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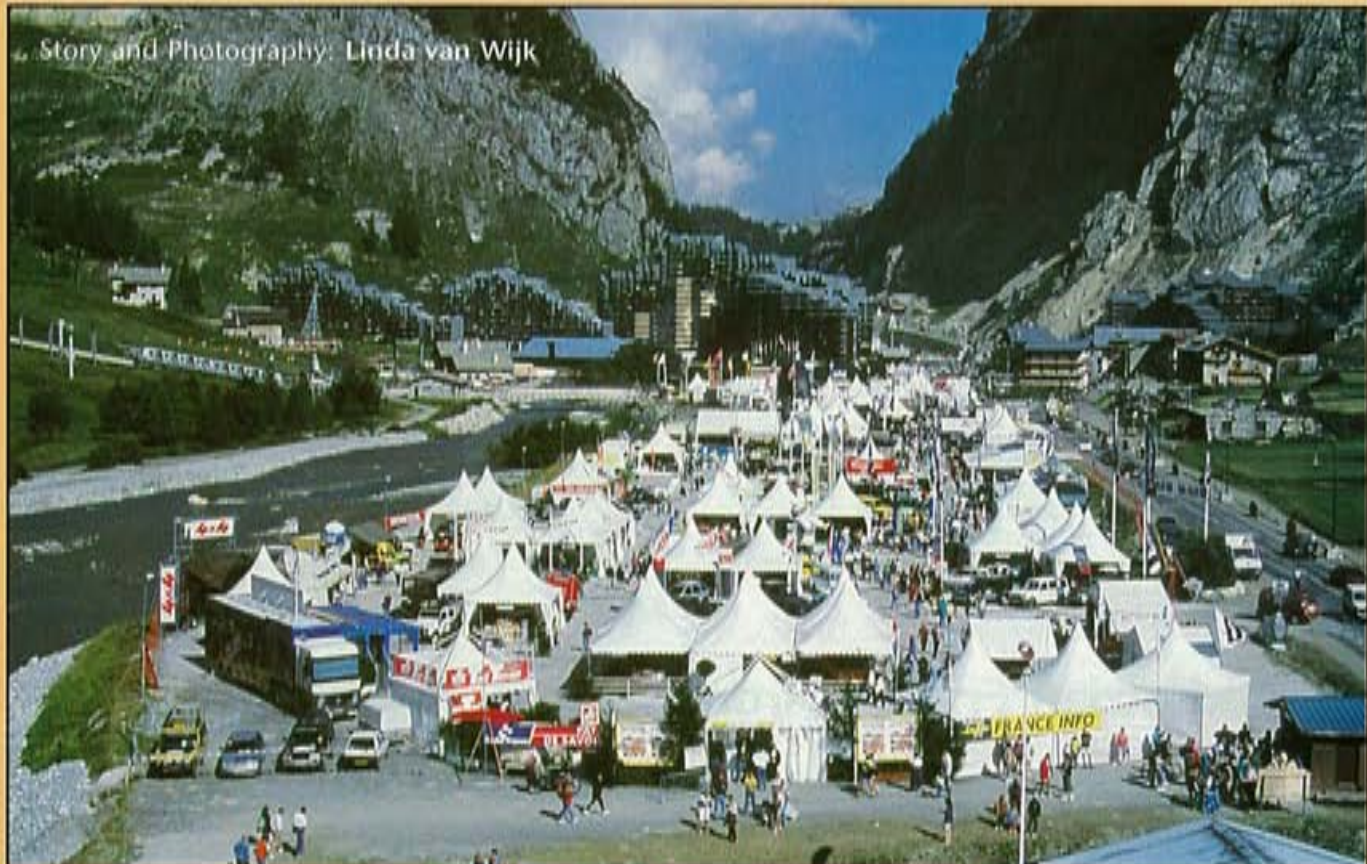
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Champagne

Story and Photography: Linda van Wijk



and kevlar

When the French drive off-road, they don't mess about. The 'Salon international 4x4 et tout terrain' was held in the French Alps, the toughest 4x4 testing ground in Europe

Val d'Isère, normally crowded with skiers, bustled instead with four-wheel drive vehicles from all over Europe. Those who like going downhill fast and quietly had been ousted by people who prefer to go uphill equally fast but noisily, as 50,000 of Europe's 4x4 fans arrived for the 13th exhibition and 'Montée de l'Olympe' race.

The show, which ran from August 10 to 18, consisted of two parts. In the valley, an open-air exhibition ground packed with tents and 4x4s contained stands representing almost all the world's four wheel-drive

manufacturers and many engineering, conversion and accessory companies. This year Mitsubishi chose the 'Salon' to launch its L200 pick-up, Toyota revealed its modified Land Cruiser and Opel unveiled the 2.5-litre TD Frontera models. There was also an impressive display of legendary four wheel-drives, including the first moon buggy (unfortunately, the replica at the show was two wheel-drive) and a Citroën Kégresse that participated in a rally to Mongolia in 1931. Many people rented quads to explore the mountains, and others perused the stalls and exchanged 4x4 small talk.

The second part of the show is a 4x4 race. And not just any race, but an assault on the highest mountain in the area, stage of the 1992 Winter Olympics. The viewing point for this race, half-way up the slopes at an altitude of 3000 metres, is reached by a small train running from the valley site, and the upper site boasts helicopter flights, parachute jumping and off-roading test drives.

On Saturday we were given press car-stickers and told that we could drive up to the higher ground, a climb of over 1000m. We weren't sure that we could make it, but spotted a convoy of racing cars forming in

the road and tagged along behind a Mitsubishi driven by the well-known racer Saby. Behind us Lartigue, winner of this year's Dakar rally, lined up. We expected to be spotted and hauled out of the queue at any moment, but escaped capture and drove slowly through Val D'Isère and Tignes to the upper site, via the starting point.

The road was lined with crowds of people, waving at the Dakar veterans and famous racers. Lartigue, behind us, cheekily drove up to our vehicle and touched it, blowing his horn. He was lucky we didn't brake suddenly, as his kevlar Citroën ZX would have crumpled against the Land Rover.

The race track started at around 2600m and climbed a 4km route to the mountain top, most of the time clearly visible from the 3000m site. As the cars started out one by one on timed runs to determine the starting order for the main event, we could follow their progress by watching the trails of dust race up the slopes. The race was spectacular, though it was clear that some of the cars simply lacked the power to keep charging uphill without slowing.

The main event, held on Sunday, was as atmospheric as any Formula One race. But the results weren't as impressive as the race itself, staying fairly consistent with the starting order. In the T3 class Lartigue came first, chased by the Supervox of Chatenay and Lancia's Lancia Delta. Delavergne won the T2 class in his Nissan Patrol, closely followed by Jugand and Blachon's Toyota. And in the T1 group L'Hotellerie's Mitsubishi topped the chart, leading Barigazzi, also in a Mitsubishi. The only surprise in the results was a third place for Guerreiro, driving a Jeep Comanche.

In between the racing we managed to fit in some test drives. Initially, we were disappointed that visitors couldn't drive the cars



Mitsubishi's new L200 double-cab pick-up made its *début* at the 'Salon', and the drivers didn't waste any time getting it on to the race circuit

themselves, but when we saw the testing ground we were more than happy to leave the wheel to the experts. Even as a passenger, it wasn't hard to get a feel for the vehicles on terrain that extreme. Cluttered with mudholes and deep puddles, hemmed in by steep slopes, the test drive site was littered with dented 4x4s. Many of the drivers weren't afraid to tackle tough obstacles, and we heard screams from nervous carloads of visitors as their pilot lifted a wheel, poised 1200m above the valley.

Some of the test drivers, admittedly, tended to avoid the trickier obstacles, but the driving skills and bravery of others were very clear. The test driver of Remorques Hubières, a trailer company, tackled steep slopes where most drivers balked, made sharp turns and conquered hills so steep

that the car and trailer bent in angles that I never imagined possible. I also took a spin in the new Mitsubishi L200, a luxurious pick-up with a four-cylinder, 2.5-litre Tdi motor. In the back the driver had a 300lb weight, in order 'to stabilize it a little bit.'

Four wheel-drives are *en vogue* in France, and Val d'Isère is the hub of the Gallic scene. This show, ringed by the huge, majestic Alps and held under the clear blue skies and bright sun of the high mountains, is a very special event. Whether you join an organised visit or combine the race with an Alpine holiday of your own, you're bound to have an amazing time. And, tinged by a healthy streak of internationalism, the distinctive French culture shines through – by Sunday, even the English stand owners were serving champagne. Santé.

Lartigue's Rallye Raid Citroën ZX, fresh from taking the honours at the Dakar rally, sets its sights ever higher and hits the Alps in style

