

Charge de Gaul

Phil Llewellyn and friends cut a rapid swathe through France in one of the greatest saloons ever, a Citroën DS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTYN GODDARD

In 1955, a 'cheering, exuberantly enthusiastic crowd' besieged Citroën's stand at the Paris Motor Show. The future had arrived in the astonishing shape of the DS19, a shark-nosed saloon that has been rightly hailed as a major landmark in the automobile's history. Features that made its rivals look like throwbacks to the chariot-and-charger age included advanced aerodynamics – to make the most of what was essentially a pre-war engine – inboard disc brakes for the front wheels, an entirely novel self-levelling hydropneumatic suspension, and, of course, the front-wheel-drive layout that had been a Citroën speciality since 1934.

The people who flocked to the stand didn't just goggle, gasp and gape. Citroën's reputation for delivering the *avant garde* engineering goods helped account for 749 firm orders within 45 minutes of the new-comer's sensational debut. By the end of the day, the total had topped 12,000. The whole of the following year's planned production had been accounted for.

Cars for the British market were assembled at Citroën's factory in Slough until 1966. One of the last, GBL 666C, was sold by the importer's Reading dealer on 10 September 1965. The total on-the-road price was £1664/13/9d. What is now an amazingly low-mileage car remained with the original buyer until 1968. Twenty years later, the second owner sold it to Andrew Brodie, who regards yesterday's Citroëns as the greatest things to come out of France since Dom Perignon invented champagne. His business, Hypertronics, restores them on the Sapcote Trading Estate in Willesden, London NW10.

Brodie, whose qualifications include membership of the International Food and Wine Society, suggested giving the 'Day Ess' an opportunity to stretch its legs on French roads. How would a 25-year-old example of a 35-year-old design, propelled by an engine whose roots go right back to the Traction Avant of 1934, stand up to a long weekend involving a four-figure mileage? Photographer 'Jean Luc' Goddard and I

accepted the offer with alacrity. Brodie's credentials as a first-class travelling companion had been proved during a few days in Normandy with a Citroën SM, chronicled in the August 1988 issue of *SUPERCAR CLASSICS*. Chris Morrow, who speaks fluent French, volunteered to be our interpreter.

Thursday This is the life! Stagger out of makeshift bed in Goddard's studio at five o'clock. Brodie arrives in mind-boggling DS that has clocked only 15,909 miles from new. He fills Gasthof Goddard's breakfast room with doom-laden talk of dodgy driveshafts, how incredibly complicated the gear linkage is – something about ball bearings in a holed tube – then switches to such light-hearted topics as the SM's manually tensioned secondary chains. Your reporter, looking even blanker than usual, explains that at this hour he's incapable of concentrating on anything more technical than crunching cornflakes.

Boot swallows personal luggage, plus Goddard's photographic equipment, without

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER BLANDAMER

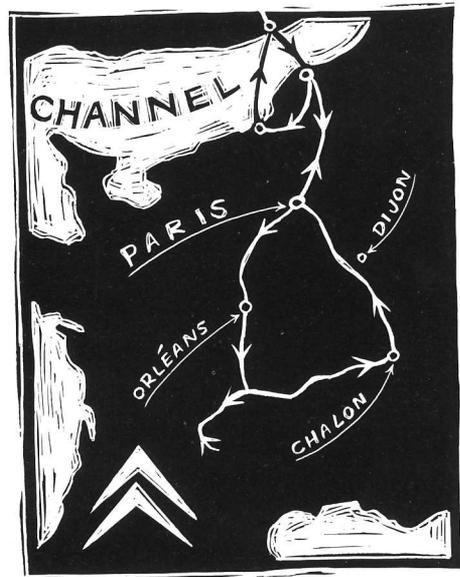




Bertoni's DS, inside and out, is sculptural, still distinctive after 35 years



Right-hooker DS parked in Place Vendôme, on return through Paris



Champs Elysées rush hour traffic, with Arc de Triomphe visible

too much trouble. But finding room for a few cases of wine will be a problem. Brodie drives, with Gallic panache, while Goddard navigates us out of London. Morrow and Llewellyn stretch legs and relax in the exceptionally spacious rear compartment. Wave to worker ants, crawling into the city, as blue Citroën cruises eastward at 75-80.

'Top speed was 101, according to the Autocar road test,' says Brodie. 'But the old 1.9-litre engine has a reputation for throwing rods if you get too enthusiastic. This is the high compression version' – he interjects a mocking laugh – 'so we're talking about 8.5 to one and all of 83bhp on tap at 4500 revs. Sounds like a middle-aged bumble bee when you put your foot down.'

Must have crossed the Dover-Calais ditch literally hundreds of times, but this is the first trip by hovercraft. This 18-year-old member of Hoverspeed's fleet is named after Sir Christopher Cockerell, who filed his first cushion-of-air craft patent in 1955. The ramp angle gives Brodie an excuse to remind us that DS features – carried over to the CX and today's Car of the Year XM – include a body that rises or falls through umpteen inches as you move a lever inside.

Cars are strapped to the deck. Goddard recalls brother-in-law, who used to work for Hoverspeed and once saw an XJ6 hit the roof during a rough crossing. Depart right on time... but return four minutes later, with a skirt problem. Commendably swift transfer to standby craft, but soon after, I realise that these crossings are too short for a proper breakfast to be served. Fortunately, the International Food and Wine Society's representative produces a package of home-made *rosbif* sandwiches as the *Swift* tackles what Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort's scale classifies as a near gale. The captain says: 'I hope you're having a reasonably comfortable crossing.'

Back on land, interpreter and chronicler comment on excellent visibility from back seat before settling down to peruse the *Financial Times*. Brodie drives to within about 70 miles of Paris, then hands over to me as rain starts to fall.

My half of the split-bench front seat lacks much in the way of shape, but feels almost armchair comfortable. Soft seats tend not to be good for the back – mine has been giving trouble for years – so wonder what the end-of-day report will be. Big, single-

spoke wheel, spiral-bound in black plastic. Curved dash, flanked by large air vents and demister bleeds for side windows, has rectangular speedometer, plus water temperature and fuel gauges. Seven identical knobs would be anonymous had previous owner not applied such stick-on clues as 'WSW' for windscreen wipers. Four-speed gearbox's cogs are juggled by a lever on left of steering column. The shift pattern is easy to remember, though: first is third, second fourth, third first and fourth second if compared with a conventional four-on-the-floor shift layout.

The only place for the left foot is under the clutch, because the old Traction motor is set far enough back for Brodie to nominate the DS as the first mid-engined five-seater. The clutch itself travels as far as Marco Polo, but engages sweetly just before knee reaches ear. Must remember that the black rubber mushroom of a brake pedal responds to pressure, not a common-or-garden car's umpteen inches of movement.

Fast-moving traffic thickens as we start negotiating the *Boulevard Périphérique*. What its owner describes as 'the full two-bob watch' of an engine lacks mid-range muscle for battling with six lanes of big-city

belligerents. Car also lacks exterior mirrors, so rely on *périphériqueal* vision, supplemented by Brodie's anguished gasps, to avoid side-swiping the locals while responding to last-gasp instructions from Martyn the Map.

Average 64mph from Calais to mid-afternoon lunch on autoroute near Orléans. Brimming 14-gallon tank reveals DS to have averaged 30.1mpg over 349 miles. Three-course meal for about £8 includes apple tart notable for pastry tough enough to protect the space shuttle's nose.

Push on to tranquil little spa town of Nérès-les-Bains. Hotel Mercure has splendid *fin de siècle* facade – as have many other buildings – but the interior is modern, anonymous. Amazed by complete absence of twinges after 478-mile journey. Cross road to wonderfully ornate casino's restaurant. Exceptionally effusive welcome probably linked with fact that we appear to be the night's only potential gamblers. Brodie and Morrow treat Goddard and Llewellyn to £30 bottle of Margaux. Corsican casino boss adds to the merriment by offering his British guests a buckshee bottle of champagne; 'No bad feelings about Napoleon and Waterloo!' he chortles.



Llewellyn joins 100mph club near Orléans. Neat dash layout





Rare 2CV Sahara has twin engines



Part of vast collection of cameras at Chalon museum

Friday Why are we right in the centre of France? To visit Pierre Bardinon, one of the galaxy's greatest Ferrari fans, for a *Supercars I Have Known* interview (SCC, January). He lives near Aubusson, and has a two-mile race track in his back garden. Before reaching there, stop to inspect Citroën ID19, parked on verge with for sale sign on windscreen. Turns out to be a 1961 model that has covered 60,000 miles. Alphonse is asking the equivalent of just less than £2000. Brodie and Goddard exchange glances – the snapper is another Citroëniste – but I remind them that we have a job to do: 'Punctuality is the politeness of kings,' quoting no less appropriate an authority than King Louis XVIII of France.

Bardinon's mind-blowing collection, beautifully housed in an old farm building of almost golden granite, includes a short-wheelbase 250GT, two 250GTOs and four Le Mans winners. The first car he ever owned, just after the war, was nothing less than a Type 35B Bugatti. He's very anxious not to be depicted as having bought the Ferraris as investments. Most were acquired years ago, when old racers were 10-a-penny by today's crazy standards. Why collect them? Because right from childhood he

had been fascinated by top-quality high-performance cars. He has raced and hill-climbed. Pierre Bardinon is nothing if not an enthusiast. His heart's in the right place, and he has also been blessed with a great sense of humour. Within minutes we're chatting and laughing like old friends.

Would we like to join him and his wife for a light lunch? How kind. Would we like an aperitif of some sort? How very kind. Champagne? How very, very kind. Brodie is handed the short straw – 'Guess who's driving for the rest of the day' – as corks pop from bottles of 1982 Moët et Chandon. Sit at a huge granite table, made for a great 19th-century exhibition, whose top alone weighs almost two tons. 'Apple with apple' is Bardinon's suggestion for dessert. This turns out to be the best *tarte au pomme* I've ever savoured, accompanied by old calvados whose softness belies a kick like a mule. The light lunch ends at four o'clock.

We're hoping to reach Chalon-sur-Saône, about 200 miles away on iffy roads, in time to investigate a restaurant good enough to win one of the Michelin guide's coveted stars. Brodie determines to show how swiftly the venerable Citroën can be hustled along, even on wet roads. There's a lot of roll. Chris

Morrow abandons ship in Moulins. This is not a reflection on Brodie's cavalier wheelmanship: he's catching the rattler to Paris. God willing, we'll all meet up there on Sunday. Reach hoped-for destination exactly four hours after bidding the Bardinons farewell. Chauffeur says; 'Passengers are disrespectfully invited to contribute to the BBC – Brodie Beverage Collection – before leaving the bus.'

Leave luggage in pleasantly old-style Hotel St Jean, overlooking River Saône, then walk through rain to Hotel St Georges' Michelin-starred scofferie. Excellent dinner for as little as £11, in my case, ends with marc de Bourgogne – also known as Ariane rocket fuel – distilled from skins, stalks and pips left after grapes have been pressed.

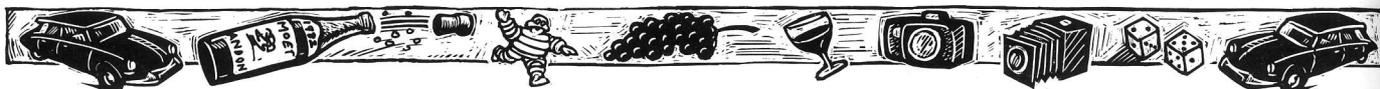
Saturday Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, 'Inventeur de la Photographie', was born here in 1765. Superb museum dedicated to him is a two-minute walk from our hotel. Spend most of morning fascinated by vast collection of cameras spanning 150 years. Leica, Mick-a-Matic, Globuscope, Hasselblad used on the moon, amazing little turn-of-century spy cameras, huge 1940-vintage Japanese device for air-to-ground work, Victorian box cameras big enough to prompt jokes about planning permission... you name it. Wonderful 19th-century images are displayed in salons recalling such pioneers as Louis Daguerre – his system involved nothing less hazardous than boiling mercury – and William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the negative.

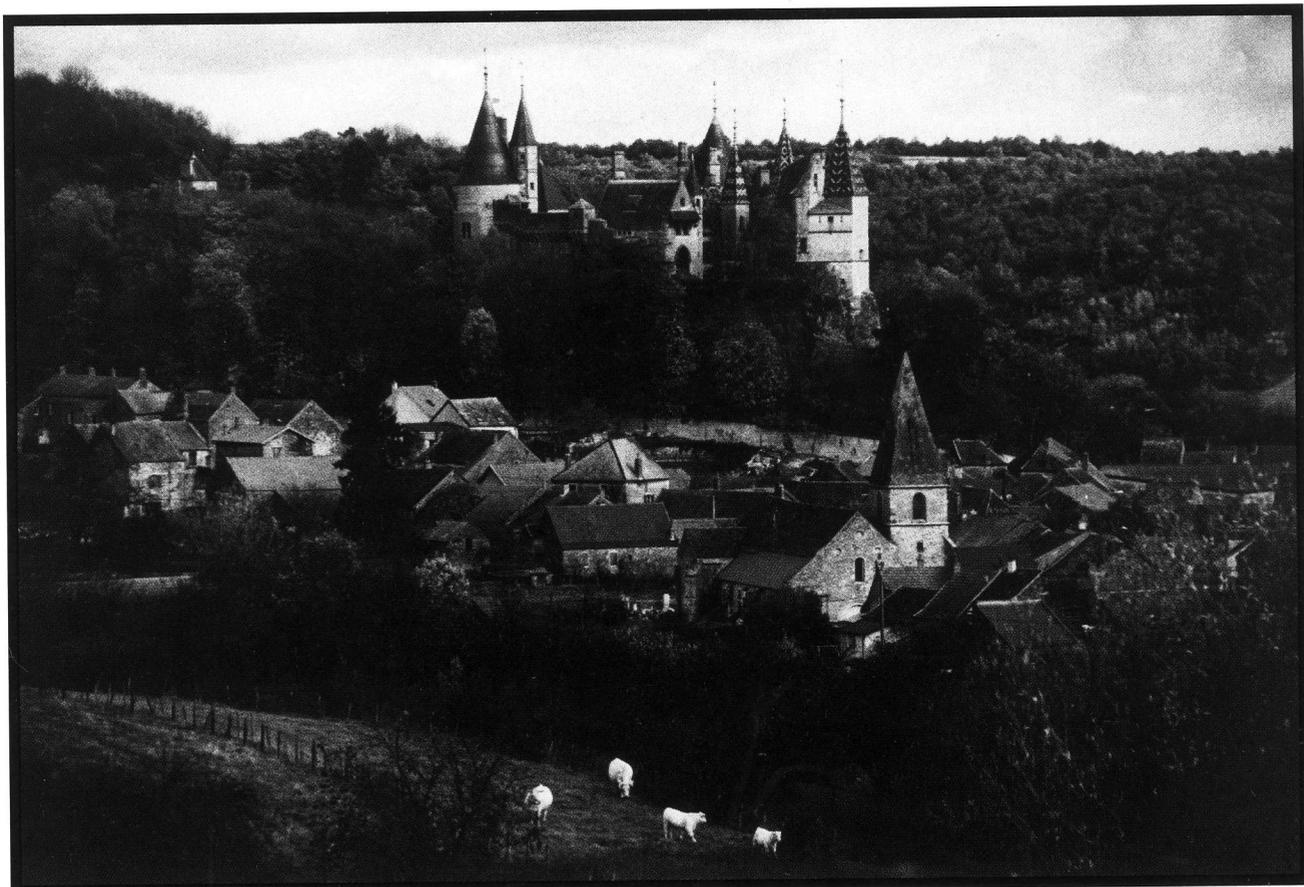
Niépce's first snap required an eight-hour exposure. That's almost as long as some of the *SUPERCAR CLASSICS* photographers take. Goddard celebrates the visit by immortalising Citroën with a pinhole camera, a technique that eschews a very expensive lens in favour of a piece of opaque paper punctured by one small hole. First attempt thwarted when devil-may-care local takes a riverside leak, unaware that he's in shot.

Volunteer as chauffeur for relaxed drive through grey afternoon. Blissful lack of traffic on Burgundy's rural roads conceals venerable four-cylinder's shortage of low-down acceleration. Citroën experimented with six-cylinder engines, but lacked funds to produce them. That's one of the DS19's few shortcomings. In most other respects – space, comfort, ride, economy, aero-



Llewellyn, Morrow (in back), Brodie demonstrate DS's space

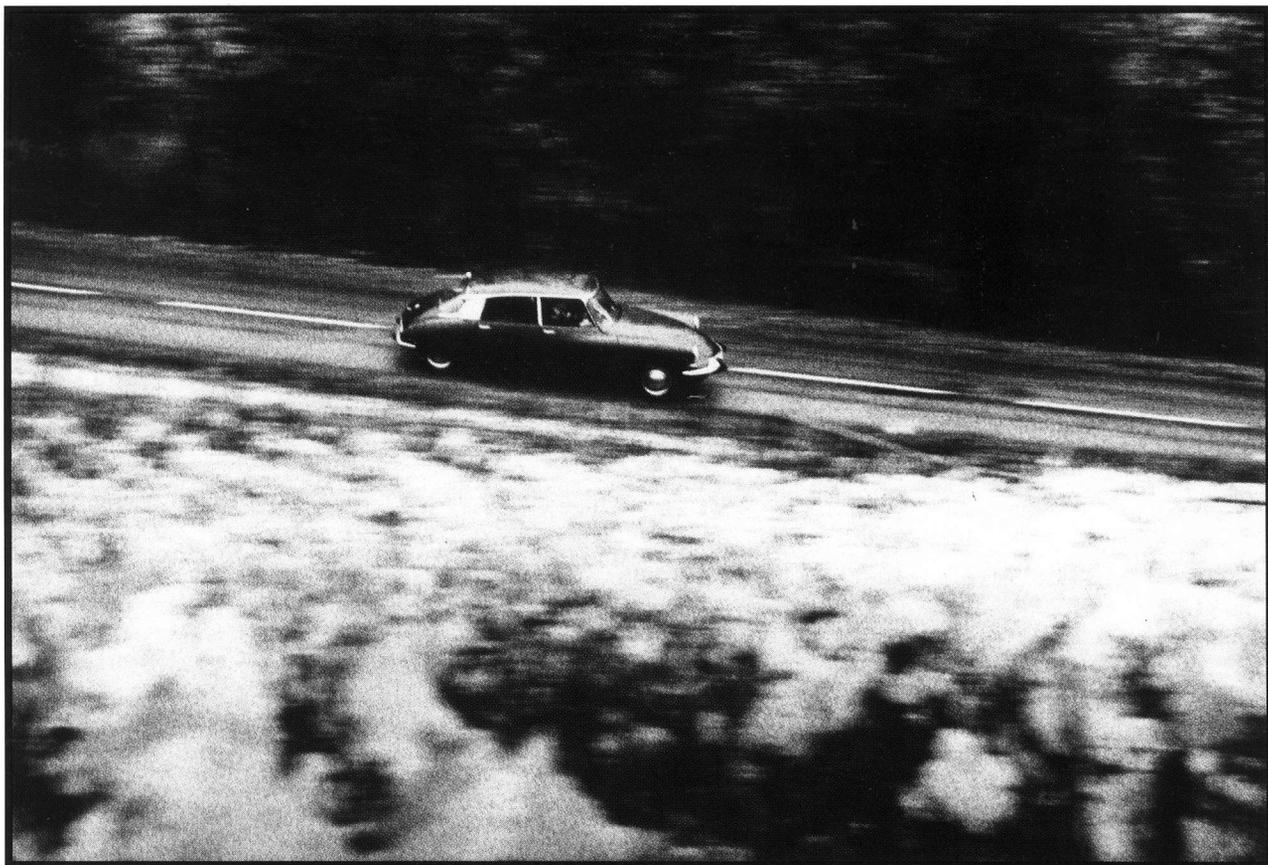




Classic unspoilt country village near Beaune



Lovely vintage Cloverleaf in Citroën garage, Paris



DS proved surprisingly quick across country. At Chalon-sur-Saône (opp)

dynamics, overall concept – it could be modern. A bit lurchy on corners, perhaps, but yesterday's dash vividly illustrated unexpected roadholding and handling qualities.

Map looks like a wine list, but Goddard's navigation steers us clear of temptation. Brodie wonders if Bouze-les-Beaune is an invitation, rather than a placename. Despite the weather, spend a pleasant hour in Châteauneuf, a 12th-century village perched on a steep hill, high above the Autoroute du Soleil. Cafe in tiny square serves delicious apple-and-plum tart. Semour-en-Auxois and cobble-stoned Noyers delight us en route to Chablis. But the day's highlight for the Citroënistes has been sight of a 2CV Sahara from the 1950s. Devised to defy desert, this *Doox Chevoox* sports four-wheel drive courtesy of front and rear engines.

Chablis is another nice little town. Hotel l'Etoile charges around £12 for a room, serves a fair five-course dinner for about £14, and provides ample opportunities to sample local lubricants. Grapes for top-ranking *grand cru* wines are limited to vineyards covering only 250 acres, on gentle slopes to east and north of Chablis.

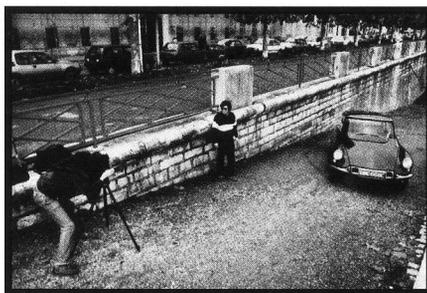
Sunday 'Who said these skinny little buggers don't grip in the wet?' Brodie challenged, rhetorically, as the DS sped in the general direction of Paris. Rain was pelting down hard enough for prudent citizens to be noting the ark-building instructions in the sixth chapter of Genesis. Stop for lunch in Fontainebleau, where half the population of Japan is visiting the former royal palace, most of which dates from the 16th century. The town's a tourist trap, of course, but despite that we get an accept-

able three-course lunch for £5.50 a head.

The rain stops. On to bustling Paris by mid-afternoon. Brodie commemorates what may well be GBL 666C's first visit to its spiritual home by lapping the Arc de Triomphe at a speed worthy of Alain Prost with Senna in his sights. Drive down the Avenue des Champs Elysées, noting such quintessentially French establishments as McDonald's and Burger King, then check into Hotel de Calais, a 60-second saunter from the Place Vendôme. This is another



Citroën close to Brodie's heart



Taking pinhole camera shots

old-style hotel – ornate brass bedsteads, antique chairs trimmed with red velvet, marble fireplaces. Around £50 is probably not unreasonable for a room right in the heart of one of the world's most beautiful and vibrant cities.

Monsieur Morrow and friend join us for dinner at Le Procope in the Rue Ancienne Comédie. The other guest, Jean Blondeau, is in the same line of business as Brodie. Founded in 1686, Le Procope claims to be the world's oldest café. The list of famous patrons looked good even before we arrived. Voltaire, Robespierre, Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon . . . Hilarious evening ends with a bill that could be mistaken for distance in inches from Paris to Peking.

Monday Briefly visit Blondeau's establishment, packed with post-war Citroëns, then point trusty DS's snout towards Calais. Goddard drives, for the first time, and is no less impressed than I've been. He doesn't go quite fast enough to join the 100mph club, which welcomed Llewellyn in a deserted stretch of autoroute near Orléans. Speedometer is commendably accurate.

Arrive at Calais hoverport to be told that the return ticket is from Boulogne! This gives Goddard excuse for 10-10ths charge down coast road. Channel like a millpond, so *Prince of Wales* completes crossing in 33 minutes, then it's back to the reality of south-east England's traffic. The astonishing DS19 has covered 1309 miles at 29mpg. Verdict? In terms of futuristic technology, if not scalding performance, yesterday's big Citroën demands and deserves a place of honour among the world's most outstanding classic cars.



