

Monkey Run 2006, Copenhagen. – Press release.

Rudyard Kipling once wrote, “Oh, to see a monkey run!” The debate still continues as to whether or not he was in fact describing the motions of a small primate or simply daydreaming about the day a team of men would group together to form one of the greatest races known to man – The Monkey Run.

Similarities between a baby chimpanzee reaching adulthood and the Monkey Run are uncanny – both have gone through serious growth spurts in just three years, no longer in nappies, both can run on their own now with very little help and neither enjoy being manhandled or bottle fed by Michael Jackson.

The Monkey Run began back in 2003 with a simple race between two cars – a 1973 875c Hillman Imp and a 1982 4200cc Jaguar XJ6. Rules were simple – buy a car for ‘a monkey’. You would think it didn’t need explaining that ‘a monkey’ is Cockney Rhyming slang for £500 – but try telling that to Edward Burnett who tried to swap a 1979 Ford Anglia with a Black-Tufted Marmoset.

The only other rule, on the purchase of the car, is that the production of the make and model of car must have begun no later than 1980 and of a certain ilk – ideally pieces of old British engineering, Morris Marina, Austin Princess, Allegro and Ambassador. Still confused? Then visit the official Monkey Run website for a detailed list of Monkey Run approved cars. Still confused? Then visit www.lifeasimpleton.com.

It is officially classed as a race – but it’s not all about speed – it’s about endurance. The best way to look at it is like a day job. You’re sat behind your desk (steering wheel), between 8am and 5.30pm traveling as fast as you can without burning out before lunch – trying to keep your mind on the job ahead, but all you can think about is doing the hibberdy-dibberdy with Cassandra in PR. If you do burn out or break down on the Monkey Run – you can’t call in sick – you’ll need to fix it and drive through the night in order to catch up. Moral of the story – endurance is key, slow and steady wins the race. That said, on this year’s Monkey Run there was one scheduled night drive from Nurburgring to Copenhagen in order to make up distance and to add to the all round experience.

The route taken this year covered just over 2100 miles (which incidentally is the exact same length as the width of the centre of the Earth – and could be a possible route for the 2012 Monkey Run) and 6 European countries in total.

The starting line was just outside London and on Saturday morning numbers were drawn from a hat to decide the starting order and the drivers were fed bacon sandwiches and cups of tea. Quite a crowd of enthusiasts turned up to pass their knowledgeable eyes over the cars for the ‘Best in Show’ award and both of them were able to agree on the winner.

The Noon-Day gun was originally booked to mark the start of the race, but they refused to change it to the Eight O'Clock in the Morning gun so it was feared that teams would never have made a midday channel crossing.

Disaster struck early on in the race for team 96, The Flying Teapot. What was initially believed to be a water pump issue turned out to be a major internal engine failure. Team 96, please never come to my house to fix my water pump. The remaining teams all made the campsite outside Lille, where minor adjustments were made to the cars, a b-b-q was scoffed and beers were downed in memory of Team 96's 1972 Saab.

Day two was another early start, but with the promise of a lap around the historic grand prix circuit Nurburgring awaiting competitors nobody had any major problems waking from their slumber. It would have been a completely different story if the teams had been told in advance of the accident which had taken place causing the circuit to be closed and not re-opened until the following day. Always looking for the silver lining of every cloud – the teams retired to the on-site hotel at Nurburgring track side for a good night's sleep, a lie-in and dreams about racing the following day. Nobody quite knew who ordered an alarm call of around a thousand motorbikes racing at 9am, but it soon became apparent that sleeping in wasn't on the cards.

After the escapades on the ring the teams drove the night shift with the aim of reaching Copenhagen in the early hours of the following morning – which basically meant driving nearly 600 cold, dark and wet miles – oh the fun we had. The effort was worth while though as the maximum time between each team at the destination was just two hours.

The wonders of the Hotel Copenhagen Island faced the Monkey runners and they now faced 12 hours to catch up on sleep, sample the local beer or if they fancied play simulator driving games at the local arcade, before heading to the casino donned in dinner jackets and dancing shoes. Bets were placed which would have put the willies up Richard Branson and systems concocted that would have made Stephen Hawkin's head spin. One big winner came away that night – the casino.

It was decided by the amount of alcohol consumed that the following day should be a mid-afternoon start – and the teams headed towards a small village just over the German boarder, 10 miles outside the well known town of Flensburg. The dubious directions given can only explain why car number 1 was the only car to make it to the camp-site and I am sure the fact that they had an onboard satellite navigation system had nothing to do with it. The campsite was perfect, a secluded field, surrounded by trees and a raised bank which meant more cooking by gas stove and mindless chat into the small hours.

The next leg saw car number 78 severely punished by the gods of the road. The aim was to get to the services 15 miles outside Voorst. But you try doing that when you suffer an electrical misfire slowing the car to 50mph, a leaking input shaft seal on the gearbox and a broken throttle cable. If, at this point, three wheels had have blown out car number 78 could have been officially classed as a wheel-barrow. Incredibly car number 78 went from wheel-barrow to monster truck extravaganza. Obviously not packing a spare

throttle cable they used their ingenuity and some chrome trim from around the rear window and attached it to the carburetor. If there was a prize for 'Best Example of Team-Work Shown in Moment of Crisis' car number 78 would have won hands down, as in order to keep their beast running they had one driver in the back actuating the throttle using the chrome trim whilst the other driver sat upfront taking charge of the rest of the controls.

All this was forgotten though as soon as the teams packed into a magnificent country manor house east of Amsterdam and recuperated. Some Monkey Runners even took advantage of the lake, overlooked by the house, and went for an early morning doggie paddle.

Another leisurely breakfast and a 4 hour service window allowed a number of teams to prepare mentally and physically for the run to Amsterdam. The teams were led in convoy on the ring-road Voorst to Amsterdam. Team 38, 'Spank the Monkey' notched up another stage win and now had enough points to win them the coveted title of Monkey Run champions of 2006.

Unfortunately, on arrival in Amsterdam team 3, the Crusaders had a terminal engine mount failure, which resulted in the engine dropping down and sitting on the steering rack! The car was pushed into the garage where the local mechanic helpfully exclaimed, "Ha ha. Stuk van shit, het kijkt alseen auto Flintstone!" – which apparently means, "Ha ha. Piece of shit, it looks like the Flintstone's car!" The Crusaders' crusade had come to an end and the final leg for them would be a towing all the way back to the UK.

The remaining cars all tucked up for the night the teams checked into the centrally located youth hostel in Amsterdam. Being faced with remaining in the hostel rooms, which smelt like a service station toilet, or heading out into one of the most free-spirited, liberal, diverse and tolerant cities in the world – the teams sat and debated what to do for half a second.

The final day can only be classed as a survival of the fittest. The last leg – nurturing tired machines and team mates back to UK mainland. Time of departure depended on how heavy the night before was – you could cut the air of suspense and eagerness with a sledgehammer.

As mentioned at the start though it isn't about speed it's about endurance and I am proud to say that three teams in total made it back to the UK under their own steam. Overall winners were 'Spank the Monkey Racing' with the 2004 champions 'The Sonic Satsuma' runners up.

Needless to say entries are already coming in for next year's Monkey Run which will take the runners into the eastern block with a visit to a casino in Prague and a stop at the Nurburgring on the return journey. For further details, updates and to download your entry form please see our website, www.castaldini.co.uk.