

CLASSIC DRIVER

Night and Day: 24 Hours in a V12 Vantage from London to Le Mans



It's a marketing man's fantasy. Thursday night: a smart dinner in the West End, after attending a preview at the Summer Exhibition. 03:00 Friday morning it's off for the Eurotunnel and a brisk drive through northern France to Le Mans - all accomplished in Aston Martin's most sporting model, the 510bhp V12 Vantage.

A demanding schedule for man and machine. One minute, lightweight suit, **Berkeley Square** traffic and pockmarked English roads, the next, all-weather clothing for the **Le Mans 24 Hours**, an overnight bag and smooth-as-the-baby's-proverbial French autoroute.

From 20:00 on Thursday to 20:00 on Friday (when we turned up at the **Aston Martin Racing** pre-race BBQ), I spent a long time in the lightweight sports seat of the **Morning Frost Aston** - a quite appropriate 24 hours.

Driving a supercar in London has its ups and downs. True, park anything north of £100k in **Mayfair** and you're in good company. However, the road to riches can be a rocky one - quite literally, in the case of the UK's capital city. The **Aston's** uncompromising suspension, **Pirelli P Zero Corsa** tyres and wafer-thin seats are not exactly the osteopath's friend.



Hang on, though, this is why you've bought the car in the first place. It's the modern version of a **DB4 GT** or **Ferrari 250 GT**, a real driver's car, uncompromising and built for speed.

This particular driver was up and ready for action at 03:00 the next day (I'll spare you the packing-the-car-at-midnight story), which makes three hours' sleep - yes, THREE. A stopover to collect my co-driver and we were soon cruising down the **M20** with other Le Mans-goers, in torrential rain.

The weather was so bad you simply had to slow down and let the car take things at its own pace - which it did, very well. No time for heroics so early in the first stint.



Emerging, mole-like and blinking from the Calais end of the tunnel, it was time to stretch our legs. This is where the big-hearted car comes into its own, loping along stretches of the world-class French motorway system with ease, a real 'horizon-shrinker'. On decent Tarmac the transformation is extraordinary: much, much smoother, with beautifully weighted steering and little bump-thump over expansion joints. I would apportion this 50:50, tyres:dampers.

A breakfast break meant a driver-change, too, and it was time to appreciate the car from the other side of the cockpit. There's no doubt about it, for all the virtues of upmarket **Audis**, **Mercedes** and **BMW**s, an **Aston** or **Ferrari** is a special thing.

Come midday and we were closing on our first objective, a stop at the hotel to drop off bags and make sure our reservation really **had** been taken (no worries there, thank you, **Rob** and **Bernard**), then an hour out for some D-road driving and photography. This was a journey – not a full-on road test, but just 30 minutes at speed in the **Aston** is a pleasure. Keep the big engine turning over in a high gear and let the now desirable hard damper/performance tyre combination look after you.





Fast, assured motoring on dry public roads: the **V12 Vantage** is made for it.

Having picked up tickets and met the rest of the Friday evening drivers' parade party (a **Rapide** and a **DBS**), it was time to follow-my-leader to the city centre. While all nine **Aston Martin** racing drivers travelled in open vintage cars, we were the meat in the sandwich, showing the crowds just why the British company competes in long-distance racing with production-based engines.

And the sound of the **V12** in '**Sport**' (the remarkable setting that really opens up the engine's performance, almost as if a turbo has cut in) is better than a diesel's, *n'est pas?*



Come 7 o'clock, everything was over and it was time to drive to the Friday night party. There was one teeny-weeny problem, though, as we needed to cross a heavily congested city with many road closures. Well, we got there, with the sat-nav saving us on more than one occasion, so don't believe everything you read in the press.

As we crunched up the gravel drive to the **Gite**, the 24-hour mark was up. My personal test of endurance was over and the next day it was time to hand the key back to **Aston** in exchange for that of a **2011-model DB9**. A very different machine, more suited to the journey we'd just done, perhaps?



Maybe. And there's no doubt that if you needed to commute to work the next day, the **DB9** would be the better choice. However, for those 'get in the car and just **GO**' occasions that come over us all, once in a while, the **V12 Vantage** has few peers. And as a road car in the **Aston Martin** range that seems to have most in common with its similarly engined racing relations, what better destination to go to than **Le Mans**?



Postscript: *A couple of comments after the flag had dropped. It uses a lot of fuel; don't bother working it out (I didn't), just be prepared for it. And prepare yourself, too, for a damp road; with all the safety systems on, it will still kick the tail out, and needs respect at 100mph and beyond, even in a straight line. There: never say I don't tell it like it is.*

















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