

FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

Car launches have to be organised by manufacturers with great care and efficiency and usually are. The logistics are complex: the timing must not clash with rivals' introductions otherwise valuable space in the press is lost if fewer journalists attend; invites have to be sent out and air and rail transportation to the venue arranged; hotels have to be booked and dietary requirements specified; the test fleet has to be in perfect condition and worthwhile test routes planned, the local police having been alerted; presentations must include the attendance of experts to field all the awkward questions and press releases made available.

The list is endless and not surprisingly things can go wrong - and sometimes they go horribly wrong. I, as one of a party of correspondents, was once flown to the Cote d'Azur for the introduction of a new Lada. Unfortunately there were no cars to drive because of a French dock strike.

Airline schedules can often become meaningless, especially in winter, and on more than one occasion I have arrived at the venue long after the cars have been put to bed, missing the driving exercise altogether.

Snow scuppered another planned trip to France to drive a new Renault. I had flown down to London and stayed overnight at a Heathrow hotel ready for an early start next morning but as I boarded the minibus to the airport snow began to fall. My abiding memory of that launch was sitting in the airport watching a Concorde being towed amid a snowdrift after which I travelled home by train.

Fiat conceived a brilliant launch in Florida to which I greatly looked forward. It would include grandstand seats for the launch of a space rocket at Cape Canaveral and on arrival powerful binoculars were issued to all and sundry so we could fully enjoy the blast-off. Unfortunately the weather was so appalling the launch was postponed but at least the cars had arrived.

On another trip our plane suddenly aborted a landing in Bergen for a reason never revealed and it was diverted to Stavanger - which meant we had to be ferried by coach back to Bergen and we arrived at our hotel in the Norwegian hinterland at 3.00am. However, the second planeload of writers never made it at all as their aircraft had to turn back over the North Sea because of a technical problem.

Nowadays press officers also have a mass of health and safety legislation with which to comply, in particular breathalysing every journalist before he or she drives and also checking their licence for any penalty points.

Journalists can also provide some headaches too: on another trip to the United States a couple of German writers set from our hotel and ran into the back of a car at the first set of traffic lights.

And I once shared a car with a writer from a lifestyle magazine and at the halfway stage on the route I suggested he take over at the wheel.

"Oh no," he said, "I can't drive."