

Steve Shaw's Snippet!

Steve Shaw, I said half a page, not half the bloody magazine! Still, I'm not complaining because this man tells an interesting tale.....

Forget all those mega-buck exotics (as all of those reading this mag have done) and look instead at the original pocket rocket. Extol the benefits of low weight combined with modest power outputs and discover the entertainment a Caterham Seven offers as the epitome of this reasoning.



Le Mans - Septieme Paradise!

I have been driving my Seven for the past five years, in fine weather and foul (hence foul weather Shaw, as John will explain). A 1600 live axle short cockpit car built in 1984 by the factory. It had passed through three hands, it has now covered above 64,000 miles and is presently undergoing an engine replacement. Another story there.

It's registration is A470 UGN and it is presently finished in black fibreglass, wings and nose cone, with the remainder bare aluminium. It originally had red wings etc. but a close encounter with a Renault 9 required the extremities to be replaced.

For the initial three years of my ownership the Seven was my only car, being used for travel to and from work, as well as jaunts designed around the delights of driving the Seven. For the past two years I have had the use of a company car so the yearly mileage has dropped and I can now insure the car for a 5,000 limited mileage. Helps with the costs. Tyre wear has not been excessive, if the wheels are kept turning at the same rate as the distance travelled. Or has all added up to low running costs. Or put another way high smiles per pound!

After the initial excitement of buying the car had worn off it was time to test the idea of the Seven as a touring car (?) It just happened to be time for the 1988 Le Mans race and Jaguar were in with a chance of winning. But then Le Mans is part way to the Pyrenees mountains and then its a short hop to those bigger ones over to the right a bit. The idea was set. Five days to watch the racing and nine to nip over the hilly bits.

So myself and co pilot Steve Porter set off to Le Mans to watch the race, starting with practice on Wednesday. Crossing the channel was via Hovercraft, quick but soul less, followed by a quick blast diagonally from Calais to Le Mans, stopping only at Sees for a coffee, one we now use as a watering hole most years.

It goes without saying the race was superb, Jag first and foremost. It was also great fun sneaking onto the circuit on the Friday to get a few laps in. Not the same speeds as the big cars but it seemed to upset the circuit Renault 5 patrol car, much to the amusement of the flag waving Brits around the circuit. If you have not been to Le Mans it's a race worth seeing, and the Seven is an ideal car from which to enjoy nipping between viewing points around the circuit. Find the Les Hunaudières bar (the back way) at about 3.00 am ready to watch the dawn rise. The cars are just about hitting maximum speed at this point of the Mulsanne straight (well

it was straight in '88) and at that time of the morning most of the other spectators are suffering monumental hangovers so the viewing balcony (read straw bale) is empty. BROooooommm.....

Next stop the island of Ile De Re just off La Rochelle for a few days R & R to catch up on sleep lacking from watching the race. Nice island but would not want to be there in high season. Found a few nice bars and had a drink or two and spent a day recovering. The next day we had a quick run down the coast to Biarritz, where we found a small camp-site by the sea and settled in for a few days sight seeing. First stop the beach to take in the local sights. Nice! Except that after only a few hours it started to rain.... and rain.... and rain. In fact the area of south west France had the heaviest rainfall it had had in years. We stood it for two days until everything was wet through and decided to look for some sun to dry out in.

Being slightly one down on a six pack we had not packed the doors only the roof, well its always sunny in France is it not? Lotus elbows all round. So all packed up we follow the bottom of the Pyrenees mountains. It was still raining and the spray was getting bad, but worse was to come. Turning a corner the road dipped and the excess water ran across the road in a sort of instant river. The car floated, momentarily, until the holes I had drilled in it's floor pan to let the water out let in enough water to neutralise the cars buoyancy. When we settled the water level was over the sides of the cockpit and we were sitting in it! Time to push.

We reached a small garage with a cover and proceeded to dry out the car and engine.



Drying out in Perpignon

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Remove plugs and turn over engine to expel water. Strip and dry distributor and empty water from carbs. Re-assemble and after much swearing it eventually caught and fired, just before the battery became completely dead.

Back on the road, taking each corner very slowly, we were eventually stopped at a road block as the flooding was too great for cars to pass. Either turn back or find an alternative route. Up into the mountains we go, thinking there would be less water higher up. True, but the speed at which it was flowing down the side of said mountains had caused some other problems. Yet another corner but not a puddle this time. The bridge over what had been a small river had been washed away. We stopped inches from the edge, over looking a very fast moving and angry looking large river. Some days its best to stay in bed. Back track, climb even higher and tip toe along the top ridge until nearing the Med we spot sun! It had taken us all day to cross over the Med and we were knackered. Found the first camp-site near Perpignon and set everything out to dry.

Sand sea and sun, by now very welcome. Two days were spent drying out and exploring the flora and fauna around the local sand dunes and sampling the local brews. When everything had dried out we packed up again and set off for St Tropez. Here we set up camp and again went in search of the local beach, and found another Seven! After leaving a note we met up with the owner. One Dave Mirylees! You meet the funniest people in the strangest places. We spent a few days terrorising the inhabitants of the camp-site which was built on the side of a hill, until we set off homeward.

Its funny how the brain loses sight of the obvious in times of stress. Looking at the map, which was more of a napkin with lines on it, the distance from where we were to where we wanted to be, lake Le Lemman, looked to be only a few hours drive, even going via Cannes. Should have thought about the wobbly roads, steep climbs etc. We didn't, but we will next time.

Driving through Cannes was great. All the Ferrari's, Porsches, Rollers etc. out posed by two dirty, scruffy jobs in an equally scruffy car. Brilliant. We just had to cruise the strip a few times. We then took off up into the mountains to drive what seemed a short way to the lake. Oh Hum. The car found the heat and altitude a bit of a struggle, and stalled at every stop until I lifted the idle speed. We also suffered in our T shirts and shorts, covered in sun cream as the sun beat

down. But the driving was great. Fantastic roads and equally fantastic scenery. From the roads we could see snow and glaciers and we laughed about the obvious change in temperature, until we literally turned yet another corner and found ourselves sitting on a road that had recently been ploughed out of large snow drifts. Oh did we feel silly in T shirts, shorts and sun cream!

Time was getting on so the thought entered our heads that we could stop and pitch tent after we had negotiated the snow. All looked good until dusk when the car head lamps picked up some animals crossing the road ahead. They looked like very large rats (coypous?) and the thought of waking up and finding one of them sharing the tent put us off of the idea. It was going to be a long night. After the best part of a days driving we eventually arrived at a camp-site on lake Le Lemman. In the early hours of the morning we snuck in and pitched camp, without the tent. Ground sheets wrapped around the sleeping bags being used to keep any moisture out. Sleep came quickly due to fatigue only to be broken by shouts of anguish from Steve Porter. Sitting bolt upright and grabbing a torch a stab into the darkness revealed a hedgehog molesting Steve's feet!

First thing in the morning we packed up and left to do a quick lap of the lake and head for Calais. After the mountain roads the drive to Calais couldn't have been any more different. Long open roads covering flat barren land with a cross wind that plays havoc with your neck. The only interest came when the road dipped into a valley and a small village appeared. I suppose the locals suffer from wind too!

We eventually reached Calais, found a camp-site and pitched tent ready to catch the mornings Hovercraft. Yet another soul less crossing and we are back home, nearly.

Only a couple of hundred miles back to Newbury and a long overdue bath.

The two of us had been stuck with each other for two weeks, covering some four and a half thousand miles, most of the time sitting side by side in the Seven. If there was anything left that we didn't now know about each other it must have been well hidden. But we survived and we are still talking to each other. More to the point the car survived, the only problems being a broken headlamp suffered on the first day, a hole being worn in the rear exit exhaust when the suspension bottomed out with all the weight in the back and low oil pressure soon fixed back home by knocking the sump back out away from the oil pick-up pipe.

Knob out, as Lol would say - Steve Shaw

P.S. Would you please remind Pat Coneley through the pages of this mag that he is due to write the next article from the Winterbourne Arms social club.



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