

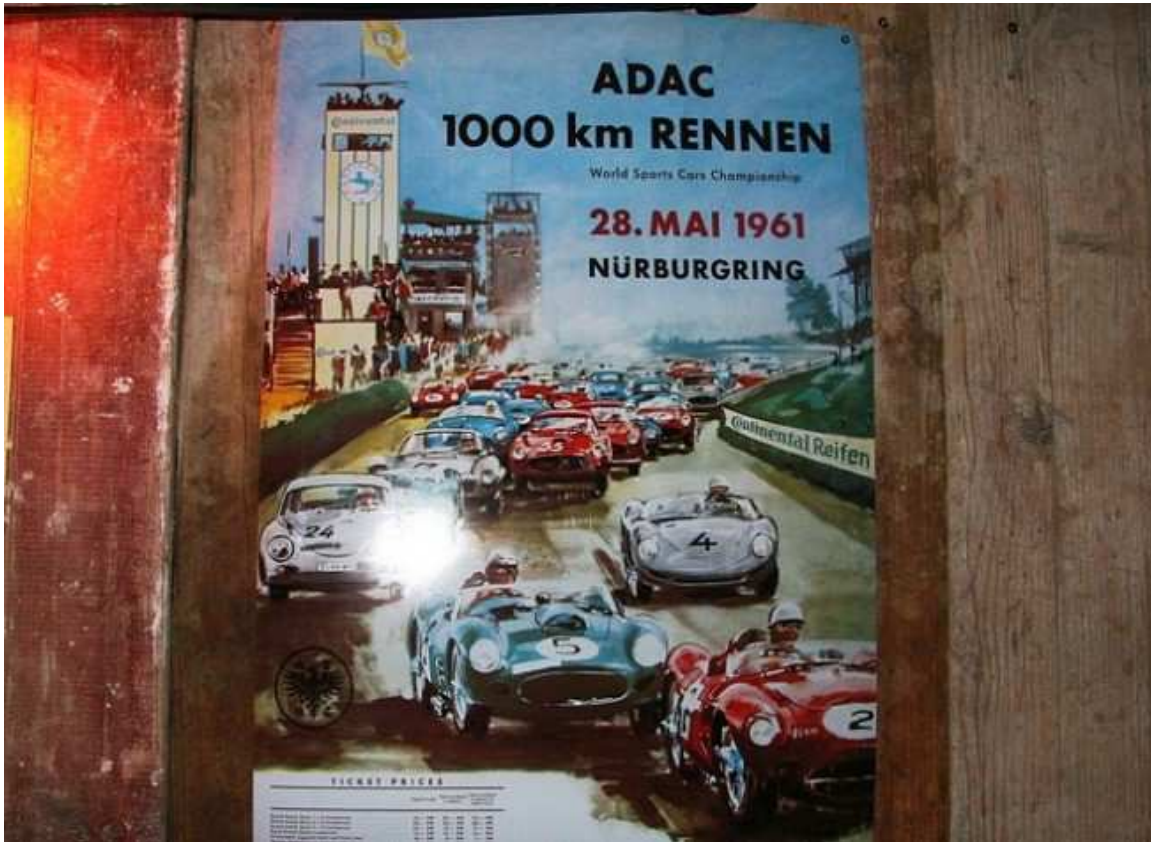
B46 "YOU WANT TO DO WHAT?"

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011

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DATE: 10 AUGUST 2011

We were about to go to breakfast at the Hotel Landasthof when I said, as casually as I could, "I think we'll drive the Nurburgring today. OK with you?" Louise has some unique expressions but I'd never seen this one before. Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened to the ultimate limit. "You want to do what?" was her look followed by those very words.



"Yeah, Benny and I kinda kicked it around a bit last night over some wine," I said even more casually. "I thought you heard." She came back with, "You mean you want to drive that track where we saw professional drivers going a zillion miles an hour yesterday? Are you out of your mind?" "Well, they're all gone and today it'll be just a bunch of wannabe's tootling around the track," I said, somewhat defensively. "Benny says it's just up the road and it'd be a shame to pass up the chance since we're so close." Louise was alarmingly quiet during breakfast. Even Maria couldn't get a smile out of her. Resignation is the best way I can describe her attitude.



Benny's "Just down the road" calculation turned into a 1 1/2 hour drive on an unfinished autobahn that ended abruptly in the middle of nowhere. Mlle. Recalculaire had a field day running us through villages and cow paths before overshooting by 10 kilometers. I was concerned because there was a 5 PM deadline for the last run and it was getting dangerously close.

We arrived at 4:30 and were greeted by a long line of wannabe's eager for their chance to emulate or better the track times of yesterday's heroes. Their cars had numbers on them and the mufflers were far from stock. Guys were wearing Nomex fireproof suits, pro driving shoes, mean-looking helmets and were deadly serious about their time on the track. Up against that, our Aston Martin Racing ball caps were definitely non-pro.



Louise dashed up and paid the \$36 fee before the window closed. That amount guaranteed us one lap on one of the most famous and challenging racing tracks in the world. We got in line and kept revving the engine, not only to sound somewhat competitive but to control the engine heat which was rising dangerously due to sitting in line so long.

To accommodate the future Sebastian Vettels who cannot yet afford competition wheels, the track rents a complete line of race-ready vehicles from Fords up through high-level BMW's, all stripped of interior trim and fitted with racing seats and competition safety harnesses. There's also a driving school on track for those who really want to impress the girls or themselves.



It was finally our turn to approach the barrier letting us on the track. During our wait I instructed Louise on operating both the digital and the video cameras so our moment of glory could be memorialized. I also wanted to show my calm and collected technique on a professional race course. "Nicht, Nein, Non, Nyet," screamed the woman at the start line. "Positively no cameras." I was about to protest when the bar went up forcing me to release the clutch and we were off to the races.



It's about a mile run before reaching the actual track and we'd already fallen way behind our starting partner. I was just getting comfortable when two un-muffled motorcycles sped by like I was sitting still, leaving a stinging sensation in my left ear. By the time we reached the 13-mile circuit we'd been passed several times in the same way, each vehicle almost stripping the paint off our fenders.





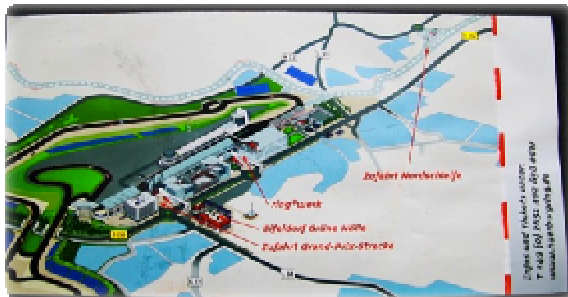
Neither of us was prepared for the traffic and the high-pitched noise. It was so loud I couldn't hear my own engine and was forced to drive by the tachometer alone...just like a pro I mused. We paid for one lap but the track offers a varied menu of 4, 15 and 25 laps and, for the serious driver, an all-day ticket that costs 1,350 Euros (\$1,917). There must be a lot of loose money in Europe because the track was crowded beyond belief. I put my foot in it but we were being passed by whole fleets of cars traveling over three times our 55 MPH. A pair of Porsches passed bumper to bumper like two hornets in heat. That's when I checked to see if I'd released the parking brake.



The Nurburgring is deep in the Eiffel Mountains and the track follows the landscape. Twice I had were followed by steep downhill, usually with a curve at the bottom. I immediately adopted a new race strategy of hugging the red and white striped curb to stay out of the way. The jeopardy was, if I hit the curb, our car might flip over. We still had the large MG placard from the Liege rally covering our spare tire. At first I was hoping it would help approaching drivers see our slow moving car but now it seemed they were using it to focus on us as a moving target.

At one time I considered raising my hand like the pros do when their car is running poorly but I was afraid I would be black-flagged. By Mile 6 we were looking for places to pull over so we could discuss new strategy but there were none. "Press On Regardless" became the order of the day.

Driving that famous track was thrilling and frightening at the same time. At Mile 8 I began to question my sanity. "What the hell is an old man in an old car doing on a racetrack?" was one of them. "Why did you drag your helpless wife into this mess?" was another. The words of mechanic Mike Goodman, rang in my



ears. "Oh, you'll have problems," he said with a chuckle "and they'll happen when you least expect it." Same with Declan Kavanagh who re-welded the broken clutch rod before we left. "If I was you I'd replace that as soon as you get to Europe," he cautioned. "You never know when it'll break again." I never got around to doing it.

When Jerry Alban finished the car he said, "Maybe I'd better go along in case you have trouble." Of course I saw through that ploy but I wished he was with us right now. The two mating Porsches passed us

repeatedly as did two Lotus 7's, the only cars that waved as they passed. Don't know if they were being friendly or dismissive. Suddenly we dove into the world famous Karrussal, so called because it's an almost 180 degree banked turn that gives the impression of being on a merry-go-round if you drive it right. "We're in the Karrussal," I shouted to Louise who remained totally unimpressed. In defiance of the starting lady, she whipped out the video camera so she could capture my snappy shifts and deft heel and toe action.



Unfortunately, she fell victim to the curse of all amateur camera operators. She forgot, only once, to stop recording so every shot afterward was of her feet or my hands grappling with the gearshift. She'd bring the camera up to catch my skilled driving, hit the button and the recording would stop only to resume with shots of feet or her purse. Unfortunately we've all been there at one time or another but she was crushed when we looked at the video. I guess the starting lady had her revenge after all.



By now I was appreciating the skill of Oliver Rudolph, brother of our good friend Alexander. He drives professionally for Audi and raced the full 28-mile course two weeks after Le Mans. Alex said he first drives the track before a race and then walks all of it, taking notes as he goes. Then he drives it again and again until he knows it. I asked about all the spray painted graffiti on the track surface, thinking drivers sprayed reminders as they walked. Alex said they were just greetings from fans who sneak in the night before to cheer their favorites on. Seems to me it would make the track slippery but no one complains.

Just as I thought I couldn't handle another turn or brake for a downhill curve it was over. We were herded into an orderly line of cars who had timed out, watching those with more money pass us like we were sitting still...which we were. When we pulled into our parking spot we only wanted two things. An ice cold beer and a bathroom. We deserved one and badly needed the other.



Would we do it again? In a Piesport minute, but this time we'd consider renting one of those Race-ready cars with the pro seat harnesses and helmets...after a quick course at the driving school. The Nurburgring is no place for rank amateurs driving old cars. Just ask the two old people who did it.



The next day we calmed down with a Mosel River boat trip to the quaint town of Bernkastel.