

My Return to Motor Sport's Circuits of Competition.

A Monthly Series

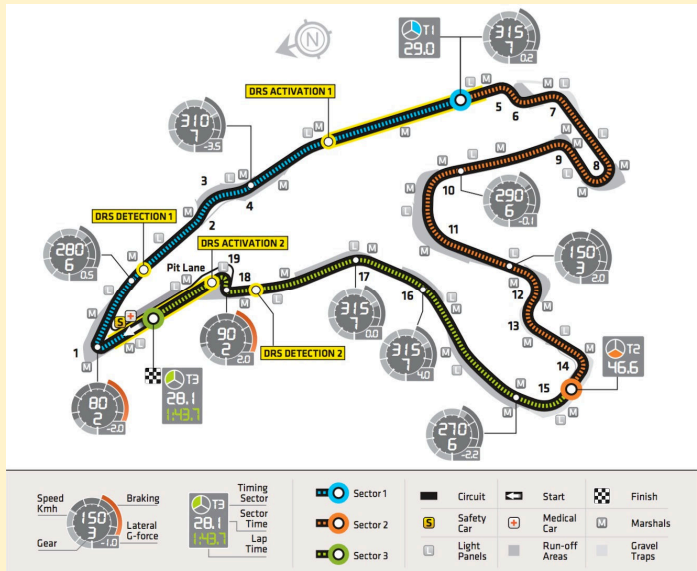
By Geoffrey 'Grumpy' O'Connell. 2019 Part 10

Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps, Spa, Belgium. From the circuit distances by car are as follows: Liege City 50km/31 miles; Brussels 140km/87 miles; and Ostend Port 259.42km/161 miles. The N62 and N640 roads route into Francorchamps village which is at the top, north end of the

original triangular circuit completed in 1921. The 14.98km/9.31 miles layout was agreed at a meeting held at the 'Hotel des Bruyeres' in Francorchamps. At that get-together were Jules de Their, the owner of the Liege City newspaper 'La Meuse', Baron Joseph de Crawhez, the burgomaster of Spa town, and the racing car driver Henri Langlois van Ophem.

Incidentally, although in the year 2016 the hotel (which had been renamed 'Francorchamps Racing Hotel') was closed the building is still in situ. The course of the very fast track was simple. The start (and finish) line was at 'La Source', Francorchamps, from whence it followed the existing road clockwise into a left-hand bend called the 'Eau Rouge' (due to a red coloured stream that flows there) and onto a hairpin named 'L'Ancienne

Douane' (after a German Empire customs post that stood there until 1920). The term 'Raidillon' did not come into being until 1939 when the track was altered to cut-out the hairpin which was slowing down the speed of the racing cars. I hope readers are 'hanging in' here!



Once beyond that name-confusing section the original circuit swept on round past the Burnenville village bank and Malmedy City and on to the town of Stavelot where the route swept back up to 'La Source' at Francorchamps.

The first motor race was to be held there in August 1921 but due to an almost total lack of entrants the proposed event was changed to a motorcycle race.

Motor racing commenced in 1922. Over the decades the course of the circuit has been considerably altered up until 2007. Since the modern '*Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps*' was laid out for the 1981 season alterations to the track have been relatively minimal. They only resulted in adjustments to the course lengths of: 6.97km/4.3 miles; 7km/4.35 miles; 6.98km/4.34 miles; and since 2007 a circuit of 7km/4.35 miles. The venue is regarded by a number of racing drivers as the finest in the Western world and Stirling Moss believed that '*Spa-Francorchamps*' was the greatest European motor racing track and that included '*Autodromo Nazionale Monza*' and '*Nurburgring*' circuit. And to tell the truth and so, say all of us.



Without doubt the best value place at which to stay is the somewhat quirky, family run 'Hotel Beau Site' which has a good restaurant and a bar. It is located in the village of Hockai, some 8km from the circuit, north of Francorchamps and off to the right of the A27/E42 road. Apart from the 15 bedrooms, with en-suite

bathrooms, there are two 4/5-person apartments. To the front of the hotel is a chestnut tree shaded greensward with tables and chairs. It may not be the 'Ritz Hotel' but it is excellent value and very welcoming.

It goes without reporting that 'our man' of whom I have made previous references caused a stomach-tightening moment one-year en-route to the '*Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps*'. From previous experience I well knew that the centre of Brussels, let alone the outskirts, is to be avoided at all costs. However, on that occasion the 'menace' was driving and despite my earnest pleas to bypass the city he knew best. Not only did he manage to get our

long wheelbase, high roof van and the trailer into the centre of the city but somehow, he managed to drive us into the old medieval quarter of the place. That is where the streets are so narrow and convoluted that driving a saloon car is difficult, let alone a large and long rig. And there was no-way we could back out. As would be expected once in the mire he decided to hand

over the driving! So there we were, not only deep into an almost impossible to drive street system but by then lost. I recall I stopped outside an extremely smart, upmarket hotel and enquired of the behatted and uniformed flunky which way we had to go to achieve our objective of getting the 'what's-its name' out of the 'Middle Ages' predicament.

Fortunately the footman spoke some English and was most helpful. And yes, we did extricate ourselves – just.

Whilst at the 'Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps' if you have time to spare it makes a worthwhile trip to head slightly west of Stavelot town to the villages of La Gleize and Petit-Coo. These settlements, and nearby Stavelot and Malmedy, are where the late WW2

German offensive, 'The Battle of the Bulge' (16th December 1944-25th January 1945), finally came to a halt by the end of December 1944.



engrossing cine-camera footage. As an aside not only were the German forces eventually outnumbered and outgunned but their supplies of food as well as equipment, ammunition and weapons became inadequate. Moreover, most notably they ran out of fuel for their tanks and trucks.



In my opinion the character of the participants that we encountered during our second 'throw of the racing cars' between 2001 and 2012 were a rather different breed to those of the 1960s. That of course might be a misjudgement but I think not.

The Museum 'December 1944' at La Gleize is impressive.

I mention Petit-Coo as I am sure that is the village where there is a one-time school house which contains a very remarkable series of black and white German film reels of them to be thwarted offensive. Visitors sit on school benches in front of which were school desks to watch the most

Whatever, it would be remiss of me not to mention some ten of the interesting and, in cases, fascinating characters we encountered in that latter period. Two (Lukas Huni and Warwick Banks) have already been detailed in previous part works. The remainder will follow in future issues.

Geoffrey