

CLASSIC DRIVER

Nürburgring Nordschleife



Track day drivers are divided into those who've been to the Nürburgring Nordschleife and those who haven't. It's so widely used by the media that most people have heard of it, even if they've never driven its 13 miles of wildly soaring, plummeting, twisting track. Despite all the media hype it will not disappoint. It is, quite simply, the greatest track driving experience in the world.

For a start it's big. The 'Ring is the size of Jersey and there are villages in the middle of it. In its 21 kilometres there are often said to be 175 corners but it's a figure that expert drivers laugh at. It all depends on the car. One 'Ringmeister' said he'd "got it down to four corners in a racing Mini; everything else was flat out. But in a Historic Ferrari, there are about 80 corners." They say it takes 1000 laps to begin to learn the circuit's secrets.

Secondly, it's dangerous. There's almost no run-off on the old 'Ring, the Armco comes right up to the track. If you put a memorial up to everyone who'd been killed on this ultimate circuit, its circumference would be bristling like a porcupine. The memorials would include Peter Collins, Herbie Müller – and very nearly Niki Lauda. It's not, however, necessary to put your life in danger, and the best way to minimise the risk is to go with a track day organiser such as RMA, which hires the entire circuit and limits the number of cars to around 110. On a public day, when anyone can just roll up, pay a few euros, and drive themselves round, there are slow cars and fast cars and motorbikes and tourist buses. I've been told that the Nordschleife averages one death per week on public days – almost all of them motorcyclists, but you get the picture.



In November, RMA took the old 'Ring for two days and the quality of cars taking part was breathtaking. Porsche 911s of all eras, Jaguar D-type, classic Ferraris of immense value, while Tim Samways Sporting and Historic Cars brought along no fewer than four cars from its stable: the 1959 Le Mans-winning Aston Martin DBR1, a 660bhp Ferrari 288 GTO Evoluzione, Ferrari 250LM and, outrageously quick with its downforce and

slicks, a 1990s Prosport. In the line of duty, I mooched rides in all of them with Tim Samways' professional drivers, Tony Dron and Peter Hardman.

What a privilege. From the nimble agility of the 250LM, where driver and passenger are squashed together in the tiny cabin; through the sheer cornering ability of the Prosport which prevents you keeping your head upright; to the raw, wild, terrifying power of the 'Evo' Ferrari which was pulling 120mph out of a corner when the sling-shot acceleration of the turbos came in... I thought I'd been kicked hard in the back. But of all these gems, the 295bhp, 800kg, perfectly-balanced DBR1 has to be the supreme machine. This actual car not only won Le Mans, it won the 1000Km on this very circuit in the hands of Tony Brooks. I feel shy to say that I was moved almost to tears by the eager engine, the controlled sliding of the chassis first one way and then the other, coping gamely with the unpredictable, squirming circuit, the car in experienced hands reeling in modern 911s. From the swooping curves of the Carousel and the Swallowtail, or the long vista which burrows down into the tree-lined darkness of the Foxhole, the DBR1 seemed tailor-made for Nürburgring lappery.



But these were all passenger rides and it's a different thing entirely to drive the 'Ring yourself. As a Nordschleife virgin, there's no point having a hugely powerful or valuable car. My own first attempts in a modest, rear-drive saloon, under instruction, gave me more than enough to think about. Another 990 laps and I might want something more powerful. The main thing is to get out there and try it for yourself – ideally at an RMA day, with a fair bit of instruction before attempting a lap alone.

One owner, at the 'Ring for the first time despite years of track driving at European circuits, summed it up nicely. He got out after his first lap muttering "I thought I'd seen it all, but this – incredible."

For more details on RMA track driving days at the Nordschleife, see www.rma-limited.com

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