

THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

What do you get for the person who has everything? Well, not exactly everything, but adults reach a point where they have almost everything which they realistically want and if they don't have it it's probably because it's financially prohibitive! Thus another birthday rolled around and I was faced with the usual head-scratching in trying to come up with something for J which would be welcome, but perhaps not something which she would buy for herself. Hmmm

At around this time, possibly after one of our more unusual flying experiences, we were talking about what to do next and circuit driving came up. This set me thinking and a bit of internet research revealed that there were many permutations of this available at various locations: Supercar experiences, Ferrari experiences, Italian performance car experiences, Racing experiences and a host of other variations in putting you behind the wheel of cars which you would not normally get to drive, but in an environment where it was safe to give them some exercise.



While they all had their attractions, the Racing Experience seemed to offer the greatest variety and the chance to drive a real racing car on a circuit and while Castle Combe had something to offer I felt that the package available at Thruxton provided a more diverse selection of vehicles and was also at one of the longest and fastest tracks in Britain. The voucher was valid for a year

and when it came I was impressed with its quality, especially the sound of a racing car revving up and accelerating away when it was opened!

The surprise was duly presented, but it was not until over 10 months later that we finally arrived at the circuit, which seemed remarkably unchanged from when I had raced there nearly 20 years before. J was by now very apprehensive about the whole undertaking, despite my reassurance that it was a fun day and would also be of some practical use in improving car control and I was surprised just how many others there were taking part in the same and other experiences.



The session began with an excellent and well-illustrated lecture covering everything you might need to know about the day, although it was perhaps a bit too much to assimilate in one go for the total novice. Then it was straight out to the assembly area where groups of three were taken around for a few laps in a Mazda3 MPS to get use to the track layout, the correct lines to take through corners and so on.

“Although beforehand I felt very nervous, I impulsively jumped into the front passenger seat. The drive was at a fairly leisurely pace, but I was intrigued by the cones marking the braking, apex and exit points of the bends and after a few laps began to get the general idea of how to make smooth progress. Being based on an airfield there were some very fast sections, but there were also some very demanding bends.”

Next it was on with a crash helmet and into the driving seat of a Porsche Cayman, 245bhp and a rear engine being a bit of a contrast for an Alfa and Seicento driver.



“My instructor settled me behind the wheel and made sure that everything was adjusted to my liking. I made my way gingerly - being a redhead!- on to the track and was almost immediately urged to get up to the speed and circulate with the other traffic. The car was firm and precise, particularly in the way in which it could be hustled through the chicane at a speed which I would not have believed possible and I soon found myself enjoying the drive.”

Collecting an overall mark of 69% for her track-driving skills, it was off to the pit lane to be fitted out with racing boots, gloves, balaclava and a fullface helmet for some laps in a Formula Renault single seater, although a problem in not being able to get comfortable in the car brought about a switch to a Tiga Sports 2000.



“It seemed quite a leap from being out with an instructor to being sent off on my own in a real racing car, although the warning about using too many revs was unnecessary. This was like

nothing I have ever experienced in a road car: Noisy, vibrating and apparently larger than it really was due to my being only inches from the ground. I had to cope with a righthand gearchange but there was little else to distract me in the basic cockpit. It was amazing how large road-going cars looked from down there and I had to keep my eyes peeled for blue flag signals when the faster cars caught me”

To round things off on a high note there was a (very) fast lap passengering a professional instructor in a race-prepared Mazda RX8, just to show how it can be done given the car, the skills - and the nerve!



“This was breathtakingly fast and the safety-harness did an excellent job of keeping me firmly in my seat during the high cornering speeds. I felt very confident in the experienced drivers’ abilities and was disappointed that this bit did not last much longer!”

The whole thing was well-organised and incredibly friendly with nothing being too much trouble. If you want a taste of motoring which is outside your normal terms of reference why not give this sort of thing a try? There are many different events to be had at various prices and locations, so if you like the idea get Googling now!

“The day certainly got my adrenalin flowing and having gained an insight into how things are done on a racetrack I would certainly like to have another go.”

MJB/JBHS