Not just slip a tooth but to jump off completely! Not what you want at the top of a steep mountain! It seems incredible that these tiny teeth can hold two tons of motor car on a 20% slope! I flushed out the top of the rad again as the engine had started to overheat again the previous evening.

My plan was to head for the Dolomites and to drive along southern Austria skirting the Alps through Hungary to Prague before heading for home. I knew my insurance was OK for these countries, but not sure if I could go yet to Slovenia and Croatia without a green card.

I took the easy Resia Pass into Italy with that magnificent view of the snow covered north face of the Stelvio group of mountains that I could still visualise from 1957! After Bolzano I turned off at the Pont de Gardena. This narrow bridge would have been impossible to turn right on to, but I missed the sign. I stopped and asked a policeman if the no lorry trailer sign meant no caravans. He checked with a colleague and said it was OK for me to go that way. So I did a U turn and squeezed through the mass of traffic on the bridge. The drivers coming the other way all shut their eyes as I went by with my mirrors skimming their roofs on one side and the bridge supports on the other. There were several steep 14% hills on the approach to the Gardena and Stella passes. Eventually at the junction the dreaded no trailer signs were there again contradicting my information from The Caravan Club. I pressed on up the Stella followed immediately by the Pordoi. The scenery was quite magnificent, as I knew from 3 visits over 30 years before.



On the descent of the Pordoi I was trying to see where a small FIAT, which seemed to be trying to get into the fridge at the back of my caravan, was, when I failed to swing out far enough on to the wrong side of the road for a right-hand hair-pin bend. The nearside caravan wheel caught the high kerb, tipping the caravan over until its front hit the road, when it bounced back with a big crash. I stopped and so did the FIAT. The only exterior damage was the rim of the wheel and minor

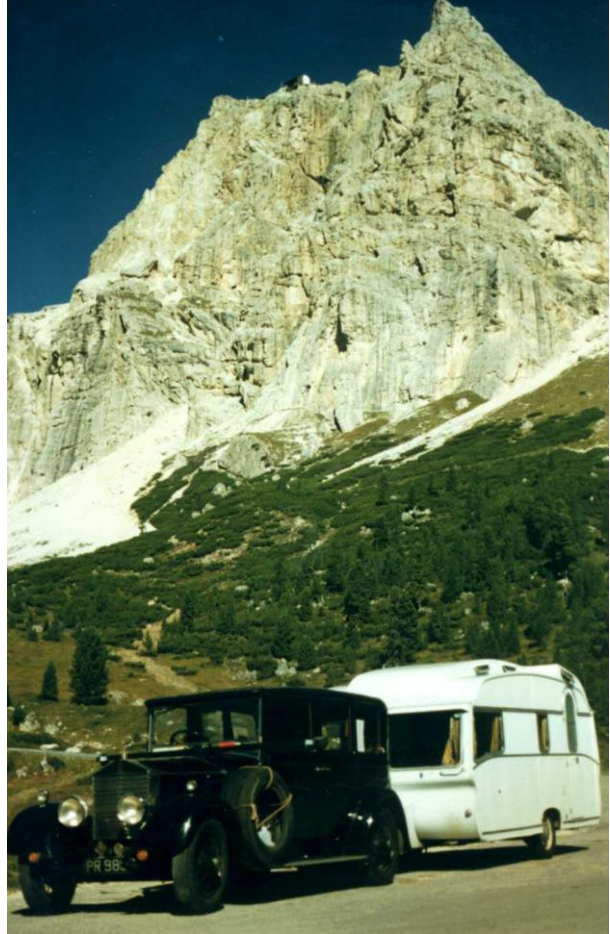
damage to the bottom of the front corner of the body. A few hefty blows with a lump hammer on a thick bar made the rim reasonable. (The tyre lasted OK until the following summer when it was torn to shreds after a puncture.) I checked the interior. All the 6 top cupboards had opened and all the contents, plates bottles, books were piled high on the floor. All the bottles of booze and even glasses had bounced, but 2 plates and 2 dishes were smashed. I found a campsite at the start of the Falzarego. I tidied up the caravan. This must have been very near where I had stopped in PAL (my 1962 Mini-Cooper) when the flywheel came loose in 1966. I was hammering in wooden pegs to hold the flywheel on when a small avalanche came down. I ran

away to escape, leaving my fiancée, who never forgave this ungentlemanly behaviour. Not even when I said I had to escape to be able to save her!

We climbed up the fabulous Falzarego in brilliant sunshine. At the top a chap just happened to have an album of photos of all the Ghosts from the 1993 Alpine. He gave me the repro postcard of cars at the top in 1928 and said my car would be added to the album.

Next was the Tre Croci, where the descent was closed because of an avalanche. So back to Cortina and right round to get to Misurina. This beautiful lake was the favourite place of "Bizuk", my Italian friend Piero I had met near Venice in 1957.

I had spent the previous two nights in a dusty yard getting my old Vespa fixed (big-end failure!) and after several hours drinking a few bottles of wine at a roadside café he had persuaded me to stay with him. We arrived at his home at midnight. Bizuk woke his wife, Miranda, and said "Look what I've brought home!!" She ranted and raved without apparently taking breath for half an hour. I was a little embarrassed. I ended up staying nearly a month! In those days even the local policemen were *ubriaco*, so as long as you could keep sitting on the Vespa you were OK.



Soon we were in Austria and my map showed a nice straight road number 111 along a valley for about 100 miles towards Villach. But it was not like that at all. For over 30 miles it was non-stop hills up and down, with sharp blind bends and narrow little tunnels. Lots of Klaxon use, but there was no traffic at all.

The road was very beautiful in the evening light, but really hard work. There were several 16% hills with no warning. When I got petrol I bought a better map and this showed that not only was the whole road not recommended for caravans, but that for half its length they

John Dixon's Research

were expressly forbidden! The campsite at Kötschach is the best I've been to. The owner took a photo of GUY27 so perhaps it will appear in a future brochure. The next day we went south of Villach, past the Würzen Pass, but at Ferlach the call of the Loibl proved too great.

So I unhitched the caravan at a big car park beside a large music festival, where musicians in national costume were playing all over the town. Apparently this is illegal (leaving the caravan!), but it was only for two hours. I would have pleaded insanity. Two hairpins before the tunnel where the frontier with Slovenia now is I noticed the track where the old road went. I turned round at the frontier and then turned off up the old road past yet another sign with a big white disc on, with a message I didn't try to understand. The road is steep - 26% with sharp bends. There are deep drainage gulleys traversing the rough gravel road, with big piles of stones presumably to fill the gulleys occasionally. You can gauge how good



Although silent and very eerie I did not see Radley's ghost or any other ghosts!

I returned down the hill, hitched up the caravan and headed east.

the steering is on a twenty and how strong my biceps had got because I managed to steer one-handed all the way while holding the video camera in the other hand! There was thick fog at the top. A substantial chain hung across the closed road. The one building on the Slovenian side did not appear to be occupied so I was able to walk briefly in Slovenia. I had come up that side (34%) in 1961 in my little 1932 Morris Minor.



I knew now that there were several steep hills ahead, mainly 14%, but one was 16%. Fortunately I knew where it was, got a good run at it and as it was quite short I barely had to use first gear! Another nice campsite with a four course dinner in the restaurant, after a superb sunset across the Pickdorfersee.



An early start the next morning meant there was no-one to pay my site dues to - never mind! I headed for the Slovenian frontier, but would not pay £26 for a minimum of 21 days 3rd party insurance, so visited their duty free shop and returned to Austria. I could not find a decent map for the east part of Austria, but I knew there was a steep hill ahead. The sign just past the point of no return said 15% for 12 km! Sugar! The road just went on and on up the mountain. The view of the valley was soon just like that from an aeroplane. I

did not know till later that this was Magdalensberg!! I missed the one place I could have topped up the rad, thinking we must be near the top. There appeared to be nothing higher than the road just in front. I could see the road levelling out ahead, but the bit before was extra steep. Magdalena ground to a halt. I turned to full left lock and allowed the front tyre to rest against the curb, and sat and pondered how to get up the last 100m.

After cooling down and filling with water I gently coasted backwards for about 200 m to a bend where the gradient was less than 15%. Not easy when there were packs of high powered motorbikes using the road as a racetrack. The wide cambered bends and good surface must have made it ideal for them. I could hear them coming, so loud were their exhausts that I did not inconvenience them. Two more goes, but I just could not get any further. A SAAB 900 turbo driver offered to tow me while I drove behind. But his front wheels just span and smoked like Damon Hill's on a bad GP start. So I told him it was useless. Eventually a Range Rover stopped. He too tried to help, but he had no idea how to do it, rolled back and then snapped the rope. His wife insisted on ringing ADAC. When the tow-truck arrived he too broke two ropes, before he managed to get going without rolling back with his last rope. We got over the steepest part and stopped. I showed him my Britannia Rescue documents, but he would only accept the AA or RAC. Despite the badges I have not been a member of either for over 40 years. The charge was about £80, but he accepted my last £25 in Austrian schillings. I then wished I had paid the £26 in Slovenia!

I set off but stopped after another 100m as the clutch was obviously slipping. Floorboards out, clutch cover off and I could feel that the toggles were all tight. I told the tow-man that I would be alright after adjusting the "coupling". I said I would check my instruction book! So I did and off he went. A couple of police motorcyclists also asked if I would be OK. They did not mention that caravans were apparently forbidden on that road, but perhaps they didn't know either. I soon got 20 thou gap on each toggle and topped up the engine oil, much of which had run out of the rear oil thrower. Later in the afternoon I stopped and oiled critical points like the king pins and steering links and shackle bolts and topped up the gearbox oil.

The restaurant adjacent to the campsite changed a £20 note so I was able to buy a meal and pay for the camp site in the morning.

Soon there was yet another 16% hill, but that was easy-peasy. Then we were in Hungary and heading north. My books said that Sopron was worth a trip to - but it wasn't. So I headed for Bratislava. I knew the campsite was on the edge of the town on road 61, but at critical places I had to guess the way and guessed wrong ending up at the top of a long steep dead end road! Eventually in the dark I found the right road, but missed the sign (if there was one!) just before the road became a motorway. It was 15 miles before I could turn off, so I found a quiet spot in Senec to stay.

The next day I drove on minor roads through Slovakia and into the Czech Republic. I was aiming for Prague, with the intention of giving Petr Brabnik a surprise visit. The roads I had picked were pretty awful and very slow going, there had been no bank at the frontier and none of the petrol stations seemed to take VISA. So I gave in and got on the motorway just after Brno and turned off to Jihlava, where I found a bank. Needless to say the next petrol station did take VISA! I arrived in the centre of Prague at dusk and spent an hour parked up in the utter traffic chaos trying without success to find a phone to take coins. Eventually an American rang Petr's number on his mobile, but there was no answer. Not surprising, as I later discovered both the number and code had changed! The map I had bought did not mention Dolni Brezhany, but the information girl in a hotel told me it was a long way out and it might not be possible to get there because of major roadworks! I worked out that if I headed down the road beside the river I would eventually come to Dolni.

The congestion was dreadful. I managed to weave my way through gaps past the trams too small for all the local tiny FIATs. At last after about 12 miles there was a sign for Dolnyi. I was looking for number 36. I stopped outside a small restaurant, which was 23 and next door was 37. But no-one knew Petr or where 36 was! I drove round and found someone who knew him and I followed while we drove to the other side of the village. There was a light from the skylight, but no answer from the door. I was about to give up when the chaps threw some small stones on to the skylight, which then opened! I had a chat with Petr and Dana about Rolls-Royces with the help of many pictures. With his English not being nearly as good as I had expected from his letter (B215/73) this was a bit difficult. Still - we managed. I insisted on sleeping in the caravan, which I was able to back up beside his house.

In the morning he showed me his lovely Tatra and the various cars he was building new bodies for. I saw his supposedly complete 20 hp rolling chassis (GZK44) and the picture of the car when new. It is difficult to imagine that anyone could make a complete car from the various incomplete grotty bits he had! I certainly didn't envy him his task. I have had since 1964 the complete engine, gearbox, steering column, petrol tank etc from GEN38 (engine X2E originally in GXL53) - all I needed for a complete concours car is a twenty chassis with radiator, axles and wheels, a lottery win (unlikely as I've never bought a ticket for this voluntary tax!) and a new in-the-style of Barker barrel shaped open body! I have since sold him the petrol tank and a few other bits, which a friend collected when in England.

The weather over Prague was ominous so I took the pretty route to Plzen and managed to miss the rain. We were nearing the top of a long 14% hill near the German frontier when I was stopped by the police - for boiling! A quick top-up and the restart was no problem, although I would never choose to stop on such a steep slope with the caravan. At the frontier I squeezed past the mile long queue of double parked HGV and through the empty route for cars. I dread to think how long it must take the lorries to get through. It's the same at nearly all the crossings to and within the old iron curtain countries. It's worse now because there are extra borders such as Slovakia to the Czech Republic. Nor could you use Slovakian money in the Czech Republic.

In the morning I could not find my 20 DM note so I wanted to get away from the campsite early, but the engine would not start. I noticed that the ammeter did not flick as I turned the engine over, so the contact breaker was not opening, hence no spark. I checked my manuals, but they did not say how the contact breaker could be removed. With a magnifying glass, torch and glasses I just managed to work it out. There were tits on both faces, so I filed these off, set the gap and the engine started instantly. I noticed that the camp admin were in confab away from the office so I quickly slunk out!

A quick drive to Marburg via Fulda to visit friends, where I changed my film and never saw it again so no pictures! I then drove through Koblenz, skirting the Nürburgring where all cars were heading for the next day's GP, across Luxemburg and along southern Belgium. Cruising at 52 mph on the fast N4 helped us to do 324 miles in the day, but too late to get to Mammouth and Sainsburys in Calais, so I visited Mammouth in St Omer. At the camp site in Calais the barrier was down - we were not welcome. So back to Mammouth's massive carpark for the night. I then discovered that Mammouth was now Auchan and would be shut next day (Sunday). Just as well I'd got some wine and beer in St Omer! I got home at 2pm on the Sunday. 3212 miles in 19½ days using 240 gallons of petrol at 13.4 mpg. 2724 miles towing and only 484 solo. On the rare fairly flat day the car did 17 mpg towing, but only about 8 mpg in the mountains. I had no trouble with tyres. I had fitted a pair of new Michelins to Magdalena's rear and a pair of new Polish radials to the caravan in the summer, but the 20 year old Dunlops on the front and spare were finally replaced in 1998 for the MOT. The brakes needed no adjustment and there was never a trace of vapour lock!

There is no doubt whatever that the four speed gearbox is vastly superior to the three speeds of the early twenties. The gearing on these is completely wrong for the mountains, both for going up and going down. Where I could use second, Ben Grew in 66H9 had to use first. With no front wheel brakes he had to keep in first gear going down, but I could often use second or third, just using the brakes briefly before some hairpins. GUJ27 can descend mountains faster with the caravan than an early twenty solo. I know the difference as I had fitted a four speed box in 1961 in my 1932 Morris, which could never have got up the Würzen or Loibl with its original 3 speed box with the high first gear I've used for the last 30+ years.