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THE MOTLEY CREWS

Seldom has the noble pursuit of cross-Channel hopping been embraced quite so eccentrically. We tag along as the Gumball Ralliers take to the water **TEXT COLIN GOODWIN PHOTOS GRAHAM SNOOK**

There is no more stirring a sight for an Englishman than the white cliffs of Dover lit by a setting sun. Unfortunately, this Englishman is currently wedged into the cockpit of a Bladerunner 34 that's clipping the waves at 60 knots while he furiously squeezes a fuel-line bulb. There's a problem with the flow of petrol to one of its 300hp Mercury outboards and the only way it can be kept running is by constantly squeezing the priming bulb. Slacken for more than a few seconds and the Merc's scream turns to a harsh stuttering and the boat immediately sheds over half its speed. I'm not comfortable. My arm is about to fall off and I'm picking up new bruises by the second.

Not that I should be complaining. Somewhere behind us two blokes dressed in blazers and flannels are two-up on a jetski bound, as are we, for Boulogne. Welcome to the inaugural Deauville Rally.

You may have heard of the Gumball Rally. Started in 1999 by an eccentric young blade called Maximillion Cooper, the Gumball is an unofficial car race over 3,000 miles of public roads featuring exotic cars and even more exotic drivers. Everything from a *Dukes*

of *Hazzard*-style Citroen 2CV to McLaren F1 supercars are de rigueur. Cooper is a master of publicity and ropes in a clutch of Z-list celebrities to take part. It's mad, mildly irresponsible and looks like a whole load of fun. Especially the parties every evening.

This year the Gumball has decided to take to the water by backing a rally from London's Tower Bridge to Deauville in France. The rally is the brainchild of Edward Balme, whose grandfather captured the Enigma machine from a German U-boat.

It's not a race, because even these crazy young folk realise that the sea is a rather more threatening environment than the highways of Europe, but nor is it the kind of safety-conscious RYA event that yacht club commodores are likely to approve of. We're here to find out whether it's a bold attempt at reinvigorating a dying sport or an excuse for rich kids to have a laugh.

The pre-event bumf proclaimed that 30 vessels were due to take part, but when we gathered at Tower Bridge this morning ahead of the planned 12.00pm start, it appeared that we were somewhat shorter in number. Personal watercraft aren't allowed on the Thames, so the snappily dressed John



Eurotrash: the ralliers leave Tower Bridge for the French coast.



This photo: Rebecca Loos flies the flag. Left: Our man forces a smile.



One of the two Zapcats that joined the rally.



Sarah Donohue on the Bladerunner Howler.

