

# Student Gumball Rally 2006

In September whilst people across the country were battling their way through the clearing process, finishing off their summer jobs and generally preparing and packing for the new academic year, 500 students drove across Europe in the first ever Student Gumball Rally. **Nathan Millward** was one such adventurer.

I love driving, I love cars, I love being a student, so three months ago when I stumbled across a website for the first ever Student Gumball Rally, I gathered the troops and booked our place.

The premise was simple; over 150 teams, made up of 500 students, all competing for a £1,000 prize on a six day motoring adventure across Europe. At the end of the 1,500 mile journey lay Croatia, and the mother of all parties in the coastal resort of Zadar. It sounds easy, yet with the route snaking through Cologne, Prague, Budapest and Zagreb, this was to be as big a test of man and machine as these students were ever likely to face.

Drawing inspiration from the original Gumball Rally, where new moneyed rich boys hoon across America or Europe in an assortment of high powered supercars, the twenty-something graduate organiser thought it time the student population of Great Britain got in on the act. If you've seen epic '80's driving movies such as Cannonball Run or Smokey and the Bandit, you'll have some idea of what's about to transpire.

The adventure began at Dover town hall under a blue September sky. Pulling into the half empty car park we were apprehensive, then without warning all hell broke loose. From nowhere an endless wave of flamboyantly decorated student cars descended upon the town, shattering the peace and waking it from its slumber. You couldn't move for tatty superminis and well polished German saloons, yet for novelty value, the fully functioning hearse, black London cab and 6-litre American Town Car had the others licked.

With registration over and Student Gumball stickers applied, it was time to hit the road. For some however, it looked like this could be the start and end of the journey. Gushing fluid as it arrived at the dockside, the hearse

looked like it had carried its last corpse. Fortunately, the automotive reaper spared it this time and with a cough and a splutter it was back in business. One thing's for sure; Dover never has, nor ever will see anything quite like it again.

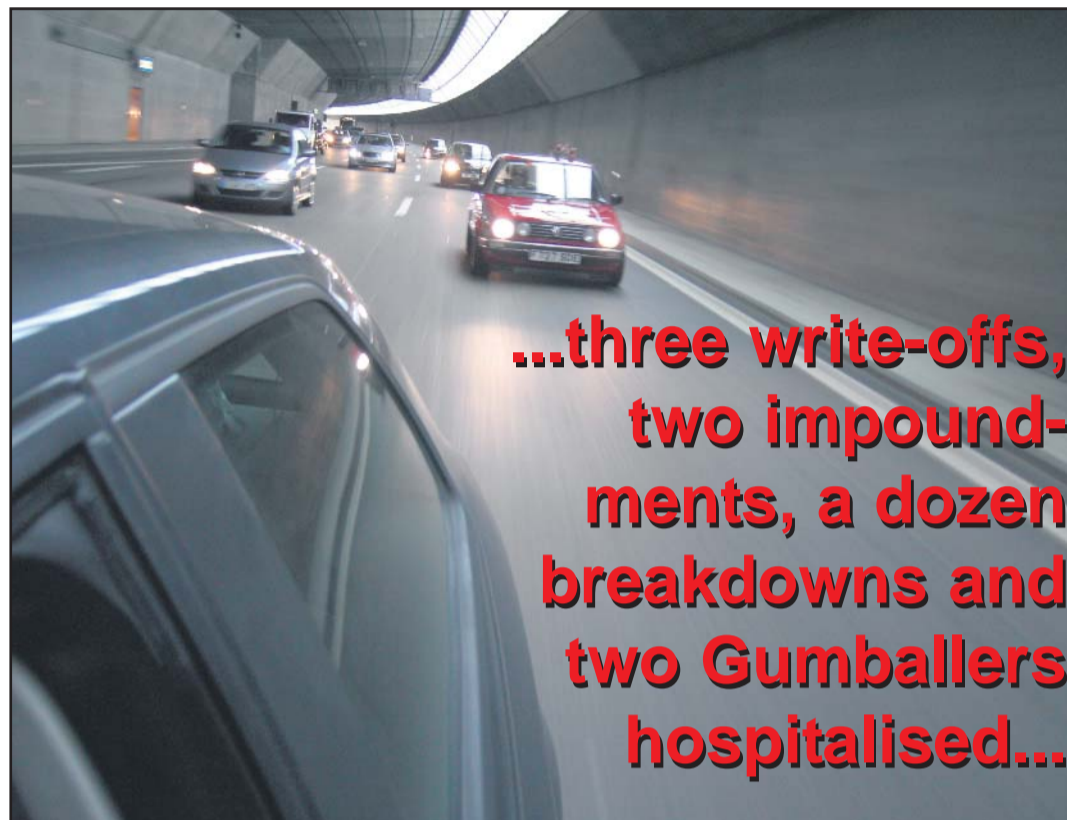
To the other holidaymakers on the ferry that day I can only apologise, for as the Mexican wave of car horns and klaxons ricocheted around the hull, they must have wished they'd taken the shuttle. For the Gumballers however, this was just the start, for as the cargo doors swung open in mainland Europe, the wave of colour and noise that erupted from the hull was immediate. With Calais brought to a standstill, the image of French cheering on English is one I'll never forget.

The journey started with a 250-mile dash through France, Belgium, Holland and into Germany for the first stopover in Cologne. With no drama to delay our progress we were soon nudging the city's outskirts and contemplating a night sleeping in the car. Foolishly, we'd failed to book any accommodation and as we went from one 'full' hotel sign to the next, our lackadaisical approach to planning was proving idiotic in the extreme. Teaming up with two other teams we finally found a bed in the next town. A quick shower and a taxi back into Cologne and we were soon partying with the rest of the Gumballers in the city's gothic centre.

As morning broke, the reality of the 400-mile journey to the Czech capital of Prague kicked in. Equivalent to driving from London to Edinburgh, for this bunch of weary travellers the task was mammoth.

Having started well, day two soon went down hill, and fast. Picking up signs for Nürnberg, we ventured off the highway to take in a few laps of the town's legendary race circuit. After an hour of U-turns and puzzled head-scratching it took a map-reader with a most basic grasp of English to realise the track was 200 miles west at Nürnberg, not Nürnberg. A vowel and a consonant have never caused so much havoc. By the time the error was spotted we were stuck in a traffic jam and going nowhere.

Little did we know



the guys in the convoy ahead were in an even tighter pickle. Clocked at 151kph as the unrestricted Autobahn joined an 80kph single carriageway, the speeders were relieved of 190 Euros, led away to the local police station and had their car impounded for the night. The end of their Gumball? No chance. With seats to spare we lead the convoy to their rescue.

With the speeders on board - they would return the next day by taxi - we headed for the Czech border and what turned out to be a rather unpleasant run-in with the border guard. Having taken issue with our travel documents we were left with no option but bribery. So, with 48 cans of Red Bull energy drink the deal was done and we were on our way. Welcome to Eastern Europe.

With nightfall marking our arrival, we descended on Prague, the city of a thousand spires and a place where stunning architecture sits atop a more sinister underbelly. Compared to the cheery, well-groomed face of Cologne, Prague by night wears a pockmarked scowl that demands caution, although with the party in full flow that was the least of our concerns. We weren't the only ones with a story to tell. Leaking petrol tanks patched up with tape, broken cars abandoned at the roadside and

a team having to drive all the way from Cologne to Prague with no windscreen, were just some of the stories to emerge over a round of beers.

Day three and with Prague soon a speck in the rear view mirror it got surreal. An overturned lorry had brought the carriageway to a standstill and there, amongst the queuing traffic, three student Gumballers were playing golf from atop their minibus. Even the locals were amused. With the traffic finally cleared, it wasn't long before we were in Hungary and on our way to bribing our second officer of the law. We'd failed to purchase a mandatory local tax disc and so the policeman wanted us to return the next day and each pay a 150 Euro fine. We just wanted to get to Budapest, so with a fresh 50 Euro note we waved goodbye to another corrupt official.

If only negotiating the streets of Budapest was as easy. Lost and with only a crumpled map for guidance, the crossroads in the centre of town called for an imme-

diated decision. As navigator I should have had the answer, but I didn't. Then, from out of nowhere, the Gumball hearse, driven by Elvis and co-piloted by Jimi Hendrix, rocketed through the junction, left to right. That was our cue to follow and in no time we were jockeying for position in the hotel car park with the rest of the Gumballers.

With the sinful side of Prague still lodged in my memory I didn't have high hopes for Budapest, yet I couldn't have been wider of the mark. A stunning city with a hard working population clearly proud of its visual and cultural splendour, Budapest is somewhere I certainly hope to return to, although at the time, my only concern was squeezing into the cowboy outfit I'd prepared for the night's fancy dress theme. Yehhaha!

The morning of the fourth day soon came and as we peeled ourselves from our beds it felt like someone had been messing with the space-time continuum. Was it really only 96 hours since we were in the shadows of Dover's white cliffs? With so much driving and partying crammed in to that short space of time it felt like we'd been on the road for a month. With the cobwebs desperately in need of a clear out, the offer to make the day's 200-mile journey to Zagreb in the passenger seat of a convertible MINI was too good to miss.

Blazing into Croatia behind the flashing neon's of a police escort, kindly arranged by the Croatian Minister for Tourism, we felt like kings. And with the authorities happy to set the pace at twice the legal limit, we pointed the MINI at Zagreb and floored it.

Crossing into Croatia doesn't just signal the point at which two nationalities draw their boundaries, instead it marks the point at which Western Europe's flat, greyscale landscape is replaced by a world of lush forested mountains and never ending valleys that zig-zag all the way to the Adriatic. It's just a shame the Zagreb taxi driver wasn't as awestruck by our attempts to haggle over the inflated tourist fares as we were by his native land.

I'd like to report that the night in the Croatian capital was a dignified and orderly affair but I'd be lying. With too little sleep, free-flowing local beer and a lakeside nightclub, there was only ever going to be one outcome. I could argue we were crocodile hunting in a tribute to Steve Irwin, but the reality is that we were a little drunk and thought it a good idea to swim. It wasn't.

The final day of driving and with no borders to cross and a straightforward drive to the coast, it was left to a bowl of the local goulash to create a scene. Dog, cat or any other star

of *Animal Hospital*, who knows, but the meat was still on the bone and had the look of roadkill. Not surprisingly, it had the taste to match the looks.

With the local cuisine making uneasy progress through my digestive system, we were soon in Zadar and pitching tent on the shores of the sun-kissed Adriatic Sea. Described by some as Croatia's answer to Ibiza - maybe in 20 years time when us Brits have conquered it with roast beef dinners and 'kiss me quick hats' - Zadar is a charming seaside resort with wealth oozing from the porthole of every moored yacht and off-shore luxury cruiser. Judging by the headlines of the local newspaper - positive I hasten to add - the townsfolk had been expecting us. Whether the holidaymakers on the campsite knew they would soon be penned in by 500 boisterous UK students is another matter.

After five days on the road, there was now time to reflect on a journey that had taken us from one side of Europe to the other. With so much ground to cover we may have missed most of the sights and experienced only pockets of local cultures, yet that was a small price to pay for the privilege of journeying with 499 like minded individuals on a carnival across Europe. It hadn't gone without incident. There had been three write-offs, two impoundments, a dozen breakdowns and two Gumballers hospitalised, yet the camaraderie amongst the students was like nothing else. The eventual winners, 'Maximum Craic', were not the team who crossed the finish line first, they were the team who stopped at every opportunity to tow and repair more than a dozen stricken teams along the 1,500-mile journey. The £1,000 prize was rightfully theirs.

With the batteries recharged it was time to head home. Having said farewell to good friends, strangers six days earlier, we plotted our course and hit the road. Driving through the night, we cut up through Slovenia, Austria, then across the border to Germany and into France, making the Sunday morning ferry to Dover in time for breakfast. Drained of energy, lacking in sleep and needy of a decent meal, we were all exhausted, yet in no doubt that we'd just enjoyed one of the best weeks of our lives. Student Gumball 2007 can't come soon enough.

[studentgumballrally.com](http://studentgumballrally.com)

