

BLUEPRINT for the

Le Mans

classic

A SHORT STORY

It's evening. It's balmy, still sunny but with a light breeze lingering in the air, despite the time drifting towards 8.30pm. We had more of the wall to wall blue skies today, to which we are now growing accustomed, during lockdown. I have been feeling thoughtful, all day: thoughtful of how differently today could have panned out for me. It's 8.30pm, on Wednesday 1st July.

Inside now, with a fan turning gently, to move the air around the living room. It's Mrs. G's turn to cook tonight, so I settle down in my chair and take the opportunity to just "rest my eyes". 40 winks, as my father used to say.

Before I know it, I am up again, grabbing the checklist and frantically ticking things off:

Select Participants

Establish a real commitment from each, at an early stage – *that'll be the day.*

Make sure that you will all get on with each other – there's nothing worse than someone, that you don't know, joining your group to make the numbers up, for you all to find that you don't get on with them, or that they don't agree with your plan. Yes – *we all remember that time, don't we.* - TICK

Decide preferred dates

Decide if you are a "dash down, on the Friday night, after work" group or want to a "make a holiday of it" – Do you want to take a channel crossing overnight, so that you arrive, in France, in the early morning. Don't assume that everyone will want to stay an extra night, just because it appeals to you. *Good job we all decided on the scenic and extra day plan – because that's what I wanted.*

Build some flexible options into your proposal, to the group, perhaps for one to go on ahead or to catch an earlier crossing back. – *Yeh, you're on your own though, mate.* - TICK

Ferry Bookings

Choose preferred (and secondary) crossings – *a couple of you decide the preferred option, or it will be like herding cats.*

Establish when booking "opens" for these – *Yes, that's important.*

Any discount vouchers available?

For an event such as this, your preferred dates are also likely to be everyone else's, so book early. *Back to the herding cats*

thing again – but keep the pressure on and make sure everyone keeps trying and trying to log on to the web site. Encourage them, by saying how easy you are finding it, once you get past that little hold up. It's bound to be due to your Internet connection, of course. As darkness falls, the last of the group confirms "all booked". *Pheeew.* - TICK

Camping arrangements

Decide what facilities you want and how far from circuit, do you want to be based?.

Do you want to stop overnight on the way down or back? *Just decide, yourself and tell them that this is the plan. The cats thing again.* Promise to buy the first round of beers, when you arrive and they'll go along with you. - TICK

Event Tickets and Travel Documents

Which ticket options do you want? For an event like this, is access to the Paddock areas required – so you can have a close look at the cars being prepared – *For me, yes, it is.*

What about "inside circuit" parking – tickets purchased through the club may include a special car pass, so that you can drive your car(s) into the circuit and park / display them there, each day – a real thrill. *Don't worry – you just give me the money and I'll sort it out. Cats again.*

You may find that you can agree a deal with your Camping provider, whereby you can buy one ticket per car, from them, and then buy the co-driver's, for each car, from the Club, thereby getting an inside parking car pass. *Good idea.*

Make a list of the essential travel documents that you will need – and put it somewhere that you cannot avoid seeing, before you go – like, for instance, tying it around the handle of your holdall. *Yes – and keep reminding everyone else, or someone will forget – honestly, someone will.* - TICK

Route Plan

Does your group want to get there and back, fast – using the Autoroute, or make a slower, more leisurely journey of it.

Decide early, amongst your group (*i.e. tell them*), so that someone can plan a route for you

Provide a route sheet for each car – there is nothing worse than losing someone – *you will anyway, of course.*

Communications, between cars, are essential – Don't wait for someone to get lost, before distributing a list of all of your

mobile numbers. Also, when you are driving along (particularly in an open topped car) it can be difficult to hear your phone ringing.

Establish some waypoints in your route – where you can all stop – and where those you wish to go on ahead, know they will meet the group. - TICK

List of Kit to take

Particularly in cars, such as Healeys, with smaller luggage capacity, it is important to plan what you will each take.

Distribute a list of essentials, but also, think of things that would be more easily bought when you arrive – there's little point in lugging a bucket with you, to keep your beer cool. You can drink warm beer, until a 2 Euro bucket can be bought if there's no choice.

Make sure that it will all fit in to your car. *Huh. Sounds obvious, but we've all done it, haven't we?*

Distribute common items between you – *Don't end up with 8 water storage cubes, but no paper plates.* - TICK

Breakdown planning / getting separated from the group

Plan for the worst and agree this, now. Don't wait, until the heat of the moment. Decide an overriding principle – perhaps how long your group will try to fix a car, before agreeing that the breakdown will have to be left – you don't want to fall out over this, later on. Has everyone got breakdown cover – to get their car home, if all else fails?

Agree to all check and service your cars, before departure – *no, really, you must.* Despite the obvious frailty of older cars, it is easy to forget that old cars used to break down more, when they were still new cars!. Of course, it's still always a good idea to have a Mr. Fixit with you. If you can limp in, you can find a garage later, to fix most cars – and turning up to a French Garage with an old English sports car, is bound to result in the desired outcome, *particularly if you at least try a few words of French – they love it, you know.*

Get some miles on your car, before you go – *Oh, yes – I mean deliberately try to break your precious piece of art, before you get the chance to take it overseas* – yes, of course, I am already convinced, as I am thinking of this and yes, I recall someone's drive up to AH, the day before departure, one year – but it worked and the little treasure didn't (touch wood) break down on that trip.

Establish which spare parts will be essential for each of you to carry

Think of other (perhaps less likely) parts, which a group of similar cars could distribute between them – but make sure that these are items that could be used to fix something at roadside - "en route". It will be no good having something with you, which relies on something else, which is large, to fit it, but which you can't fit in. - TICK

TICK

I kiss Suzy farewell and my co-driver and I settle ourselves into the Sprite, squeezing ourselves into our seats, around the bottles and bags. We gently settle against the seat backs (I find that I need to gently bounce up and down a few times, until I settle into just the right position) and shuffle ourselves as far back as possible, to help push the last few things, which were shoehorned in, into place behind us. The last thing was to tuck the tonneau under the rear deck and over the top of the day bags. Most of the packing had been completed yesterday, so that we could relax, during most of the morning, although we just sat around, thinking of things that we had omitted – and considered whether each "last" item, could still be compressed into that last airspace behind us. A few frantic phone

calls, follow. Have you got the washing up bowl, or was I bringing it?

One last check of the essentials, before we meet the others around the corner and then set off, in earnest. OK. All ready now.

Passport, Ferry Tickets, camping tickets, Circuit entry tickets, underpants and shoes, not forgetting sunscreen. Done.

Ooooh, Hat – almost forgot, but then I remember streaming down the bypass and suddenly noticing one of our number is no longer with us. The convoy stops and we ring a mobile, eventually answered: *Did I say that it's difficult to hear a phone ringing whilst you are moving along in an open topped car.* He thought that we had all seen that his hat had flown off his head, at 60 miles an hour - so had had to go around the block, via the next junction, to go back and pick it up. "I've bought that specially, so I'm not going without it"

So, we are off. The plan is to get down to the port, hopefully before the rush hour and settle down in an eatery.

Wow, we seemed to get down the motorway quickly. Luckily, there weren't any hold ups. Although the sun was beating down on us, the effect of the wind, kept us cool. There is a bit of the usual banter in the ferry queue, of course, which we've all managed to join, after filling up with fuel at the garage just outside the terminal. Overnight crossing Wednesday night, so that we get a nice early start, to drive down, taking the scenic route, on Thursday.

I seem to have slept well. I'm just finishing a satisfying stretch, before getting up – woops, I'm the last – meeting up with the others in the forward lounge. Ahh, there they are. The ferry is just turning to reverse onto the dock.

It's hot already isn't it. Sunscreen is applied, shades and baseball cap affixed to head, using the clip-on lanyard. OK, careful over the raised metal on the lowered ferry door (there's not much ground clearance on these Healeys) and we're away. A couple of the others are in sight, which is great, although we are pulling into the car park of the Pegasus Bridge Museum, to all safely collect together. Hang on, someone is late, as usual. There's always one – oh, there they are approaching the car park, from the opposite direction.



Avenue des Arbres, sunshine dappling through the tall trees. Very French. I'm turning around in my seat, to take a quick snap of the line of convoy behind. Lovely – I caught a good one, just as we started to rise out of a small dip, all 8 of us in the picture, including the van, bringing up the rear. I'm obviously not driving now. No. My co-driver is at the helm, with a big smile on his face – and why not – what could be better. We're about to stop at the little village on the river, where we plan to get a coffee from the café and cake from the patisserie, next door. Things are looking good.

We're on the way. It's good to be back.

I can hear laughing. That's great – everyone is happy – so far. Hold on, it's getting a little louder and now someone is touching my shoulder. "Come on sleepy head – time to eat, then you can get a nice early night".

Sunny Day again tomorrow. "I fancy a Pain Au Chocolate. I'll pop down, into the town in the morning and get a couple for us, shall I", I say.

She laughs "What's brought that on?"

"Oh, nothing, just daydreaming of France".