



FINISHING SCHOOL

NICK HENDRIX COMPLETES HIS EDUCATION OF THE ENJOYMENT OF CLASSIC CARS ON THE GSTAAD PALACE CHALLENGE.

Switzerland: Home to Toblerone, impartiality and I'm told some watch manufacturers. It's a place that reminds me of school ski trips and white-out alpine vistas, a stunning but ultimately wintry place. What I discovered quite quickly over an unforgettable August Bank Holiday weekend was that it's one of the most beautiful places on earth in the summer. The snow melts away and ice turns to water to reveal a place so lush and green that it looks photoshopped - like I was driving through a cartoon. It has a special quality - it feels like a happy place, I sort of want to move there - just might need to sell a family member to buy some milk. Its beautiful. But God its expensive.

Feeling like we had covered every corner of the UK it was time for myself and DRIVEN co-founder Michael Shelford to fly the nest, venture abroad and tackle some of our European neighbours' great roads. By some stroke of outrageous luck, we had received an invite to the exclusive Gstaad Palace Challenge, a classic car rally (pre-90s) hosted by the iconic and uber-Swiss Gstaad Palace Hotel. Michael has been nagging me to work with classic cars for some time now, so who knows, maybe he bribed someone - either way we were set to embark on our first ever classic car rally. Scratch that. First ever rally. This could be interesting.

Now I'll be honest, I'm not a massive classic car expert - I've always found the fact they could break down on a country road in the middle of the night, with no one nearby that even knows what it is, let alone how to fix it, rather daunting. I'd much rather a 2021 Lamborghini that I know is really an Audi, that I know is really a VW; it breaking down is as likely as the Pope converting to Islam. But we must all try new things and therefore I was happy to grab the opportunity with both hands. And let's be honest, simply leaving the UK was exciting enough on its own.

To allay my classic car nerves, I employed the capable hands of Zenith Ferrari in Swiss town of Sion. When I say 'capable', I mean like Federer is a capable tennis player. This dealership is the largest seller of LaFerrari's outside of Maranello and the only place other than the hallowed HQ that will store the FXXK program - that's pedigree right there. We were the lucky recipients of a glistening Nero Ferrari 328 GTS - a 1987 classic, nearly as famous as its Magnum P.I. sister the 308. Oozing 80's drama, complete with flip up headlights, removable roof panel, and an interior that was wall to wall red; seats, carpets, door panels - I was surprised the steering wheel wasn't red. It looked and smelt of a time gone by, and I loved it.

On our drive to the hotel, I did a little acclimatization as always. Usually this consists of setting up Apple Carplay, getting my seat just right and finding how to change from strada to sport to track. This induction process was a little different. Fairly quickly I realised that the connection between a function and its respective light wasn't a simple matter. Yes, the lights on the temperature gauge worked but they were back to front. Hot was cold - cold was hot. Well actually, hot was hot and cold was hot. Moving on to the fans: The light saying they were on, was on irrespective of whether they were or not and let's not talk about the fuel gauge - I spent most days either completely full or about to run out. Oh and 'getting the seat just right' amounts to pushing it all the way back and hoping you're not too tall. Although this sounds like a damning report, I absolutely loved it - the car was aching with character - all it did was make me concentrate on the driving of it, the sound of engine, the feel of a





proper metal clunk with each gear change. Its evocative, visceral and instantly better than any 2021 Audi/VW/Lamborghini.

Arriving at the stunning Gstaad Palace Hotel was like pulling up at a blend of the Grand Budapest Hotel and a Parisian mansion block - imperious, quirky and aching with style. Its staff continued the feeling of class as they put a glass of champagne in our hands and promptly showed us to our gargantuan suites; rooms full of alpine charm, warmth and a wine fridge so well stocked it should come with a sommelier. But we were there for the rally, so we met for dinner to prepare for the following day's chequered flag.

Sadly, we were easily harpooned by the delectable menu and quickly forgot about the next day's pressures - Michael devouring lamb whilst I was on the beef. Drawn as ever easily to the cocktail menu it was Negroni-o'clock and, like it was the first night of a stag do, we completely over did it.

Alarms came earlier than we'd like, and it was time for the briefing - a chance to get to grips with the rules, the routes and the other racers. In short, we had a bit of a panic - we felt well in over our heads and suddenly engulfed in talk of 'regularities', 'tests' and 'tulips'. Michael realised quickly, to his credit, that the co-pilot was the most important member of the team so got his head down and got to grips with the finer details of how the rally worked. We set off for the drive to the start line apprehensive but with a boyish bravado we hoped would work in our favour.



After a wheel-spin start and a vague sense of direction we headed off and quite quickly realised that 'boyish bravado' wasn't as useful as we thought. We had worked very hard on the first regularity to nail the changing average speeds - in fact we felt fairly smug about how well we thought it had gone. It was only when we realised we had been reading the wrong page that that 'boyish bravado' turned to juvenile incompetence. Kicking ourselves we hit the next test (regularity plus map reading) with gusto, desperate to make up for the silly error. It was going well until we took a wrong turn, got completely lost and had to resort to a quick Google map search to avoid spending the whole day lost in the Alps. We finished the day a little embarrassed and expecting to be bringing up the rear in the first day's standings.

On arrival back at the hotel we made a beeline for the welcome drinks for both the alcoholic refreshment as well as the notice board announcing how the day's drivers had done. By some stroke of luck (that and the fact I tore around the time trial test like Lewis Hamilton on speed) we came in 12th (of 31) surprisingly after the days' calamities. The cold champagne went down a lot easier after that realisation and we took the evening to get to know the other guests and enjoy a gourmet 3 course meal.





Having settled into the previous night's wine list with a little too much conviction, day two came around a little quicker than we'd have liked with our 8:12am start time feeling a little aggressive - when will we learn? Still, full of added confidence from the previous days dodged bullet we set off with a renewed conviction and bodies full of high-quality coffee and room service.

Like day one we had regularities and time trials to complete, as well as the ongoing tulip system of directions. - it was a full-on commitment for Michael in the passenger seat - and on a raging hangover quite an achievement. Meanwhile in the weathered red leather driver's seat I was making the most of the gearbox and the wonderful engine placed just behind our heads.

A car of this age, compared to my spaceship of an AMG GT63S waiting at home, felt more like an organism than a machine. The character and simplicity of it encourages you to get to know it, take time to find the sweet spots in the gearbox, respect the brakes and work with the steering round a tight hairpin. I loved a certain point in 4th gear where it felt like an extra dump of horsepower was always hiding and it was up to me to seek it out - like the car was playing games with me, making me earn it, making me work for it. This meant that when I found the moment in the right place, on the right corner and nailed a gear change and the 328 decided to kindly let me have all its horses, the feeling of satisfaction was all the more palpable. It was a relationship between the two of us, like a marriage; I had to earn its trust, understand its ways and generally learn to compromise. The more I drove it, the more I loved it.

We stopped for a lavish lobster spaghetti lunch and looked at the car park outside. It was an outrageous collection - like a greatest hits album of European classics (plus a Ford Mustang GT350 - Michael's favourite.) After an interesting debate with a pair of Qatari girls driving a Morgan Aero 8, which didn't qualify but they were following their father's Ferrari Daytona just for fun, we set off for the final afternoon. Needless to say, we were now having a whale of a time.

The final challenges of the rally were upon us, and we were in full flight now, Michael had become a finely tuned navigational machine and I had full control of the 328's reins - all three of us working together to find our way around the fairytale Swiss countryside. As we arrived at the final airfield of the day to complete not one, but two, time trials we were greeted by a table of refreshments sitting in the centre of a large hanger - the only other thing there was a private jet for our consideration., should we in need of a fresh pair of wings. I said I'd think about it.

Finishing strong has always been a desire of all great sportsmen so I channeled Usain Bolt (actually he finished waving to crowd most of the time, didn't he?) - metaphors aside Michael and I put our all into the last races. Other than a near collision with a stunning 1950s Mercedes (less said about that the better) we pushed the 328 hard and it responded with the gusto I knew it would. Let's just say whoever buys it (for sale for €82,000) may need to look at the tyres before driving anywhere. We crossed the line full of pride and a not insignificant amount of adrenaline pumping through our bodies.

We returned to the hotel feeling triumphant and truly honoured to have been part of such a special weekend. A cold beer was thrust in our hands from



the makeshift bar in the car park and we shared stories with the other drivers of a glorious few days.

All that was left was the awards ceremony and with Chopard providing some elegant watches as the prizes we were genuinely keen to know how we'd done. Did we think there was a chance we'd won? Yes. Did we think we should do this professionally? Yes. Were we delusional? Slightly. Newsflash: We didn't win. However, we did come 10th which to all the seasoned veterans was apparently quite an achievement so we held our heads high and tucked into a wonderful meal whilst chatting with the other competitors.

As we made our departure the following day, we said goodbye to the wonderful Palace Hotel and took the 328 GTS back to its home. We'd both grown very fond of the car by the end of the trip - and I had certainly cured my phobia of classics, in fact, I think I may be a convert. I now think back to my original assertion that Michael may have bribed someone to get us there - well if he did it was the best money he's ever spent.

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