

Germany

Become a racing demon for a day (in your own car)

At the Nürburgring your inner Ayrton Senna can run free. **Alexi Mostrous** put his foot to the floor in the Rhineland

As a clapped-out Volvo overtook us on the wrong side of the track, my instructor shouted: "That is exactly the sort of idiot who comes to the Nürburgring."

Ron swore as the German-plated family car screamed past us, almost forcing me to drive off the track. We just had time to see its owner, a balding, sweaty, fortysomething man with a manic smile spread across his red face. His poor estate, at least 20 years old and more used to school runs than motor racing, squealed in protest as it was forced around yet another corner. Cars like this, and drivers like him, were not meant for the racetrack.

Yet this is the point of the Nürburgring. It is one of the world's most demanding racetracks. Car manufacturers such as Jaguar use its 13 miles and 154 corners to test their prototypes to destruction. But the real reason thousands of petrolheads come to this circuit deep in the Rhineland woods, is because only here can Mr-Average-Volvo-owner pretend to be Ayrton Senna.

So long as you pay a lap fee of £20, anyone, and I mean anyone, can drive their own car on the northern loop of the Nürburgring. There are no oil checks. No safety briefings. No one to tell you how the track slips and slides and drops more than 1,000ft in the first five miles. No one to warn you that 80 per cent of the track is

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blind and that, unlike modern racetracks, there are no runoffs or gravel pits, or speed limits either. Whether you're driving a bus or a Ferrari, the Germans will simply sell you a ticket and watch you go.

This extreme liberality (or stupidity, depending on how you look at it) allowed me and two friends to drive an old Audi with 120,000 miles on the clock from London and then race it alongside Porsche GT3s, souped-up BMWs and in one case, a motorbike ridden by a man who, it seemed, had placed his own offspring in the sidecar.

Such different abilities made the experience exciting and terrifying in equal measure. About 12 people die here every year, with many more injured. We videoed my friend in the passenger seat, whose face morphed from stoicism to terror in three, quick turns.

Your finances are even more at risk than your life. Crash into the barrier and the Germans will replace it, at a minimum cost of £1,000. Drop oil and cause another accident and you pay all the damage. One man who crashed a Porsche last year was billed £14,500 by his hire company. "The only rule here," one driver says, "is do not, under any circumstances, crash."

But the track is so long it is easy to lose concentration, especially if you're driving yourself. So we decided to hire professional cars and instructors from RSRNurburg, a company run by a grizzled former racer called Ron Simons.

Ron is a serious character. He has stickers in his garage saying "You are now entering Planet Ron". He has been here for years and knows the track inside out. He and I went out in a race-prepared Renault Cleo, with me driving. The experience was exhilarating. By trusting where he was telling me to brake and turn, I found myself travelling much faster. For about a third of the ten-minute lap my fear fell away and I got into a groove where everything seemed to work together as the little racing car slotted into the corners and sped out again.

"Slow in, fast out," Ron says. "You need to have mechanical sympathy."

Later Ron let me take one of his faster machines, a Lotus Exige S240. This is essentially a £40,000 go-kart. Completing a lap in its low-slung racing seats with its engine screaming inches behind your head, as the winter sun fell over the surrounding forest, was exhilarating.

Outside cars, the town of Nürburg offers little stimulation. Set among pretty hills beneath a castle built in the Middle Ages, the place is almost bereft of women. No wonder our friendly, cheap hotel was decorated with car parts and had a constant loop of fastest laps on the TV. The downside of motor racing is that unless you are actually doing it, it is incredibly boring. But if you want a weekend of thrills, with a slim chance of death thrown in and the chance to see what your aged Volvo can do on a track, there is no better place to go.



As a driving test the Nürburgring, with its 13 miles of track and 154 corners, is unsurpassed

Need to know

How to get there

Alexi Mostrous was a guest of Stena Line's Harwich to Hook of Holland ferry; return fares from £190 for four adults with a car. Book on 08447 707070. stenaline.co.uk

Where to stay

He was a guest of Hotel Burgstube (burgstube.com), which has rooms from €49-€159, including breakfast.

Further information

One lap of the Nordschleife with an instructor with RSRNurburg (rsrnurburg.com) is €125 for the Renault Sport Clio Cup and €199 for a Lotus Exige S240.

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