

European Road Trip 2018



Given how much my touring buddy Rob and I enjoy driving our cars on mountain roads, we were really looking forward to Thomas Dibke's 2018 European Cobra Meeting in Switzerland. It proved to be extremely popular, resulting in a final total of 124 cars booked, including 12 from the UK. So this was set to be an epic event!

Route Planning

As we had travelled via Switzerland on our way to ECM 2017, I was able to use last year's outward route as a starting point. Thomas Dibke had recently finished planning a car tour of the Ballons des Vosges region in France, so I was able to fairly easily incorporate his "twisty bits" into our route.

Rob and I were booked on Thomas' two day ECM extension tour into Austria and northern Italy, as were our friends Roel and Yvona de Vringer (organisers of ECM 2017) and our friend Bob Swift from the Netherlands, who we hadn't seen since ECM 2013. Bob would be joining us for the outward and return trips, and we also arranged for all five of us to spend the night after the extension tour in Dornbirn in Austria for a final evening together. Well, that was the plan at any rate

For the return route we decided to head west from Dornbirn back through Switzerland, then cross the border into Germany and take a scenic route through the Black Forest. We would then cross the Rhine and head back through the Ballons des Vosges region, using the same hotels we used for the outward trip.

By the end of February the routes were finalised and all the hotel bookings had been confirmed.

Day 1: To Pesche (Belgium) via Eurotunnel - 260 miles

We set off from Rob's house at 08:30 on Sunday 17th June. As it was so early we decided that rather than my waiting outside with the engine running while Rob reversed out of the garage, I'd drive further down the road and wait for him to catch up. Unfortunately, I took a wrong turn and we managed to lose each other a couple of miles into the journey – not the best start to the tour! By the time we realised the mistake, we were out of radio range, so we ended up making our separate ways to Folkestone.

When I got to the Eurotunnel terminal I realised that there was nowhere to park up to check where Rob was. I was at an unmanned booth with an ANPR automatic check-in system, with a queue of cars behind me. As we had allowed good time, it offered me a choice of two earlier trains. With no way of knowing whether Rob had already checked in, I decided to stick with the planned departure time and went through the barrier. As I did so, I saw Rob walking towards me.

He'd arrived just ten minutes previously and, faced with the same dilemma as me, had also chosen the original departure time – proving that great minds truly do think alike!

We set off from Calais on a 160 mile motorway/main road blast to our first overnight stop in Pesche in Belgium, where we were joined by our friend Bob. After parking up, I noticed that my nearside rear light wasn't working. So while I set about fixing that (another broken wire somewhere in the rear wiring loom – how does that happen?), Rob and Bob set off to the local supermarket to buy food and wine or a BBQ. It was great to catch up with Bob, who we'd met at our first ECM in Germany in 2013 and hadn't seen since – so there was a lot to talk about.

Day 2: To Danne-et-Quatre-Vents (France) - 260 miles

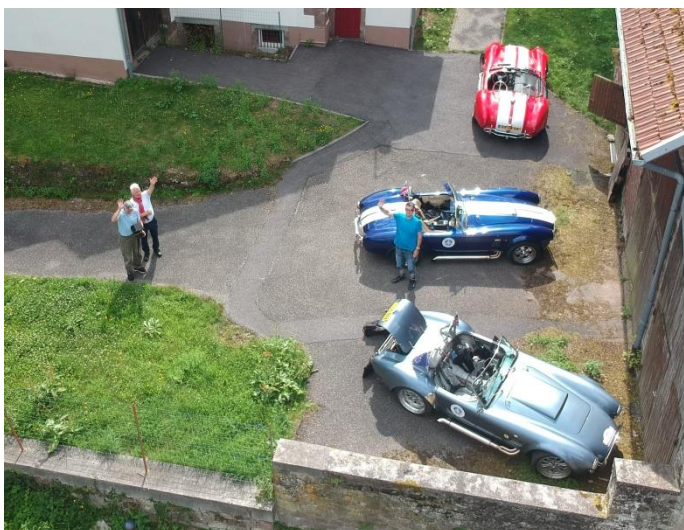
We set off the next morning, and weird things started to happen as we tried to leave the village. The Garmins went berserk – they thought we were driving through fields, and kept trying to take us down ridiculously narrow and rough farm tracks. We went round in circles for about 15 minutes – it was as if we'd entered the Twilight Zone. So we decided to ignore the satnavs completely and follow our noses. After a few minutes the Garmins returned to Earth and started following our pre-planned route – or so I thought.

After about half an hour I noticed that the arrival time was now considerably earlier than it should have been. When they reset after the Twilight Zone episode, they'd recalculated the route ignoring all the waypoints I'd set up for a scenic route. So we pulled over to work out where we were and hence which waypoint to direct them to in order to get back on track.

It took a long time to get back onto the route, and we'd missed a nice section following the River Meuse, but never mind – we had no shortage of good roads to look forward to on the rest of the trip.

It was very hot that day, so it was great to arrive at our next overnight stop. Talk about off the beaten track – it was on the edge of a forest in an absolutely superb rural location. We checked into our first floor apartment parked the cars up.

We then headed to the hotel bar and sat outside to enjoy a succession of nice cold beers. After a great meal we went back to our apartment and sat outside in the garden chatting and watching fireflies – absolute bliss!



Day 3: To Rimbach-près-Guebwiller (France) - 180 miles



After breakfast, we set off for our long awaited return to the Ballons des Vosges region. It was another glorious day, and the scenery and roads were every bit as enjoyable as the previous year's – and we managed to avoid single track roads this time! We stopped for lunch in a nice town called Villé. Parking was proving difficult until the owner of a café saw us and invited us to park in the hatched area outside. So with the cars parked up we enjoyed a pleasant lunch.

We arrived at our next overnight stop on schedule, again in blistering heat. We had our first mechanical incident outside the hotel – Rob’s radiator boiled and dumped a fair amount of coolant on the road. We sat down for a beer while the car cooled down, then topped it up with water so Rob could drive it to the back of the hotel. The problem was quickly diagnosed – the fan thermostat switch had failed so the fan wasn’t coming on. We only had a short drive to the Davos convoy meeting point the next morning, so we decided to leave bypassing the switch until the morning.

Day 4: To Davos (Switzerland) - 210 miles

The next morning it was even hotter – and with the sun beating down on us in the open car park the job took a bit longer than we’d originally thought. But eventually the thermostatic switch had been bypassed and the fan relay connected directly to an ignition controlled supply so it would then be permanently on.

We hit a Swiss Customs vehicle inspection checkpoint near the border with a resultant traffic queue. At the border, we purchased the obligatory Swiss motorway vignettes and set off again for the convoy meeting point at The Pantheon motor museum in MuttENZ. We were now running late, so we had to skip the museum tour.

The 11 cars in the convoy included six more Brits, and we were quickly able to say hello to them before it was time to set off in convoy. Unfortunately, there were major roadworks at the first junction, and with all the extra traffic the convoy quickly fell to pieces! But the Garmins came to the rescue and we soon caught up with the lead cars on the motorway.

After a while we turned off the motorway and met up with the French convoy, with a further stop in Glarus at a disused garage to meet another car. It was by now blisteringly hot, and there was nowhere to get a cold drink. So we decided to let the others go ahead and find somewhere to stop. We soon found a café in Landquart with an accordion trio playing outside, which was a nice introduction to Swiss customs and hospitality.

Suitably refreshed, we set off on the final stretch to Davos. We arrived to find that the main road through the city had been completely dug up, so we had a long bumpy drive with sudden steep changes of level and raised manhole covers and construction vehicles to negotiate – not much fun with only 50mm of ground clearance. After getting lost a couple of times we eventually managed to find the hotel.



Davos is at an altitude of over 5000 feet, so my car was now running extremely rich with a very uneven tickover, not helped by the 35 degree air temperature. Unfortunately with the convoy of 13 cars having arrived shortly before us there was chaos outside the hotel. I found myself stuck on a small roundabout on a very steep slope, with a handbrake that had yet again packed up en route. So with no way to do a hill start without running into Rob’s car behind me I had no choice but to



keep the engine running. When I eventually managed to get off the roundabout the engine boiled over.

I was a bit stressed at this point, but our friend Rob de Laat saw my dilemma and immediately took emergency action. He dashed into the hotel and came back with a nice cold beer – thanks Rob!

The car didn't lose too much coolant, so after I'd checked in I moved the car to

the parking garage. When I returned to the hotel I noticed that as well as coolant on the road outside there was also some engine oil. So I made a mental note to check the oil level in the morning.

We had arrived in time for the “Early Birds” part of the event, with the main event due to commence the following evening. After a shower we joined the other early birds in the bar, followed by an evening meal in the hotel restaurant.

Day 5: Early Birds Tour - 120 miles

Thomas had organised a 185km circular tour, covering the Flüela Pass (2383m), the Passo del Gallo (2310m), the Passo del Bernina (2330m) and the Julier Pass (2284m).

I drove my car up the ramp out of the car park and parked up on the road outside, and then noticed a trail of oil spots. With the sump guard I'd fitted prior to last year's trip it was difficult to see exactly where it was coming from. I checked the oil level, and it was slightly overfull – so with the overheating the previous afternoon I figured that this probably explained the oil spillage. I concluded that it must have been lying on top of the sump guard from the previous spill, and came out as I went up the ramp, so I decided to just keep an eye on the oil level.

Eventually Rob, Bob and I were ready to set off on the tour. However, as we were coming out of Davos, Rob and I turned right to take the road to the Flüela Pass, but Bob was stuck behind a large tractor and missed the turn. We waited for a while for Bob to turn round, but he didn't appear – and because Bob's mobile wasn't working, we had no way of contacting him. All Rob and I could do at that point was to carry on and hope that he would catch us up later.

We were soon driving along the Flüela Pass, which did not disappoint. It felt so good to once again be negotiating hairpin after hairpin, and the scenery was spectacular!



When we reached the Munt la Schera tunnel entrance we parked up and went to buy a toll ticket. We walked through a door and were given a very strange look by the officer inside, who then asked “what is your emergency?”. It was a police station rather than a toll office – you pay the toll fee at the Italian end.

The tunnel is narrow, with one-way traffic light control, and is 3.4 kms long. The difference in air temperature between the heatwave outside and the damp tunnel was at first refreshing, but after a couple of kilometres, I was getting pretty cold! So it was quite a relief to finally emerge into the sunlight again.

We then followed the edge of the lake into Livigno and decided to stop for a coffee and keep our eyes and ears open for Bob. Alas, there was no sign of him, so after filling up with duty-free fuel we continued with the rest of the route.

The mountain passes were great fun, but we were pretty tired when we arrived back at the hotel at 16:00. After a refreshing shower we headed for the bar, then to the front of the hotel for the official opening of ECM 2018, complete with Alpine horns! All the ECM participants had now arrived, and it was great catching up with all our ECM friends that evening.

Day 6: ECM Day 1 Tour - 100 miles

Thomas had organised a 245km tour, covering a great collection of mountain passes. However, before we set off I needed to change the main jets, and Rob also wanted to tweak his EFI fuel mapping. So we set off for the parking garage to do this while everyone else had their photos taken setting off for the tour.

With a recently fitted Holley “Quick Jet Change” fuel bowl I expected the jet change to be an easy job. I removed the two access plugs, inserted the special jet removal tool, unscrewed the first jet and, as I then pulled the tool out, the jet promptly fell off into the bowl. The same happened to the second jet – absolutely useless Chinese-made US junk! So I had to remove the fuel bowl after all – sigh.

It’s actually not too bad a job – but there’s always the risk of ripped gaskets or fuel leaks. I went down three jet sizes, started the car up and as I left the car park I noticed our Danish friend Kurt Søggaard parked on the ramp with his head under the bonnet.

His Holley carb was leaking fuel into the primary venturi – a sure sign of a sticking float needle valve. Fortunately, I was carrying quite a comprehensive set of Holley spares, which included a spare needle valve assembly. So after stripping it down, replacing the valve and then setting the fuel levels again, his carb seemed to be OK.

As we were now running late, and after all the driving we’d already done getting to Davos, we decided to drive to the top of the Umbrail Pass and turn round, hopefully meeting up with people returning from the full tour. Kurt joined us for the first part of the trip to give his car a quick road test.

In the city centre, for some reason the satnav went into “shave 10 metres off the journey” mode and took us over a crossroads towards a church. Unfortunately there was a large wedding taking place, and I doubt that the wedding plan included the sight and sound of three Cobras negotiating their way through the guests. Things got even more interesting when, having finally emerged from the crowd, we found the road blocked by a large stone trough with a rather impressive floral display. But after much forward and reverse manoeuvring, we were finally able to leave the assembled throng to resume the wedding festivities.

After a few miles Kurt’s car seemed to be running OK, and he decided to return to the hotel just to double-check everything was OK with his carb. My car was running much better on the smaller main jets, which made the Flüela Pass even more fun than it had been the previous day.

Halfway up the Umbrail Pass we met our German friend Achim coming the other way. He waved his arms as we passed and shouted “you British drivers – your steering wheels are on the wrong side, and you’re driving the wrong way”. That really made me chuckle!



Further up the pass we met plenty of other Cobras coming down, including Thomas himself. We continued to the top where it meets the Stelvio Pass, and there we stopped for lunch. We then turned round and headed down the Umbrail and then back to Davos via the Flüela.

Day 7: ECM Day 2 – Car free day

Thomas had arranged a photoshoot of all the Cobras in the morning, and it was a spectacular sight. As well as the official photos taken from a cherry picker hired for the occasion, a few drone shots were subsequently released. I took the liberty of editing and reformatting one of them in Photoshop, which is now my PC wallpaper.



Original photo copyright ©2018 Andri Wyss (www.instagram.com/drone.motion)

After six days and over 1100 miles in the Cobras, we decided to have a non-driving day. As the hotel had provided free local transport passes, we took a couple of cable car rides to fully take in the local mountain scenery.

After a trip to Filisur and back on the Rhaetian railway, we went back to the hotel bar for drinks before the evening meal, for which Dick Vesters had put his superb Cobra guitar on display. This guitar was specially built for ECM



2011 by Davorin Sever from Slovenia, with titanium parts produced by the Akrapovič Exhausts factory – a truly unique piece of Cobra memorabilia!



After dinner came the traditional ECM speeches, with Thomas and Nadja being thanked for organising and hosting such a superb event. It was announced that ECM 2019 would take place in Denmark, and Kurt Søgård later hosted an information booth outside the bar. There was clearly a lot of interest in Denmark as a venue, so that's definitely something to look forward to next August!

Day 8: ECM Day 3 – Car free day

This was another Cobra-free day. Thomas had arranged lunch in the Schatzalp restaurant, which involved taking a funicular railway ride up the mountain. The views were pretty spectacular, and provided a nice backdrop for a "Brits on tour" group photo.

Most people started their return journeys that afternoon, but we had booked onto the two-day extension tour, so after walking down the mountain we headed once more for the hotel bar.



Day 9: ECM Extension Tour Day 1 – 150 miles

For hairpin junkies like Rob and me, this was the part we had been waiting for – a chance to drive thirteen mountain passes over two days. Our group (Roel and Yvona de Vringer, Bob Swift, Rob and I) set off a while after the others at 09:30. We headed via the Flüela Pass and the Ofenpass for our first stop in the village of Tschier in the Val Müstair valley. It was pretty cold up there, so after a hot cup of coffee we set off again for the Umbrail Pass. At the top we headed southwest on the less twisty western section of the Stelvio Pass to Bormio.

We then headed east to Santa Caterina and the start of the Gavia Pass – and what an experience that proved to be....

On the plus side, the scenery was superb (although I didn't fully appreciate this until I returned home and watched the video footage from my onboard GoPros!), and it was definitely an adventure. However the road surface was terrible, and there were some very narrow sections. I was in front, and had therefore to be on constant lookout for potholes (not wanting a repeat of my Spanish experience) and cars coming the other way, especially on the downhill section. These cars are great to drive on wider mountain roads, but the prospect of having to reverse my way uphill out of trouble was not at all attractive, especially with a handbrake that had once again failed! Basically, the pass was downright dangerous.



We eventually reached the lunch stop and saw Thomas and the rest of the crew enjoying their lunch outside. When we parked up, I saw Roel inspecting the underside of his Sumo. The road surface had loosened something on his car, as he was hearing some loud clonks.

The restaurant (Pietra Rossa near Ponte di Legno) was superb - they made their own cheese and cakes on the premises, and they gave us a personal "behind the scenes" tour. Roel also gave their son some expert advice on fishing in the mountain stream that ran alongside.

Feeling refreshed, we set off for our overnight stop in Bolzano. The route was via the Tonale and Mendel passes, and was great fun - until fate intervened. The clonks from Roel's car became worse. So we pulled over and jacked the car up to investigate. As we had suspected, he had a broken diff carrier – a common problem with Sumos. We decided that Yvona should join Bob, and that he and Rob would carry on to Bolzano whilst Roel drove at a more sedate pace



with me following. With the reduced weight and gentle driving, Roel limped safely to Bolzano.

That evening we were joined by a friend of ours (Elmar Zöschg), who we had teamed up with on a previous European tour of the Dolomites in 2016. He lives not far from the hotel, and he has a large workshop with welding equipment, which he said we were welcome to use. So, safe in the knowledge that we had a way to get Roel's car fixed, we were able to relax and enjoy our evening.

Day 10: ECM Extension Tour Day 2 – 270 miles

After breakfast, Rob and Roel headed for Elmar's workshop, whilst Bob (with Yvona in the passenger seat) and I prepared to travel with the rest of the group on day two of the tour.

We headed north to follow the Penserjoch and the Jaufenpass (Passo di Monte Giovo) to our lunch stop at the Top Mountain Restaurant and Motorcycle Museum at the top of the Timmelsjoch. Rob and I had sampled these passes two years earlier, and it was great to be driving them again!



After lunch, we set off on the final leg of the tour to Bludenz, and then on to Dornbirn where Bob, Yvona and I would then meet Roel and Bob for our final evening together before we all headed home. Unfortunately, after about 30 miles I noticed that my water temperature gauge was starting to creep up. I flicked the manual fan switch and kept the car in a high gear, but the temperature wouldn't drop. I'd fallen behind the others by now, and decided to pull onto a garage forecourt. As soon as I switched the ignition off, it boiled over.

The cause was immediately obvious – once again it was leaking from the top radiator hose connection. I rue the day I ever fitted silicone hoses, as no matter how many times I tweak up the hose clips, that one in particular will start leaking again. So my winter 2018 job list now includes replacing that hose with a standard rubber one!

Whilst I was waiting for things to cool down, one of the other guys (Klaus Böhler) pulled onto the forecourt. There was no outside tap and watering can on the forecourt, but Klaus had quite a

collection of empty drinking water bottles in his car, so we filled them all up inside and eventually the cooling system was full again.

A quick test showed that the leak was now fixed, so we set off to catch up with the others, who had stopped at a cafe. After a very welcome coffee, Bob, Yvona and I decided that we would head directly for our hotel, as it was getting late and we'd already driven a long way that day.

So we said our farewells to Thomas and the rest of the crew, and set off for Dornbirn. After checking in, Yvona had a call from Roel to say that the repair work was complete, but that it had taken much longer than they expected, so they wouldn't be arriving until late evening. So the three of us went into the town for something to eat, and we eventually met up with Roel and Rob at around 22:00. So much for the relaxing final evening together – but that's just how things go sometimes.

Day 11: Dornbirn to Danne-et-Quatre-Vents – 270 miles

The next morning I drove out of the underground car park, and then noticed that I'd left a trail of oil behind me. With the engine still running, I looked under the car and could see oil dripping from the rear of the sump guard – but after a while, the leak stopped. The car was now on level ground, so I checked the oil level, and it was still OK. I suspected the oil filter O-ring, but we didn't have a jack slim enough to get under the chassis rail to investigate further. So again I decided just to keep a regular eye on the oil level.

Once again we had a great drive through the Ballons des Vosges – long sweeping bends with superb views – and we made good time to our hotel.

Day 12: Danne-et-Quatre-Vents to Pesche – 260 miles

We had a great drive through Belgium, stopping for lunch in Vresse-sur-Semois. From there it was only a 35 mile drive back to our apartment in Pesche, so we had a relaxing final evening to look forward to.

I was still running on the leaner mixture, so while I changed the jets in my Holley, Rob and Bob headed off to the supermarket to get some food and drinks. After another pleasant meal in the garden, we returned to the apartment to watch the England-Belgium match – I'm not a fan of football, but as we were in Belgium and all the locals were watching it, it seemed appropriate somehow!

Day 13: Pesche to Home via Eurotunnel – 300 miles

The next morning Rob and I said our farewells to Bob, and set off on the final hop to Calais. There were no traffic hold-ups on the way, but there was a 30 minute delay for the Eurotunnel crossing. This was a bit annoying, as we'd been hoping to be offered an earlier crossing to beat the Friday afternoon traffic on the M25.

After setting off from Folkestone, all went well on the motorways until we got to Junction 8 of the M25, where we hit an enormous queue. It took us an hour and 20 minutes to drive the 30 miles to Bracknell, which itself was gridlocked. It would normally take me 45 minutes to drive the 40 miles from there to home, but it took me an hour and 40 minutes. So in all it took three hours to drive 70

miles – a reminder of the reality of driving in the south of England on a Friday afternoon, and such a huge contrast to the 2000 pleasure-filled miles we'd driven across Europe. C'est la vie!

Epilogue

After a few days I wheeled the car out of the garage and jacked up the front end to investigate the cause of the various oil leak incidents, and discovered that the oil filter wasn't fully tightened. I removed it to check the O-ring for damage, but it was OK. I then fitted a new filter, and followed the usual finger tight, then another $\frac{3}{4}$ turn routine. But having marked the new filter, I discovered that I could only turn it an extra $\frac{1}{4}$ turn.

This was because with the sump guard fitted I could only grip the filter from below, rather than from the side, and I was unable to get as much leverage on it. So what was happening was that oil would seep past the O-ring on initial cold start-up, until the heat of the oil and block expanded the O-ring to make a seal – hence why it was only leaking when I first started the car. Another lesson learned!

It had been another great trip, and Rob and I are already looking forward to ECM 2019 in Denmark.

Alan Browse