

# The Le Mans 24 Hours, or



## Too Much Fun in L'Ouest

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Ok let's get this off my chest from the outset. We are a male orientated bunch in orthopaedics, no getting away from it, half of us like hammering things, the other half like sawing things. Even the women in orthopaedics have something of a hands-on attitude to life, otherwise they'd be earning their living as lawyers or journalists or something. Not that it's all men at Le Mans, a female friend who came with us last year has done the six previous races. So you can see how I was drawn to attending the Le Mans 24 hours race. The flame was too strong for this young moth to ignore. For those of you who are unaware of the event a quick run through of the history, then the nitty-gritty of the "Race...what race?" slant on things.

The Le Mans 24 Hours is the worlds oldest endurance race, having been held annually since 1923. It's something of an institution in world car racing, but being endurance rather than the usual sixty to ninety minute sprint, it holds a completely different allure to racing teams. The circuit runs along standard roads, closed off for the weekend, neighbouring the town of Le Mans in central France; and at 13.6km a lap is about three or four times longer than most circuits. Racing is divided into weight, power and chassis classes and some of the big teams like Audi and Peugeot throw many millions at the race. For them it's a combination of prestige in winning and a development ground for new automotive innovations. Got an Audi TDI? They put their research from the race into your steed. Endurance racing is usually three

drivers per car, driving in shifts, get the car across the line first 24 hours after the flag drops. Adoration by millions, spray champagne, a woo hoo.



So midway through 2007 my brother (#2) calls me and says “Le Mans.... fancy making good on the endless pub promises to get-it-organised and..... get it organised?” A few weeks later, some ebay purchases and a call to my insurance company and we were organised. Five days in France, about 200 quid all in, and a widening grin. It’s that easy.

There’s an often quoted simile that Le Mans is like Glastonbury, but with cars; and I think that’s a fair comment on the spectator experience. For me the draw was the cars obviously, but it’s so much more than this. The majority of British attendees



who are about 100,000 out of the total 250,000 spectators camp in one of about a dozen campsites inside and outside the track. The race starts usually 4pm on the Saturday and runs through ‘till 4 on the Sunday. But we all turn up on the Wednesday-ish. Why? Because you would too if you could. The combination of camping, beer, motorsport, British fans, beer, barbequing, and sunshine of France in June is too much to miss. And here’s the rub...

You could motor down for all of the above and have masses of fun before the race even kicked off. In fact, overdo it on the Pierre Blonde and one might forget about the race all together.. Until the engines start of course.

Logistics then: and 2008’s trip was not for just bruv and me, but ten of us in four vehicles, including old school mate and sports car manufacturer Arash Farboud. Basically buy the ‘emplacement’ or pitch tickets on the Le Mans campsites (about €40 per car) book a channel crossing (£40 at best) and buy some camping gear if you’re lacking (2 man tent ASDA Home £10). Any left-over pennies go to the French god Carrefour and his many wares... So you plan your departure time, maximise the days off-work, start bargaining with the girlfriend and fill up the car with juice. I live in Leeds and brother #2 in London, so my route was fixed pretty much. Leave The North at midnight, make London at 3am, switch drivers, Dover docks for 6am ferry, two hours



drive to Rouen, switch drivers again and two more hours to Le Mans. Throw the tents up ASAP and go and buy calories +/- ethanol from the supermarket. Something of a dash down there, but the motorway services en route are absurd with about fifty Ferraris jostling for space with seventy two Lamborghinis in each one and grins you could see from space. Already the absence of deodorant is being swamped by the sheer excitement of it all. They say that 3000 TVRs make the trip each year.



The campsites fill up with happy campers, about two thirds British and there's no top limit for exotica on site. Last year I struggled out of my tent one morning to go and wash, lent on something red to put a flip-flop on, and stood back quickly. I shouldn't really be leaning on an F40 in my unwashed state. Value: £200,000 (not me). This carries on all weekend. Men bring their pride and joy automotive treasures to a field in France to

watch the race and treat the cars as they should be treated.

Friday and Saturday see the track used by the race cars on practice and qualifying sessions, you can get down to the asphalt in loads of viewing enclosures and feel the monsters as they scream past. Live motorsport thrills in such a visceral way, the raw power of an unsilenced race engine, once you've experienced it you realise that televised racing such as F1 or BTCC is good, but a pale imitation of the real thing. My respect for the drivers knows no bounds, and to do this for four or five hours around Le Mans is either something quite special, or mad.

A man cannot survive on warm French beer alone (it turns out), so pretty soon the ancient art of barbeque is rekindled and we partially cook some iffy sausages and tell stories of the drive down, and who's spotted Jay Kay on the neighbouring campsite. Incidentally I spotted an unhappy Brit on the hard shoulder of the M1 last year at 2.30am getting a speeding ticket from the plod, Impreza Turbo (RB5 if you're interested) in full spectator livery. Not a happy start, but it's all about the experience. Brother #3 came across from Morzine (where he lives) and is driving an ex Royal Mail van belonging to a girl he met two days before; tempting her along with 'a weeks camping with some mates' A gentle manipulation of the truth.



The night dwindles into empty small green bottles and tall tales of high speed on the French road network and we vaguely remember to text girlfriends back in the UK.



Or not, depending on battery charge and bravado. Sleep comes as a relief, particularly as I had two hours of it the previous night, insomnia responds to poking the barbeque and wandering over for 'just one last beer' with nearby Brits.

So the race. The cars start from a grid in the standard fashion, although the drivers used to run over en masse to the cars and jump in, but that was stopped due to some knock-downs a few years back.... We find ourselves a good viewing spot with some Gallic lubrication and a bottle opener and enjoy the spectacle! Radio Le Mans broadcasting in English is as good as Five Live. Wander back to the campsite after an hour or two.... at which point your standard Grand Prix would be over. Fire up the barbie, do some tidying (of beer bottles) catch some sleep. The cars keep going. Evening comes and the sunset is something to behold, drift back to another part of the circuit and marvel at flames coming out the back of the cars. More barbeque, perhaps a ride on the ferris wheel at the circuit, happy days.

Apparently the drivers have reported that at one particular point the circuit loops close to the biggest campsite, and on the Saturday night as you drive round the corner in your race car the cockpit fills with the smell of a thousand cooking sausages and burgers. What a dream. We make plans to hike over the fields to remote viewing points of the Mulsanne straight, places where you aren't allowed to access the track. We pack essentials for our mission: beer and some bottle openers and some spare beer. We cut our legs on thorn bushes, we hide from the track marshals. We get about one metre from the track, at 2am, with the cars racing past. At 230mph. When three cars go past together we are deaf, it is a religious experience (of sorts). Hage #1, #2 and #3 are united in a moment of awe and diesel fumes. At this moment I don't want to do anymore DHS's. I want to be a Le Mans racer. ( I still do a bit now)



Race night is kind-of the opposite of sleep, what you get if you try and sleep next to a washing machine that someone has filled with bricks and put on full spin cycle. Who cares, I can catch up next week in between on calls and life. They say that the dawn is very exciting with the racers attacking the corners hard at 7am having driven through the night. I wouldn't know anything about this. The very thought is simply appalling. About 11am is much more appealing and the shower blocks are entertaining to say the least, but it's all taken in the spirit of things and never have I queued for a mobile loo and admired seventeen Lotus Exiges parked in close formation.

Too many other great stories to tell at this point, chatting to race drivers in the Tattinger enclosure in the fading light. Pit lane access on race night courtesy of a French bird somebody pulled last year. Underworld tunes at 6am thanks to late arriving Dutch fans (cheers lads). A galleon on a Land Rover SWB chassis driving around firing fireworks off the back...



The end of the race is exciting, the cars are brought into 'parc ferme' for scrutineering and you can see the endurance stained into their sides. Very impressive to take a cutting edge vehicle designed for 3g corners and 240mph and make it do 24 hours of racing, straight. The Le Mans race is about the same distance as the entire Formula 1 season put together. Who won? Audi again? They're going to have to handicap the diesels next year. Where's my wallet? Who are you anyway? We amble back to the campsite and start packing. Happy faces, dirty legs and mild tinnitus. Sink the last of the fizzy brown warm stuff and consider the route home. Money for tolls, the autoroute vs the back roads, the gendarmes and the TVRs. Buy some perfume on the ferry for the long suffering girlfriend, start swapping numbers for next year's trip.

Unforgettable.

