

Trackday Cars...

The right stuff

WITH INCREASING RESTRICTIONS ON PUBLIC ROADS, MORE AND MORE OWNERS OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE CARS HAVE BEEN SIGNING UP FOR TRACKDAYS WHERE – AS MOTORING AUTHOR, RACING DRIVER AND PHOTO-JOURNALIST **IAN KUAH REPORTS** – THEY CAN EXTEND THEIR CARS IN RELATIVE SAFETY





The choice of dedicated trackday cars is expanding all the time, and thinly disguised road-legal track machines from the Radical and KTM X-Bow to the Gumpert Apollo offer hardcore track junkies a true racecar experience at different price points.

However, not everyone wants a second or third car that is total impractical for normal road use, so we lined up three seriously quick road cars at the Ascari Race Resort to see just how close they come to giving you a racecar experience.

The Noble M600 and Porsche GT3 RS are genuine practical supercars, while the Caterham Superlight R500, with a supercar power-to-weight ratio, is a minimalist machine whose basic design has been honed to a fine point over decades of development from the original Lotus Seven.

Then we threw a wild card into the mix in the form of a Ferrari F430 Challenge, the race version of the F430 road car. As this has just been made obsolete by the 2011 season Ferrari Italia Challenge car, there will be a few F430 Challenge cars floating

around looking for homes. Wealthy enthusiasts often find ex-racecars like the F430 Challenge, a Porsche Carrera Cup or a GT3 RSR appealing as trackday cars. Unlike the three road-legal machines, however, these have to be transported to and from the circuit on a trailer.

PORSCHE GT3 RS

While the second generation GT3 that debuted in 2009 stood out for its power, torque, chassis dynamics and all-round competence, it left me emotionally unmoved.

On reflection, I realised that, while its dynamic excellence impressed at an empirical level, this car lacked the *je ne sais quoi* that would make me want to put one in my garage.

The GT3 RS, on the other hand, has all the missing ingredients and more. Not only does it take the strengths of the GT3 to the next level, but it throws a large measure of the subjective excitement I was looking for into the mix as well.

Its ability to engage its driver with the finite tactile, aural and seat-of-the-pants inputs that seem hidden behind a thin veil in the normal GT3 is nothing short of spellbinding.

With a single mass flywheel, more aggressive ignition timing and a raft of changes to the suspension, such as wider tracks and wider bodywork, the RS is as different from the GT3 as the RSR 2.8 was from its Carrera RS 2.7 sibling in 1973.

The resulting heightened level of dialogue between car and driver bores straight into your synapses, bypassing rational thought to establish the instinctive emotional connection that makes the difference between a good sportscar and a great one. It fully justifies use of the hackneyed phrase, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". There is real synergy at work here.

The RS feels more communicative and alive than any other current production 911, even approaching the realm of the Carrera GT in areas such as throttle response, and the way that power bursts from its motor rather than merely developing with engine speed.

The irony is that, despite its greater front and rear track widths, it feels more nimble and agile than the GT3, and responds more deftly to inputs at the helm.

The 20kg weight reduction over its sibling is significant, but not that significant at 1,370kg. But when you consider that, unlike some rivals, Porsche measure this with all fluids and half a tank of fuel on board then it is light by new car standards.

On track, I could not help but think how much the RS reminded me of a very well sorted racecar, sans the discomfort. From 0-100km/h takes 4.0 seconds and top speed is 310km/h. But, while this is important, it is secondary to the car's responses and handling on both road and track.

Every time I drive a GT3 Cup car, that feeling of heightened and much more urgent response in the throttle, steering and engine note, and the crisper and more tactile feedback from all the controls, is immediately apparent. It is like being wired directly to the soul of the car.

The same is true of the GT3 RS, albeit at a more civilised road car level. Using hi-fi amplifier analogy, the non-linear character of some volume controls means that you have to turn the knob beyond a certain point before the sound really blossoms.

"It is like being wired directly to the soul of the car"



The RS has an immediacy that feels like the big dial has been turned up a couple of clicks to the point where the soundstage opens up and everything snaps into focus. The result is revelatory.

Boasting 444bhp at 7,600rpm and 430Nm at 6,750rpm, the blue-printed 3.8 litre flat-six motor revs much faster and with far more vigour than the GT3's. The power literally explodes from the motor rather than merely building, and carries on right to the cutout, underpinned by that spine-tingling exhaust note. It is an experience that gets you going even in normal driving, when you cannot exploit the chassis and aero, the other two areas of big improvement.

Here, the GT3 RS turned in crisply to the slower corners, exhibiting the pointy and grippy front end I remembered. It also felt tremendously stable in the faster bends, where you could feel the aero working to your advantage. With nearly double the downforce at speed of the previous year's RS, its ability in

high-speed bends is a big eye opener.

The second generation GT3 RS generates 170kg of total downforce at 300km/h, nearly 70 per cent more than the previous model. This makes a huge difference to high-speed stability, both in a straight line and when cornering, especially in long sweepers. That extra stability and the relatively benign chassis give you a much bigger confidence window in fast bends.

After a couple of fast laps, it is apparent that the Michelin Cup trackday tyre-shod Porsche has better traction out of slow bends than the Ferrari on slicks, and interestingly, although it is a road car, the GT3 RS is ultimately not much slower on track than the high-maintenance F430 Challenge racer. It delivers much of the thrills with none of the pain.

I first drove the GT3 RS on a track in Germany back in March 2010. My second encounter at Ascari simply endorsed my original impressions. As before, I was both surprised and delighted.

“If you don’t want to extract every last ounce of performance from one of the fastest supercars on the planet, you can actually drive it to the shops”



NOBLE M600

Six hundred and fifty horsepower. Say it slowly and deliberately, and the three seconds it takes to vocalise this number is enough for the brain to register that it is not an extraordinarily large output by today’s big league supercar standards.

However, when you learn that the Noble M600 weighs just 1,230kg, and therefore has a power-to-weight ratio of 520bhp per tonne, the true significance of its horsepower number becomes clear.

Eight point nine (8.9) seconds. That is precisely how long it takes for the Noble M600 to go from rest to 120mph (192km/h). It is a time that most current supercars would be proud to own for the 0-100mph (160km/h) sprint, which in fact the Ferrari F430 does.

Performance numbers are one thing. Few supercar owners ever wring their cars out, even on a track. What is more important is the real world driving experience; the grin factor if you like.

This is where the back-to-basics philosophy of the Noble M600 will either attract or intimidate. In a world full of increasingly intrusive electronic nanny devices, the Noble has no ABS, no ESP and no brake servo. And when you turn its traction control off it really is OFF. So when you write out the cheque for £200,000 you are signing up for an authentic analogue driving experience.

The heart of the Noble M600 is the Yamaha-developed 4,439cc DOHC 60-degree V8. Two Garrett turbochargers on bespoke manifolds boost at a modest 1.0 bar, and the motor makes 650bhp at 6,800rpm with 818Nm (604 lb-ft) of torque at 3,800rpm. A pair of massive intercoolers keeps intake temperatures down.

The motor is mated to the ubiquitous Italian-made Graziano six-speed manual gearbox, which has seen service in several low-volume supercars. I was surprised to learn that the car does not have a limited slip differential.

The accelerator travel is very precise so you can meter in exactly the amount of squirt required, which makes it a very easy car to balance into and through corners.

On the back straight at Ascari, with the motor on full noise in Race mode, the forward thrust was incredible. Thanks to the car’s low weight and the absence of discernible turbo lag, power delivery is instant, linear and a million light years from the sudden and peaky kind of on-off arrival associated with turbocharged engines of yore.

Some equally powerful but heavier cars seem to pause while they inhale and fill their deep lungs before beginning their battle with inertia. Not the Noble. With plenty of torque and relatively modest mass to move, you can feel it accelerating the second you dip into the throttle travel.

The counterpoint to the Noble M600’s ability to sling you up the road at warp speed is its docility and tractability. If you don’t want to extract every last ounce of performance from one of the fastest supercars on the planet, you can actually drive it to the shops.

The deep NASCAR grade V8 rumble from the motor really turns heads when you accelerate away on full throttle. Its exhaust note does not just hint at big power, it clubs you over the head with it.

The perfectly honed power steering allows you to translate your desired direction of travel to the front wheels instinctively. The nose

“Its exhaust note does not just hint at big power, it clubs you over the head with it”



turns in accurately on cue and the rest of the car follows through all-of-a-piece. There is no hint of bump steer or the nervousness that over-assistance can bring, so the engineers have done a fine job here.

Not only do the massive Alcon race-bred brakes lack ABS, they also lack a servo. Instead, a race-style twin master cylinder looks after leverage. If you are not used to such brakes, they can cause a moment of panic the first time you approach a bend at speed and find that the pedal requires a much greater shove than you anticipated. You soon learn that you can lean on them pretty hard without locking up, and they are progressive, full of feel and very effective.

As a pure driving experience, it would not be a stretch to describe the Noble as a bigger, heavier and massively more powerful Lotus Exige. The steroids they use in Barwell, Leicestershire, are obviously very effective!

CATERHAM SUPERLIGHT R500

Even an ultra supercar like the Pagani Zonda F still weighs 1,250kg, and the Lotus Elise has grown over 700kg, so at 506kg the Caterham Superlight R500 really does what the painted script says on its aluminium bodywork.

With 263bhp to propel just 506kg (516kg with the sequential gearbox option), the R500's power-to-weight ratio of 520bhp/tonne approximates that of the mighty Bugatti Veyron.

Of course, other factors such as gearing, aerodynamics and rev limits come into play so, although the little Caterham rockets to 100km/h in 2.95 seconds, it runs out of steam at just 240km/h, 160km/h short of the Bugatti's Vmax.

However, on a racetrack, especially a tight and twisty one, the nearly four times heavier Bugatti would be out of its depth. Here, and on challenging country roads, the Caterham is in its element.

Getting into this rocket-powered roller skate is an art in itself. You climb in over the side, avoiding the hot exhaust if the car has just been driven, step on the seat and then slide into the foot well. It really feels like you are strapping the car on rather than getting into it!

Even someone of average size will find the Caterham's cockpit a tight fit; once in place, you hold the small steering wheel with both elbows bent, and one spilling out over the side. And, if you have a passenger, you had better be on good terms as you will share the drive experience in very close proximity.

A significant option on the Superlight R500 is the sequential gearshift, which makes a huge amount of sense if you are intent on track attack times. Not only will this help you to shave your lap times, but it will also ensure that you never mis-shift and buzz the motor.

From the first corner, your senses tell you that the Caterham operates to a different set of physical rules from the other cars here. For a start, it is so much narrower that you can take much straighter lines through bends, allowing you to carry more relative speed.

The steering is absolutely brilliant in terms of feel and feedback, and describes exactly what is going on at the front wheels. I had fears that the small steering wheel and 1.93:1 ratio quick rack would make the car twitchy but, because the chassis is set up perfectly, it feels all-of-a-piece and totally secure both in slow and fast bends alike.

The last Caterham I drove on a track was on normal road tyres and, as it had far more handling than grip, I ended up drifting it through all the bends. The Avon CR500 trackday tyres on 6J and 8J x 13-inch alloys, plus the lower weight and uprated suspension of the R500, put it into a completely different league, and it took me a couple of laps to find out just where its significantly higher levels of mechanical grip ran out.



Although the other three cars are light by road car standards, you always feel you are managing understeer, oversteer and weight transfer with them. In contrast, the Caterham simply goes where you point it, and is by far the most accurate weapon here when it comes to clipping an apex within an inch of where you want to go, each time, every time.

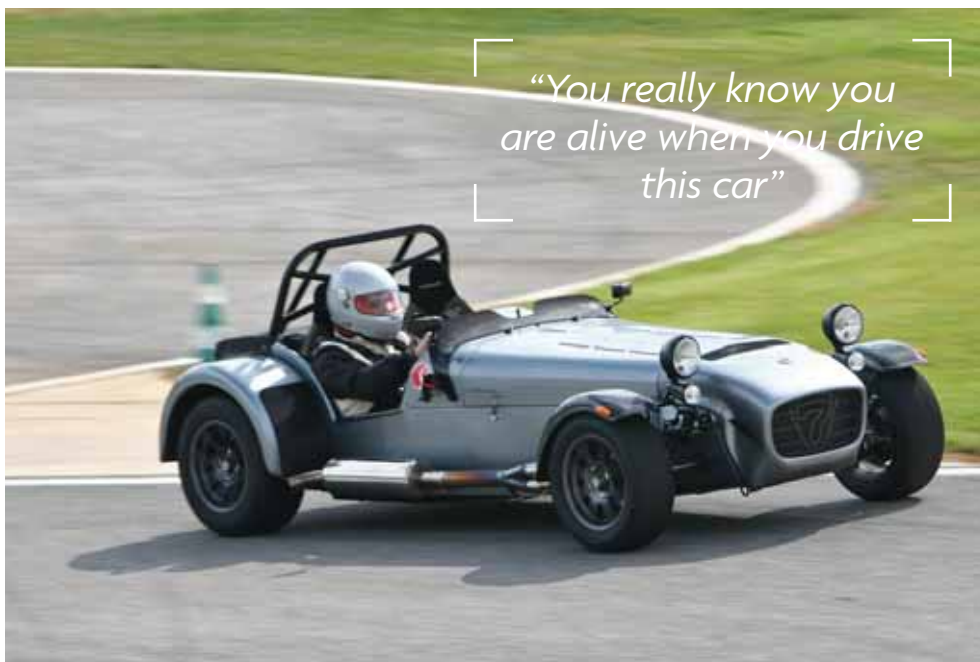


The sequential gearshift is brilliant and totally in keeping with the immediacy of the car's character. You still have to use the clutch for each shift but, with no across the gate movements, speed and accuracy of ratio change is fast, precise and consistent.

Perhaps the only disappointing aspect of the R500 is the rather flat soundtrack of its tuned 2.0 litre four-cylinder Cosworth Ford Duratec motor. While it delivers a healthy 263bhp at 8,500rpm and 240Nm of torque at 7,200rpm, and it is a pretty lusty unit, it is best described as effective rather than charismatic.

However, even the lack of aural brilliance does not stop you from coming back from a few hot laps in the R500 with a grin on your face as broad as the proverbial Cheshire cats.

Being open, the Caterham brings you that much closer to the elements. This al fresco exposure, compact size, low weight and responsive controls collectively deliver a visceral experience that makes the other three cars feel a level or two removed from the proceedings. You really know you are alive when you drive this car.



“Revving to the redline involves the whole gamut of sounds from the baritone low end to the primal scream of the flat-lane crank V8 in full battle cry”



“It bombards your senses with furious sounds and sensations from the moment you pull out of the pit lane”

FERRARI F430 CHALLENGE

Of the four cars here, the Ferrari is the only one that is not road-legal. A former UK Challenger series car, it can now only be used as a rich man's toy for trackdays.

Because of the way the series rules were framed, the engine of this car is effectively the same as the road car, its 4,305cc, quad-cam V8 producing 483bhp at 8,500rpm, with 465Nm of torque at 5,250rpm.

Like all race derivatives of road cars, the F430 Challenge has its weight reduced to 1,225kg by a cockpit strip out, so there are no carpets or sound-proofing. The interior is dominated by the full roll cage, snug racing seats, five-point harnesses and a detachable race steering wheel, with the analogue instruments replaced by a digital display.

With no “manettino” or start button on the detachable race steering wheel, the car is set in Race mode only, with the road-going F430's traction control and stability systems permanently disengaged, and only ABS and ASR left active. The E-differential is replaced with a mechanical limited slip differential, and the coil-over suspension has much stiffer race springs and dampers.

Getting in and out of the Challenge car is your first baptism of fire. Clearing the side bars

of the roll cage involves putting both feet on the seat, holding on to the top bar and climbing in.

Once in, you find that the already compact cabin is made even more so by the roll cage. Your race helmet is almost permanently in contact with the roll cage, and I have decided to retain the resultant marks on my helmet as a badge of honour!

With less weight to pull, the V8 revs up a fraction faster than the road car, and the lack of sound-proofing gives you the full dose of soundtrack right behind your head.

Revving to the redline involves the whole gamut of sounds from the baritone low end to the primal scream of the flat-lane crank V8 in full battle cry. The six-speed paddle shift operated gearbox shifts ratios in 180ms, which is pretty much instantaneously. It also blips the throttle perfectly on downshifts.

However, the over-square V8 motor does its best work over 4,000rpm, and I had to use second gear to obtain convincing acceleration out of the two slowest corners at Ascari, where the other three cars were happy in third.

A very low car in standard form, made lower by its race suspension set-up, the F430 Challenge initially feels more like a racing car than the more upright GT3 RS.

Like the Porsche, the Challenge is very sensitive to the state of its tyres. When they are on their way out, the stiff front end understeers noticeably in tighter bends; the mechanical limited-slip differential that replaces the E-Diff of the road car contributing to this.

However, when the tyres are doing their job and the suspension is properly dialled in, the Ferrari's handling is a thing of beauty. Unlike the F360 Challenge car, which was very snappy on the limit, the F430 Challenge lets go progressively, and trail braking to rotate the tail into a bend holds no big peril if you know what you are doing.

The F430's underbody aero works a treat, more so with the lower Challenge car, which better utilises the ground effect to keep it anchored in fast bends. In fact, in medium and fast bends, the understeer I experienced in the slower turns because of the worn slicks was counterbalanced to some extent by the aero.

The F430 Challenge driving experience is best described as intense. The only pure racecar here, it bombards your senses with furious sounds and sensations from the moment you pull out of the pit lane. Doing a 10-lap race in this car would be both incredible and emotionally draining.

advert

RS ACADEMY –



ONE AMAZING WEEKEND

Several clubs offering supercars and classic cars to their members have come and gone in recent years – and this is not wholly down to the recession.

Part of the problem has been the fact that, after taking their clients' money, most of these clubs could not live up to their promise that the car you wanted to drive would be available at the right time. This led to frustration and dissatisfaction and, with an annual membership fee to pay, many people simply did not come back.

That said, driving supercars on the road has its own issues anyway, and so Rob Stanbury, who worked for Damon Hill's PI Club for three years until it closed down in 2008, decided to start his own supercar club with a quite different angle.

"During my years with Damon, I also had my own operation that offered trackday experiences at the Nurburgring with a BMW M3 CSL and Mitsubishi Evo 9, and had a link up with the Nissan GTR operation there too," Rob explained. "My own operation, but marketed under the PI Club banner, it was very successful and

established that there was indeed a market for such an operation."

A supercar club only lets you drive their cars on the road, while an experience day has you moving quickly from one car to another under pressure. Finally, a trackday means that you use your own car, and not everyone wants to do that.

The RS Academy that Rob founded in 2009 combines the best parts of all three, mixing them together with a flourish that is proving very addictive to those who have signed up.

The RS Academy allows you to drive some of the world's most exciting cars on race tracks, where you can extend them in relative safety. Some members are track novices, while others are hard-core trackday junkies. No matter what your level is, professional drivers such as BTCC racer and former-Clio Cup Champion Danny Buxton and British GT driver Tom Ferrier will be on hand to help you sharpen your technique.

A one-off joining fee buys you membership, and then you simply pay a fee each time you want to come, for either one or two days on the

scheduled weekends. You will be able to switch between cars at will as often as time permits.

Currently, the RS Academy fleet consists of the latest Porsche GT3 RS, a Caterham Superlight R500 and a Ferrari F430 Challenge racecar. The mighty Noble M600 makes a frequent appearance as a "guest" car.

"We chose these cars because they are all very different from each other in terms of character and driving qualities," Rob said. "This gives our members the opportunity to experience the many different facets of modern supercars. We will continue to add new and different cars to our fleet over time."

Based mainly at the picturesque Ascari Race Resort near Ronda, the RS Academy is also active at Spa, the Nurburgring and Paul Ricard in summer.

The RS Academy is the perfect way to drive the latest supercars on demanding tracks in a relaxed atmosphere, with top-class catering and hospitality all part of the package.

More information at: rs-academy.co.uk

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