



"New" Dunlop bridge

### Planning a trip to le Mans?

In most years a group of V8 enthusiasts has gone to the annual 24 hours sportscar endurance race at le Mans. It's an event that combines a sense of expedition, an opportunity to drive on some relatively uncluttered French roads, the enjoyment of good food and wine, and of course spectating the race! Here Victor Smith provides a guide to planning your trip and finding your way around when you are there.

### When is the event held?

The event is usually held over the weekend closest to the longest day in June. Practice is held over several days during the week leading up to the race at the weekend, but do note there is no practice on the Friday. The race starts at 3pm on Saturday afternoon and the chequered flag comes out at 3pm on Sunday afternoon when the weary drivers gladly throttle back after more than 3,000 miles round the 13.6 km circuit. It is not only an endurance event for the competitors and their cars but also for the spectators too because ambient noise levels are high and you are on your feet a great deal - and of course you are watching a 24 hour motor race in all weathers! But there are many compensations - good company and above all good food, and the joie de vivre of being in France with the long hours of daylight in June.

In some years the dates for the 24 heures du Mans in the middle of June have tested loyalties as unfortunately they have clashed with the dates for the MG Car Club's annual International MGLive! weekend at Silverstone, but thankfully only occasionally.

So what are the key points to bear in mind if you are planning to go to the event?

### When to be there

It is probably best to go over on Wednesday or even earlier in the week so you can avoid the invasion via the ferries and Channel Tunnel - with over 60,000 enthusiasts making the annual pilgrimage to le Mans from the UK, this is a serious consideration. That way you will have a more relaxed journey, be able to see at least one day of practice and get a feel for the layout of the place - particularly in daylight! The Mulsanne Straight is returned to a public road at the end of each afternoon after practice, so it's always a pleasure to take a

run down that famous straight passing Restaurant Hunaudieres on the left and then hammer down through the right kink to the roundabout at Mulsanne corner just outside the village - preferably before dinner!

With no practice on Friday it is an opportunity to drive down to Chartres and see the magnificent cathedral. One year John Targett, David Waterton, Mike Maude-Roxby and I set off early down the deserted three lane motorway towards Chartres at a brisk pace. Even with open fields spreading either side for kilometres, we still had to keep an eye open for le Flic. Coming back to le Mans later that Friday afternoon was a complete contrast - the road was heavy with traffic and particularly so for a section of two lane dual carriageway. We all chose to cruise in the nearside lane because the near suicidal driving habits of the French drivers in the outside lane were just beyond belief! They drive as though the car in front, even if held back by other vehicles ahead, is not there until they have the comfort of being so close they are no longer able to see your rear bumper!

### How to get over there

You can take the ferries from Portsmouth to Cherbourg, Caen or le Havre, but if you take the early morning ferry, sailing at between 8am and 9am, it takes until early afternoon French time to get to the French port. There is then a fair drive to le Mans. As it is a weekday, you pass through numerous towns at the time when the factories are turning out and assorted camions are pottering, so the traffic can be heavy, and the journey slow and tiresome.



Le Mans 2014 finish





Nissan GTR-2

In recent years Bob Grieves is a frequent visitor to the event at le Mans and mentions "now the new A28/E402 motorway is open west of Rouen to Le Mans, this reduces the travel time from Calais by over an hour. Also beware of the toll section of motorway on the A16 between Boulogne and Abbeville both going and coming back on Sunday and Mondays because the French police can time you between tolls and they also have speed cameras!"

The drive down the west side of the peninsula from Cherbourg can be most pleasant but it is quite a journey, possibly more comfortable with an overnight break at Villedieu-les-Poêles for example.

Another alternative is to use the Eurotunnel Shuttle and then drive down on the autoroutes. I found the Shuttle very convenient one year when I went over for a weekend break near le Touquet. The key point to note is that if you do plan to go by ferry, you will need to book by early January (and often earlier) at the latest to be sure of getting a place, particularly if you plan to go over on or near Friday of the le Mans weekend.

### Where to stay

You have essentially three choices depending on the style you wish to enjoy and the price you can afford - **camping**,

**small hotel** or as a **paying guest** in a house or at a chateau. Victor Smith remembers "the last time I went, we all stayed at a magnificent chateau near a village called Flée about 35 kilometres south of Mulsanne village. The charges were reasonable and the welcome warm. On a previous occasion, my son and I stayed at the [Hotel de France](#) in la Chartre-sur-le-Loir, a beautiful village a few kilometres further south of the village of Flée. This hotel is in the main square of this village and was the place where the Aston Martin team used to billet in earlier years when their team competed at le Mans. The walls of the bar are covered with signed photos of the team drivers, the works cars and other people".

"The food is truly wonderful at Hotel de France. I have memories of a delicious duck dish accompanied by a bottle of Gevry Chambertin, followed by a splendid crème brûlée made with real vanilla pod. It was a splendid evening in good company with ample good humour and banter. I long to be back there again!" The difficulty is that rooms at hotels like that get booked 12 months ahead, so your real choice is a smaller place which can be fine, but do make sure that they will let you in at one or two in the morning when you roll back from the circuit! - and that they can cope with your leaving early on Sunday morning to get

back to the circuit by 8am or 9am.

### Camping facilities

The camping facilities within the circuit are reasonable as the ground is sandy with spaces sheltered by pine trees. Bob Grieves says "for 2015 we are camping at a new campsite in the Vert area called Epinnette - the entrance is opposite Houx - everyone is welcome to join me in a beer, just look for the MG flag". Bob has provided useful [information](#) on the layout of the camping areas at le Mans and how to find the ticket office.

### Where to park when you get to the Circuit

In earlier years the V8 Register group used to park outside the circuit in a small field (called "Parking Rouge") on the north west side overlooking Tertre Rouge corner. Access to this car park was from le Mans so you had to go armed with a Michelin guide or map to ensure you could find your way through the town - it can be grim in heavy traffic, particularly if you are not sure where you are going! So see the small extracts from two essential maps which are reproduced at the foot of this note.

Bob Grieves has provided an updated and says the Rouge car park is now so popular that "you can never get tickets for these campsite or parking areas" so he **prefers the Vert area called Epinnette**, with an entrance opposite Houx.

### Up to date Michelin maps are essential

These maps provide the essential detail of the smaller roads you will need to use to get round some of the road closures caused by the event, particularly at night! Do not scrimp on maps - you will need these Michelin maps and a good torch or map reading light too! It's important to buy the latest updates of these maps before making the trip to le Mans so you will have full details of the local roads and any new autoroutes too.

### Tickets

Tickets used to be supplied with the four day tear-offs, but Bob Grieves says these are no longer used as the entrance staff all have barcode readers. This means you can keep your tickets in a plastic ticket holder and in good condition over the weekend.

Bob highlights a particular issue with tickets as he has found "getting tickets is becoming more difficult for the general public. As a member I get mine direct from the ACO, but not from the official website as I have found this normally crashes when the online booking starts and when you do



Astons outside the Hotel de France





Nissan – Jaguar GpC

eventually get on, they are all sold. This is because ACO make very few tickets available to individual enthusiasts, they seem to prefer the corporates and ticket agents. I have **found it easier to get tickets from the ACO Regional offices** - I use Caen but the others are listed on the website. The **ticket office near the circuit** is [ActiSud](#). There are also several social media sites for Le Mans fans, "Mulsanne's Corner" and the "Comite de defence des spectateur des 24h du mans auto", both on Facebook. I will be with the latter again this year, mostly French and Belgians but they make you very welcome".

#### Improvements inside the Circuit

There have been a number of improvements inside the circuit. Tertre Rouge has been completely rebuilt with a new banking to view the corner and a large screen. There were **several new screens around the circuit which reinforced the plan to "walk and watch" from various points**. The viewing area at the Dunlop Bridge has been rebuilt on the inside of the circuit and there is a new walkway from Dunlop down to the pits. The "village" behind the pits is now first class with plenty to see and with proper walkways rather than mud! As ever the pit walk is a must and on Friday this was open virtually all day.

#### Access to Arnage

My only disappointment was that the police have now closed access to the Arnage bends on the Thursday and Friday. In 2005 this was the venue for several hundred cars parked up and their owners strolling and passing the time with fellow enthusiasts.

This was closed this year which meant the only access to a "circuit drive" was down the Mulsanne around to the Arnage but not actually onto the curves.

#### Friday – classic car show at St Saturnine featuring MG in 2015

Bob Grieves says "on the Friday there is the Classic Car Show at St Saturnine and this year celebrates the MG so we shall be there. I see that Roger Aldridge is going this year and I hope to meet up. I met Chris Vernon last year who was camping in the field next to us, but I seem to remember the MG did not make it to Le Mans. If anyone plans to go to St Saturnine I expect the MGs will be on show in the main car-park, but you will need to get there early though. It opens at 9am and soon gets very busy, but we could plan to meet fellow V8 members there".

#### What do you do inside the circuit?

On the Saturday, we usually try and have lunch in a bar on the inside of the track adjacent to the exit of the first chicane at the end of the start straight. The spot is not far from the famous Dunlop bridge on the hill. As lunch comes to an end, we keep an eye on the build-up of spectators on the fence, then move out to a position with a line of sight through the corner to the end of the start straight to see the rolling start. It is a tremendous sight as the cars surge by and set off on their long journey - well hopefully! After the first hour, when things have settled down, our group usually agrees a series of meeting times (say every three hours) at a bar - particularly one where you can get crepes and brandies at night - so you can

maintain contact and good spirits. However drivers will need to take care with their alcohol intake as the drink-drive limits are quite tight in France and in any case common sense should apply.

A visit to the funfair at le Mans used to be essential - it had a medieval flavour in some ways and some quite extraordinary sights! Bob Grieves says "I have attached the site plan of the area they call **The Village** which has been a feature at le Mans for about five years. It puts all the traders and food outlets in the same place and is between the end of the pit road and extends towards the Dunlop Bridge. Most of the area where the Fun Fair used to be is now the concert arena, this was done when the Esses were re-routed to accommodate the short Bugatti circuit".

During the evening, following dinner at a bar or restaurant outside the circuit, we call in at various points round the circuit. I say "round" but in fact you cannot easily get right round, even on foot. The section from Arnage to the start line cannot be reached to complete a walk round the circuit.

You may try and walk through to see one of the chicannes on the Mulsanne Straight but often the gendarmes will turn you back as it can be dangerous standing near the armco barriers. I understand that if a car hits the barriers at high speed, the armco sections can become detached and flail about causing very serious and probably fatal injuries to people standing nearby. If you do get near the straight (for example at the Restaurant Hunaudieres) the cars pass at such a speed you have difficulty with even reading the race numbers!

As night comes, I always enjoy seeing the disc brakes glowing cherry red at the end of the straights going into corners like Indianapolis when the brakes are still red



V8 camping is good





Aston Martin garage

hot from the heavy braking for Mulsanne Corner beforehand. The **spectator enclosure overlooking Indianapolis and Arnage Corners is quite special at night** and a very friendly group of enthusiasts always congregates there.

Usually we get back to our overnight accommodation for some sleep at around 1.30am. Most of the places we have stayed in have been too far from the Circuit to pick up the local FM circuit commentary (in English) but of course you can listen to the regular reports on French national radio on FM and Longwave".

### Circuit catering

On a comparative scale with other circuits, the catering at the 24 heures du Mans is remarkably good, but it is reasonably expensive compared with the good value in the bars and villages restaurants outside. Many of the circuit caterers really do try and provide good food and service even over long hours and in tiring conditions. It is worth using French as the catering staff respond very well to English motor sport enthusiasts who make an effort to speak their language.

### Radar

Just a caution for those members who are used to the beneficial warning that radar detectors afford of fixed cameras or hand-held speed detection devices. The **French police are out in force at the time of the 24 heures du Mans and use radar to detect speeding cars**. The Flic seem to enjoy gonging English sports car drivers - next to keeping our beef out, it must be their next most enjoyable game in June. So great care is needed, particularly when entering the outskirts of towns and villages. Often the secondary, cross country roads are much safer and more enjoyable, but you will need detailed maps and a good map reader!

If you have a radar detector which provides advance warning of X and K band and laser signals, do be aware that **in France radar detectors are illegal** with

"on-the-spot" fines demanded by the Flic together with the confiscation of the kit. But it's worse, **the Flic have radar detector detectors** and spring into action as soon as they get even a sniff of a detection of a detector! Although my trusty Valentine detector is supposed to have stealth technology, I have not been keen to put it to the test in France! I prefer to use my eyes and sixth sense.

### Coming back

If you plan to return on the early Sunday evening ferry from le Havre for example, you will **need to leave the circuit before the end of the race**, probably 90 minutes or so beforehand, and then park up about 15 kilometres from the circuit so you can listen to the local FM radio transmission of the closing stages of the race before you go out of range. This way you avoid the exodus of around 250,000 fans and the scratch race to the ports - probably the most dangerous part of the weekend!

**Being prepared to leave early is really an important part of your planning** unless you have arranged for a few days of extra holiday in France during the following week. Leaving the circuit early avoids a tedious episode and you should be able to reach le Havre in time for the early evening ferry without pushing too hard. If you have booked the later overnight ferry, then there will be time for an early supper at a restaurant or bar as you get near le Havre.

### Return ferry

For the return ferry, it is a good bet to book a day cabin for four if you are a day party so you can have a place of refuge and a doze during the long crossing. An overnight cabin is a must for a comfortable night on the late ferry back to Portsmouth.

### Essential kit

There are three items you will be well advised to obtain in advance. Firstly **ear defenders** and/or soft ear plugs are a "must-have". Even defenders from a hire shop will do but they are necessary because you will grow weary of the din. Next you need a **compact FM radio** for the local race commentary transmissions from the circuit in English and French - the baseball caps with built in radios and dangling ear plugs are ideal as they do not get in the way and are very convenient - and you can put the ear defenders over the top of the ear plugs too! The third key item is a **plastic ticket holder** on a cord round your neck to hold the tickets and passes for regular inspection as you move around and in and out of parts of the circuit. You will need to make a reasonably strong and **watertight see-through plastic ticket holder**. Without it, your tickets will turn to pulp within hours if it rains!

Of course you will also need stout boots, wet weather kit, a fleece and a hat together with a small rucksack to carry those items - and sun kit too (sometimes it can be a scorcher) - plus food and water.

So have a good time at le Mans.



Warming the pain au chocolat!