



Le Mans or bust!

Lawrence Butcher heads to the Le Mans 24hrs in a T5.5

Words & photos: Lawrence Butcher

Le Mans is something of a Mecca for anyone with petrol in their veins. Not only is it the oldest continuously run motor race in the world (except for an inconvenient break for the Second World War), it could also be fairly called the greatest motor race in the world. It makes your average grand prix look like a kiddies' go-kart race. And though the cars go round the corners a little slower than the single-seater playboys, they top over 220mph down the circuit's mammoth straights; oh, and they don't slow down in the dark! Make no mistake, this is big boy (and girl) racing and, alongside the Goodwood Revival, is an event I would not miss for the world.

Fortunately, my work requires that I head down to La Sarthe (the region in which Le Mans is located), to cover the race each year; a week of intense

work, tiredness and, in the intervening gaps, playing hard. In previous years, I've stayed in a hotel in Le Mans town centre, which has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, it is nice to be able to escape from the hubbub of the track, and soak up the atmosphere of one of the town's many

The campsites at Le Mans are the stuff of legend

bars and restaurants; not to mention enjoy amenities like a hot shower! However, once the action on track starts, it is a pain to travel to and from the circuit – not only is there a lot of traffic but the majority of the course is on public roads, meaning lots of diversions to get around.

The biggest problem, though, is cost. The hoteliers have something of

a captive audience and thus prices for rooms rocket come the 24hrs, and in 2012 you were lucky to find anything for less than €600 a week.

So, this year I decided to bow to the economic downturn and camp, given that my hotel for 2011 had one toilet shared between six rooms, I was even hopeful it would feel more like an upgrade.

The campsites at Le Mans are the stuff of legend. Crammed with upwards of 100,000 fans, many from the UK as well as a host of other

countries, the atmosphere is intense and something I was keen to experience. There are a number of options available in terms of camping plots at the circuit, from fully serviced luxury pitches to a square of grass and a porta loo; with prices to suit all budgets. I ended up booking a plot with a company called Travel Destinations, who have been organising camping for Brits at Le Mans

NEED TO KNOW

WHERE WE STAYED

■ Travel Destinations campsite at the circuit, a car park

HOW MUCH?

■ Fuel £200
■ Tickets £70
■ Food £100+
■ Beer £100+
Total cost: £500

MUST SEE/DO

■ Drivers parade. The race...duh. The old town of Le Mans

RAINY DAY OPTIONS

■ Get wet, imbibe enough beer not to care about it. Or, visit the Le Mans 24hrs museum

SPECIAL THANKS

■ Camper Vantastic. www.campervantastic.com Tel: 020 8291 6800



Observing poor people from P&O's club lounge



It's amazing how quickly you can fill a Van up with rubbish



Mercedes Group C cars were a sight to behold



Having picked up the Van from CamperVantastic, it would have been rude not to try the toys



The world's most expensive beer shelf?



The T5 became home to a number of journo's sleeping on a rota basis



Being on site meant I never missed any of the action



The Campsite shenanigans are stuff of legend – take my advice and do it!

No other race track on earth looks this cool



Ne ne ner ne ner ne Ghost Busters!



Night becomes day and the race continues – it's epic motorsport



The calibre of my fellow campers was evident

Ferraris... mmmmmn



Imagine if this happened at your local Audi dealer



About ten feet up the road was the edge of the track, hence the sign

for many years. You can buy a complete travel and ticket package from them and they also happen to have some of the peachiest spots available, so I opted to camp at a site on the outside of the legendary Porsche Curves, for reasons which will become apparent later.

The next question was what to camp in; while a tent is traditional, Le Mans has a reputation for epic thunderstorms, so I fancied taking my trusty Type 25. Unfortunately, it's not in the most roadworthy of states so an alternative needed to be found. Enter camper hire company CamperVantastic, who

club lounge – it may sound expensive, but for an extra £20 you can enjoy your crossing free from screaming kids and cosseted in a very pleasant bar. When you have a long drive ahead, it certainly makes a difference.

Deposited en France, it was time to hit the auto route and head south, with the T5's cruise control working well to prevent any unwanted attention from the Gendarmes (the dash also has a handy digital kph display). This is especially important during Le Mans week, as thousands of Brits – many in a plethora of supercars – provide a veritable feast

“The Van I hired was considerably more luxurious than my flat!”

specialise in renting out very plush VW T5 campers. They have no problem with renting to Europe and were incredibly helpful in sorting out all of the practicalities of taking a Van abroad.

Their fleet is made up of brand spanking new Californias, which are truly awesome in terms of specification; in fact, the Van I hired was considerably more luxurious than my flat! You get all of the usual items you would expect in a van – cooker, fridge and bed – but it is things like the electric pop top and central heating that really make it stand out. The 180bhp diesel engine was also a welcome addition, especially once the Van was loaded up, and made for a very relaxed cruise on the motorway.

So, with the logistics sorted, it was time to head across the channel. Some people opt to take the tunnel, and if you are in a hurry it is a good bet, but I still love the ferry crossing. A little known secret of cross-channel travel is P&O's

for the French traffic police. These guys can stop you and escort you to a cash machine to take on the spot fines, so you don't want to mess with them.

Much as I would have liked to trundle through the scenic Normandy countryside, I had work to do, and thus stuck to the fast, but uninspiring motorway. The one highlight, and an annual stop, is the services at Baie de Somme, about an hour out of Calais on the A16; it really does put British service stations to shame. It's got ponds, ducks, a nature reserve – the lot!

Another recommended stop for the avid racing enthusiast is Rouen, or more precisely Rouen Les Essarts, just south of the city, off the A150. This is the site of the old Les Essarts race track, a throwback to an era when motor racing was still lethal on a weekly basis. The track plunges through thick forest and was all based on public roads – it is scary enough at road car speeds but in

▼ The California doubled brilliantly as a makeshift office



a single-seat race car, it would be a true test of commitment. Hidden away in the undergrowth are still plenty of relics of the old circuit, and it is well worth a stop to absorb some of the atmosphere that abandoned race tracks seem to exude.

Race week

Most race fans arrive in Le Mans on the Wednesday or Thursday of race week, however, I arrived the Saturday before. This was in order to cover the pre-race scrutineering process that takes place in the town centre. Each team has to trailer their cars from the circuit to the town square, where officials from race organisers the ACO (Automobile Club D'Ouest) check that they meet the myriad technical regulations. This is a part of the race build-up that most Brits miss out on, but is well worth attending as it gives you a chance to get up close to the cars and drivers, while enjoying a cold beer in the bars surrounding the square.

Unfortunately, the need to arrive early had unforeseen consequences due to my not reading the small print relating to my campsite, notably the fact that it didn't open till Wednesday! This left me with somewhat of a conundrum – where was I going to sleep for three days?

Fortunately, the French seem pretty understanding when it comes to people bumbling around in Campervans and a plan was hatched. I knew that there was a small and, more importantly free, car park just outside the town centre, where I reckoned I could get away with parking up. With no idea how the law stands on just pitching up in a parking space for a kip, I spent the whole first night waiting for a knock on the window from a Gendarme ready to move me on; luckily it never came.

The upshot of my lack of campsite was that I was now tucked away in the town, free to enjoy a few drinks and not have to worry about driving. There are some legendary drinking haunts in Le Mans, which provide a good opportunity to hob-nob with team members when they are off duty; with Mulligan's Irish bar one of the more raucous. The bar has been the scene of many a rowdy evening, which this year included a member of the Corvette Racing team having a prolonged guitar jam-off with a very inebriated French punk. It's serious stuff this motorsport lark, honest!

The first few days of race week are fairly relaxed, which for me meant getting in touch with people I wanted to speak to and arranging interviews. However, the pace begins to quicken as the first on-track action approaches, kicking off with a qualifying/practice session on Wednesday afternoon. For some teams this can be their first taste of running on the awesome 13.629km course, which includes the epic Mulsanne straight (actually called the les Hunaudières). Alas, this is no longer the all-out 6km blast it used to be, as

in 1990 two chicanes were added to slow the cars, which were starting to top 250mph! However, it is still an epic straight and the fastest cars touch over 220mph, despite the organisers' best efforts to try and rein them in.

Unlike most races, the road-based nature of the 24hrs means that the only place you can set a car up for Le Mans is at the 24hrs, or during the one-day test that takes place the weekend before race week. This gives teams with long-standing experience of the race an upper hand.

All the fun of the fair

The arrival of Wednesday also meant that I could finally move into my campsite, after a not unpleasant few days in my car park. I had even managed to keep my personal hygiene up thanks to a shower block at the back of the pit garages, which is open to anyone and something I took full advantage of.

Up to this point, the California had performed admirably and the extra kit provided by CamperVantastic, such as cooking equipment, had proved most welcome. I had also come to the conclusion that the upper bed, located in the pop top, was the most comfortable; while it is a little noisier, the mattress is great. This meant that my comrade in arms, Andrew, who also arrived on the Wednesday, was to be relegated to the ground floor.

Moving into the campsite, I got a good impression of the calibre of my fellow campers. Dotted about our little site was a pile of exotica: Aston Martins, Ferraris, an Audi R8 – you get the idea. The location was spot on too, being literally 20m from the edge of the track.

Walking from the Van to the top of the spectator banking to watch the final qualifying session on Thursday night, the atmosphere was palpable. Across the circuit there was a haze of smoke from campers' fires, the funfair lights were blazing and music pumping, while just feet away the prototype racers of Audi and Toyota tore into the Porsche curves at well over 150mph, lights picking out the slower GT cars they had to avoid (not to mention the concrete walls lining the track). This was definitely what Le Mans is all about. In the end, Audi grabbed pole, but Toyota didn't roll over too easily, managing third on the grid – not bad for their first year at Le Mans in over a decade.

Friday is essentially a day off, unless you are from a team whose car has ended up in less than one piece. A wander round the paddock will find many mechanics desperately trying to repair battered carbon fibre or change engines. However, for the fans it is time to party. With the campsites full to capacity, it is often referred to as 'Mad Friday'. It is also the day of the drivers parade, which is not to be missed. All the teams and drivers parade through



▲ Camping in a car park in Le Mans town centre, next to a nunnery, was surprisingly stress free

the town centre in a selection of vintage cars, giving fans the chance to get up close and personal. I spent the majority of the day soaking up the atmosphere in town, before enjoying possibly the best burger of my life in an excellent little restaurant; it's called Au Bureau, but the location will remain secret! Suitably fed and watered it was time for an early night. Come the race, sleep is a valuable commodity and I wanted a head start.

As race day dawned, my choice of camping by the Porsche curves paid dividends. Every year, there is a support race prior to the 24hrs, and this year it was for the awesome Group C cars that raced in the 1980s. I had

few years I have grabbed a couple of hours kip in the wee small hours. Normally this is in a sleeping bag on the ground outside the paddock, but this year I had the luxury of a roof. In the end, the T5 became a doss pad for several other photographers – on a rota so we all got at least some sleep.

The race kicked off at three in the afternoon and given it lasts 24 hours it seemed to pass incredibly quickly.

Toyota's race ended with a monster of a crash for driver Anthony Davidson, who collected a Ferrari GT car at the end of the Mulsanne straight; the result was his car flipping through the air into the barriers. The second Toyota ran

Friday is the time to party, with the campsites full to capacity

decided that the run down into the Porsche Curves would provide some excellent photographs, especially as it was raining. All I had to do was get up 20 minutes before the race and head trackside, perfect! I was not disappointed and the sight of these monsters of motorsport thundering down the track was truly special.

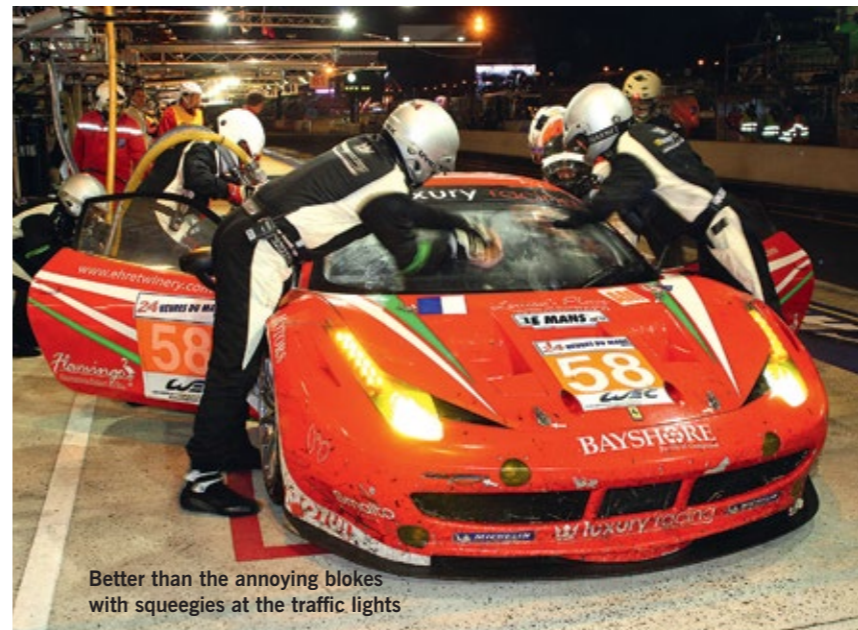
With that particular goal complete, it was time to get up to the pits for the start of the race proper and also bid farewell to my campsite. Once the race was underway, I had no intention of trekking back there to my bed so stashed the Van in the media car park.

The first Le Mans I covered, I stayed awake for the full duration. However, when you have to drive back straight afterwards it's no fun, and for the last

into problems later in the night and was sadly retired. It then became a battle between the Audis, who were running two hybrid cars and two regular diesels. They ultimately managed to secure a 1-2-3 finish, with their final car in fifth.

Rather than join the mad exodus of Brits dashing to the coast for the last ferry to Dover, I decided to catch a boat the day after the race, so retired to town for a well-earned steak. Driving, having had only two hours sleep in 48, isn't a great plan, and waking up on Monday morning I felt far better prepared. Another year and another Le Mans passes, but it never seems to lose its charm. The camping experience was an added treat and one I'll repeat next year.

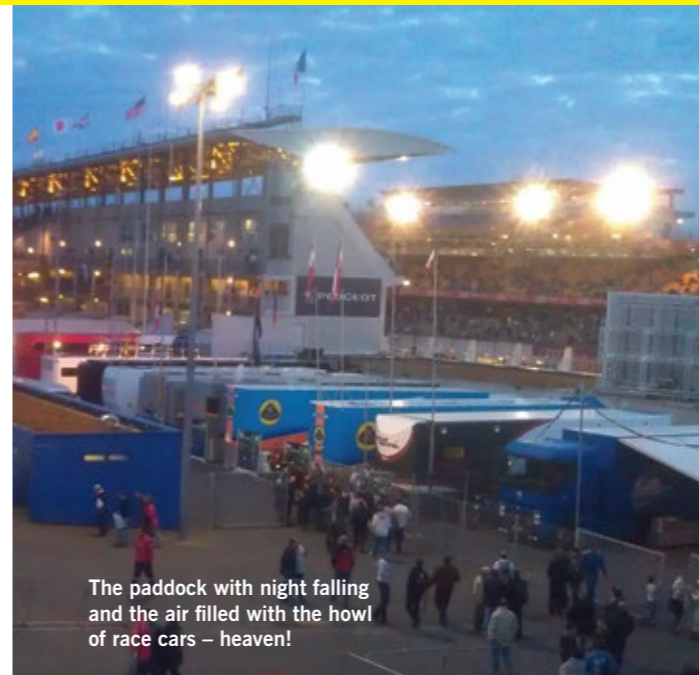
Thanks to: CamperVantastic, P&O Ferries and Travel Destinations.



Better than the annoying blokes with squeegies at the traffic lights



Where else can you drive on a race track on the way to the shops?



The paddock with night falling and the air filled with the howl of race cars – heaven!



The mad DeltaWing from Nissan



Audi took the first win for a hybrid at Le Mans



Aston Martin, a Le Mans institution