

I thought motoring in Europe was fun until...

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Peter Selby-Huber's story of his family's motor cycle trip to Switzerland appeared in the August issue. Here he continues his travel tales.

THE return journey from Switzerland to England after our 3,000 mile tour by motor cycle and sidecar was uneventful except for one thing — the weather.

The moment we stepped off the boat at Dover the heavens opened and it rained on us all of the 270 miles to Leeds.

Wet and bedraggled but quite satisfied with the freedom of travel our three wheels had provided, we decided that our next adventure would be taken in the comparative comfort of a car.

Cars at that time were not rolling off the production lines as rapidly as they are today, and the second hand car industry was a lucrative business for both the genuine and shady dealers.

I of course managed to visit a shady dealer, who took my faithful Panther in part exchange for a 1938 Ford Popular. It was not until I got it home that I discovered a hen's nest in the spare tyre compartment. My wife and I could only deduce that this particular Ford had spent its petrol-starved war in some farmer's barn.

Making the best of a bad situation we worked on it and ran it until our next holiday came round. As most of my war years were spent sailing around the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal it can be appreciated that there was not much time left to take a driving test, and as my motor cycle licence did not cover me for car driving I asked a friend who did have a full car driver's licence if he would come to Switzerland with us as the driver.

He readily agreed to this proposition and the happy day arrived when my wife, myself, my friend and his wife, and our family now consisting of a son and a daughter, plus all the luggage, clambered aboard Poppy, as we affectionately named our car. Poppy must have groaned.

We then discovered one small problem which was that my friend couldn't drive too well. He had obtained his licence before driving tests were thought of, so willy nilly we had to make the best of a bad situation.

I am not saying who did drive all of the 3,600 miles of that



The Singer on the Susten

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holiday, but suffice to say that we got there and back in one piece, although I well remember the words of my brother-in-law as we arrived at our Swiss destination.

"I would not go to the bottom of the street in that car", he said.

Nevertheless, our route took us via France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany, including Heidelberg and the Black Forest. Within Switzerland we travelled extensively with long lost relatives who lived as far apart as Davos and Lausanne all gegressed and gekussed.

Small problems arose on the journey like a steering wobble which occurred once the car did over 45 miles an hour, making it veer violently from one side of the road to the other.

What with that and its capacity for having punctures about every 40 miles life wasn't all that easy.

However Poppy eventually brought us all back home safe and sound, but the Swiss passes proved to be too much for her and shortly after her arrival in Leeds she gave up the ghost completely. R.I.P.

A complete book could be written about the next car we acquired. It was an early model Singer not now in production and the song it was to sing became a nightmare to us.

Another year had gone by and another encounter with another spiv salesman left us with one of the most highly polished pieces of second hand

junk ever to be put on the road. Beneath its flashy exterior and super comfort interior lay a mechanical disaster waiting for someone like me to take it to Switzerland. And I did.

The first signs of trouble happened shortly after disembarking from the car ferry in the very early hours one Sunday morning. The needle on the overheating gauge indicated that we were about to blow up. Investigation showed a badly leaking radiator and this had to be countered by frequent stops at the many canals and rivers en route.

Then a high piercing squeak started to emit from one of the wheels and it was in this state that we limped into Cambrai.

My exasperated passengers had decided to go in search of refreshment and had left me in a completely deserted square.

Not a soul was to be seen, and I had just jacked the car up when a small French car appeared as if from nowhere. The gentleman behind the wheel beckoned to me to follow him and this I hurriedly did wondering what my family would think when they returned to find me gone.

Stopping in a small side street my new found friend knocked on a large door set in a wall. It opened to reveal a small garage with four Frenchmen working on a car.

Half an hour later temporary repairs had been made to the radiator and the wheel hub had been packed with grease. My

mysterious benefactor shot off in his car shortly to return with my family from wherever they had been.

The Frenchmen charged me about £2 for the job, but my new found friend would not take a penny for his trouble. He, it transpired, was a Belgian and his words of 25 years ago are still with me. "I'll get my reward in heaven" he said.

I am sure he will, and I still have a soft spot for the Belgians today.

Despite our earlier setbacks the car did take us over the Susten pass and to many other undiscovered gems of Switzerland. Even today I find that after almost 30 years of Swiss travel there are still plenty of awesome, tranquil and delightful new Helvetic discoveries to be found.

Our journey back to England was a nightmare. The radiator went again but worse than that the master brake cylinder decided to malfunction.

Every 40 miles or so I had to top up with brake fluid then go under the car and bleed the brake nipples — done by sucking the stuff through the system.

I arrived back in Dover black as the ace of spades and completely exhausted, with a lifelong distaste of brake fluid. To add insult to injury the engine caught fire just outside London, resulting in the complete loss of the footbrake.

Fortunately our subsequent visits to beautiful Switzerland have not been dogged by such minor disasters I have described, although much of the adventure of the early days is gone.

‘The most highly polished piece of junk on the road’