

SALZBURG SPUNK

Sunshine, beautiful roads, a classic car rally, and an AC Cobra.
What more could one ask for?

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A WEIRD MESSAGE POPPED UP ON MY phone a couple of weeks ago: "You're going to Austria next week". At first I shrugged it off as a practical joke. But after double-checking who had sent it, I was sure that it wasn't one. The guy on the other end of that text is a close friend, and I had no doubt that he would have a special reason to ask for my presence in our neighbour country.

Austria is a tiny country, spread around roughly 84,000 sq kilometres and is home to less than 9 million people. But it's a beautiful little country, thanks to its tall mountainous terrain and a picturesque setting. However, what I was more interested in was where in Austria would I be hanging around that week. So I called my friend, and to my utter surprise, he had invited me to a classic car rally which takes place in the tiny city of Salzburg. Not only that, he even offered me the position of co-driver in an original and timelessly beautiful 1965 AC Cobra! Truly, an offer I could not refuse.

A couple of days later I arrived at my friend's place with excitement levels off the roof. But the Cobra was nowhere in sight and I wondered where the trailer carrying the car might be. Finally, it arrived. It was time to load up our stuff, but the Cobra was already almost fully packed. So I squeezed my stuff in every remaining empty corner in the car, and had to leave a major chunk of my luggage behind. I never realized how small a Cobra is until then. It was time to set out on our journey, and I hoped that we would have good weather. Sure, the car does have a top, but the top of a roadster from those ancient ages is pretty much useless.

It's only a 2-hour drive from Munich to Salzburg. The weather, as I hoped for, played its role to perfection and we arrived just in time at our hotel next to Schloss Fuschl, a famous castle, situated on the shore of a picturesque lake, 30km east of Salzburg, embedded between meadows, cow paddocks, green forests, and hills. The landscape was almost too pretty to be true.

Left: Arrived at Schloss Hellbrunn just in time.
Top: Waiting for the start at Kapitelplatz, downtown Salzburg. Right: Last engine checks at the workshop, already on the way to Salzburg.
Below: During the City Grand Prix which is a demonstration run only, based on regularity





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Clockwise from top: Waiting periods are always a good chance to talk to old friends, like Otto Schömann (left) who took part in our own event last year; Mercedes SSK – an almost unbeatable car when new in 1929: 6 cyl., 7 Liters, 147hp; important and rare Ferrari Barchetta racecar; Red Bull Promotion Monster on Dodge Ram; 1938 Lagonda V12 Le Mans behind a tiny Simca Rallye 2 from 1972

The rally program informed us that we have to be at the drivers briefing at noon the next day in the castle. Of course, we assumed it to be the castle next door but when we went there before time, we couldn't find anybody. After carefully reading the program again, we realised that they are talking about another castle, Schloss Hellbrunn, at the southern end of Salzburg! After having the pleasure of driving the AC Cobra for about 60km in the morning, my friend took over as we rushed over to the right spot. Call it luck, but almost every traffic light we encountered was green-lit and we managed to arrive sharp at 11:59am.

Getting our credentials, signing the disclaimers, and the rest of the formalities took up a mere five minutes, so we had enough time for a cool drink after that. The thermometer hit an unusually high 30 degrees when the whole convoy of classic cars finally headed to downtown Salzburg. Police officers closed the roads for us, and we reached a square with hundreds of tourists. But instead of starting with the first event, a race in the middle of the city, we had to wait for over





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an hour. We later learnt that the delay was caused because of an abandoned suitcase lying around and the police had to make sure that it wasn't a bomb. This break gave us the chance to interact with enthusiasts interested in the Cobra. They were inquisitive about its originality. "Yes, the car is original, not a replica. And yes, this really makes a difference: of about 6,50,000 Euros!" The Cobra has a Ford V8 engine with about 350 horsepower, which is not bad at a weight of only 950kg.

Clockwise from top left: Sandglass precision; our AC Cobra on the trailer with broken front wheel bearing; one of several Abarth race cars; mascot of an Austro Daimler overlooking the street while the Salzburg Fort overlooks the city in the background; traffic jam before the hillclimb; impressive, naturally ventilated intakes and outlets of a V8

Thanks to our super accurate stopwatch, we managed to drive every lap in more or less the same time. The results showed one round which we finished 24th (out of about 150), just using this funny sandglass. You might've guessed by now that we didn't really give much thought on these regularity tests – we take part just because of how fun it is to drive an old car together with like-minded people. I remember a shop window with a decoration sign saying, "Time does not exist. Only watches." After passing this sign thrice I was convinced that this sign was really there. How true and congenial in this situation!

The next day began with the hillclimb. At one point in history, the Gaisbergrennen was a real race for cars and motorcycles, but those days are now long gone. For us, it was just a regularity drive. We could enjoy the hillclimb thrice and thankfully for us, the rain had stopped. We had dry roads and sunny skies again. After lunch, we started a 150km trip with several checkpoints and special stages, but after 2km we heard some noise from the front wheels. A closer inspection of the car showed us that the left wheel bearing was damaged. We decided to quit because we didn't want to risk such a valuable car just for a fun event. After 30 minutes, the organizers sent out a trailer which picked the car up. And in the end, I had to call my wife to pick us up.

It was an absolutely fantastic experience, and one that wouldn't be leaving my memory any time soon. In fact, I often find myself staring at my phone hoping for another message to flash on the screen! 📱

