

# Girl Power



 Sitting around after a long dinner last January, Nancy Thomas, Fedex pilot, balloonist and Parmigiani brand-ambassador asked if anyone would like to join her on the Rallye des Princesses. Sensing a Thelma and Louise-esque opportunity to escape from my Volvo-born school run and writing duties, I volunteered. Six months later, I was speeding towards the south of France in Paul McCartney's old DB6....

## Maria Doultou

Unlikely as it may seem, there *was* a horological reason for racing through the French countryside in a gleaming Aston Martin DB6 on the five-day Rallye des Princesses this June. The fact that the DB6 used to belong to Paul McCartney isn't it, but the car certainly added another layer of glamour to this shamelessly Penelope Pitstop-style event.

In fact, Swiss watch house Jaeger-LeCoultre was the chief sponsor for the women-only rally. Lined up in

Place Vendôme at the beginning of the race, the 40 pre-1974 cars, which also included a rare Porsche 356A Speedster Monza, a Mercedes 300 SL 'Gull-Wing' and Bugatti 37, were all stickered-up with JLC logos. The firm also sponsored Karen Minier, the Belgian TV presenter and girlfriend of Formula 1 driver David Coulthard. Curious visitors strolled in and out of the watchmaker's boutique on the square, including Coulthard who bought himself an AMVOX1 while seeing-off his girlfriend in her MGA open-top Roadster.

It was with some trepidation that I first sat behind the large, blonde-wood steering wheel and brought the six-cylinder engine to life at the starting arch. I tried not to think too hard about the fact this was the very vehicle in which 'Macca' first captured *Hey Jude* on the specially installed tape recorder, as I wound my way through the chaos of the Parisian rush hour, praying that I wouldn't stall, crash or scrape this British- racing-green dream machine.

It was actually our friends at Aston Martin itself that had kindly offered us this genuine piece of history, bought at Bonhams in 2001 for £25,000 with 79,000 miles on the clock. The Aston Martin Works Service department in Newport Pagnell lavished 4,000 man-hours on the car to bring it to its current state of perfection and it is now a favourite of Ulrich Bez, Chief Executive for Aston Martin, who personally bid when it came up at auction.

## Timing is everything

As soon as my co-pilot Nancy and I had hit the open road and I'd managed to push the value of the car from my mind, I eagerly put my foot on the accelerator. With the roar of the engine, a smile spread across my face and it wasn't long before I developed a hungry taste for driving the sleek vintage car through the back roads of France. Our circuitous route took us through the Loire Valley, crunching over pine needles through sun-dappled forests, snaking along the foothills of the Alps, precariously hugging the roads carved into the precipitous Verdon Gorge and finally down to Monte Carlo. Of the 1,700 km driven, 450 km were comprised of 'regularity sections', where you are rated according to your adherence to a specified average speed. An 'O' level grasp of French perhaps impeded my understanding of the penalty-free arrivals system's finer points and the niceties of *carnet contrôle*, but the fabulous

(Opposite page) Your author guns her borrowed Aston Martin DB6 through another French village, during June's 1,700 km Rallye des Princesses. (Photo: Clement Marin)

(Left) Somewhere near the Alps, co-pilot Nancy Thomas (left) and driver Maria Doultou pause to pose. Since 2000, the number of pairs entering the Rallye has soared from 18 to almost 50! To enter, each pair must have a car built pre-1974 and a spare €3,800. (Photo: Clement Marin)

(Above) The Rallye des Princesses set off from Paris's ritzy shopping plaza, Place Vendôme on the morning of Monday 5th June. The entire fleet was on display to the public from 8am to 6pm the previous day. (Photo: Max Maniglier)



(Above) Catherine Meyer-Körber, Sarah Runzis and their Mercedes-Benz 300 SL collecting first prize in the women's category at Monaco. The gull-wing car, built in 1955, was the fastest car in the world when launched in 1955. (Photo: Clement Marin)

countryside that rolled by and the camaraderie of the cockpit needed no translation.

On the very first evening, we were treated to a masterclass from Catherine Meyer-Körber, the biochemist from Switzerland. Her eyes narrowing, she explained the complexities of 'regularity rallying' over dinner: "It is a science: it is about research, timing, calculation and logic. You have to be exact and if you are more than three seconds out you are lost." These were sobering words to one who was out by dozens of minutes that day, but it was clearly the way to win as Meyer-Körber picked up the winning prize (a pink-strapped Jaeger Reverso) five days later.

Unfortunately, your correspondent did not report back to QP HQ with a prize watch, but I did learn more than imaginable about the importance of timing and the grave consequences of taking your eyes off the stopwatch. Being a regularity rally, timing is everything, and as I had never used my stopwatch for anything more than timing the pasta, it was quickly apparent that I was a pushbutton novice - and incredibly bad at maths.

### Not just a pretty race

To win, apart from improving our driving and navigational skills, Nancy and I would have needed a host of scary-looking gadgets velcroed to our dashboard, highlighter pens in our shirt pockets and tables that calculate average speeds and gauge the precise speed at which to travel between point X and Y. We did have a TAG Heuer digital chronograph fastened to the dashboard with Nancy's hair band, which worked very nicely when I remembered to push the buttons, plus a trip meter that took us three days to work out how to use. But even as it was, the allotted navigator was lucky if she saw any of the scrolling vistas, with her head craned over maps and the all-important Road Book. Despite the fumbling though, we came in a very respectable 19th out of 45 in our category. (The other 'mixed' category actually permits male co-pilots, but still no male drivers.)

First organised by Patrick and Viviane Zaniroli in 2000, veterans and pioneers of 4x4 rallies around the world, the Rallye des Princesses was actually inspired by the Paris-Saint-Raphaël-Féminin started in 1929 by the Count Rohan-Chabot and ended



(Above left) The Comte Edme de Rohan-Chabot (in the car) launched the Rallye Paris-St-Raphaël Féminin in 1929. It was the first woman's motor race in the world. (Above right) The poster for the 1933 Paris-Vichy-Hyères-St-Raphaël - women's rally - the event that inspired Viviane Zaniroli to organise the Rallye in the late 1990s. Patrick Zaniroli Promotion also organises the Critérium Neige et Glace, and the TransAfricaine Classic - the first 4WD regularity rally from Paris to Dakar.

in 1974 (the youngest year for Rallye entrants' cars). It is now the only women's regularity rally under the aegis of the FFSA (Fédération Française de Sport Automobile). But despite the effeminate name, this is no walk in the park. Driving heavy cars with no air conditioning, erratic brakes and temperamental gearboxes against the clock for seven hours a day is not for lightweights. "It is for rich troopers," was how a co-racer described the profile of a rally girl. It is here that I must confess that our motor ate up hair pin bends and galloped along the flats thanks to a powerful engine bolstered by power-assisted steering and improved suspension.

Plans for the 2007 rally are already underway so would-be princesses should download an application form from the race's website ASAP, and of course get their hands on a vintage car. Gentlemen, you have been warned: hide those keys if you don't want to see your lovingly restored pride and joy disappear in a cloud of exhaust fumes and *eau de parfum*... ◯

### What is Regularity Rallying?

Regularity rallies have proliferated over the last four or five years, with a number of competitions on both roads and racetracks; an exciting new 'hobby' with more emphasis on fun, conviviality and meeting other enthusiasts than winning at all costs.

Regularity has a competitive edge though. Its basic principle is simple, but pulling it off remains rather challenging. Competitors must stick as closely as possible to a specified average speed all the way through a Regularity Section (RS, or 'spéciale' in speed rallies). The speed and point of departure is given at the start of each RS, but the finish line of the RS is a secret, situated within a range of kilometres indicated by the commissioner at the RS departure point, as well as in the Road Book. Importantly, it is not a question of speed. The only prerequisites are exactitude and a good relationship between the driver and the co-pilot.

So that all cars, including the oldest, have a chance to win, an equitable system of average speeds is applied, based on the age category of the vehicle - pre-war is 40 km/h; 1950s, 45 km/h; 1960s-1970s, 50 km/h. Calculating from the average speed attained, the number of seconds that are over or under the ideal average become penalty points. The points determine rankings for each stage of the event and their tally produces the final rankings. The team with the least points, and therefore with the most regular performance, emerges as winner of the five-day event.

Further information: [www.zaniroli.com](http://www.zaniroli.com)