

SPA MAN

We send Spa virgin Adam Towler for some serious lappery in the RSR Nurburg fleet. Fun? With a Cayman GT4 and 991 GT3 at his disposal, what do you think? And the good thing is anyone can do it...

Words: Adam Towler Photography: Gus Gregory



It's 1.30am when I glance at the clock in the car. I turn to the left at the junction and accelerate onto a broad, deserted Belgian country road. In the passenger seat photographer Gregory has the drawn features of a man at the mercy of Eurotunnel's current malaise.

Immediately the road looks familiar. Wisps of mist drift lazily across our path but they can't prevent that creeping sense of *deja vu*. I'll never forget the first time I took a pilgrimage down this stretch of asphalt, nor all those wasted hours playing Grand Prix Legends on the PC when I should have been studying at university.

This is the Masta Straight. This is the 'old' Spa. By the time we reach our hotel I collapse onto the bed and try and push from my mind the endless passing miles of Belgian Autoroute; given the unearthly hour it hardly seems like the ideal preparation for my first experience of driving the world's ultimate circuit. The only thing worse will be the sound of rain thrumming on the window when I wake up tomorrow, which given the climate in the Ardennes is worryingly all too possible. Oh well, goodnight.

The day of RSR Nurburg's Spa track event mercifully dawns with bright, warm sunshine, and after a coffee or three and

one too many croissants I don't feel too bad. Adrenalin does the rest.

Ahead lies the mouth-watering prospect of serious track time on the Spa circuit in a range of new Porsches run and rented out by Ron Simon's RSR Nurburg operation. These days Ron is the official driving school at Spa, and has lined up for us a tantalising trio: I'll attempt to learn the circuit in a 981 Cayman S, then be able to compare Cayman GT4 and 991 GT3 at speed.

Yes, I did say Cayman GT4. That unicorn of hardcore Porsches is ready and waiting for us, and has been in the RSR Nurburg inventory since mid-summer.



On board in Porsche's latest GT machine – the Cayman GT4, complete with driver-centric manual gearbox. Ideal for the task of being a hero round Spa

We're here in the same week that the UK press office GT4 arrives, and while we'll be doing something with that as well in these pages in due course, this is a sublime opportunity to experience the new GT4 at very high speeds. Given that I've yet to sample the car, I simply cannot wait. Another blast in the GT3 should act as a decent barometer for the ability, or otherwise, of the new mid-engined warrior.

Spa appears immaculate. Everything is brightly painted and there's barely a blade of grass out of place. With the forested hills stretching out as far as you can see, and the historic, uniquely Spa buildings in the foreground, it is a pure fantasy for a car and motorsport enthusiast. I can't imagine my ultimate, dream racing circuit looking much different, or any better.

After signing on, the day begins for real with a visit to a couple of corners on the track, the first being the infamous Eau Rouge corner. Having parked up our cars and assembled around Ron in the sunshine he begins his spiel in near-evangelical tones. "Welcome to the best race track in the world; to the best corner in the world".

Everyone turns and stares back down the hill and I'm certain is thinking exactly the same thing: 'It doesn't look that steep on the telly'.

"This is a special place for me", continues Ron, "a magical place. Now; whatever your friends tell you, Eau Rouge is not flat". There's a ripple of laughter around the group. "In fact, some say it's faster when you don't take it flat. It has three challenges: high speed, it's blind, and the elevation change. All the groundwork for the corner is done at the start: when you start something off the wrong way, it never ends right".

The secret to Eau Rouge, then, is to line the car up at the bottom of the hill in such a way that you minimise the direction changes required as you then climb the gradient, hopefully, back hard on the power. "It's not a fight it's a dance", urges Ron, advocating smoothness, "we want to party not fight", he adds in his inimitable Dutch tones. "If you do get it wrong just let the car run straight, there's an area you can run over now with the barrier set back, which wasn't always the case. It only looks stupid

but you don't die". This time hearty laughter rings around the assembled drivers, but Ron cuts it dead by adding: "No, seriously, people still die here". It's as if someone has just pulled the plug out on a sound system; the silence is deafening.

To the Cayman S, then, and at this point I team up with my instructor for the day, Roy Hastings. Roy's background is primarily in motorbikes, and he's so passionately devoted to driving and riding that he now lives at the Nürburgring. Proof, if ever it was required, that driving at places like the 'Ring and Spa gets so far under your skin it becomes a way of life.

There's no corporate banality or waiting around with an RSR Nurburg event. The 'S' is checked over and soon ready for our use, and with the ok given I jump into the driver's seat and after checking I've installed myself in the car correctly, Roy jogs around the other side and climbs into the passenger side. I select 'drive' in the PDK 'box, nudge it to the side to gain manual control, check my helmet strap one last time and we're funnelling down to the pitlane exit. In my head are Ron's words:

"Don't hang around at the pitlane exit. If someone loses it at Eau Rouge you'll be right in line for their accident". Gulp. Better floor it, then.

There then follows some of the very best, most enjoyable driving I've ever had the pleasure to experience. Spa is every inch as good as I had hoped after a lifetime spent watching it on the telly, and reading about the place. No, in fact, it's considerably better than that. Roy's instruction is superb: a constant stream of advice on line, braking points and throttle usage when required, and silence when not. Most of all he urges me to use the car to the fullest extent – every rev, every last ounce of brake retardation, every millimetre of the track.

It's good to drive a Cayman S again. Around Spa it feels largely foolproof,

particularly with the PDK 'box fitted. Don't make any fundamental errors and it feels as though it'll never get out of shape, or bite you, and yet it's fast – properly fast. Even this regular S has the inherent speed to worry all sorts of high performance machinery around this track.

So far, I'd be lying if I didn't say that Eau Rouge was something of a mystery. Ron and Roy say that you should only increase your speed through here when you can drive it ten times in a row and end up at the same point as you exit at the crest. To be honest, I'm nowhere near that level yet. But what a feeling it is to drive through there: it begins with a stamp on the brakes to slow for the La Source hairpin. Then, as the car flows out to the kerb on the exit you have an extraordinary view, past the 'endurance' pits and down

to the bottom of the hill, with the road flipping up violently to the sky behind it and the treeline on the horizon. It must be one of the greatest views in the whole of motoring, and every single lap I'll do throughout the day my stomach flips slightly as I catch a sight of that vignette.

Having got past the sense of awe at the top of the hill, the S is soon rampaging down the straight, the sense of speed heightened by the close proximity of the pitlane wall on the right side. My eyes are fixated on the peel away point near the end of the wall, where I'll brake and let the car cross the road until we trouble the kerb on the left. This is the eye of the storm, the G-force suddenly hitting you as with a release of the brakes you aim the car to the right and then as the car straightens you're hard on the power. All

Spa's defining moment is Eau Rouge, one of F1's legendary turns. Cayman GT4 is rather blocking the approach, but the backdrop is pure Spa. Silverstone it is not!



“ Driving at places like the 'Ring and Spa gets so far under your skin it becomes a way of life ”

Our man Towler looking pensive, as well he might. The RSR Nurburg event is no quick taster. It's a full on experience with instructors that will push you hard all the way. And Spa, let's not forget, is a proper old school track



you can see through the windscreen is sky, but if you've done it right as you crest the rise only a slight correction to the left is required to make the final part of the corner. Separating it into sections is one thing, but given it all happens very fast, ideally in one fluid movement, getting it right requires immense concentration, a fair dose of courage and lots and lots of practise.

After letting the car sing up the Kemmel straight, it's another hard stop before the challenge of Les Combes, and the lateral forces of repeated changes of direction. Then it's down to the enigmatic Brussels curve, which seems to last for an eternity and is almost as vexing as Eau Rouge. There are various lines to be taken, but the overriding approach seems to be maximising corner speed over the more usual exit velocity, given the need to get the car over to the right hand side immediately after it for Rivage.

It's Pouhon – which Ron describes as

the second best corner in the world – that follows next: it's a one steering movement type of corner, your precise line tailored by the use of throttle that can be brought into play more and more as the corner opens out. It is completely exhilarating, feeling the car under such sustained and formidable load – something which you never get to experience on the public road, or at track days in the UK for that matter. The sensation is similar towards the end of the lap with the Stavelot 1 and 2 curves, the first flat and the second requiring just a dab of the brakes at very high speed before committing onto the correct line. Once you're there, it's another big stop into the new bus stop chicane, where it's easy to induce some oversteer both in the middle and on the exit, and then the run down to La Source, and the majestic view of Eau Rouge that heralds another lap.

After a short breather it's time to jump in the GT4. It's often the case that when a car looks right, it drives right, and the GT4

really does look right 'in the metal'. It still has the compact, cheeky dimensions of Porsche's small coupe, but with the added muscle and aggression of a GT department car. Visually, it just begs to be driven.

Once out on the circuit, although it fundamentally feels like a Cayman, the detail messages coming back to the driver are quite different. It's louder, more mechanical, more precise, and more stable under load. It feels stronger, more direct, as if the layers of slack and the slight 'give' engineered into every road car, even Porsches, have been delicately sanded away to reveal a carbon steel core of purposeful personality. Having a manual gearbox with which to work takes a momentary recalibration on my part after the S's PDK, but when the shift quality is this good it's far from a chore. As Ron will say later, "That car (GT4) brings the old school thrills back. It's not about how quick you go, it's about how much fun you have,

RSR Nurburg's GT3 brings with it a real taste of race car thrills. Experiences don't come much more vivid than this



“ It's completely exhilarating, feeling the car under such sustained and formidable load ”



Cayman GT4 chased by 991 GT3 rounding La Source hairpin before the plunge down to Eau Rouge

and changing gear is part of the fun of driving. It's a real drivers' car". Indeed, the GT4 is an absolute belter. It's one of those cars where the overall package is even more impressive than one single element. The extra shove of the engine elevates the performance onto another level, and the steering – for an electric assistance rack in particular – is beautifully weighted and so precise that your confidence soars within seconds. The overall balance is so friendly that there's no fear even when tackling Spa: only the encouragement to push harder still. But it's how all of these elements, and more, come together that marks the GT4 out as special. Even the long gear ratios, perhaps a hindrance on the road, seem to suit Spa's long expanses of track rather well, enabling third to be held at certain points without necessitating a brief blast in fourth before coming back down the 'box.

The GT4 forms a fast train behind a track prepared E92 M3 V8 running masses of camber and a roof-high rear wing, and it occurs to me as Roy keeps the advice and encouragement flowing that this might be

the ideal trackday toy: fast enough to present a challenge and see off plenty of other cars, but friendly enough that it allows the driver to relax slightly, concentrating instead on learning the lines and perfecting technique rather than staying constantly vigilant that the car may be about to do something nasty, or unexpected. The GT4 may be a baby croc with teeth, but it's still on your side. With its built-in adjustability I'm sure the GT4 can be tailored to be a bit friskier, but right now I simply don't want to stop lapping. Nevertheless, Eau Rouge still remains a brilliant corner trapped somewhere in the fogginess of my mind. There have been no anxious moments yet, but neither have I got close to really nailing it, either. Part of that is a lack of confidence to really commit that final 15%, but like I said, every time we run down the hill towards it there are certain sections of my synapses that are screaming abort, abort. This, inherently, is one of the challenges of driving Spa.

It's time to park up the little GT4, now gently ticking as the heat soak washes over it, and get reacquainted with its big brother.

It doesn't matter how many times you drive one, getting behind the wheel of a GT3 remains a deeply special experience, and never more so than at a circuit like this. Clearly, the GT3 is going to be hitting some very significant velocities at various points on the track.

At this point there's a significant part of my consciousness that would love to report how the GT4 remains at the centre of my affections. But I must be truthful. While the GT4 doesn't depart, it does have to at the very least make room for the big white car with the large rear wing and the loopy engine. It's obvious from the moment we exit the pitlane and the engine bites hard into Kemmel's gradient that this is going to be something special, and with one lap down to acclimatise myself to the car and warm through the fluids, the GT3 is absolutely flying. Even though I'm still reasonably tentative through Eau Rouge, we're just nudging 150mph as I brake hard – although still not quite as hard as perhaps I could – for Les Combes. Firing through the trees with the engine revving to 9000rpm in each gear, it feels fast – majorly



Ron Simons is the top man at RSR Nurburg. He's come some way since his days of running Alfa 75s at the 'Ring and a ride round Spa with Ron is an experience to remember. His enthusiasm is infectious





FAST, as in, try not to leave a fingernail indent in the wheel rim fast.

Thankfully, the powers of braking are immense, and I know there's even more I could get out of them with a little more courage. Yes, I do miss the manual gearbox, but with an engine like this the PDK is a very fine match, and for the inexperienced it does free the mind up to concentrate on everything else going on.

I can't quite bring myself to take Stavelot 1 flat out, but even so, the speeds are getting pretty serious indeed, and we settle into a nice rhythm with an Audi R8 GT up ahead. What I do notice is that, unlike the GT4, my brain is finding the GT3 experience more of a struggle, and after six high-speed laps I'm ready to come in and take stock. I want to sit down quietly and think through what I've done, where it could be improved. I need that moment to

mentally process what has just happened, and because of the intensity of the GT3 experience that's not something I feel like I can do while driving the car.

There's time for one more lap. Out of La Source I have the GT3 firing forward with 9000rpm in second gear, and then up into third with barely a jolt to register the next gear slotting home. That familiar snake of Tarmac looms in front and I screw up some courage to brake later deep into the 'left', and then turn in hard to take the apex on the right. Now the windscreen is almost all blue and I'm back hard on the power; "more throttle, more throttle" shouts Roy and the GT3 brays its head off as it goes slightly light on the crest, overhauling a Radical-type car on the outside as we take the slight right onto the straight. That was better: still plenty of room for improvement, but it felt better; more cohesive; faster,

even more exciting.

"At Spa, everything is in fast-forward" Ron will tell me later. "Your reactions need to work overtime". His business is booming, for as he remarks: "Cars are getting faster and the limits on the road are getting lower: to use any of the car's potential you need a track. Life is getting too safe. We need to do things that make us feel alive – that's why there's high demand".

I can categorically state that if you want to feel alive, then you should try lapping the Spa Francorchamps circuit. It is an essential experience for anyone who loves cars and driving, and when it comes to wheels of choice it doesn't get much better than the GT4 and GT3. The former has the involvement and a wonderful personality, the latter that engine and an integrity that's even better on the track than it is on the road. Both are brilliant cars. **PW**

You will never approach a 991 GT3's limits on the road. If you want to really push one, to feel it grip and move around, then the track is the place, and Spa the ultimate track and place



CONTACT

Many thanks to Ron Simons and the team at RSR Nurburg. For full details of forthcoming RS Nurburg events go to:

rsrnurburg.com

Many thanks also to Family Roxs for putting us up at the Romantik Hotel Le Val d'Ambleve, which is located within a mile or so of the Spa circuit.

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