

Carry on camping

As much about a few nights away under canvas and drinking vast quantities of gassy French beer as it is about motorsport, Le Mans is one of the unsung highlights of the British sporting calendar. Peter Morgan, who in his time has emptied his share of little green bottles, suggests how best to capture the full experience this coming June. Photos from the author's own archive

It's that time of year again. The time of year when if your Porsche could talk it would probably be making absolutely sure that you've made plans to make your annual pilgrimage to Le Mans this coming June.

Pilgrimage? Well, yes. It's no understatement to suggest that the entire Porsche story revolves to a very considerable extent around *Les Vingt-Quatre Heures du Mans*, better known to we English speakers as the 24-Hours of Le Mans – or, more likely, just plain old Le Mans.

There have been Porsches at La Sarthe (see page 101 since 1951 (see also *Going the distance* in the August 2001 issue), and in that time the company's sports and racing cars have between them notched up an unmatched record of 16 overall wins, and literally countless class victories.

But going to Le Mans as a spectator (as opposed to a competitor; that's a whole different ballgame again) is rather more than simply watching a motor race. Even if that race is one of the longest and the toughest in the world.

For some enthusiasts the total immersion in the unmistakable atmosphere of the place is enough to feed their addiction for another 12 months, but for many others the weekend is a chance to unwind from the pressures of work, and to enjoy the simpler (although not necessarily quieter) pleasures of this picturesque corner of France.

The race is usually (although by no means always) timed for the third weekend in June – conveniently close to the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, 21st June. In fact, this year's event is scheduled to take place over the weekend of 15th and 16th June, but in order to enjoy the whole experience many will be staying for much longer,



perhaps taking in the practice sessions on both the preceding Wednesday and Thursday evenings.

Arguably the best day, though, is the Friday before the race. There's no track action, as such, but it's a day when spectators can not only get into the pits and look at the cars at very close quarters (sports-car racing is a long way from F1), but also drive some of the circuit and feast their eyes on the

Porsche has competed at Le Mans – without a break – since 1951. For many private teams and drivers to race here is the culmination of literally years of planning, preparation and effort



The start of the 1999 24 Hours as ITV's F1 commentator Martin Brundle, driving the Toyota, leads the pack into the Esses next to the famous fairground



hundreds of road-going classics that turn up outside the Restaurant des 24 Heures on the legendary Mulsanne straight. Others will simply head out into the beautiful Loire valley to find a suitable restaurant for a long, leisurely (and often liquid) lunch.

There is also plenty to see and do in the ancient city of Le Mans itself. It's a regional capital, so there's more than enough opportunity for those who need retail therapy, French style, and the historic cathedral dominates the architecture of la ville ancienne.

Ask regular visitors (and many people do go back year after year) to sum up the Le Mans experience and you will probably get a completely different answer from each one of them. For most there is the unforgettable thrill of watching racing cars come screaming out of the darkness, headlights blazing, to howl past at over 200mph with all the ferocity of a jet fighter on full reheat.

For others it's the fun of the notorious circuit campsites, the Radio Le Mans experience (again see page 101), and perhaps building a sculpture of as many little green beer bottles as possible (ditto). But the underlying message is that this doesn't have to be a full-on anorak weekend; it's just an opportunity to see some genuinely impressive racing cars, and to have a very good time.

There isn't a set formula for going to Le Mans, and



This lightweight, aluminium-bodied 356 took Porsche's first class win at Le Mans, way back in 1951

this will undoubtedly appeal to those who don't want to be nannied all the time. Among the confessions of the regular Le Mans-goer will be the admission from some that they have actually watched very little racing, indeed. It's just that kind of place and event.

You can enjoy a fully organised package, where everything is done for you, or you can take a do-it-yourself approach and turn it into an adventure with your Porsche and perhaps a few of your mates. To draw an analogy with art, a traditional passion of the French (well, one of them, anyway), consider it as a canvas ready for painting. What you subsequently do with that canvas is entirely up to you.

THE CITY OF LE MANS IS THE REGIONAL capital of the Sarthe region in north-western France. Le Mans is around 100 miles south of the Normandy coast (where the Allies landed in 1944; some of the war graves and memorials you'll drive past are well worth stopping to see, if only for a few minutes), and has excellent road, rail and air links with the rest of France and the wider world.

Naturally one of the first things the DIY driver has to do when travelling from the UK is to arrange the ferry crossing (or the trip through the tunnel, of course, for those who don't like sea travel). Check out the websites of the main operators (see page 100) to get all the routes and latest prices.

Crossing from the English south coast (usually Portsmouth or Weymouth) to Normandy (usually Cherbourg) is the popular route, but it is an overnight

Something for the weekend, sir?

Insider tips that can – no, will – make all the difference to your weekend's enjoyment

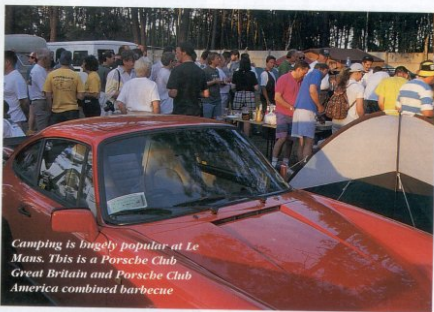
- Take along a small backpack in which to stow all your personal belongings
- Take a waterproof (OK, then, an anorak...)
- Buy a Michelin France motoring atlas (about three miles to the inch) in advance
- Pack clothes for both hot and cool weather
- Don't take your best clothes (unless you plan to wear black tie for your Friday-evening campsite dinner. And don't smirk: it does happen!)
- Remember to wear a cap or hat when it's sunny (to avoid sunstroke)
- Eat plenty of strong mints (those all-pervasive hamburgers will leave their mark on your breath!)
- Carry a portable FM radio with a headset (a must for the unforgettable Radio Le Mans). A mobile phone is near-essential these days, too, if only for keeping in touch with other members of your group
- Take a lightweight camera – and plenty of film. You might not get great action shots of the cars, but at least you'll be able to blackmail your friends
- Take a first-aid kit of sun cream, insect-bite cream and not least headache pills. Even if you don't help to support the French brewing industry the chances are the noise and the heat will take their toll
- Wear good walking shoes
- Wear a money belt or similar for valuables (and remember it's all euros now)
- Before leaving have your car serviced (it completely spoils the weekend if you break down, especially if it's on the Kingston bypass...)
- Watch the speed limits (the local *gendarmier* will be ready and waiting). And leave your radar detector at home, too, unless you want to lose the unit and have to pay up to a £500 fine
- Be considerate to the local population, particularly when parking

sail (and not the most exciting of journeys – Ed).

If you prefer to drive more or less all the way (and why not?), then Dover-Calais is probably the best route, but leave a day for the drive on the other side (it's about 250 miles from Calais to Le Mans). Doing it this way has the added benefit that it takes you past the old circuit at Rouen-Les Essarts, where Dan Gurney won the French Grand Prix in 1962. It remains to this day the only GP event to be won by a Porsche car.

Flying into Le Mans will appeal to British light-aircraft pilots, and it's an undeniably quick (and relatively painless) way of getting in and out, because Le Mans airport is adjacent to the start line.

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Camping is hugely popular at Le Mans. This is a Porsche Club Great Britain and Porsche Club America combined barbecue

Hello, campers...

- Choose a space away from the main lanes (which are both noisy and dusty)
- Camp – and park – in a reasonably accessible spot
- Don't park or camp under the trees (they deposit resin everywhere on hot days)
- Avoid the hollows (they flood when it rains)
- Take a tent that's simple to erect (very useful when you're, er, tired and emotional)
- Don't forget some rope or tape to picket your camping space. It's no more guaranteed than leaving your towel on a poolside sun lounger in Torremolinos, but you'd be surprised how effective it can be
- Wear ear-plugs (especially if you're camping inside the circuit; if you don't you'll probably suffer from tinnitus for a week afterwards)
- Take a warm sleeping-bag and pillow with you. It can be surprisingly chilly at Le Mans
- Put your clothes inside your sleeping-bag to avoid early-morning damp
- Don't forget your drinking-water container
- A supply of toilet paper is always a smart idea, too (just in case...)
- Always lock all your kit away in the car (and ideally out of sight) before leaving the campsite for the circuit



There's absolutely no truth in the malicious rumour that going to Le Mans is just for the boys. The author went to great lengths to obtain this photograph of some nice ladies enjoying the pre-start atmosphere...

Contacts book

ACO (race organiser; tickets for admission and camping): tel: +33 2 43 40 24 24;
websites: www.lemans.org;
www.lemans-aco.com

LATEST PORSCHE NEWS (including motorsport): www.porsche.com/english

AGENCY TICKETS

Just Tickets: 01304 228866

TOURIST OFFICE

(for regional accommodation)

Comité Départemental du Tourisme:

tel: +33 2 43 40 22 50;

fax: +33 2 43 40 22 51;

e-mail: tourisme@sarthe.com;

website: http://tourisme.sarthe.com

TOUR OPERATORS

Motor Racing International: 01304 612424

Page & Moy Ltd: 0116 250 7008

FERRY OPERATORS

P & O Ferries

(Portsmouth to Le Havre & Cherbourg):

0870 600 0600

website: www.poportsmouth.com

Brittany Ferries

(Portsmouth, Plymouth & Poole to Caen,

Cherbourg & Roscoff): 0870 5 360 360;

website: www.brittany-ferries.co.uk

P & O Ferries

(Dover-Calais): 08705 980 980

SeaFrance (Dover-Calais): 08705 711 711

Hoverspeed (Dover-Calais): 08705 240241

LE MANS (ARNAGE) AIRPORT

Aerodrome: +33 2 43 84 34 85

Aeroclub: +33 2 43 84 10 23

TECHNICAL STUFF

Rwy 02/20, 1410m x 30m, Asphalt, TORA and

Lighting

Monday-Friday 0800-2000

Saturday, Sunday 0900-2000 PNR

BEST CLUB TOUR

Porsche Club Great Britain. Contact Bob

Lovelace on 01237 422070 (evenings, but

before 8pm, please)

Club office: 01608 652911

Smartgroup website:

www.smartgroups.com/groups/pcgb/m

(Chatroom for those going to Le Mans with

Porsche Club GB tour)

OTHER USEFUL WEBSITES

Club Arnage: www.club-arnage.com

(best independent)

Autosport (UK-based weekly motor-racing

magazine): www.autosport.com

TELEVISION

For those who can't make it to Le Mans itself,

Eurosport (Euro ESPN) offers excellent

extended coverage of the race. Furthermore,

last year the UK's terrestrial Channel 4 included

an excellent four-slot show over the course

of the 24-Hours. ■



There's always plenty of British interest in the race – not that you'd know it from the at best sketchy coverage it receives from the terrestrial news and current-affairs programmes on TV and radio. This is Derek Bell's Kremer-Porsche K8 back in 1994

You simply apply in advance to air-traffic control for an arrival slot, and they will also assign your aircraft an outdoor parking spot for the duration of your stay. It's also essential to reserve a rental car before you go, unless you're prepared to be reliant on shuttle buses and/or your own two feet. A similar condition applies to those wanting to go by rail. (And French railways are, needless to say, a cut above their dismal British counterparts. – Ed)

But by far the simplest way to travel is to book a coach tour with one of the big package operators. These companies pre-book hotel rooms, and will bus you to and from the circuit once you are there. Most will also take you out to the extremities of the course, and will often have hospitality facilities, too, so that you can get out of the sun (or the rain) or simply relax. What's more, many package tours offer camping accommodation within the circuit itself.

The organiser of the race is the Automobile Club de L'Ouest (ACO). The ACO is impressively specta-

tor-orientated, and seems to manage to make improvements to the on-site facilities every year. It has a good website (details over on the left), and has even set up a club for the thousands of visitors who come to the 24-Hours every year.

You can get tickets for the event in advance, or buy them on arrival. If you want a grandstand ticket then you will have to book in advance. This year general admission tickets (allowing the holder to get anywhere around the circuit where spectators can normally stand and watch) are priced at FF350 for the whole weekend. Interestingly, these advance tickets also give you access to the traditional test-weekend, which this year is scheduled for 4th and 5th May.

Rather bizarrely, at the time of writing (mid-January) the ACO had still not published prices in euros, but the figure above works out at about €53, or £35, so again there's no F1-style madness here. And the good news is that they do speak English if you call and your French n'est pas up to le job.

Ten things you didn't know about Le Mans

1 What's this 'La Sarthe' that motoring writers always bang on about in stories about Le Mans?

La Sarthe, strictly speaking, is the river that flows through the city of Le Mans and joins the Loire near Angers in the south. The region around Le Mans is known as the Département de la Sarthe, and writers often refer to La Sarthe as another way of describing the circuit itself (which, of course, isn't a circuit, as such, since part of it is actually the public road).

2 Radio Le Mans

Radio Le Mans is to regular race-goers nothing less than an institution. The presenters (anchored by John Hindhaugh) are petrol-heads to a man, and understand perfectly that everybody who's listening is there for a good time. The presentation (in English) is informal at best, and quite unlike any other radio programme you've ever heard. From early in race week until late on the Sunday evening Radio Le Mans is the essential way to keep up to date with what's happening in (and around) the race. There are driver and celebrity interviews, an informed race commentary, and all the latest news. Best of all, you can pick up RLM some distance from the circuit, which is great if you need to get urgent fluid supplies from the *hypemarché* or eat out.

3 I say, do pass me another one, please!

Those little green beer bottles that are such an integral part of life at Le Mans can be stacked into all kinds of interesting shapes after the contents are drained. In some of the campsites there's even a prize for the best bottle sculpture. Most Brits, however, are unable to determine whether the yellowish liquid inside them was put there before or after consumption.

4 Bonjour, m'sieur. Alors, où est le feu?

Christmas comes in mid-June for the police in north-western France. Armed with radar guns and cheery smiles they will pop out from behind beguiling road signs that say *Bienvenue en France*. So don't speed, don't show off, and absolutely don't drink and drive. And be specially careful on the Friday anywhere near the circuit, because there will be literally thousands of people wandering around with their brains completely in neutral – if not switched off altogether.

5 You know when you've been Le Manned...

Do you remember how a few years ago a soft-drinks manufacturer thought it would make a great advertising campaign to have a guy dress up in an orange

suit and slap the customers about? Well, being Le Manned is in many ways the French equivalent. If you think a bottle of water should cost 10 francs (sorry, €1.59), then be prepared for the fact that at Le Mans it will cost you just about double. But then, hey, it's only money, isn't it?

6 Be prepared!

Your Porsche is most unlikely to expire by the roadside (come on, you had it serviced before leaving, didn't you?), but at the very least take some jump-leads and a roll of gaffer tape with you. The battery can get flattened easily when the engine isn't run (if you use the lights at night, or listen to the radio in the campsite). And don't forget that French regulations require you to take a warning triangle in case you break down, and a set of spare light bulbs. Get caught without either of the above and again the local *plod* will relieve you of *beaucoup de euros*.

7 Best place to watch before the start

The build-up to the race is a great occasion, and if you get there early in the day you can stand in the area in front of the pits without any extra charge. Marching bands, parachutists, driver presentations and lots more happen before the start. If you

can't get close at least try to find a café in the village with a view of one of the big TV screens.

8 Best place to watch during the race

Opinions vary as to precisely where this is, but I never miss the chance to peer over the hedge in the garden of the *Café des Hunaudières* once darkness has fallen. It's a pretty good place to refresh yourself, too.

9 The village

Best place to buy souvenirs for the loved ones you've left behind – and maybe even your family, too... But avoid the *Veuve Cliquot* booth selling fizzy wine at absurd prices. It is worth remembering, though, that those back home are unlikely to appreciate your bringing back an Hawaiian Tropic girl (see page 99), or the after-effects of that dodgy *saucisson* you had on Sunday morning.

10 The great Friday walkabout

If you want to see the cars close up, then don't miss the Friday-morning pit-lane walkabout. It's free! This is your chance to check out the Le Mans pit lane, to see the famous clock, and not least to get a driver's eye view of the towering stands. It will be a very special moment for any dedicated race fan. ■

Whether you take a package or go the DIY route, though, the type of accommodation you want will be the most important aspect of your stay in Le Mans. With attendance often exceeding 150,000 over the long weekend, hotel beds are obviously at a huge premium. If you want to stay in a hotel then booking through a tour operator will offer your best chance of success.

Some visitors will continue the DIY theme by seeking out hotels, B&Bs, gîtes or quiet campsites in the surrounding countryside, but we would advise that this is really only for the more experienced traveller. The Le



There's no racing on the Friday, and it's a chance to drive your own car on the world-famous circuit. Here fans gather outside the famous Restaurant du 24 Heures. This is the place to watch over the bodge at night and experience racing cars passing close by at over 200mph

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The Le Mans start line and, over on the far right, the famous clock. At 4pm on race day there isn't a seat in the house. Imagine screaming down here at 150mph-plus – and in the dark, too...

Mans office of tourism ought to be able to help locate available accommodation.

The fact is, though, that camping is by far the most popular form of accommodation. The ACO-run campsites are now very good, with hot showers, mobile shops and passable rest-room facilities (it wasn't always thus...). And the fact is that camping at Le Mans is a wonderfully cosmopolitan experience with so many different nationalities thrown together, all with one consuming interest (er, the cars...).

If you're fortunate enough to be in one of the sites behind the pits you can enjoy the total immersion in the heady race atmosphere. There really isn't a better way of dozing off in your sleeping-bag at night than to listen to a Prototype accelerating out of Tertre Rouge and – aurally, at least – following the driver all the way up through the gears to full speed.

The sites are now well-drained, but they can – and do – become very crowded. If you get there early enough to choose your spot then avoid the areas next to the busy car lanes (they're very dusty!) and don't park under the evergreen trees (when it's hot they dump resin on just about everything in sight). Predictably, those campsites within easy walking distance of the pits (Le Houx and Le Houx-Annex) get booked up very quickly.

The best way to ensure the camping experience doesn't backfire is to go in an organised group. Many car clubs picket areas exclusively for their members, and our own Porsche Club Great Britain is no exception. This year's leader of the pack is the ever-enthusiastic Bob Lovelace (see page 100), and he has first call on no fewer than 300 spaces in the Le Houx-Annex area.

The club will have a marquee in the campsite, and is even taking along its own caterer in order to provide both meals and tea and coffee for the duration of the event. The club will be on site from the Tuesday before the race. On the Friday night there will be a combined barbecue and firework display.

In 1977 the 936 of Ickx, Haywood and Barth (right, foreground) easily fended off the Renault challenge

And if previous Porsche Club nights at Le Mans are anything to go by then there's always the prospect of some well-known faces from throughout the Porsche world dropping by for a hot-dog or a beer (or two or three...). For new travellers undeniably the greatest advantage of travelling with the club is that you will benefit from the considerable experience of those leading the trip.

By the time you read this many of the more obvious travel and accommodation options (especially any hotel within about 20 miles of the circuit) will be taken, but experience suggests that it's never too late to find what you want. This year 911 & Porsche World will be soaking up the Le Mans atmosphere, and we look forward to talking to you, especially if you are driving down in your Porsche.

One thing's for sure, though. Given Porsche's record sales of the raw and exciting 911 GT3RS over this past winter there's little doubt that the company's many thousands of fans will have no shortage of cars to cheer on to victory this year. If you have never been to Le Mans and you drive a Porsche, then you really do owe it to yourself – and to your car – to make the trip. We'll see you there! ■



What all the fuss is about. Alongside the Borg-Warner trophy for the Indy 500, this (above) is arguably the most important and sought-after prize anywhere in motor racing. There are some very famous names, indeed, inscribed on the base

