

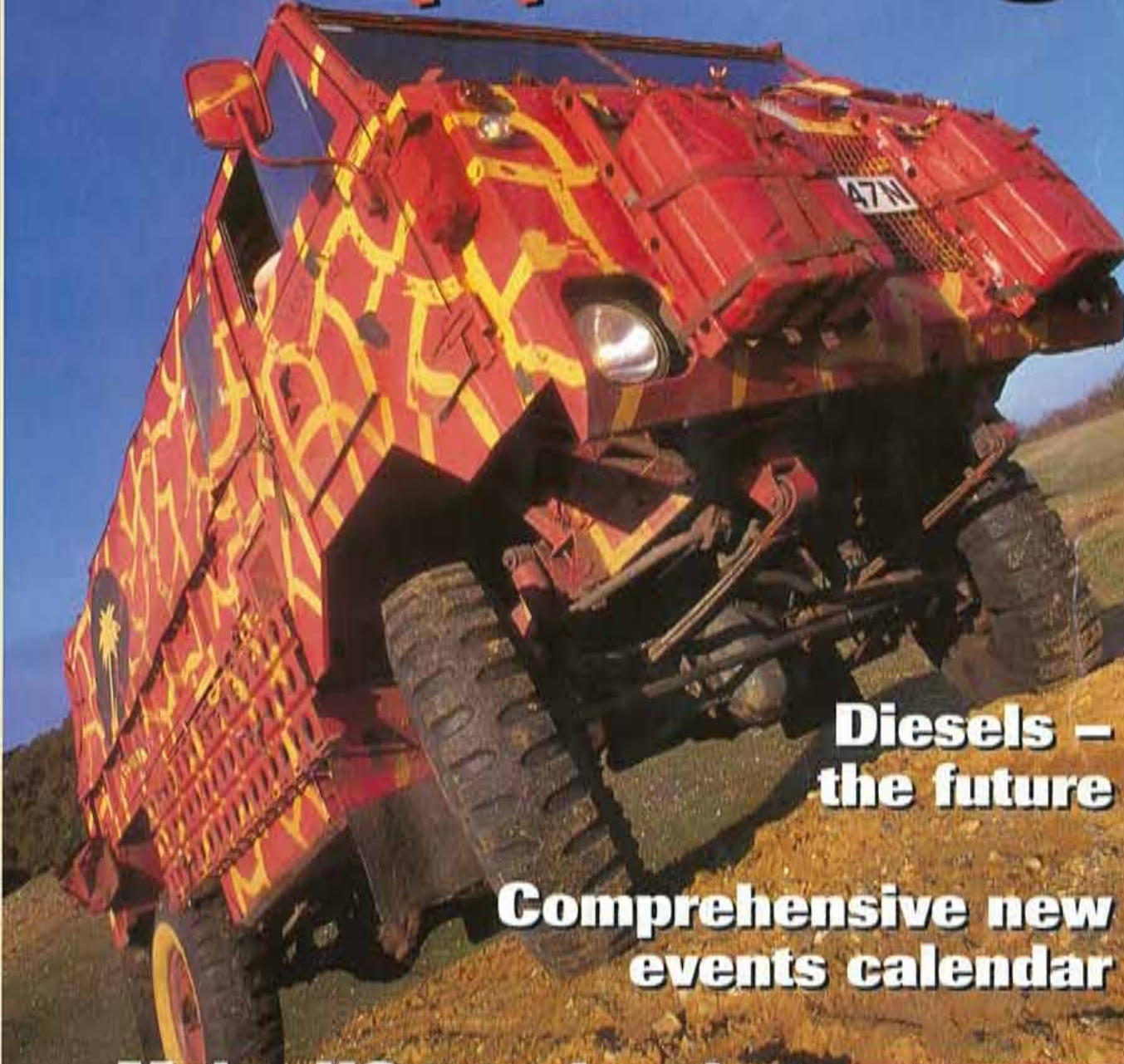
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# News

## White out Two decades of the Croisière Blanche

**F**rance's best-known and longest-running randonnée, the Croisière Blanche, celebrated its 20th anniversary this year, and for three days the Vallée de Champsaur was filled with 150 4x4s, 70 quads and 30 motorbikes playing in the snow under a radiantly blue sky.

Organised by the FSGRM (Fédération Sportive des Grands Randonneurs Motorisés) and sponsored by Yokohama, the Croisière Blanche started in 1977 when a group of friends had the idea of conquering the snow on motorbikes. They organised a tour near Grenoble on normal but difficult roads, and since then the word has spread all over Europe. Short of going to Iceland nothing else could offer people the chance to drive through snow like this, and so the event attracted more and more off-roaders every year. Then, in 1985, its base was moved to Orcières-Merlette, a small ski station nestling in the Alpine valley of Champsaur.

This year's event started on 15 January with a prologue, the purpose of which was to check that entrants were suitably prepared. There's no scrutineering as such, as this isn't a competition, but it is necessary to be equipped with strong snowchains, a shovel and a towing strop. Furthermore, it's handy to have big tyres and a lot of ground clearance, and you have to be prepared for some steep descents and a lot of trees.

The FSGRM's randonnées are always presented as family events, but that doesn't mean they're a picnic. Entrants may be sleeping in a hotel and having lunch in a restaurant – unimaginable luxuries if you're used to things like the Transylvania Trophy – but the days are long and teamwork is expected. Every year a few happy couples attracted by the idea of a drive in the snowy countryside drop out after the first day, and this event was no exception.

Mind you, the briefing time of 6.45am ought to have given everyone an idea that this was going to be a testing event. With entrants

from Britain, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and Portugal (normally, about 75% of the field is French), there was sure to be a bit of a language barrier, but it was easy to understand that the majority of vehicles were Land Rovers.

Following the briefing, each navigator was given a roadbook and the vehicles were teamed up in groups of 15, with one marshal in front and one at the rear. It was still dark when the first three groups started at seven o'clock, one heading for each of the three routes that made up the three-day event.

At 1800 metres, the blue track was the highest of these. It was also the closest to Merlette, and after a mere ten minutes on normal mountain roads we faced the narrow entry to a valley between two steep walls. The tracks, covered in a metre of fresh snow, were hardly visible, and even with their chains in place the vehicles started getting stuck immediately. As if that wasn't enough, the temperature stayed at several degrees below zero until the sun rose above the mountains some two hours later.

The convoy moved slowly, metre by metre, until the first snow chains broke and had to be repaired on the spot. Eventually the sunny valley of Prapic appeared, and getting out of the car and working didn't seem so bad any more. It had warmed up, and the untouched white landscape looked beautiful in the sun. Still, getting a heavy Toyota Customwagon up the hill meant thirty people digging with shovels and icepicks to clear the way, and for a moment the quiet valley looked like a labour camp.

As it turned out, however, this first hundred metres of the Croisière Blanche proved to be the hardest. I had been travelling with the 'Extreme Group' of hardened off-roaders in serious vehicles, who had obviously been chosen to clear the way. We drove through a village in the middle of the valley which exhibited absolutely no signs of life, and after some snowy but easy roads faced a wooden suspension bridge over the river Drac. A sign told us that it was specially constructed for the Croisière Blanche – now that's what I call preparation. Next to the bridge was a helicopter with problems, and one of the randonneurs tried to remedy its ailment by jump-starting it from his vehicle's battery. Getting it going was a matter of some concern, as the Extreme Group were going to be camping that night, and the chopper was needed to carry wood for the fire.



According to veterans of the Croisière Blanche, the weather conditions vary every year. 'Some years you will find just a little snow and a lot of muddy roads, other years heavy snowstorms and fog. "Des Hautes Alpes" are, however, renowned for 300 days of sun per year'. For the 20th anniversary, organiser Jean Louis Milleli ordered lots of snow and three days of clear blue skies, and that's exactly what he got.

Not that all the driving was done under those blue skies, because the second day stretched on from 6.45am to 3.30 the following morning when the last vehicles returned from the night task. This time we were on the Red Route, starting at Pont de Fosses in the middle of the valley. It was the longest of the three routes but not too difficult, crossing a river and skirting a frozen lake from where you could see the snow-covered mountains in the distance. As the going was a bit easier than it had been the previous day people in faster vehicles were able to go ahead and drive at their own pace, enjoying the impression of being all alone in the Alps.

At the end of the day all the participants gathered in Gap, the biggest city in the valley, from where the Monte Carlo Rally would begin the next weekend. At a huge parking lot, food was served for 700 people. Yokohama tyres for dinner (at least that's what we guessed it was). The night task turned out to be a bit of a traffic jam (there was a Suzuki in front), and to ease the pain local people invited the participants in for red wine and French cheese.

It was a very short night for some, though the British convoy managed to be in bed around midnight and, with a 7.00am start on the black track, at least got a civilised amount of sleep. I travelled with them on what was the final day.

Seven British vehicles attended. Overall the crews felt that the event wasn't too difficult or challenging, but offered a unique opportunity to experience some deep snow driving. 'It's good fun, and the views are spectacular'. The black route went through a national forest reserve,

which is specially opened for the Croisière Blanche. It's a short track, and after lunch we had the chance to have another run at it before relaxing and enjoying the evening show. There were fireworks, champagne and (would you believe?) Can Can dancers. Oh yeah, that's right: this is France.

**Text and pictures:**  
**Linda van Wijk**



### Do it yourself

If you're interested in being a randonneur and taking part in a French off-road event like the Croisière Blanche, it's easier than you might think. That's largely down to the sterling efforts of one man, David Davenport, whose Long Range Off-Roading (we'll call it LRO here, because we think you'll find that funny) acts as an intermediary between British off-road fans and the clubs which organise the events.

The value of LRO is that it publishes lists of forthcoming events well before they would otherwise become common knowledge. This allows Brits to plan ahead and book holidays and ferry crossings - the biggest randonnées tend to be run on French public holidays, so not knowing the dates until the last minute isn't as much of a problem if you live across there.

Take the Trophée Cévenol, for example. A four-day, single-centre event based in the Cévennes mountains and the gorges of the Ardèche, this is generally held to be the most technically demanding of all the FSGRM's randonnées. It features river crossings, near-vertical descents and rocky ridges, the likes of which you don't get on even the most ridiculous green lanes, and everyone who comes back from it raves about how great it is. The scenery's completely mega and so is the off-roading, while the panache with which the French do these things sets the seal on it. Is there a catch? Yes, actually, there is - the event takes place on 7-11 May, and the average Brit is going to need a bit of time to sort out his or her entry.

Thanks to LRO and *LRW*, however (now there's a phrase I bet you never thought you'd see in print), you've got that time. Even subscribing to the French off-road magazines wouldn't give you the sort of advance warning you really need, so this organisation really is helpful if you're into the idea of taking your Land Rover on a non-competitive off-road adventure in a very big country.

As well as the Trophée Cévenol, LRO has come up with a list of other selected events for 1997, including all the best-known randonnées. There's the Malgré Tout, a 'masochistic mud run', also on 7-11 May; Les Mille Rivières ('Thousand Rivers') is on 31 October to 2 November; and, last but definitely not least, there's the Croisière Blanche on 14-17 January 1998. You've just read Linda van Wijk's report on the 1997 running of this most famous of all randonnées, and that ought to have been enough to whet your appetite for taking part in the 21st.

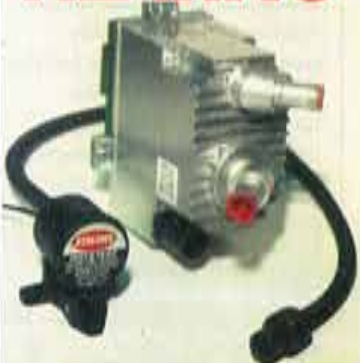
For further details on these events, or to get a comprehensive list of the dozens of randonnées you can take part in with the help of LRO, contact David Davenport by phone or fax on 01483 273786. Mention *LRW* (not LRO), and we'll love you forever.

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