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by RICHARD MEADEN PHOTOGRAPHY by GUS GREGORY

# SPATIR





# RS3

*It's the time of year for getting on track. We start the season in adventurous style by putting a trio of core evo machines through their paces around the legendary Spa-Francorchamps circuit*



**F A EUROPEAN ROAD TRIP IS A PETROLHEAD** rite of passage, then a road trip to one of the world's greatest race circuits is about as good as it gets. With overland travel back to normal and the trackday season in full swing, we're hitting the open road. Destination Spa-Francorchamps.

Finding track time at Spa isn't difficult. Many of the UK's best trackday companies have slots in their calendars, but on this occasion we're attending an open pitlane day organised by RSR. With an impressive base just outside the circuit gates and a fleet of track-prepared cars available to hire – from Hyundai i30 N to 991.2 GT3 RS – RSR offers more than a dozen dates spread evenly across the year.

So, you're heading to Spa, but what do you take? We wanted to reflect the cars we see readers enjoy at an **evo** trackday rather than simply call the friendliest press office with the juiciest cars. So representing the real(ish) world and today's compact, four-wheel-drive, circa-400bhp hyperhatch/saloon is our Audi RS3 long-term. At the other end of the spectrum is the latest trackday road car from Porsche, the 718 Cayman GT4 RS. And in the middle, perhaps the sweet spot, is the daily driver that's been tuned to be far more exploitable on track while still remaining useable on the road, here represented by the Life110 Alpine A110. It's a disparate trio that echoes down the ages. Replace the Audi with an Impreza or Evo, the Alpine with an S2 Lotus Exige, and the Cayman with a Gen 2 996 GT3 RS and you have the same mix, rewound by two decades.

We arrive at Spa on Sunday evening in good time for a few beers and dinner. But a pilgrimage to this place also demands a reverential lap of the mighty old Spa road circuit. Ideally punctuated with a pit stop at the Masta Friterie – an evocative if somewhat insalubrious chip shop located on the exit of one of the most fearsome corners in motorsport.

Back in the '70s, Porsche 917s, Ferrari 512s and V12 Matras would approach this spot at the best part of 230mph, shimmying through the Masta Kink at 180mph then onward for the blistering run from Stavelot to the La Source hairpin. The scale, speed and hair-raising nature of this old 8.7-mile public road circuit is jaw-dropping.

Contrary to the forecast, Monday dawns clear. Up in the F1 paddock the Audi and Alpine make a welcome change from the hordes of Porsches and BMWs, but it's the Cayman that's the star. Especially amongst the Porsche owners, who clamour to pore over the car they've read so much about but have yet to see in the metal. I doubt there's a hotter car in the world right now.

This example is optioned with the Weissach and Clubsport packages, with superfluous kit such as the PCM system deleted. It's as hardcore as they come, yet like all Caymans it swallows luggage and looks after its occupants. The four-hour drive from Stuttgart to Spa was no hardship, though the GT4 RS is *vocal* on all but the barest tickle of throttle. Ironically, it's now a bit short-gear for motorway driving, but it still has some reach, with a lunge to an indicated 304kph (189mph) on some derestricted autobahn limbering us up nicely for the fun to come.

With its long straights and speed-sapping inclines, Spa is a power circuit, but such are the challenges of its twists and turns you also need a chassis to make use of it. On paper the 394bhp (and 369lb ft) Audi RS3 has all the stonk you want from its warbling 2.5-litre five-cylinder motor. Combined with an all-wheel-drive system that

**Above and top right:** exploring the old road circuit and partaking in the ritual of frites and mayonnaise. **Right:** Meaden, Pook and Towler sign on and get fully briefed



## 'THE PILGRIMAGE DEMANDS A REVERENTIAL LAP OF THE OLD SPA ROAD CIRCUIT'

includes a torque-vectoring rear diff, this miniature supersaloon blends everyday practicality with big-league ballistics.

It certainly means business powering down the steep hill from the F1 pitlane exit towards the newly reprofiled Eau Rouge, gravity assistance and the effortless DSG gearshifts making the plunge feel impressively headlong. Our RS3 is fitted with the optional RS Dynamic Pack, which includes carbon-ceramic brakes and adaptive dampers, but being a UK car it doesn't come with the Pirelli P Zero Trofeo R tyres offered as options in other markets. Shame.

Had it been raining we wouldn't have missed the extreme rubber, but in the dry the Bridgestone Potenza Sports don't offer the bite and sidewall stiffness the car deserves and Spa demands. The RS3's contrived agility makes it entertaining on the road when you're shy of the limit, but it doesn't sit so happily with Spa's long corners, the front end unable to sustain the car's eager initial rotation.

You can mitigate this by blending in and out of the throttle, but because the lateral loadings are high and the tyres are immediately working at or beyond their limit, it's tricky to find a fine balance between rear-end yaw and front-end push. The sweet spot proves elusive, at least until you learn that dialling things back to what feels like 80 per cent helps the Audi find its feet. You can't really attack the circuit – something those Trofeo Rs would have helped with – but with discipline it's possible to carry proper speed through the ballsiest corners and slice satisfyingly through the medium-speed sections.

On the plus side, Spa's scale and speed play to the RS3's overall strengths more than a smaller, twistier track. Ironically, I suspect its best chance of shining would be just across the border, with a few tourist laps of the Nürburgring Nordschleife. Next time, perhaps.

Climbing into our other RS illustrates the gulf between a fast road













**'THE SATISFACTION  
FROM THE PREVIOUS  
CORNER LASTS UNTIL  
THE NEXT ONE'**



car such as the Audi and a fast road car optimised for track use. The GT4 RS is truly hardcore. The shorter gearing injects tremendous energy into its actions, and when you open the throttle wide the engine and induction noise is all-consuming. The PDK 'box is a cracker, thanks to the incorporation of some internals from the Clubsport race car. In Sport the shifts are like rifle shots and match the keen edge of the motor perfectly.

**Above:** RS3 struggles to find a rhythm; stickier rubber would help. **Left and far left:** Life110 Alpine is ideally modified for the job in hand, while the GT4 RS proves simply sublime on track

It seems gratuitous to wind the 493bhp engine round to the red line at every opportunity, but it thrives on such treatment. In a straight line there's very little in it against the 991 and 992 GT3s.

It's telling that when I decide to pit it's because I need to calm down, not the car. Motor, gearbox, brakes and chassis all feel entirely happy being worked flat-out for six- or seven-lap stints. Even the tyres – Michelin Cup 2s – shrug off the punishment. Utterly addictive and truly unforgettable, I would venture to say it's the best road car I've ever driven on a racetrack.

And so to the Alpine. We've tracked the progress of Life110 since the company first appeared on the scene, but for those of you who don't know the backstory, here's a quick summary. The UK-based Alpine tuning company was founded by ex-Jaguar vehicle development engineer David Pook. With the Project 8 on his CV and an E46 CSL and 911 GT3 amongst his back catalogue of personal cars, his connection with the A110 was forged through a combination of ownership and the engineer's urge to improve things.

The car we have at Spa is Pook's own. It has done all the development work for his growing range of upgrades and now sports the most focused suite of enhancements yet. Encompassing chassis hardware and geo changes, aero kit, engine and aesthetics, this Track Spec is aimed at owners who want to sharpen their car for trackday use, but don't want to sacrifice its on-road capabilities.

If you were to fit the whole shebang – that's to say wheels, tyres, geo set-up, A110S anti-roll bars, super-cool R53 two-way coilover suspension (factoid: R53 kit is also fitted to the GMA T.50), braided brake lines and upgraded pads, aero package and engine upgrade – it would cost £12,000. That's a substantial amount, but with early A110s on the used market for circa £45k, this means you could have a fully optimised Track Spec Life110 Alpine for less than the price of a new, factory-standard A110S.

The way it tackles Spa's demanding undulations, technical twists and daunting high-speed curves is a big change from the A110 we fell in love with back in 2018. It punches harder through the gears, summons more grip, corners flatter, feels more stable when you need it to, yet the reinvention is a sympathetic one.

There's the lightness, of course, both in terms of physical mass and delicacy of control weights, but there's a freeness to the way this Alpine makes progress that's genuinely joyful. Yes, it lacks the steely precision and immense control of the GT4 RS, while the pepped-up powertrain doesn't have the grunt and purposeful vocals of the RS3's five-pot, but it compensates with a familiar sense of the car flowing across the tarmac rather than clawing into it.

Stepping from the GT4 RS you notice the Alpine moves around a little under braking, and that the tail isn't as tied down, but through the slow and medium corners it lends the A110 a playfulness that's fun in those moments where the Porsche is deadly serious and the Audi tends towards flat-footedness. The fast corners are where you'd like a bit more harmony between front and rear, for although the nose is steadfast, that rear-end mobility makes blending out of the throttle through 100mph-plus corners such as Pouhon and Blanchimont a little trickier than ideal. What remains unfailingly impressive about the Life110 Alpine is its effervescence. Spa is a big stage on which to play with 300bhp, but despite its relative lack of stonk, it shines. It's quick enough that the straights don't drag, and there's so much enjoyment to be had from the corners that the satisfaction from the previous one lasts until you're lining-up for the next.

This A110 sits neatly between the Audi and the Porsche. It follows a well-trodden path that many trackday regulars head down when upgrading their road car for track use, its modifications not extreme enough to render it a hindrance on the road, yet the car feeling special enough to make every trip an occasion.

Speaking of which, if you've been putting off a road trip to Spa – or the Ring or any other track for that matter – now is the time to reconsider. Whatever car you drive.







# GET ON TRACK

*If you're new to trackdays, it pays to listen to the experts. We hear from the guys at RSR*

RSR HAS BEEN RUNNING EVENTS AT SPA AND the Nürburgring for more than 20 years, ever since owner Ron Simons (pictured bottom right) started making the trip from his native South Holland to the Ring in one of his Alfa Romeo 75s and began offering trackday hire and tuition. These days his business has grown into a leading proponent of the trackday scene, with bases at Spa, the Ring and elsewhere, an impressive fleet of rental vehicles and a client base from all over the world. Which makes Ron and RSR operations manager Jonathan Chan ideally placed to give anyone new to trackdays some top tips on how to look after your car, your own well-being, and your wallet.

Let's start with you, the driver. 'If you're coming to Spa for the first time,' says Jonathan, 'one of the best things you can do is get an instructor alongside you. You can be confident about what you're doing on the track, and the traffic around you.' RSR provides instructors for either half or full days.

'The biggest problem we see is guys driving outside the limits of the car, the track and themselves – so if you're hiring, we can help with choosing a level of car you're confident in driving. The main bit of kit you need is a crash helmet. You don't need a race suit unless you really want to wear one.'

'And don't drink too much the day before,' quips Ron. 'Generally speaking, trackdays are quite gentlemanly,' says Jonathan. 'It's not a race, there's nothing to win. If you are slower [than the car behind], just lift off the gas a bit [to let them past]. But don't slam on the brakes – that's even worse!'

Clearly, car prep is vital, but it's sometimes overlooked. 'Some guys, particularly we find with those coming from the UK, arrive with worn brakes and tyres,' notes Jonathan. 'They'll be here for two to three days, but by lunchtime on the first day they'll be needing brake pads, and then there's a panic to get them fitted – usually expensively, on a Sunday. So have your car checked over before you come, not six months in advance. Make sure it's all tight underneath, there're no oil or fluids weeping, nothing like a split driveshaft boot. Make sure the oil is topped up. Anything that needs sorting

over here is a waste of your track time, so even throwing away a 50 per cent worn tyre will save you money in the long run. If you're doing two days here, bring a second set of tyres or organise to have them here waiting to be fitted. After all, if it starts to rain you'll also want to get home without a problem!'

Ron agrees, adding: 'Refresh your brake fluid and make sure the pads are of a certain thickness. There's a lot of wear and tear of brakes on a circuit, but Spa is not a high brake-wear track like Zolder or Monza. The Nordschleife you don't need much brakes at all, and you don't have that much tyre wear either as it's a natural, flowing track with low-grip tarmac.'

As for car choice, Jonathan has this advice: 'When anyone asks me what the ideal car for a trackday is, I tend to mention something like a Porsche Cayman. You want something that's quite lightweight, so it's easier on tyres and brakes.'

'The best car is so personal,' adds Ron, 'and is very different from the Ring to Spa. At the Ring you don't need a fast car, the track is so fast down the hill anything will run 120mph easily, so you can get into a lot of trouble. So the best bang for buck is a Clio or Mégane RS, or an M2 or Cayman, but even those [latter two] are already very fast for a beginner. At Spa you can learn the track in two hours, what gear to be in, and then you can push a bit, and the track is very forgiving so you can make a mistake and only go slower, as opposed to the Ring where you will need to replace the guardrail afterwards. So at Spa everyone can drive a GT3 – you may not use it to its full potential, but if that's what you want to do you can [hire one from us and] do it. We have everything from a Twingo RS to an LMP car.'

Most of RSR's fleet is run on road tyres to make them more forgiving for beginners. Their BMW M2s, for example, use Michelin Super Sports and standard discs, but with an endurance brake pad that gives longer life but doesn't generate the sort of heat that can easily warp a disc. However, adds Jonathan, 'You can't drive an M2 like a Porsche Cup car. You have to drive to the level of the car and not over it.' It's a good piece of advice for anyone taking their own road car.

RSR get around 250 miles per set of tyres on one of their rental Mégane RSs, with brake pads lasting 500-600 miles. A disc change is carried out after the third pad change. With the 911 GT3s, the tyres last about the same amount of time, with pads making only 400-500 miles. As a general rule, the company believes their costs are £2-3 per trackday mile for one of the Renaults, rising from there. They'll inspect the car before every time it goes out, which means some cars are examined almost daily. And while they stick to the makers' oil change schedule, they're regularly checking and changing the brake fluid.



ATTENDEE'S VIEW  
**MELVIN SPEAR**  
PORSCHE (964) 911  
CARRERA CUP

'I'm from England and I've owned this 964 Cup car since 2001, but I've been attending trackdays since 1994. I've probably done them every year since then – in the Noughties maybe doing 1000 miles a year, just on track. I've lost count of how many times I've driven here [Spa], maybe 15-20 times?'

'The good things about driving at Spa is that you're never sure what the weather is going to be like, it's a mega fast track, and it's good to give this car some beans. I was getting 220kph [137mph] into Eau Rouge – I don't think I could get that anywhere in England.'

'My advice for a trackday newcomer is get an instructor. Or at least get a passenger ride with someone who knows what they're doing and isn't showing off, and you'll learn something. And don't worry about falling off. There's a certain amount of self-preservation; everyone's worried about damaging their car, but you won't.'

'I had a 964 Carrera 4, and an instructor said I'd got to the end of the car, and had I considered an RS? I went looking for one but came across this car instead, and I've competed in hill climbs and speed events as well as trackdays for many years. It also happens to be an appreciating asset, so that's a bonus!'









# JOIN EVO AT SPA

*We've partnered with RSR Spa to bring you the chance to join evo on track at Spa*

THE EVO TRACKDAY CALENDAR HAS burgeoned in recent years, with brilliant British circuits such as Goodwood, Brands Hatch and Oulton Park joining our 'home' venue of Bedford Autodrome. But now we're taking things to another level for what promises to be our most exciting track event yet: the **evo** Spa-Francorchamps trackday!

Held in association with RSR, we'll be joining one of their Premium Trackdays on 18 October at arguably the world's finest circuit. So you get full access to everything RSR offers, plus a Eurotunnel crossing, one night's accommodation and dinner with **evo** the night before the event.

The Spa-Francorchamps circuit needs no introduction. A current F1 venue, it has managed to keep the challenge, atmosphere and aesthetics befitting its elder statesman status in the world of motorsport, and hence is like no other track in the world. It offers raw speed, technical corners and, of course, the test of courage and car control that is Eau Rouge. Need we say more?

RSR Spa's Premium Trackday package includes a comprehensive safety briefing and a unique track walk. Attendee numbers are kept lower than average and an open pitlane means you can drive when, and as little or often, as you like. The noise limit is 103 dB. RSR also offers a vast rental fleet including Renault Sport, BMW and Porsche cars, some modified further for track work, and even options with hand controls for drivers with disabilities. Instructors are available too when pre-booked, and there's the option to buy additional driver and passenger spaces.

Add in a good road trip with the circuit of Spa-Francorchamps as your destination and it promises to be an unforgettable experience. Register your interest now at [evotrackdays.co.uk](http://evotrackdays.co.uk).



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