

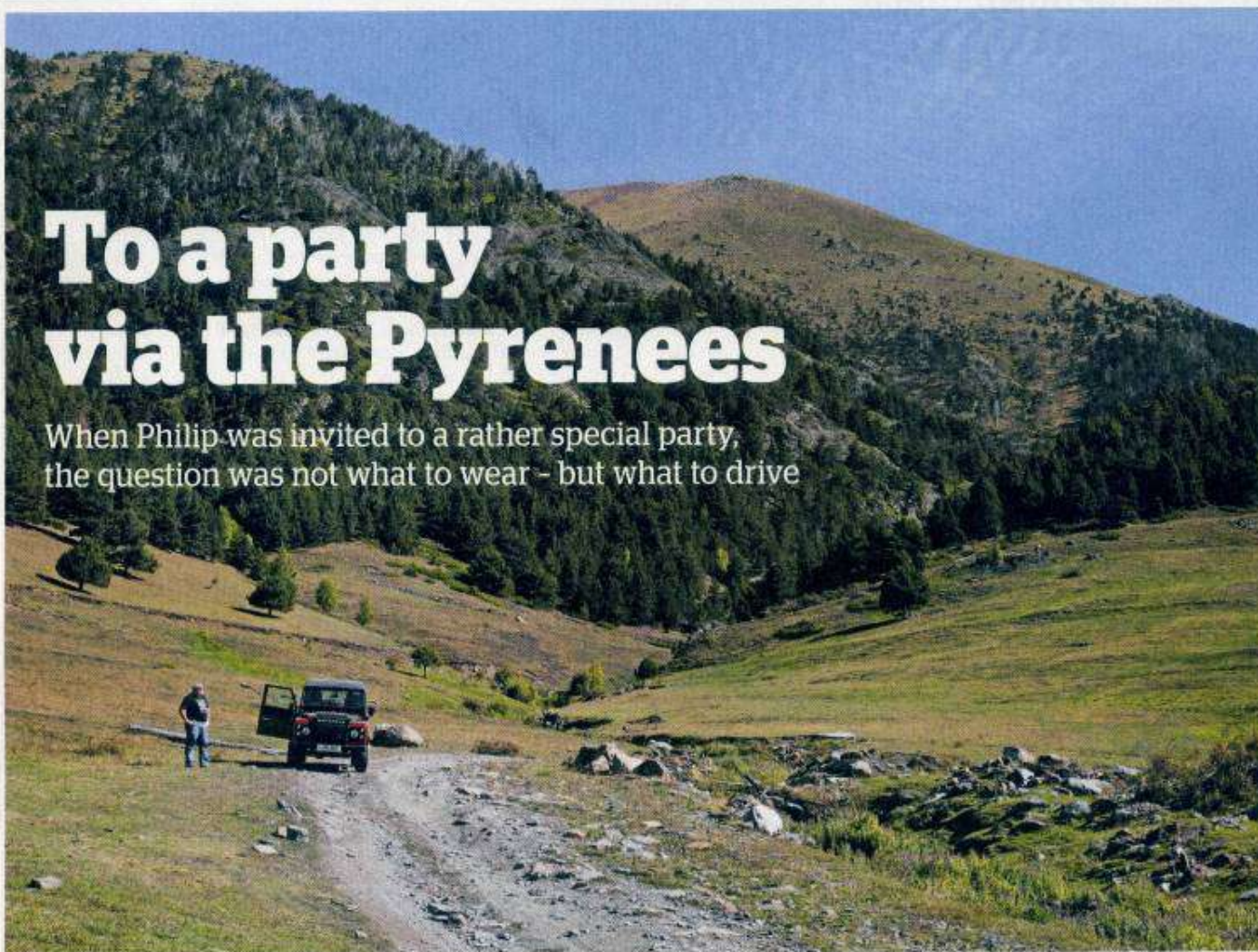
DUNSFOLD DIARIES

With Philip Bashall



To a party via the Pyrenees

When Philip was invited to a rather special party, the question was not what to wear – but what to drive



I CONFESS that I'd never heard of the Land Rover Party at Les Comes, Spain, until David Sneath – who is someone very high-up in Jaguar Land Rover's Drive Experience programme – mentioned it to me at the Goodwood Festival of Speed. "Why don't you come along?" he said. Thinking it would be good way to get myself behind the wheel of some modern Land Rovers, I was keen to accept. Then he told me that the rule is that everyone on the trip has to bring a vehicle that they personally own – no company cars allowed!

The plan was for a bunch of JLR employees, plus a few invited 'friends of the brand', to drive their Land Rovers from the UK to Les Comes, on the eastern side of Spain near Andorra, for the 12th running of the big party that's held there

every year. Les Comes is a bit like a Spanish version of Eastnor: lovely old stone buildings set in hundreds of acres of rolling hills and home to a Land Rover Experience Centre, but with a lot more sunshine! The Land Rover Party is an off-roader's paradise and is basically an enormous pay 'n' play event held over a long weekend, but with more emphasis on the social side. This year, of course, being the 70th anniversary of Land Rover, it promised to be rather special.

Our drive out to Spain wasn't an official JLR-organised trip, although it did have the company's blessing in that its PR manager, Kim Palmer, would be part of it in his own end-of-line HUE Defender. I had been intending to take my daily-driver Discovery 4 but Kim suggested it might be an idea to use something rather more interesting. I suspect he was hoping

that I would bring one of the Dunsfold Collection's historic Series I or IIs, but knowing the distance involved and the timescale, I thought 'blow that for a game of soldiers!' Instead, I decided to use Dunsfold's 90 Autobiography, pictured above. This was a special run-out edition to mark the end of Defender production in early 2016, and I was lucky enough to secure the registration L316 DEF for it – L316 being the internal code number for a late-model Defender. Before Les Comes, L316 DEF had fewer than 1500 miles on the clock, and I thought a nice little run would do it good!

There were about a dozen vehicles in our Land Rover convoy, most of them Defenders but also including a nicely-restored three-door Range Rover Classic and a CVC Range Rover P38A. Undoubted star of the show, however, was Rob



Santana-built Forward Control is a rare sight



Les Comes' Isa Kroger shares a joke with Philip



Camel Trophy Freeland takes to the stage

Sprason's 1948 Series I, pictured top right, which he drove out from Warwickshire with his Aussie mate and business partner, Alex Massey. One of the very first batch of vehicles sent out to Australia, it spent its life on a sheep station and was discovered by Rob after he tracked down the family that bought it new in the 1940s. Now mechanically rebuilt but otherwise in totally original condition, it simply flies along and it put many of the tricked-up modern Defenders to shame on the off-road courses at Les Comes. It's still hard to beat a well-driven, bog-standard Series I.

Having crossed from Portsmouth to Bilbao, on the west coast of Spain, we split the long drive across the country into two days so that we could take in the mountain trail known as the Smuggler's Route across the Pyrenees. Steve Purvis showed us the way in his 110 and, despite fears beforehand that there might actually be snow on the peaks, you can see from the photo of me with L316 on the opposite page that we had an easy drive thanks to hot and dry weather. It was spectacularly beautiful, too, the rocky track hugging the side of the mountains as we descended towards Andorra.



Rob Sprason's 1948 Series I was driven out from Warwickshire – and home again – without a problem



Two special Defenders: Dunsfold's 90 Autobiography and Kim Palmer's end-of-line HUE tribute

Les Comes also proved to be scenic, but a lot more challenging – or rather, it was as challenging as you wanted it to be. The organisers had marked out the trails in degrees of severity, from dusty tracks to severe rock crawls. Kim and I, in our pristine end-of-line Defenders, had to be a little more cautious than we would otherwise have been in a Land Rover, but we managed to complete nearly every track we tackled, and with no damage whatsoever. It was very hot and very dusty, though, so I was glad to have the benefit of air con in the Autobiography!

The evenings at Les Comes are when everyone gets together to eat and drink, a real United Nations of enthusiasts; not just from Spain, but from most of the other countries in Europe. On the Friday night, a parade of a few of the more interesting vehicles was organised, and I was asked to say a few words. The warm weather encourages everyone to socialise long into the night, and despite the number of people there, it's very much 'the right crowd and no crowding'.

While off-roading is what Les Comes is all about, there are lots of side-attractions too, including a display area for classic Land Rovers. Here I spotted something I'd never seen before in the metal – a Forward Control Santana (pictured top left). We don't have a Santana in the Dunsfold Collection and I confess that if this one had a For Sale sign in the window, I would have found it hard to resist. I was also surprised to see a 1997 UK-registered but Spanish-owned Camel Trophy Freeland. This one actually was for sale, but I deliberately didn't seek out the owner because I suspect I would have ended up doing a deal...

The drive home was uneventful and L316 DEF performed flawlessly over 1200 miles. Would I go back to Les Comes again? Yes, I would, but perhaps next time I'll take Dunsfold's Fifty 50 Challenge Wolf 110, nicknamed Goldilocks, and I'll sleep in the roof tent and tow a trailer with a Series I on the back. After all, if you're going all that way, why not take two vehicles rather than one?

THE DUNSFOLD Collection is not yet open to the public but is hoping to establish a permanent museum. You can help make that a reality by becoming a Friend of the Collection for an annual subscription of £35. Visit dunsfoldcollection.co.uk to find out more.