

40th anniversary of Pyla dune ascent by 2CV Sahara 4X4

Sands of time and our favourite toy

By Alan Brown
alan.brown@free.fr

Foreword

I started primary school in the September of that year. I learned my first three words of French - ("Général-de-Gaulle") and my first three words of Russian ("Yuri-Ga-ga-rin"). I remember my first visit to the dentist, after Alice Allsop's sweetshop supplied me with a swizzel lolly which removed two front teeth in an accident involving a tea tray and a sand dune in Wales...

Those of us whose biological form was other than DNA, ovum or embryo at the time will have some impressions of summer forty years ago. Odds on- if you were a kid -are that two of the memories, hidden there in the recesses of your mind, will be sand and your favourite toy.

1961. 2CV to the summit; Motoring history in the making.



Summer sunrise through the pine forest west of Bordeaux. Smoke from a campfire is drifting towards a green canvas ridge tent. The smell of coffee wakes its inhabitants.

A 2CV is parked nearby. Not just any 2CV. Even a casual observer would notice that this one looks different. The tyres are those of a DS. Its bodywork seems to be higher off the ground. The rear wings are cut away in a sweep which is almost elegant, and in each of the front doors there is a neat hole which appears to give access to a petrol tank.

The campfire is now crackling, and a Continental Edison "Radioën" long-wave radio is switched on. The seven o'clock *France Inter* news bulletin informs the listener that it is 21st of July 1961, and has reports of a worsening situation in Algeria. There is also a report that Virgil Grissom is due today to become the second American in space. The news editor, perhaps wryly, adds that a Russian cosmonaut, who back in April had become the first person to orbit the earth, last week had lunch with the young Queen Elizabeth of England.

The group of Citroën technicians, drivers and a press photographer gather around the vehicle to discuss the plans for the day. If all goes according to plan, the 2CV "Sahara 4X4" would make motoring history this day by becoming the first vehicle to climb Europe's highest sand dune.

In the background, the sand of the Pyla dune rises in an almost vertical wall. Behind it, a kilometre away, is the Bay of Biscay. The rising sun casts a giant, receding shadow westwards over the glimmering water.

A solitary figure looks out from the top of the dune. The half hour climb to the summit has left him exhausted yet elated. From a height of 100 metres, he looks back at his receding footsteps. The dune stretches almost 3 kilometres to the north in a series of gentle peaks and cols. It sifts down to the campsite, encroaching inexorably inland a few millimetres each day.

There is not a breath of wind. From his vantage point, the watcher hears from far below the unmistakable sound of a 2CV starter motor, then the rasp of a 425cc engine. The engine quieters to

a regular idle. There is a second burst of starter motor, longer and more laboured. Then a second engine coughs into life in a manner reminiscent of a forty-a-day Gauloise smoker. He looks downward in the direction of the two idling engines.



The Dune de Pyla

Two engines, one car. *"Tout est normal"...*

He smiles, relishing the challenge of the waking day, and begins his descent towards his colleagues and the waiting coffee.

2001 Early spring - Getting to the Permit.

From the office window in the countryside outside Nantes in western France, I watch the woodpecker breakfasting on an ant colony on the trunk of the ash tree, while the computer hums and buzzes into life.

"Vous avez du courrier" says the digitalized stereo female voice of the Email server. There is a message from Steve Hill and Kathryn Dodington.

Could I contact the local authorities near Arcachon and help them obtain permission to drive some of the remaining 2CV Saharas to the top of the Pyla dune 40 years on....?

Their enthusiasm is infectious. One phone call later and I agree to take what I know will be a prolonged plunge with them into the murky waters of Gallic administrative procedures. Contact with French 2CV enthusiasts in the Bordeaux area immediately reveals that they are sceptical; The dune is a protected site, you'll never get the OK from the local Mairie, other 4WD clubs are always refused access...

Three months later, from the cocktail of faxes, phonecalls, emails and letters, we are able to distill the one piece of paper needed, (from the new Maire of the town, a closet 2CV enthusiast it transpires...sometimes you need a lucky break as well as patience and determination.) Machiavellian behind-the-scenes activities from campsite owner Lionel play no small part in securing the document.

Steve and Kathryn have been working with Peter Wibmer in Austria, and confirm that a meeting will take place at the dune in April.

The letter of authority gives permission to park on the dune near the campsite for the duration of the meeting. We decide that this can be interpreted more widely as a nod from the authorities. Fingers crossed that we will have no objections from the Gendarmerie, the rescue services or the Forestry department.

2001 - last week-end in April - 2CV's Return to the summit.

Sunday morning, and a grinning Steve Hill is able to hold aloft the magical piece of paper at the base camp of the Dune de Pyla. Smiles all round from fellow French, British, Austrian, German, Spanish, Australian and other enthusiasts. Some have brought their Saharas westwards across the European

continent to take part in this historical commemoration. Others have driven twin-engined 2CV's for hour after hour down from northern off-shore islands, braving headwinds and adverse French motorway tolls. The regional 2CV 4WD club has made it, after changing their planned club week-end in the Pyrenean snowfields.

The vehicles are warmed up and ready to attempt the climb. The story goes that the original team back in 1961 took 3 days to complete the climb. This could prove to be quite a challenge.



Little Maxime Boulanger is 5 years old and is taking a close look at the vehicles. The presence of a few children, and their mums and dads adds to the family atmosphere which the event has taken on. He is all prepared for the climb; he's wearing bright yellow wellington boots and is carrying a blue spade. Maxime's great - great uncle was also named Boulanger and 2CV enthusiasts around the world will be familiar with the name.

Alongside the four original Sahara 4WD's are Kathryn's beautiful Sahara, fresh from the Aussie outback, Steve's twin engined AK400, and four Voisin 2CV 4WD's. Maxime checks them all out and tells his mum he likes Kathryn's best, with its stripey seats. Each of these vehicles would make the subject of its own novel.

Plans for the ascent are carefully discussed in two languages, and the following two hours fly by in a whirl of sand, bursts of laughter and photo calls. All of the vehicles make it to the top of the dune.

Instructions in two languages



2001 – Following in the 1961

Driving techniques evolve rapidly, and nobody becomes sand-bogged for too long; The recipe seems to be to let down the tyres to low pressure, to keep vehicle weight down and engine power on. Some of us drive down and back up again, passing a group of blind marathon runners in a scene straight out of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.



Shovel, Sahara and Sand

Over lunch afterwards, we raised a glass to Maxime's great-great uncle whose vision of a simple, lightweight and affordable car had given so much pleasure to four generations of 2CV owners and enthusiasts and their kids.



2001 again – the line up at the top of the

Two of the Voisin drivers make the last part of the descent to the base camp via what appears to be from the base, a vertical wall of sand.

Watching them, I am transported back to my 1961 summer holidays as a newly toothless five year-old, with recollections of sliding down a Welsh sand dune on a tea tray with my little sister.

The whole week-end was great. It was worth the three-month long hack through the jungle of paperwork. Those who drove the 2,500 kilometre round trip from Vienna or London had smiles at the top of the dune which said it all.

Thank-you Monsieur Boulanger, for our favourite toy, and thanks to all involved for the fun with the sand.

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More photos of the Dune de Pyla event are available at :

<http://lehrer.freepage.de/wibmer/sahara.html>

<http://www.citroen.ac>