



TAKING IT TO THE MAX

In 1961, a standard Jaguar E-type reached 150mph on a Belgian motorway. Can Octane achieve the same now, on a German autobahn?

WORDS Mark Dixon // PHOTOGRAPHY Matthew Howell



WE'RE STANDING near the end of a rest area on the A1 autobahn south of Cologne, eyes fixed rigidly on the traffic appearing from under a bridge in the far distance. It's ten past seven in the evening, and the light is fading. The headlights of oncoming cars appear ever-brighter as the cars themselves begin to disappear into the gloom. Almost 30 minutes have elapsed since we waved a metallic blue Jaguar E-type out of the car park and watched it accelerate down the sliproad and power onto the autobahn. It should have returned ages ago. These are some of the most stressful minutes that myself and photographer Matt can remember.

Just as we've taken the decision to retrieve our Discovery support vehicle and go in search of the missing E-type, it purrs into the rest area. It's barely come to a halt before Matt and I are waiting at the driver's door to hear the verdict from its pilot, and former British Hill Climb Champion, David Franklin. How fast did he go?

THIS MOMENT is the culmination of weeks of planning. When the *Octane* team was coming up with ideas for our 150th issue, someone had the bright idea of recreating the most famous road test ever: *Autocar's* 1961 article, which proved that a standard roadgoing E-type really could achieve 150mph, as Jaguar was claiming for the car's launch. It wasn't merely a journalistic scoop or simply a key point in Jaguar history – it marked the dawn of a new era in motoring. It showed that a moderately (but not exceptionally) affluent man or woman could buy a roadgoing car that, straight off the showroom floor, would crack 150mph, a speed previously unheard of beyond La Sarthe or the world's Grand Prix circuits.

Of course, there's been a suspicion ever since that Jaguar's road test car, a left-hand-drive Coupé registered 9600HP, was specially prepared

in some way. Most owners, and certainly most journalists, would not expect a production E-type to be capable of more than the mid-to-high 130s. So perhaps there was a certain karma in the fact that our first choice of car for *Octane's* own attempt at 150mph – the original road test car, 9600HP, now owned by Jaguar historian Philip Porter – could not be made match-fit in time for our attempt. While the car is in very good condition and Philip was up for the challenge, the demands of running at 150mph are very different from those required at half that speed, and for safety's sake we could leave nothing to chance.

Instead, we were offered an equally early and significant Coupé, chassis 860001, which is in fact the very first right-hand-drive production FHC. Owned by the proprietor of Bridgnorth-based Classic Motor Cars Ltd, Peter Neumark, it was restored by Peter's company in the early 2000s to original factory specification with nothing added, nothing altered and nothing taken away. As a representative of a 'new' 1961 E-type it could not be bettered, and Peter – who believes that cars are to be used, not hidden away in garages – was just as keen as we were to find out what it could do.

NEXT QUESTION: where could we take an E-type up to 150mph – and, just as importantly, back down again – in safety? A public road test was clearly out of the question in the UK. But finding a suitable test track was next to impossible, too. It's true that there are a few places used for high-speed testing in this country: often former Cold War airfields such as Bruntingthorpe in the Midlands, where the long runways built for V-bombers are adequate for stretching modern performance cars. We knew, however, that the E-type would need a run-up measured in miles rather than yards to achieve its absolute top speed, and then a considerable distance to brake to a halt again. Even the longest runway we could find in the UK wouldn't be long enough.

Above and facing page
E-type driver David Franklin, in red-trimmed blue jacket, checks over the car as it is unloaded and chats with *Octane's* Mark Dixon, above. Every precaution has been taken to ensure this will be a safe road test, including the fitment of brand-new competition road tyres.

Another option was to drive the banked circuit at the old Motor Industry Research Association's testing grounds in Warwickshire (since July this year owned by the Japanese company Horiba). No-one liked the idea of trying to hold an E-type steady at 150mph on the banking, however, and it would introduce an element of tyre scrub that would affect the top speed, however minimal. Since our 150mph target was already an ambitious one – you can read on [pages 88-92](#) how difficult the *Autocar* road testers found it in 1961 – that was a crucial factor.

The more we thought about it, the more it seemed there was only one solution. In 1961, *Autocar* had driven 9600HP to Belgium for its high-speed test. Fifty-four years later, we would have to take the E-type to Germany, the last country in Europe to retain stretches of motorway without speed limits. Even in Germany these are becoming increasingly rare and we'd have to pick our autobahn carefully. Features editor Henry Catchpole at our sister magazine *Evo* suggested a stretch of the A1 south of Cologne might be suitable: 'It doesn't really go anywhere, so it's relatively quiet,' he assured us.

Decision made: the A1 it would be.

A FEW WEEKS later, the *Octane* team of myself, photographer Matt and driver David are cruising through Germany in a new Discovery SDV6, kindly provided as our support vehicle by Jaguar Land Rover – which appreciates the significance of this event, something we believe has never been attempted again since 1961. It's the perfect back-up car, comfortable and reasonably economical, and with enough grunt to tow the E-type out of trouble should it develop any mechanical problems.

Not that we're expecting it to. Peter Neumark's team at CMC have been through it with a fine-tooth comb, fitting new wheels and tyres and checking every mechanical element. They've even dyno-tested the engine on a rolling road – something that proved its worth when it was discovered the fuel pump wasn't coping at really high revs. A higher-capacity pump has duly been installed. It's intriguing to note that maximum power at the flywheel has been calculated at 213.9bhp at 5000rpm, which equates to a theoretical 130.4mph. As the graph on [page 86](#) shows, the figures are what you'd expect of a carefully built but standard 3.8-litre road-spec engine, proving that this is no hot rod.

The one thing we've not been able to take precautions against is the weather. It's been steadily deteriorating ever since we crossed the Channel and, by the time we reach our German guesthouse in a village just off the A1, the cloud has descended and a persistent rain is falling; although it's not yet 6pm, the light is already failing. We've allowed ourselves a maximum of a day-and-a-half to do the photoshoot and get the timed runs, but the plan is to wrap everything up tomorrow if possible, with the option of a final early-morning run the following day if the weather hasn't improved tonight. Fingers crossed.

FORTUNATELY, the rain has stopped when we stumble down to breakfast at 8am the following day. Good intentions of starting early with a high-speed run were shelved when we worked out that it would make more sense to get pictures in the bag first, just in case the engine does happen to go bang. Plus, we need to check the car over carefully before attempting any heroics; safety is paramount. ➔



Left from top
David contemplates his forthcoming high-speed test; fuelling up with 100-octane Shell V-Power Racing; Mark rigs up a GPS speedometer.



Chris, the trucker who has brought the E-type over from the UK in a huge articulated lorry, has already unloaded it by the time we're ready for action. It looks simply gorgeous, finished in its original colour of Opalescent Dark Blue with red leather interior, on sparkling chrome wires. Just as with 9600HP in 1961, the front grille bar and bumper overriders have been removed for ultimate aerodynamic efficiency, and like 9600HP this very early Fixed Head, 1 VHP, has no external mirrors. It's also one of only four right-hand-drive coupés made with carriage-type external locks on each side of the bonnet, which have to be worked with a T-handled key just like the ones I remember from old British Railways carriages in my youth.

'I bought 1 VHP from Philip Porter in October 1998 for a quid!' says Peter Neumark, when I call him for a bit of background on the car. 'The deal was that he would sell me it for a nominal pound, if I restored his other early E-type, 9600HP, free of charge.'

'Chassis 860001 was built on 10 July 1961 and despatched on 26 August to Henlys in London as a demonstrator, which makes you wonder how many famous backsides sat in it during the first few weeks. We restored it to factory condition in the early 2000s and I use it a lot. I've driven it in France and on the Scottish Malts tour, for example.'

As a result, the car has picked up the odd paintwork chip here and there, something that we find oddly reassuring as we contemplate it in the soft German daylight. This car is clearly no trailer queen. David is particularly pleased to see that the E-type has been fitted with Avon CR6 ZZ tyres, which he rates highly. 'They were developed by Avon for events like the Tour Auto as a roadgoing competition tyre and they're brilliant, very well suited to the car. The size here is a 205/70 x 15, which is slightly wider and taller than the original spec, and fills the arch out nicely without looking too modern.'

CMC has set the pressures at 31psi all round and I wonder whether we shouldn't increase them for high-speed running, to avoid any chance of overheating and to minimise rolling resistance; back in '61, the *Autocar* chaps settled on 35psi front and 40psi rear for their Dunlop R5 racing tyres. David, however, is happy to leave the Avons as they are. He points out that the autobahn is not the smoothest and that he won't be travelling at very high speed for any length of time, so he'd rather have the benefit of a little more sidewall compliance and a slightly larger contact patch. Since it will be David who's sitting in the hot seat and not me, I'm more than happy to defer to his judgement.

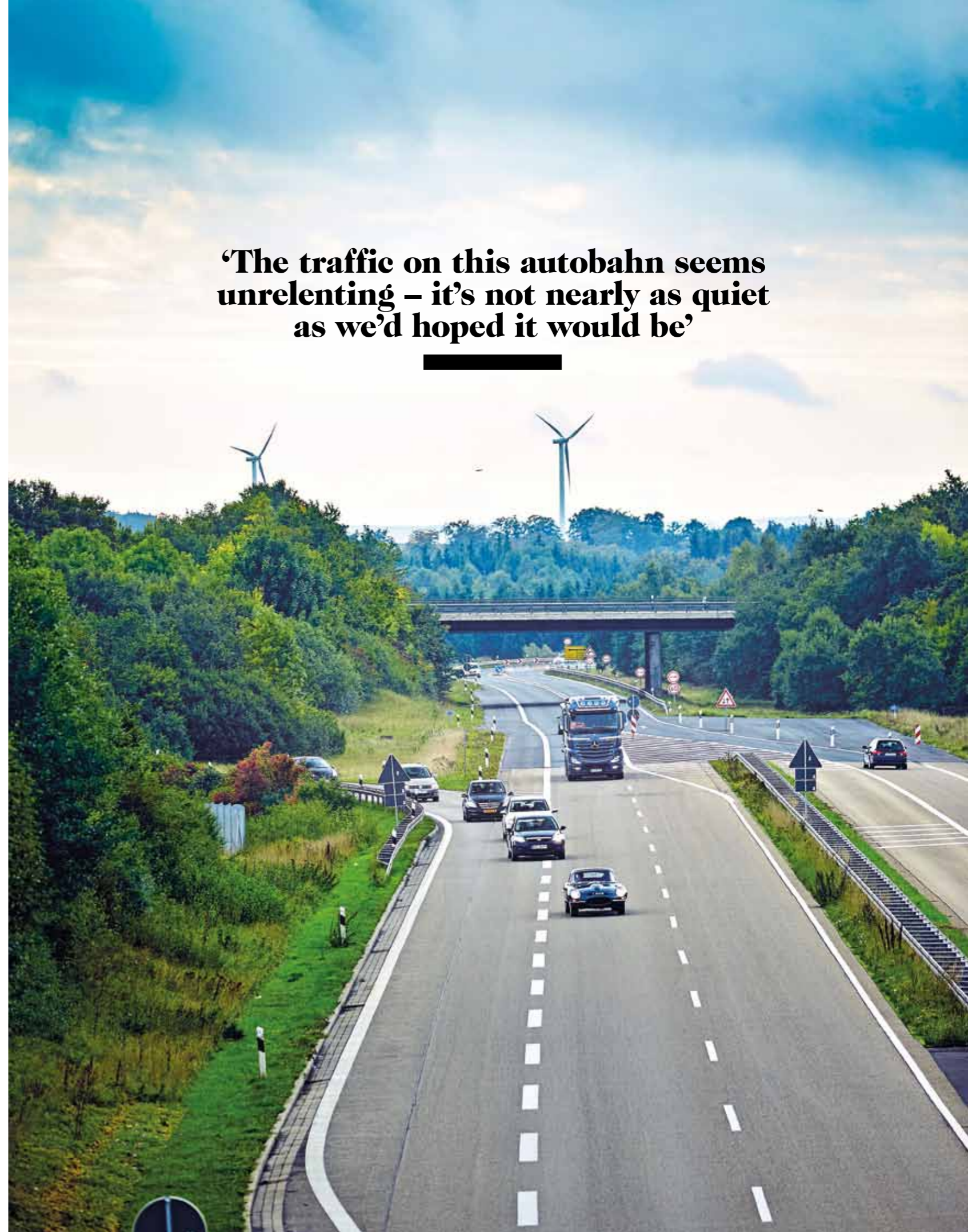
THE NEXT FEW HOURS are spent obtaining pictures for the feature and checking the accuracy of the Jaguar's speedometer against the GPS-based app on my iPhone. To our surprise, at speeds up to about 100mph the big Smiths dial matches my digital read-out exactly.

I'm feeling very glad that I won't be riding shotgun when David goes all-out, however. As a passenger, you are hyper-aware of the fragility of the metal eggshell around you; despite the E-type's famously compliant suspension, every bump in the road seems intent on throwing the car off-line – even though it probably doesn't feel nearly so nervous to the man behind the wheel.

Or perhaps it does, only it doesn't show: David has been competing in motor sport since 1965 and has been a champion in disciplines ranging from HSCC Historic GTs (with a McLaren M6B) to hillclimbs and sprints (with an F3 Ensign and F2 March). He professes himself happy with the E-type. 'It rides very well, and the engine seems notably smoother above 3500rpm. There's a slight resonance from somewhere at about 100mph but it goes away again above that.'

Cruising at 100-110mph, David's hands resting easy at the quarter-to-three position, the roar of slipstream and tyres on tarmac drown out the straight-six's refined exhaust note. It's another reminder that this is a Grand Tourer and not a balls-out racer like a C- or D-type. →

'The traffic on this autobahn seems unrelenting – it's not nearly as quiet as we'd hoped it would be'



E-TYPE TOP SPEED TEST





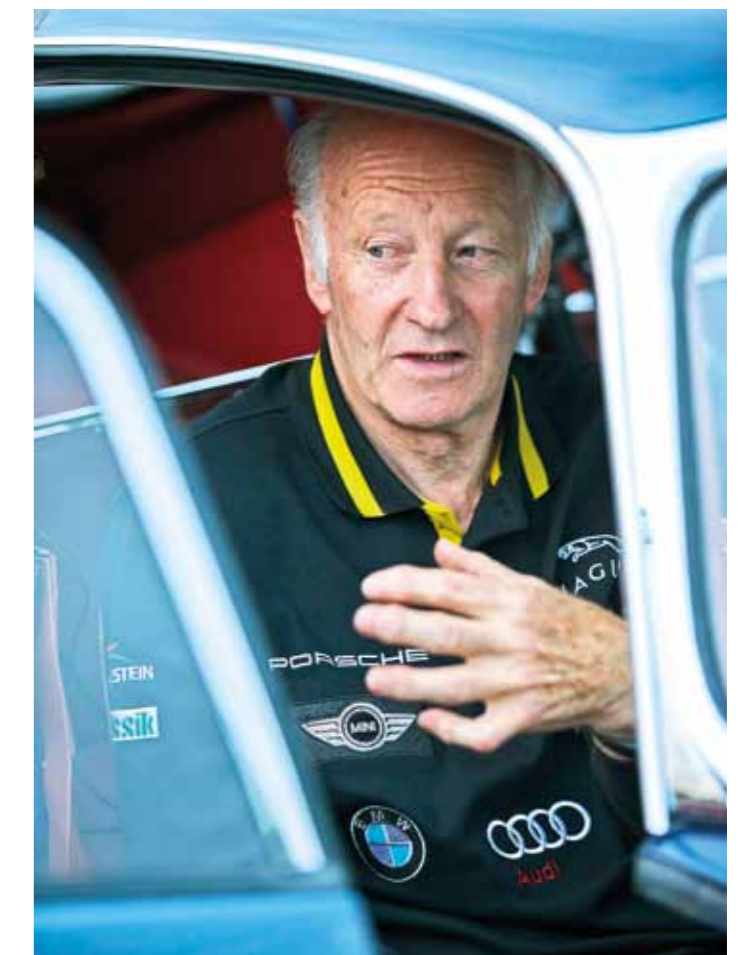
IF THE JAGUAR is near-perfect, that's not so true of the autobahn. At its southern end, it reverts to a single-carriageway road, with an exit sliproad and an overhead return to the other side. That's good, because it will make repeated runs easy to achieve. There are also rest areas on both carriageways, a couple of kilometres to the north, which will be ideal for starting and finishing a run. On the other hand, the autobahn is narrower than we expected – only two lanes rather than three – and the first few clicks are speed-limited to 100km/h. Then, suddenly, it bursts onto a long, sweeping viaduct and becomes de-restricted, as the lanes widen. It's here that David will finally be able to open the taps and give the car its head – assuming that the road is clear.

And this, unfortunately, is the problem. The traffic on this autobahn seems unrelenting. It's never nose-to-tail, and there are occasionally clear spells, but it's not nearly as quiet as we'd expected it would be. We have to hope that the road will get less busy in early evening, since the sun has come out during the day and it means we'll have the benefit of daylight until relatively late.

At 6pm we decide it's now or never. Matt starts rigging up his digital SLR in the E-type's luggage area, while I get to grips with a VBox data-logging system that will give us a highly accurate record of the car's speed, acceleration and much more. As back-up, I've gaffertaped my iPhone with its GPS speedometer over the VBox's video display, itself taped onto the underside of the sun visor. All a bit Heath Robinson but it will do the job. The VBox's GPS measuring is a lot more precise than the iPhone's and it will also record high-definition video, providing a useful alternative to the time-lapse photos taken on Matt's SLR.

A last-minute check of tyres and fluid levels, and it's time to go. Looking cool as a cucumber, David smoothly feeds in the power and breezes out of the rest area. All we can do now is wait.

'David still looks as calm and unflustered as if he were merely taking the dog for a walk'



E-TYPE TOP SPEED TEST

THE VIEW of the neighbouring autobahn is obscured by dense foliage, planted to reduce the noise of passing traffic. So our awareness of what's happening beyond the rest area is as much governed by our ears as our eyes – and we can hear that the traffic is pretty much constant. We remember that David may have decided to travel north a few junctions in his search for a clear run. We also realise, with a sense of foreboding, that neither of us has a mobile phone any longer: Matt's is being used to trigger the time-lapse on his camera; mine is displaying the E-type's speed just above David's sight-line. If David has a problem, he'll be on his own.

After 20 minutes, David pulls back into the rest area and confirms that, while the autobahn is busier than he would like, the car is running well. He hasn't got it beyond 136mph yet but he's going out for another attempt. Still as calm and unflustered as if he were merely taking the dog for a walk, he points the E-type towards the exit once more.

Another 20 minutes pass. Then 25. Still no E-type. Matt and I fidget nervously and try not to catch the eye of curious East European lorry drivers, who have begun to park up their huge rigs ahead of the coming night. Thirty minutes. The sun has set now and dusk is falling. It's becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the outline of oncoming cars on the opposite carriageway.

Simultaneously, we take the decision that one of us needs to retrieve the Discovery and go in search of David. I'm halfway to the vehicle when I hear a yell and turn around to see Matt waving furiously: the E-type is heading back!

A few minutes later, David is calmly explaining how he got on. 'I managed three runs in all. The second was the fastest; the first was only 136-138 or so. They were all spoiled by traffic, however. When you're travelling at that speed you have to err on the side of caution. You're catching other traffic up quite quickly and you have to remember that there's no ABS, although the brakes felt strong and progressive. There are also no aerodynamic aids – the car starts getting quite light above 110mph and the steering becomes "power assisted", so you have to maintain a delicate touch. But the engine just seemed to get smoother the higher it was revving. It was still pulling at 5000-5500rpm; I think I saw 146mph at five-five, and it was still accelerating when I had to back off because of cars and lorries in the distance.'

That's good enough for us. We may not have quite hit that 150mph target but we've come damn close, and we know the car had more to give. Racelogic confirms later that the VBox recorded a maximum velocity of 146.49mph and car owner Peter Neumark is delighted: 'I thought it would do well to get to 135, maybe 138mph, so I'm gobsmacked. Well done, David!'

The man himself is typically laidback about the whole experience. 'The car felt absolutely super. It would comfortably have reached 150mph. Of that, I have absolutely no doubt.' *E-mag*

THANKS TO Peter Neumark and CMC, www.classic-motor-cars.co.uk; Racelogic for the loan of the VBox, www.vboxautomotive.co.uk; and Jaguar Land Rover for the Discovery support vehicle.

JAGUAR E-TYPE '1 VHP' ROLLING ROAD FIGURES

