

Classic tours

Make the most of your classic by joining a tour, either in the UK or abroad. There's something for all budgets and no limit to what you might discover en route.



Few things can beat the feeling of escaping in a classic car for a few days. The open road, the nostalgia; it's the perfect tonic. But where do you go and what do you do? Some classic car owners are happy to just get in the car and drive, making things up as they go along; others might spend weeks planning the ideal route. But there's a raft of companies out there which will do everything for you, and it needn't cost a fortune. Indeed, some of the cheaper ones could even save you money.

Sarah Dowding set up Classic Travelling in 2003. She says: "I bought a Morgan in 1997 and wasn't especially taken by some of the trips being organised back then, so I decided to set up my own company which would allow classic car owners to get much more out of their trips, whether in the UK or overseas. I organise trips for clubs, groups and individuals, with destinations throughout the UK, mainland Europe and even the US."

Sarah's customers tend to be towards the top end of the market, as they pay up to £6000 for a couple of weeks in Europe. Autumn next year will also see a three-week tour of New England, likely to cost around \$12,000, with car owners also having to stump up the cost of shipping their car to America. Sarah adds: "For some this is the trip of a lifetime, but for many it's their holiday for the year. My aim is

to make sure that nothing is left to chance, so I drive the route at least twice, picking only the best hotels and ensuring that only the most scenic roads are driven. The best hotels aren't necessarily the most costly – they're the ones that best offer a flavour of the country in which they're based, while they must also have great food and other facilities. It's no good leaving these things to chance; you don't want to get home then find that you've just missed out on stopping by at a great attraction or you could have stayed in a much better hotel if only you'd put in a bit more legwork. I also keep entry numbers down to under 20. That way all entrants can get to know each other and there's more of a sense of camaraderie."

As Sarah puts it, her aim is to "remove the hassle and guesswork" of touring in a classic car, but not everyone can afford to fork out a lot of money for their tour. If so far you're rather alarmed by the costs associated with classic tours, it needn't be at all costly. Jonathon Bowles runs Continental Car Tours, which offers much cheaper trips to a stack of destinations in Europe. The company runs around 30 trips each year, virtually all in mainland Europe.

Rather than lengthy, costly trips, Continental Car Tours offers a raft of affordable excursions which are often little more than a (not so) long weekend. As

a result they're much more affordable, with prices starting at just £179 per person, including Channel crossings and accommodation. Says Jonathan: "Many classic car owners want to explore what Europe has to offer, but many are on a budget. To them, driving further afield is more important than staying in an amazing hotel, so our accommodation tends to be fairly basic but always comfortable and with decent facilities. Our most popular event is the Laon Historic in May; this year we sent almost 400 cars, with each entrant paying just £199 apiece. That money includes entry to the event, Channel crossings plus three nights' accommodation; with prices like that, our customers can afford to do several events a year rather than just the one."

If even Jonathan's prices sound a little on the high side, there is another option – the purchase of a route book through a company such as Classic Travelling. Sarah Dowding once more: "Having put in hundreds of hours to work out the best routes, venues and attractions it seemed a shame not to offer such a wealth of information to classic car owners who might want to go at a time that suited them best. Not everyone wants to join a larger group with a fixed itinerary, and the route books are the perfect solution. They cover a multitude of British routes as well as many in Europe and even

South Africa. Prices start at £45 and if you don't have a suitable classic for the drive, we can even supply one through one of the hire companies that we work with."

But what if you want to travel further afield? If you reckon that touring in Europe isn't nearly adventurous enough you'll want to make a bee-line for Classic Car Journeys, which offers some of the most exciting trips in some of the most fascinating destinations. Its Classic India, Classic Himalaya and Classic Africa packages are some of the most amazing excursions you'll find anywhere, at any price.

Set up by Steve McCullagh, Classic Car Journeys explores parts of the globe that others fail to reach. He comments: "This year will see the sixth running of our Classic India trip in October, which is an amazing experience. Participants drive Hindustan Ambassadors across hot arid plains and up and over the Western Ghat mountains, visiting wild life reserves, old British hill stations and tea plantations, passing through some of India's most beautiful scenery. The event is totally non-competitive with reasonable time built into each day to stop

and sightsee. Each participant is provided with a route book which is clear and easy to follow. Each year we have several participants who have never taken part in an event of this kind. Despite the fact that for them, it is a completely new experience, they always love it. I have a wonderful team supporting me and we all work very hard to ensure you have an unforgettable time."

If you're tempted, you'll need to find £1975 plus your flights to India and back – or you could splash out a similar amount on the same outfit's Classic Himalaya journey, which runs in March 2012. At £2250 per person for the two-week trip, it's great value, but out of reach for many. If that's you, the firm's £900 run round Europe in September may be more suitable. Because as with all these events, it's not about the cost or even necessarily about the destination. It's about getting out there in your classic, and driving.

Richard Dredge
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The key players

Classic Car Journeys: www.classiccarjourneys.co.uk
Classic Car Tours International: www.classiccartoursinternational.co.uk
Classic Travelling: www.classictravelling.com
Continental Car Tours: www.continentalcartours.co.uk
Country Lane Tours: www.countrylanetours.co.uk
European Routes for Leisure: www.erlevents.com