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Why Jeremy Clarkson's wife is leaving home

JEREMY CLARKSON is in trouble. Behind every great man, as we all know, is a competent woman holding the lead: take Jeremy's diary, or his no-doubt tranquil dealings with the taxman — in fact, every detail of the administration of his complex working life — and the truth is that all these things are handled by Francie, aka Mrs Clarkson.

Yet when the BBC *Top Gear* presenter arrives at his desk on Monday morning, the message from admin will be: "Gone rallying." Francie is away on her first event, the Liege-Agadir-Liege International Touring Trial, organised by the Guild of Motor Endurance.

At 2.25pm today, Francie will take the start from outside the casino at Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium. Francie and co-driver Emma Stanford will be sharing a Technic Speedster sponsored by *The Daily Telegraph*; stopping at Tarbes, France, tomorrow night, they will press on through next week across the Pyrenees into Spain to take the ferry over the Mediterranean from Algeciras to Tangiers.

On Thursday they are due in Marrakesh, before tackling the Atlas Mountains towards Agadir, 3,500km from the start and the halfway point of the event. There, they turn round and drive back via a slightly different route. They are expected back in Belgium for the finish on October 16.

I met the two women at Thruxton Industrial Estate, where their car had just been completed by Mike Walker and Barrie Martin's firm, Technic.

First things first, I thought, asking Emma how I should spell her surname.

"Stanford?" I inquired helpfully, "like the map people?"

"We are the map people," replied Emma imperiously. This may be the first rally for either of them, but Emma's cartographical pedigree, as



Ready for action: Francie Clarkson (left) and her co-driver, Emma Stanford, in the Technic Speedster they will be driving in the rally

well as that confident air, seem to bode well. It turns out that grandfather Stanford sold the business to Philips in 1957 but, never mind, Emma is a travel writer by profession and she knows her maps.

So far so good, but what is a Technic Speedster, with its rakish 1956 style? It's obvious what it looks like but it is, in fact, not the real thing at all. This Speedster is a glass-fibre-bodied reproduction, devised by Barrie and based on a 1972 VW Beetle. It was built in 14 days and was finished last Wednesday.

Purists may shake their heads but this vehicle, undeniably a fake but costing just

£15,000, will enable Francie and Emma to enjoy the motoring holiday of a lifetime: less relaxing than sitting on a beach, perhaps, but then they will see so much more. After all, when did the rest of us last take the scenic route through the Atlas Mountains?

Another advantage of using a Technic Speedster is that it avoids putting all that wear and tear on an original valued at two or three times the Technic's price; and even if all goes well, wear and tear is inevitable with these events, involving costly maintenance and restoration work when you get home.

"You'd better show me

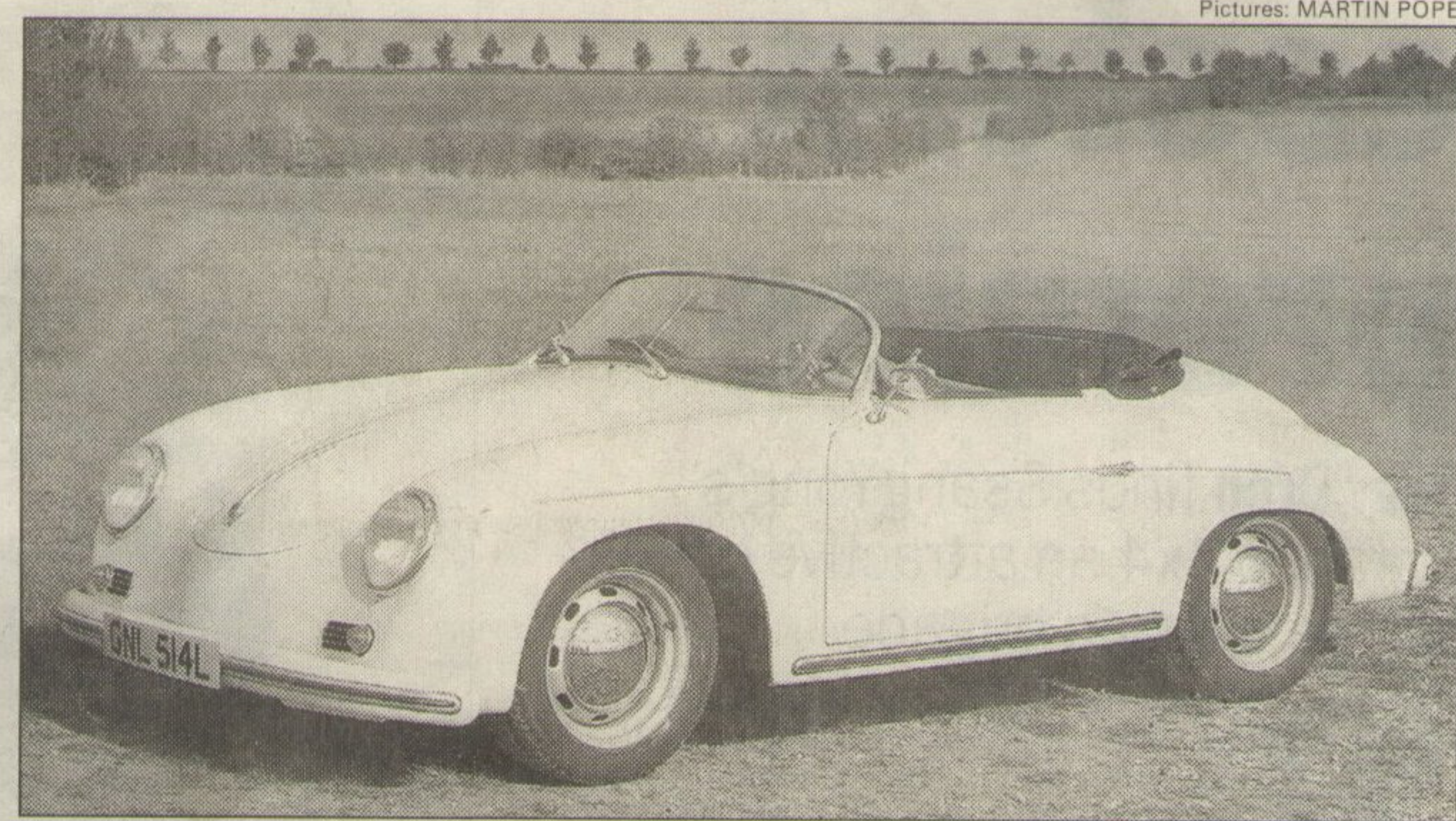
round it," said Francie to Mike and Barrie, "as I don't know anything about cars."

Unlike the original Porsche 356 Speedster, which was more of a monocoque with stressed sills, the Technic is based on the Beetle's floorpan with a special subframe bolted on to it. The suspension, however, is fairly close to that of the original that inspired it.

The Technic is powered by a near-standard 1,600cc Beetle engine, with a twin-choke Weber carburettor to give it a bit more go: 65bhp is claimed for it, so its performance should be similar to that of the standard 356 of 40 years

ago. It has a Beetle gearbox with a long final drive; Barrie reckons it should edge up to about 100mph, given a long straight.

The Speedster is a new venture for the small firm, based in old RAF buildings alongside Thruxton racing circuit. The Technic name is associated mainly with the 550 Spyder that Barrie launched in 1988: this is based on Beetle parts, too, but it has a special tubular chassis, while the body is based on the classic 550 racer's styling. Technic's 550 is considerably longer than the original, however, and it does not have the renowned flat-six, with twin



Rakish: the £15,000 Porsche lookalike is based on running gear from a 1972 VW Beetle

cams per bank, of the original. That was turning out 110bhp from 1,500cc in 1956.

Barrie has made 103 of his 550s over the past decade and his new partner, race driver Mike, will be driving his own Technic Spyder in the rally next week, with a friend, John Robinson. I suspect they will be keeping more than a close eye on the new product as the rally progresses.

In fact, there will be two all-women crews going to Agadir in these Technic Speedsters: Frances Ward, of Stroud, and Shan Armitt will be driving the prototype and, in the process, raising money for meningitis research.

It will be a gruelling test for anyone not accustomed to long events but it is not a speed event and the entire trip will be run over asphalt roads, even south of the Atlas Mountains close to the Sahara desert. There will be no winner: instead, the crews compete for a variety of medals, aiming to pass through all the control points within the specified time limits. The entry fee of £595 per person includes accommodation for nine nights. All they will need is enough pocket money for petrol and sustenance over the 7,000km journey.



Classic inspiration: Mike Walker in his Technic 550 Spyder

An unusual aspect of the event is that it is run for self-built vehicles, kit cars and reproduction vehicles of all kinds. They must be demonstrably roadworthy and include certain items of safety equipment but otherwise, it seems, anything goes; it should make for an unusual parade of cars into France this afternoon.

Having tackled many long rallies myself, I did have some simple advice for Francie and Emma: number one, whatever happens, whatever mistakes are made, don't fall out with each other. Second, get moving when leaving a Time Control: don't hang

about, thinking you can make up time later. Finally, don't go potty if you find yourselves behind schedule: motor rallies aren't worth dying for.

In this spirit of generosity, there's some advice, too, for husband Jeremy, left at home: watch out, sir, because these events are habit-forming. By the time they get back into Spain, Mrs C and Emma are likely to be planning their next rally. Oh, and one other thing, Jeremy: set the washing machine at a maximum of 40 degrees; any more than that does terrible things to the elastic in Y-fronts.

Technic: 01264 773202.

Pictures: MARTIN POPE