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Le Tour d'Alsace

Take one Citroën DS and one region of France packed with beautiful towns, exquisite vineyards, fine dining and museums galore. What are you waiting for?

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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ONLY A FOOLHARDY gambler would bet on Mutzig, Kaysersberg, Pfaffenheim and Riquewihr being towns on the oldest wine route in France. Germany, surely? Yet they are on the Route des Vins d'Alsace that, for 61 years, has been a marked road that snakes its way over 120 miles of the foothills in the Vosges mountains from Marlenheim to Thann in the province of Alsace, part of the marchlands between France and Germany.

Our mount is a Citroën DS belonging to passionate Citroënist Andrew Brodie. Getting there means a 5am start from North London, and we set off in the autumn mist for the P&O ferry at Dover. It tackles the notorious Islington speed humps with the contempt they deserve as we relax in the plush brown leather seats. Finished in Rouge Massena, our fuel-injected 1974 DS23 Pallas represents the pinnacle of Flaminio Bertoni's mid-1950s masterpiece. It's loaded with technology: a semi-automatic gearbox, that oleo-pneumatic self-levelling suspension and swivelling headlights which made for luxury well ahead of its time, and only the lack of such comparative fripperies as central locking and electric windows betray its 40 years of age.

As the first day's 450-mile drive along the motorways of France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany progresses, the car cruises easily at 70mph with modern traffic and delivers mid-30s mpg. The driving position is maybe a little upright but armchair comfort makes a four-hour stint behind the wheel easy.

By early evening we're entering Alsace along quiet country roads, en route to La Petite Pierre in the Vosges. As we unload the Citroën outside the Au Lion d'Or hotel, a passer-by comments in surprise: 'You're English, and you're driving the most beautiful French car!'

Wingen-sur-Moder nestles in the northern Vosges nature reserve, where in 1921 René Lalique set up his world-renowned glassworks and where in 2011 the Musée Lalique opened. After our night's rest, the DS rolls from side to side on the winding D135 and we arrive at the modern museum. Lalique, not satisfied with being one of France's greatest avant-garde Art Nouveau jewellers, made a life-changing move into the design and manufacture of glass perfume bottles for François Coty, which required mass production. The glass exhibits are beautifully presented and lit to accentuate their forms.

All manner of designs were produced over the years. I was fascinated by the display of 25 original radiator mascots that adorned the bonnets of Jazz Age cars. The Lalique factory is still in full production and has recently reproduced a limited edition of glass examples of the dancing elephant mascot from the Bugatti Type 41 Royale, as sculpted by Rembrandt Bugatti, and a wine decanter based on the Bugatti radiator's horseshoe form. The company has been associated with cars since 1906, when it designed the Targa Florio winner's trophy.

Continuing the day's luxury theme, our last stop before another serious drive is a visit to the Musée du Bagage in Haguenau. The building is an Aladdin's cave of luggage formerly belonging to the rich and famous, because they were the travellers of their day. Marie and Jean-Philippe

Above and right
A long drive through scenic rural France provides the perfect opportunity to enjoy the DS at its best; the Musée Lalique displays its famous glass radiator mascots; the Musée du Bagage traces the evolution of luggage.

'The DS cruises through fairytale towns that look like the inspiration for Disney's *Pinocchio*'

Rolland's collection has turned into a business, as they are the Vuitton family's chosen restorers. They can produce a bespoke trunk of their own, such as the Alsace – the ultimate picnic hamper, which sports a draught beer pump and wine cooler and has a starting price of €9000 – or a bespoke rear trunk for a Morgan.

Examples abound of automobile and steamer trunks from the world's luxury brands, such as Goyard and Louis Vuitton, which trace the evolution of luggage. Back in the 1930s, one Polish aristocratic family travelled with 53 trunks, each measuring 150x100x50cm, and all coded His and Hers! The museum hosts visits from clubs such as The Morgan Sports Car Club, whose owners are, of course, also potential customers.

The Citroën, packed with our own two suitcases, departs for Marlenheim, the northern start of the Route des Vins d'Alsace, which was created in 1953. The road





is 120 miles long, with a remarkable 1000 local wine producers ranged along it. Our short section to Molsheim goes over rolling hills covered with vineyards that glow in the golden evening light, creating a wonderful autumnal landscape. We end the day's drive at the Hotel Bugatti, built in the grounds of L'Hostellerie du Pur Sang, once the private mansion of the Bugatti family.

In nearby Molsheim is a discovery tour of ten Bugatti locations for those enthusiasts not lucky enough to visit Château St Jean, where customers take delivery of their Veyrons. We head out to Duppigheim for the memorial to Jean Bugatti, who was killed in 1939 while testing a Bugatti Tank Type 57C race car when a cyclist appeared from a field, forcing the car into a tree at 200km/h.

The rest of the day's drive is south on the wine route. The DS cruises along smooth, winding roads through meticulously manicured vineyards and fairytale walled towns, each looking like the inspiration for Walt Disney's *Pinocchio*. Unlike the stark English black-and-white half-timbered buildings, the French houses are rendered in a palette of soft colours, as soothing as the Citroën's progress, and the route calls to mind a jewelled necklace laid over the landscape, each gem representing a town, the thread the highway. The only problem is choosing where to stop, as each *ville* has interesting architecture, a share of good restaurants – and wine-growers too.

In Bergheim we pass through yet another arched tower to the Auberge des Lavandières, where we choose tarte flambée, an Alsatian take on a micro-thin pizza, accompanied with local Pinot Gris. Despite the sedate average speed, we park the red DS under the 13th-century north wall at Riquewihr by mid-afternoon.

'The French houses are rendered in a palette of soft colours, as soothing as the Citroën's progress'

Part of Alsace's appeal is the variety of scenery within its 3200 square miles. To the east, Grand Ballon in the Vosges mountains rises to 4670ft and is within eight miles of the floodplain of the river Rhine and the German border. Between are the foothills with a patchwork of vineyards where the soil is so fecund that no artificial fertiliser is required. Tourists in towns and cyclists on the open road smile as we pass; it's so easy to imagine some of them saying 'My father had a DS'.

Time for a walk through the cobbled medieval streets of Riquewihr, understandably awarded a 'les plus beaux villages de France' commendation, to the Hugel et Fils wine cellars to meet Etienne Hugel and experience some of the delights of the Alsace wine route. Hugel's has seen 12 generations work in the family business, during which its nationality would have changed between French and German at least six times. Etienne joins us in the DS around the local vineyards and lists the Citroëns he's owned: an Ami 6, a GS, two DS19s and a CX GTI.

Our car negotiates the narrow service roads of the south-facing vineyards and emerges overlooking the town, where our guide points out some of the 25 hectares of vineyards, all of Gran Cru quality.

Above left and right Molsheim is home to Bugatti – and the ancestral home of the Bugatti family; wine-tasting at the Hugel et Fils vineyard; the DS looks at home here in Alsace – just as it should.



Below
 Mulhouse's spectacular Cité de l'Automobile
 Musée National Collection Schlumpf is
 renowned for the 123 Bugattis among its
 400-strong collection; DS pictured along
 archetypal tree-lined Route National.



Back in town, the hand-picked harvest is in full swing with yellow grape bins being unloaded, and we take a trip down to the cellar to taste the 2009 Jubilee Gewürztraminer next to the world's oldest wine vat, known as Ste Catherine, in constant use since 1715. The company's past United Kingdom connections are displayed there, including the first order from the Savoy Hotel and a letter from Winston Churchill thanking M Hugel for a gift of 12 bottles after World War Two. The British market continues to be important.

The DS, now loaded with a few bottles of wine and running level and true thanks to that clever suspension, takes on the short drive in the dark to Kaysersberg and the Hotel Chambard. Chef Olivier Nasti oversees the two-Michelin-starred 64 restaurant, which has a tasting menu at €133. With an eye on the wallet, we opt for the nearby Winstub du Chambard, serving hearty Alsatian cuisine, in our case Choucroute with Riesling.

One attraction of this road trip is that there is so much to see within such a small area. Our last drive takes us to the Cité de l'Automobile Musée National Collection Schlumpf, a very long title, but then it is the largest car museum in the world. I looked forward to seeing the building as my last visit was in 1987, and now there is a spectacular entrance over a bridge with an atrium with full-size car sculptures from floor to ceiling. Once inside, a ramp leads down to the 1930 Bugatti Type 41 Royale Esders Roadster. The vast car has no headlamps, as its eccentric owner didn't plan to drive at night. This is the first of three Type 41s, and one of 400 cars on display.


1974 CITROËN DS23 IE PALLAS

ENGINE 2347cc four-cylinder, OHV, Bosch D-Jetronic fuel injection

POWER 130bhp @ 5250rpm **TORQUE** 144bhp @ 2500rpm

TRANSMISSION Four-speed semi-automatic, front-wheel drive **STEERING** Rack and pinion, power-assisted **SUSPENSION** Front: twin leading arms, self-levelling oleo-pneumatic units, anti-roll bar. Rear: trailing arms, self-levelling oleo-pneumatic units, anti-roll bar **BRAKES** Drums, power-assisted, inboard at front **WEIGHT** 1361kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 119.5mph. 0-60mph 10.4sec

The collection of automotive masterpieces is housed in the old HKD textile factory and covers 17,000sq m. The cars are displayed in bays surrounded by 800 lamp posts, identical to those on the Alexandre III bridge in Paris. It's a lot to take in but the cars are beautifully lit, their histories captured on display boards, and there are vehicles from 1895 to the 1960s – so plenty of choice. Highlights include its famous collection of Bugattis, a Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost once owned by Charlie Chaplin, and a Grand Prix race grid display from the 1950s. As our visit takes place at the weekend there's a 45-minute show on the autodrome outside telling the story of the cars; commentary is in French, limiting my understanding, but it's entertaining all the same.

Sat-nav helps us through the narrow streets of Mulhouse to the Hotel Musée Gare, a truly classic French hotel: the type of two-star accommodation I would have looked up in my well-worn Michelin red guide before the internet and branded hotel chains became the norm. We're disappointed only by the fact that our wine route tour, driven in such style thanks to France's premier *grande routière*, has come to an end. 

TRIP NOTES

Au Lion d'Or hotel
www.liondor.com

Musée Lalique
www.musee-lalique.com

Musée du Bagage
www.museedubagage.com

Hotel le Bugatti
www.hotel-le-bugatti.com

Hugel et Fils winemaker
www.hugel.com

Hotel du Chambard
www.lechambard.fr

Cité de l'Automobile
www.citedelautomobile.com

Hotel Musée Gare
www.hotelmuseegare.com