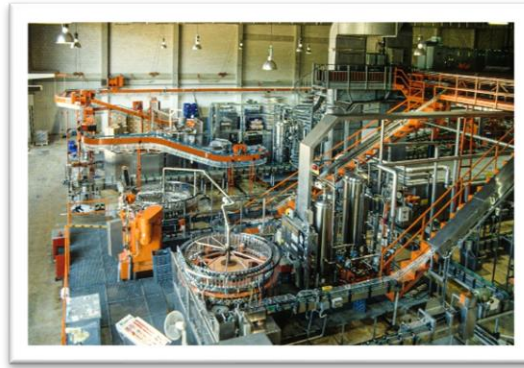


“A Tour of the Belgian Ardennes in a Vintage Jaguar”

At the end of August in 1991, while I was returning home from a business trip to Singapore, Nepal, and India, I had the opportunity to join some dear friends from London who were on a tour of the Belgian Ardennes in vintage Jaguars. I met up with Jiggy and Nick in the historic town of Spa in the heart of the Ardennes Forest.



Nick was driving his classic 1947 Jaguar coupe as part of a small group of Jaguar owners from the UK, Holland, and Germany. After checking into the “Dorint Hotel Spa – Balmoral”, we all visited the “Spa Monopole” factory where the famous mineral water is bottled. It was fascinating to see thousands of plastic bottles being formed by heat and pressure before being filled and labeled in a continuously moving line. The sound and motion of the machinery and conveyor belts was a very steady rhythm, almost “mesmerizing”!



At the end of the tour, we had the opportunity to “taste the waters”. After the tour, I joined Nick’s friend, Goff, as a passenger in his 1955 dark green Jaguar 120 convertible for a drive through the lush green countryside and dense forest under warm sunny skies – having the top down and feeling the wind in my hair was a real treat! As we drove along the winding mountain roads, I felt like I should have dressed more for the part – such as a racing hat and a long white scarf blowing in the wind! (Perhaps like the cartoon of Snoopy as the Red Baron)



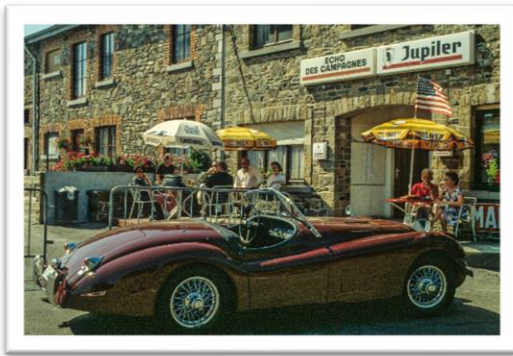
Several times, Goff floored the engine and we were suddenly barreling down the road at almost 150 KPH (90 MPH). The experience felt very powerful and surprisingly quite smooth. Along the way, we passed through the historic town of Bastogne, site of one of the greatest battles of WWII. As we drove through the small town so deeply steeped in history, my thoughts turned to how ironic it was that half of our group were Germans – although they were young enough to be a couple of generations removed from the tragedies of the horrific war. However, I couldn't help wondering how they felt as they saw the many war memorials.



After a couple of hours on the road, we came to the 16th century town of Orval, home to an ancient Trappist Monk monastery where the famous Orval beer has been brewed for centuries. When the Germans spotted the Orval beer sign they insisted we all stop at a local café next to the abbey – a great idea! We all enjoyed a pint of cold Trappist beer outside in the warm midday sunshine as we snacked on a plate of smoked pork, fresh local bread, and cheese.



Leaving Orval, we drove along the French border to the small village of Bouillon – a wonderful little town along the River Semoy and surrounded by steep slopes of the narrow valley, rising over 800 feet above the village. Once again, the Germans insisted that we stop for a cold beer at a small sidewalk café in the town square overlooking the river. (Such another great idea!) As we enjoyed our beer, we had a beautiful view of the river and the village. Later, we stopped for lunch at a small restaurant on the main street in the small town of La Francheville. I ordered a cold glass of the local beer named “Godfrey”, along with an excellent pepper steak. Meanwhile, a mother cat and her kitten “roamed” around the place, obviously looking for handouts.



While Goff went to a shop to replace his broken sunglasses, the vintage Jaguars were surrounded by a large group that “gawked” at the old cars – most likely because they had never seen so many old cars parked in one place before. Surely, they must have wondered why! After lunch, we drove past an ancient castle, following some narrow country roads which briefly took us into France before returning to Belgium. Late in the afternoon, we joined the motorway for our return to Dorint Hotel-Spa Balmoral. The drive on the motorway at 160 kph (95 mph) was thrilling! For dinner that evening, we were special guests at a huge buffet featuring a whole roasted Wild Boar from the Ardennes forest. No one left the dinner table hungry.

The next morning, I joined Nick and Jiggy in their 1947 black Jaguar coupe, the doors of which opened in “reverse”, also known as “suicide” doors. (note: the only American car to have such doors was a 1950’s vintage Studebaker) Nick’s car looked like a classic car from an old German “spy movie”! An odd feature of the car were the turn indicators (aka “turn signals”), located on the center of the steering wheel column. When “activated”, a small “flag” would suddenly “pop out” from the appropriate side of the car! (basically the same as sticking your arm out the window!) Before beginning the day’s drive, Nick washed the car, so it was brilliant and shiny in the warm morning sun.



This day, our caravan of vintage Jaguars drove up to the highest point in Belgium (702 meters / 2300 feet). It was a beautiful view of the forest, but in all honesty, it was more like just a high spot along the

road – barely noticeable, except for a small sign on the side of the road and marked by a small stone monument almost hidden among the trees! Just beyond the “summit”, we encountered a bicycle race. However, everyone was looking at our vintage cars as the bicycles passed.

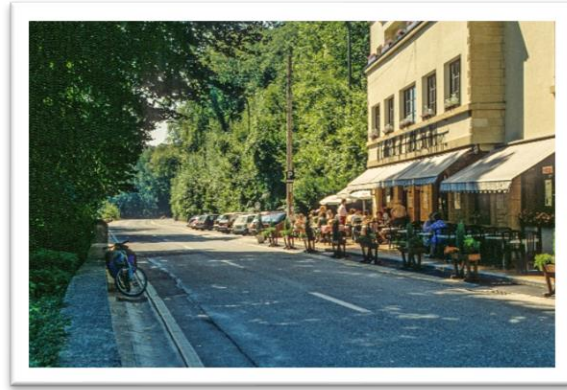
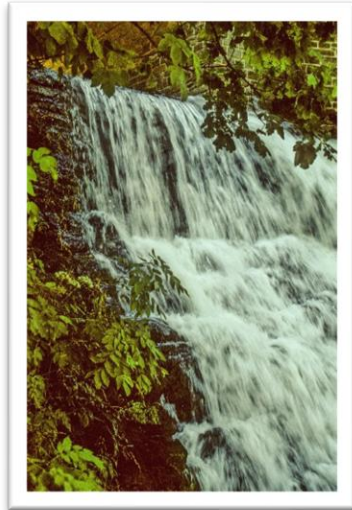


Further down the valley, we came upon a gorgeous waterfall near the town of “Trois Ponts” (meaning “three bridges” in French). We stopped in the small town for a cold beer at an outdoor café. (once again at the insistence of the Germans, and no one objected) Meanwhile, Rudy won a bottle of Champagne at the shooting gallery across the street. From Trois Ponts, we followed the River Ambleve to the village of “Stavelot”, where we toured the “Musee de Circuit” – an amazing collection of famous vintage racing cars.

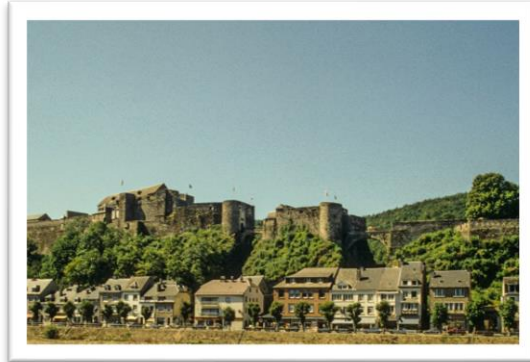


Leaving the museum, we drove east to the small village of “La Gleize” to visit the “Musee de Decembre 1944” – displaying the history and artifacts from the last battle of WWII, known as the “Battle of the Bulge”. The visit to the museum was a highlight of my visit to Belgium.





After another cold beer in the warm sunshine at an outdoor café, insisted by the Germans again, we proceeded through the Ardennes forest to the historic town of “Remouchampts”, where once more we encountered the bicycle race. As the noon hour approached, we stopped at a small roadside park near the town of “Theux” to enjoy a wonderful picnic, surrounded by dense forest and in full view of the ancient ruins of a 14th century Abbey sitting high on top of the bluff above the village of “Franchimont”, with lovely views of the river and valley below.



As evening approached, we headed back to the hotel in Spa Balmoral. Before dinner, I took a walk through the Ardennes forest surrounding the hotel, and down to a small lake. I returned in time to join the group for a special dinner in a private dining room. We were treated to a fantastic six course dinner that included traditional Peking Duck! Some of the group came dressed in black tie for the occasion. After dinner, several awards were presented, and Goff attempted to take over the bar to make two of his “signature” cocktails, neither of which was a hit! Later, we all adjourned to the lobby lounge for after dinner drinks and dancing to a local old 50’s rock-n-roll band – lots of fun, but I crawled into bed at 1:00am!

The next morning, I had to be up very early to catch the 7:15 am train to Brussels, while still feeling the effects of the night before! At the station in Verviers, I inadvertently boarded the wrong train. Instead of departing for Brussels, it was the sleeper train to Munich, which was very confusing since it had arrived on the track posted for the train to Brussels! By the time I realized I was on the wrong train, it had already departed the station. So, I had to stay on the train for 20 minutes until it reached the next stop in Leige, where I got off and waited for the “right” train to Brussels. It was posted to arrive on track 14, but as soon as I boarded the train on track 14, I quickly realized it was not the train to Brussels! Just

then, another train arrived on the other side of the platform and I figured it must be my train – sure enough! Finally, I was aboard the right train at last. As I took a comfortable seat in the first-class carriage, the beverage trolley came by, which was very fortunate since I was dying for a strong cup of coffee! After half an hour, we arrived at Brussels-Nord station where I retrieved the luggage I had deposited in the “left luggage room” three days earlier before boarding the train to Spa-Balmoral to meet up with Nick and Jiggy. Now with my luggage in hand, I took the train to Brussels airport for the Sabena Airlines flight to London Heathrow airport. From Heathrow, I boarded the “Speedlink” bus to London Gatwick airport in heavy traffic – not exactly “speedy”. Once I arrived at Gatwick airport, I checked in for the Delta Airlines flight to Atlanta and on to Los Angeles. I was questioned for a long time by airport security staff due to the fact I had changed my flight recently, and the many stamps in my passport from countries in the Middle East didn’t help! Finally, I was able to get my boarding pass and an invitation to the Business Class lounge where a cold glass of beer prepared me for the 8 hour flight to Atlanta.

On board the flight, I chose the “lighter fare” from the dinner menu, which turned out to be a fantastic cold plate of seafood, including scallops, shrimp, lobster medallions, and smoked salmon along with fresh garden vegetables and hot sourdough rolls – really delicious! I couldn’t help but notice that the flight attendant who served me was “Julie”, who had served me on the same flight from London to Atlanta back in February, over 8 months earlier. And to make the story even better, she remembered me! We arrived in Atlanta on time and I spent about an hour in the Delta Airlines Crown Room before boarding the flight to Los Angeles. As I sat in the lounge, I reflected back upon all the memories of the trip, from Los Angeles to Singapore, Kathmandu, New Delhi, and the Ardennes forest in Belgium. It had been another amazing trip around the world!!