Motoring for Fun – A classic adventure in Normandy with a 1954 Austin A40 Somerset and a 1939 Amilcar Compound

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Kim Henson describes a happy week in Normandy in his 1954 Austin A40 Somerset Coupé, together with friends in a 1939 Amilcar Compound.

Note: This trip took place in September/October 2016. This article about the holiday is intended to cheer readers while the current lockdown applies, and to help everyone look forward to the time when we can once again undertake pleasure motoring. However, for now, of course, it is ESSENTIAL AND INDEED MANDATORY *not* to undertake journeys unless they are essential, and in so doing to help the NHS and save lives...

Since 1982 my wife and I have been friends with a French couple, Remi and Huguette, and in their great company have often taken part in classic car excursions and long weekends, both in France and in the U.K.

We first met all those years ago through a classic car club twinning arrangement and by chance on the very first trip, when the twinning was being established, we found that we were allocated by the French club to be staying with them at their house in Normandy. We had never met before but got on well, our mutual interest in old cars helping of course. As time went on we became firm friends, and have often crossed the Channel to visit them (and they have come to us), almost always travelling in old vehicles. We have had a lot of fun in so doing and when our children were growing up they too enjoyed learning what French life is about and what it is like to stay with a French family.

Like me, Remi is passionate about older cars, and is interested in all makes and models, although his favourites are Peugeots of the 1920s and 30s, also Amilcars (whereas I have grown up with family connections to old Austins and Standards, but I too like all classics!). His knowledge and restoration skills are legendary, and I always admire the way he sets about tackling the most major and intricate types of work to bring vehicles back to life.

In September 2016 what started out as an idea for a ‘day trip’ to Normandy, with possibly an overnight stop there, turned into an invitation from Remi and Huguette to stay with them for a week. This was so that we could spend more time together, relax and explore the Normandy countryside and coastline, and, of course, to see and enjoy some old cars too. Previous trips had involved just long weekends; all very good but a week sounded less frenetic!

One of Remi’s more recent acquisitions is a rare Amilcar Compound four seater Cabriolet, dating from 1939 and one of the last Amilcars to be built. He asked if we could bring along our 1954 Austin A40 Somerset Coupé. I explained that it was rough-looking and in ‘40 shades’ of grey primer, but he said that wouldn’t matter, and that the four of us could all enjoy touring around together in the two dropheads… (For more information about the cars, please see separate sections at the end of this feature).

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OFF WE GO



On 26th September 2016 my wife and I, plus the A40, boarded the Brittany Ferries 'Barfleur' in Poole and enjoyed a relaxing crossing to Cherbourg, on a beautiful day with blue skies overhead and the sun's rays mischievously dancing off the surface of the near-calm deep blue sea.

On arrival in France we quickly disembarked and took the 'old main road' southwards and directly through the centre of Cherbourg. This route passes through some of the surviving older built-up districts, with many of the traditional houses displaying their typically French style shuttered windows.

Always, as we follow this road that so circuitously climbs the steep, hill, we like taking in the ever-changing views across the city to the sea beyond. We prefer this route, especially in an older car, compared with the faster ‘new’ main road to the east.

Our A40 also seemed pleased to be free of the confines of the ferry’s car deck and travelling amidst different scenery, and as we drove along the afternoon sun was now glinting off the ‘Flying A’ bonnet mascot (if not, sadly, the very dull paintwork – ‘work in progess’!).

Thankfully the Austin was pulling strongly, with all 40 bhp or so working together and the exhaust making a happy burble. In due course, after quite a few miles in third gear as we climbed, we reached the top of the hill, whereupon I was able to ease the old car into top gear. Incidentally, I like the column gearchange set-up on my A40 Somerset (similar to that found on my later A50 Cambridge, with which I have had long experience). I know that you cannot rush the ratio changes with these units, but in each case I find that if you are sympathetic with the mechanism (changing gear ‘gently and precisely’), it works well!

We were then cruising southwards on the undulating fast road towards the Avranches area, at a steady 53 mph – my A40’s ‘happiest’ unstressed speed over long distances, I’ve found. It’s an excellent road and we were not impeding faster traffic, which was able to overtake at will.

The old 1200cc motor continued purring and we made good progress along our 100 or so mile long route. It was good to escape, eventually, from the main road traffic and take to the quiet sun-dappled by-roads and lanes as we neared Remi and Huguette’s home. It nestles deep in the countryside which, at a glance, always reminds us of Somerset, with rolling green hills, valleys and woods everywhere.

After our pleasant and uneventful drive (comfortable too, as we have always found that the A40 rides well) we enjoyed a lovely traditional multi-course French meal kindly laid on by Huguette, while we chatted about the days to come.

There was no set agenda for activities or destinations during our stay (there are so many

fascinating places of interest throughout Normandy), although Remi had a few suggestions, including two long day trips, one to the famous and huge 24 Hours of Le Mans museum at the race circuit, and another to the equally fascinating and rather different Manoir de l'automobile museum at Lohéac (which in fact is in Brittany).

In terms of touring with our old cars, much depended on how the weather turned out, as we saw little point in 'top down' coastal drives in the mist and rain! However, although our first few days were overcast with some rain, the weather steadily improved, and we made the most of the classic dropheads.

When the weather was not so good we enjoyed spending time with Remi, Huguette and family. We also visited some friends of Remi, all 'old car' enthusiasts, both French and English, and very clever people; I marvelled at their restoration skills, including, in one case, fashioning complete new front wings for a pre-War Citroën, using a wheeling machine.

Normandy has many delightfully quiet and interesting country roads, passing through rolling hills and valleys, with forests galore and many chateaux and pretty villages along the way. When the weather cheered up we took out the old Austin and Remi's Amilcar, and drove together through this picturesque landscape. On these drives, and as we have done since we first met, my wife travelled in Remi's car, and Huguette came along in the A40 with me. In this way these trips always improve our French language skills, although Remi in particular speaks very good English.


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Relaxing miles behind the wheel, meandering through the French countryside with hardly another vehicle in sight, then halting for lunch at one of the many village bars and bistros for a generously-proportioned but inexpensive meal, were highlights of these days with our friends. By accident (or possibly by design!) we also encountered a variety of interesting old vehicles along our chosen routes…



Two amazing commercial survivors more than a century old…



In need of a little t.l.c. but looking solid and complete, a left hand drive Vanden-Plas 1300.

Le Mans and Lohéac

We were happy to see the Le Mans museum, which necessitated a drive of several hours in each direction, so for this trip we travelled in Remi’s modern Mercedes, as we did for the long excursion to Lohéac too, saving our old dropheads for more leisurely touring over the week.

We spent some hours in the Le Mans museum which, as might be expected, concentrates on the circuit and the history of race cars. It's very well done, we thought, and the cars are set up amidst appropriate and innovative backdrops.

On the long route back, we were unsurprised that Remi stopped to collect a trailer full of spares for his newly-acquired pre-War Peugeot 201 with a fascinating history. He also took us to the picturesque forest at Perseigne, near Alençon and to a wonderful, very comprehensive cycle museum in the nearby village of Villeneuve-en-Perseigne.

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The Manoir de l'automobile Museum at Lohéac is well worth a visit too, and on the day we went, in addition to the museum itself, we were able to enjoy the huge autojumble and classic car get-together that takes place there every September. There were many car club displays and individual classics in attendance, and the museum has its own circuit plus lake, plus extensive buildings housing a wide array of vehicles from across the decades; it all made for a fascinating day out.

I should mention that on the lake itself on the day we were there were no less than two Amphicars, their owners giving rides across the water to families and individuals who wished to experience these amazing vehicles.

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Coastal meanderings

As our week progressed the sun showed its face more often and we were able to take the two old cars out for several long drives through the local countryside, and also to the coastline around Granville, a picturesque fishing port town on the west coast of the Cotentin peninsula.

Truth be told on most of our outings it was a little chilly for full open top motoring for us

(yes I know, I know, we should have had the hood fully open) but the sun was shining and we enjoyed our gentle cruises along near-empty roads, usually with our A40's roof in the pleasant and draught-free half-way open or 'coupé de ville' position.

Guided by Remi with his extensive local knowledge, in several separate outings we explored the picturesque 'old town' part of Granville, perched high on its rocky outcrop, plus the harbour area, also the villages and the coastal areas that lie (approximately) between Avranches to the south and Granville itself.



While in Granville we visited a modern art museum (although to be truthful not really our 'thing', it was interesting) and also the Christian Dior museum/house and gardens, set high

on the coast just to the north of the main town. From the impeccably-kept beautiful gardens, a short walk of just a few steps took us to magnificent sea views from the zig-zag cliff pathway.

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Reminders galore of a more chilling episode in the town's recent history were found in the form of World War II fortifications on the northern headland overlooking the town.

Not far to the south of Granville is a peaceful area with open countryside galore, coastal marshlands and beautiful views across the sea towards the rising pinnacle of le Mont-Saint-Michel to the south-west. When visiting this part of Normandy the scenery through which we passed was wonderful, and we made frequent halts at roadside pull-ins, to breathe the fresh sea air, to take in the silence (interrupted only by the call of sea birds) and admire the vistas that unfolded before us.

Our original plan had been to return to England on Sunday 2nd October, but Remi had suggested that we stay for an additional day, as there was so much to see in Normandy, and so that we could spend an additional day together.

We were very happy to agree to adding an extra day on our idyllic break, and this was fortunate for the Sunday turned out to be the best day of the week, weather-wise.

Again with no set agenda, we departed from Remi and Huguette's countryside abode and headed first for the town of Avranches, where we joined a get-together of classic cars and their owners, admiring their cars and chatting.

We then drove westwards towards the sea, stopping at a coastal car park with a view of le Mont-Saint-Michel, and where a coach full of sight-seeing tourists arrived, also to admire the vista. They showed much genuine interest in our two old cars, as did a local French couple who seemed particularly fascinated by the A40.

After chatting for a while they kindly invited us to their home in a nearby village, where we were shown their lovely Austin Healey 3000 that they had restored (having been imported to France from the U.S.A.) – hence the connection with/interest in our humble Austin!

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The main roads were now busy with people encouraged out by the lovely weather, and, in need of sustenance, we tried unsuccessfully to find lunch in a local bar/restaurant. 'Fully booked until 5pm' said the owner, and his crammed car park was testament to this. However… he advised that if we were happy to opt for a 'modest' meal, we could try the privately-run pizza 'hut' (literally), at the end of a quiet track leading to the coast nearby. This sounded good and within minutes we were at this establishment, which was clinging to the sand dunes at the back of a broad and very long beach, again with excellent views of the distant le Mont-Saint-Michel.



Sat outside at a sun-bathed table from our elevated position atop the sand dunes, we enjoyed a very tasty and modestly-priced meal as we enjoyed the coastal views. I remember commenting to Remi that on such a lovely day we were probably better off in every way dining ‘en plein air’ (outdoors) as we were. We all agreed that all the money and status in the world could not provide a happier situation; sunshine, old cars in which to tour, a seascape to view and of course great company.

(Note: Our visit took place in 2016 and we understand that sadly the pizza ‘hut’ that cheered us so much on that beautiful Sunday, no longer exists…).

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After a walk along the smooth, sandy beach we motored northwards along the west coast of the Cotentin peninsula, again stopping often to admire the views, until we reached Granville once more.

After a week of fun and a final evening meal with our friends, Monday morning dawned and with heavy hearts we said our ‘au revoirs’. On another warm, sunny day we pointed our ‘Flying A’ northwards, and again we enjoyed an unhurried, enjoyable drive on the 100 miles or so to Cherbourg.

En route we stopped at the village of Sainte-Mère-Église, where an American paratrooper

(John Steele) inadvertently landed on the church tower on the night of the D Day landings (5th/6th June 1944), amidst the massive operation to liberate France.

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For the last time on this trip we sat at an outside table (in the centre of the village), and enjoyed a leisurely coffee in the warm sunshine, before our last few miles to the port.

HOMEWARD BOUND



As we boarded the Barfleur at Cherbourg and set sail for Dorset and home, we reflected on one of the most enjoyable breaks we have ever undertaken in France.

It was hard to believe that we had done so much in just a week; every day had been enjoyable and had introduced us to new places, experiences and people.

We were very grateful to Remi and Huguette for making it possible, also for their hospitality, and were delighted that our two old cars had provided so much enjoyment; truly ‘Motoring For Fun’ in every way.

When we arrived home we had covered a total of around 450 road miles in the Austin, which thankfully had performed faultlessly, as had Remi’s Amilcar.

THE CARS



Although differing in age (with 15 years between them), construction and country of origin,

by chance there are many similarities between the two cars used on this enjoyable break: Notably both are four seater dropheads of generally similar size and with 1.2 litre engines, and both are rare models yet eminently useable today.

Our Austin:

1954 Austin A40 (Somerset) Coupé



The model: The Austin Motor Company produced the A40 Somerset from 1952 until 1954, a distinctive and comfortable 1200cc overhead valve four cylinder saloon which retained a separate chassis (whereas the smaller A30 from 1951 featured unitary construction

bodywork). Styling lines were similar to the larger A70 Hereford, introduced in 1950, and the diminutive A30.

Following on from the very successful A40 Devon models, the Somersets proved to be very popular in their time. The four seater dropheads were produced in far smaller numbers (with just over 7,000 built) and are comparatively rare today.

Kim's Austin: Owned by him since 2005 (full previous history not known, but restoration started in the 1970s/80s; put back on the road late 2005 by previous owner); 'running' restoration continues. Was due for respray this spring, before the Virus situation arrived!

Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Bodywork: Steel two door convertible bodywork (by Carbodies of Coventry), on separate chassis/running gear assembly from the Austin Motor Co, Longbridge, Birmingham. (Note: Most A40 Somersets were four door saloons).

Engine: 1200cc overhead valve pushrod, four cylinder.

Transmission: Four speed manual (column change), rear wheel drive.

Power: 42 bhp

Max speed: 75 mph.

Cruising speed: Approx. 50 to 55 mph

Fuel consumption: Reported when new, 30–34 mpg (actual figure achieved on this trip, over approximately 450 miles, 31.7 mpg).

Remi’s Amilcar:

1939 Amilcar Compound



Amilcar Company History, in brief:

Formed in 1921 by Joseph Lamy and Émile Akar, ‘Amilcar’ initially started production of lightweight cyclecars, which at that time were tax-efficient for French buyers.

During the 1920s, cars produced by the firm included the 903cc four cylinder CC (1922), the C4 sports car, and the 1004cc CS sports model of 1924. The CGS ‘Grand Sport’ of the same year was fitted with a 1074cc engine (sidevalve four cylinder), plus brakes on all four wheels – quite a feature at that time. A development of this model was the faster CGSS Grand Sport Surbaissé, which was built under licence in several countries. Racing variants were powered

by a twin overhead camshaft supercharged 1100cc six cylinder engine… Some of these units incorporated a crankshaft running in roller bearings.

In 1928 the 1200cc ‘M-Type’ light touring car arrived, and variants of this model were offered until 1935. The short-lived C8 was also introduced in 1928, powered by an overhead camshaft 2.3 litre straight eight cylinder engine.

Sadly, financial difficulties beset the well-respected company during the 1930s. Acquisition by Sofia, and the production of the Delahaye-powered 12CV Amilcar Pégase (plus a motor sport 2.5 litre 14CV version) did little to help…

Towards the end of the decade Hotchkiss and Amilcar came together, resulting in the development of the front wheel drive ‘Amilcar Compound’, engineered by Jean-Albert Grégoire.

This technically advanced compact car featured monocoque construction incorporating much ‘Alpax’ aluminium alloy (indeed its bodywork was pioneering in its design and assembly), plus all-independent suspension (with torsion bars at the rear), and rack and pinion steering. It was powered by an 1185cc sidevalve four cylinder engine, driving the front wheels via a four speed synchromesh gearbox and short drive shafts with constant velocity joints.

Most examples of the Compound (like Remi’s) date from 1939, and nearly 600 examples were produced in that year (with a total of around 100 more, in 1938 and 1940). Although a larger-engined overhead valve version was planned, the invasion of France by Germany in 1940 put paid to the model, and thus the Compound was the last Amilcar to be produced.

Saloon and cabriolet versions were produced, plus commercial/estate car variants that saw service during the war years; approximately 150 of these were built.

It is interesting to note that the Amilcar Compound was offered in Britain as the Hotchkiss Ten.

Remi's Amilcar Compound: Built in 1939, Remi's Amilcar Compound Cabriolet was purchased by him about five years ago, in good condition. Since acquisition of the car, Remi has carried out sympathetic maintenance and 'rolling' restoration work, and has enjoyed using the car.

Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Engine: 1185cc sidevalve, four cylinder.

Transmission: Four speed manual (dash-mounted gearchange), front wheel drive.

Power: 34 bhp.

Max speed: 70+ mph.

Cruising speed: Approximately 50+ mph.

Fuel consumption: 30+ mpg.