

Impressions of the Rally in Occitania

11th to 15th October 2023

Organised by François THOULOZE

First of all...

I have loved cars since I was six years old and have a photo of my first car on my desk... with pedals! I have always been a collector of classic cars and have had the pleasure and honour of being President of the Automobile Club d'Occitanie for the past seven years.

Three years ago, I had the opportunity to buy two Bentleys that had been in the same family for 25 years, 15 km from my home. A 1954 Bentley Type R and a 1957 S Lightweight Sports Saloon by H.J. Mulliner, both in excellent condition.

As is fitting for a passionate owner, I signed up for the RREC France in the hope of making some great mechanical and human encounters. To my great despair, the outings and festivities take place principally in the Paris region. Having spent every week for over 30 years on planes and trains between Paris and Montpellier, going to Paris is now more of a constraint than a pleasure for me.

To solve this problem, I decided to bring the RREC to my region. So a crazy idea came to mind: I suggested to Jean-Pierre Boiroux that he organise a rally in my region of Occitania on behalf of RREC France. Jean-Pierre, with the agreement of the Board, gave me the go-ahead. The dates were set. Jean-Pierre, with a heavy heart, had to sacrifice himself because of the constraints imposed by our hotelier. On the chosen dates he had to be in the United States. We all sincerely regret it.

That said, it was a great pleasure to welcome the 33 crews who responded to our invitation: 11 crews from the French section, 10 from the German section, 6 from the Swiss section, 4 from the Danish section and 2 from the Belgian section.

The Occitanie Rally became an international rally, just like the last Rallye du Canadel organised by Jean-Pierre! Our compliments to the 33 crews who travelled a long way, with some of the most beautiful cars in the world, to discover a beautiful region of France and to meet up with friends they had met on previous French Section rallies.

Congratulations to you all, and particularly to Fokko and Helene Keuning at the wheel of their 1933 Phantom II Continental. At the end of the rally, they were off to Valencia in southern Spain. Well done !

On **Wednesday October 11th**, we were warmly welcomed in the late afternoon at the Château des Carrasses with a glass of excellent wine from the estate. The most elegant car park in the world, better than the one on Avenue Foch in Paris, was gradually forming.

After an excellent meal and a well-deserved night's sleep, we set off at 9am on **Thursday October 12th** for the centre of Béziers, where we were greeted by a crowd of admirers as well as the town's mayor and a priest wearing a cassock.

Our cars were blessed in absolution for our many sins and to ensure that there were no breakdowns during rally.

Then, in groups of ten cars, we set off for the Massif de la Clape and for lunch at the pink salt marshes of Gruissan. A typical regional meal of shellfish and slow-cooked duck breast - a real treat!

After lunch, we made our way back to our hotel to pamper ourselves. A bus was waiting to take us to a barge trip along the Canal du Midi, a marvel we owe to Pierre-Paul Riquet. We went through the Canal Bridge, the 9 locks at Fonsérannes and the Malpas tunnel at sunset, enjoying delicious finger-food and refreshing drinks. Dinner was served on the barge, and the group returned home by bus in the evening.

On **Friday October 13th**, we set off at around 9am in our superb cars.

Our German and Swiss friends took the lead, with German rigour and Swiss precision. The French... a little late as usual... We headed for Pézenas (my home town) where a guide was waiting to take us on a tour of the 16th and 17th century old town.

Pézenas is the capital of the Estates-General of Languedoc. The town of Molière and... Bobby Lapointe, with more than 80 antique dealers, was much appreciated, particularly by the six crews who returned the very next day!

At around 11.30am, the "exceptional convoys" set off again for the small port of Marseillan on the Etang de Thau. We were allowed to park in the harbour, where 500 people were waiting for us, and the municipality had provided us with 4 municipal police officers.

We were widely applauded when we arrived! It was a great moment of emotion and sharing. After a tour of the Noilly Prat cellars along with a tasting session, we had lunch on the terrace, facing our cars. It was a wonderful pleasure to smell the fine full-hide leather and the warm oil of our English cars...

At around 3pm, there was no time for a siesta and our beautiful cars took us to discover the Cistercian Abbey of Valmagne with its ancestral cloister and to taste the estate's renowned wines.

Around 5.30pm, it was time to head back to the Château des Carrasses, where an aperitif was waiting for us - yes, once again !

Time flies, and **Saturday October 14th** is the last day of outings. The hinterland was the place to be. Our valiant Rolls-Royces and Bentleys climbed to an altitude of 1023m.

The large car park at Roqueredonde awaited us before we visited an enormous Buddhist temple built in 1991. The Dalai Lama has been here several times, as has Nicolas Sarkozy. An unexpected place in this part of France, surrounded by breathtaking scenery. Once we had finished visiting the gardens, we headed down into the warmth of the valley to discover the Lac du Salagou. Thanks to the beautiful autumn sunshine and ideal temperatures we were able to have lunch on the terrace with a stunning view of the red earth of Salagou, rich in iron oxide. At around 3pm, after a short rest in the sun over a coffee, we crossed the Cirque de Mourèze (eroded dolomitic limestone with a ruiniform landscape) to arrive at the Royal Manufactory of Villeneuve, a jewel built under Louis XIV.

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During this 4-day journey, we had 2 breakdowns at the hotel and only one incident: a hideous scratch on the bumper of one of our Bentley Continentals in Villeneuve. A report was signed with some difficulty, but it was nothing serious.

Although this was a serious accident for the great maniacs that we are, it didn't stop us from getting dressed to kill for the gala dinner.

After the Champagne aperitif offered by our sponsor Veuve Clicquot, followed by the ritual speeches of thanks which were warmly applauded, Caroline, Christian Herr and myself were the innocent hands that organised the traditional raffle.

The glass trophies made by Jean-Pierre Boiroux were presented to Michael Pulfer and Matthias Steck, the lucky winners of the lottery, to Claus Clausen to console him for his scratched bumper, and the last 2 were offered by RREC France to Caroline and myself as a thank you for our organisation.

A few more speeches, joy and hugs rounded off a wonderfully warmhearted and elegant gala dinner.

The next day, **Sunday October 15th**, it was time to say goodbye... Some headed home, while others enjoyed the extra night offered by the Château des Carrasses.

As I had to attend a meeting of my car club on Sunday, I suggested that the remaining crews come and have lunch with us at the Cabrials estate. Once again I had the pleasure of leading a convoy of a dozen Bentleys and Rolls-Royces to the Cabrials estate. Few members of my club had ever seen so many Bentleys and Rolls-Royces together at the same time! A great success...

After a convivial lunch for over 60 people, kindly prepared by the ACO team, and a warm farewell, the rally in Occitania came to an end under a beautiful autumn sun.

I cannot end this report without thanking my multilingual support staff who looked after our guests with the greatest care throughout the rally. **Thank you César, Udo, Emmanuel and Laurent.**

This rally would not have been possible without the trust that Jean-Pierre Boiroux had in me and the professionalism of the sparkling Caroline Géroult-Herr who took care of the administrative management and much more... **Thank you Caroline.**

My last thought goes to the participants. I've never met such charming, pleasant, straightforward and particularly elegant people in any Club. And I am also very happy to be a member of RREC France too!

Many thanks to all of you, and I look forward to seeing you again soon!

Enthusiast'ment Votre,

François THOULOZE