

(GREEN) HELL ON EARTH... IS DRIVING HEAVEN

The infamous Nordschleife is likely to be within the Top Five on many a petrolhead's list of must-drives. We tackle it in some Renaultsport cars, including an epic R26 R.

WORDS: TERENCE FOO
PHOTOGRAPHY: RSR & TERENCE FOO



Nordschleife one of the longest tracks one can drive on

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nown as the most demanding and dangerous track in the world, the Nürburgring has earned itself the nickname, "Green Hell" over the years. Tracing its roots to the mid 1920s, the current configuration consists of a Grand Prix track used for Formula 1 and other races, and the *Nordschleife* or North Loop, made famous by video games and the *TopGear* TV programme.

At around 21 kilometres, the *Nordschleife* is one of the longest tracks you can drive on. Over 80 per cent of the course comprises blind corners and crests and major elevation changes that will see the track drop and rise 300 metres in quick succession. It is mainly used for testing by car manufacturers, private driving academies and private track sessions, but is also regularly open to the public during its *Touristenfahrten* sessions. These are held several times a week during most of the year, ranging from one hour in the evening to whole day sessions. During these sessions, the *Nordschleife* is operated as a one-way toll road, subject to German driving regulations and even speed limits in several sections, and is accessible to anyone with a valid driver's licence and just 26 euros (\$41) for each lap.

Three main trackcar-rental companies operate at the 'Ring, offering anything from modified versions of the latest Suzuki Swift Sport to the Artega GT. For my inaugural visit, I chose to rent from RSR Nürburg as I liked their selection of cars, which included the RenaultSport Clio Cup, Mégane R26.R, Mégane RS250 and RS265, Lotus Exige S 240 and Cup 260, BMW E92 M3, Porsche 911 GT3 and GT3 RS. The RSR team has been operating at Nürburg for over a decade, providing car rentals, driving instruction, private track sessions, road rallies, as well as local hotel and transport arrangements. They also run the driving academy at the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium, where they have additional cars, including the Lotus 2-Eleven and LMP race cars.

The online booking process was straightforward; I reserved the First Timer package, which included a morning road rally around the Nürburg area in a Lotus Exige S 240 to visit historical spots and learn racing lines, followed by lunch and laps of the *Nordschleife* in a RenaultSport Clio Cup during the afternoon *Touristenfahrten* session. Earlier this year, the RSR team decided to offer a full day Classic Cars & Castles sightseeing tour, which I booked as well, selecting a Lancia Delta HF Integrale Evoluzione. Surely, this must be the only place in the world that rents out these motoring and rally icons.

Nürburg is about an hour's drive from Frankfurt. The town was filled with interesting cars when I arrived, from classic Porsches to the latest 911 GT2 RS. The morning drive in the Exige S 240 proves to be a revelation, offering a pure and unadulterated experience as the car carved through the hilly, winding roads. Later that afternoon, the Clio Cup provides the perfect introduction to the *Nordschleife*, with its high-revving engine, sharp steering, precise gear changes and fade-free brakes, which I actually found slightly too powerful (or maybe I was going too slowly!).

It took about three laps to get somewhat familiar with the track, before really building up speed and being able to pass slower traffic. Later, I swap into the Mégane RS265, immediately enjoying the increase in power and the fluid handling. Slightly misjudging a corner and turning in a little too early, I can feel the electronic aids kicking-in to keep the car on course (and out of the armco). Otherwise, the car dances around the track, rewarding accurate racing lines with smooth power delivery and rapid exits.



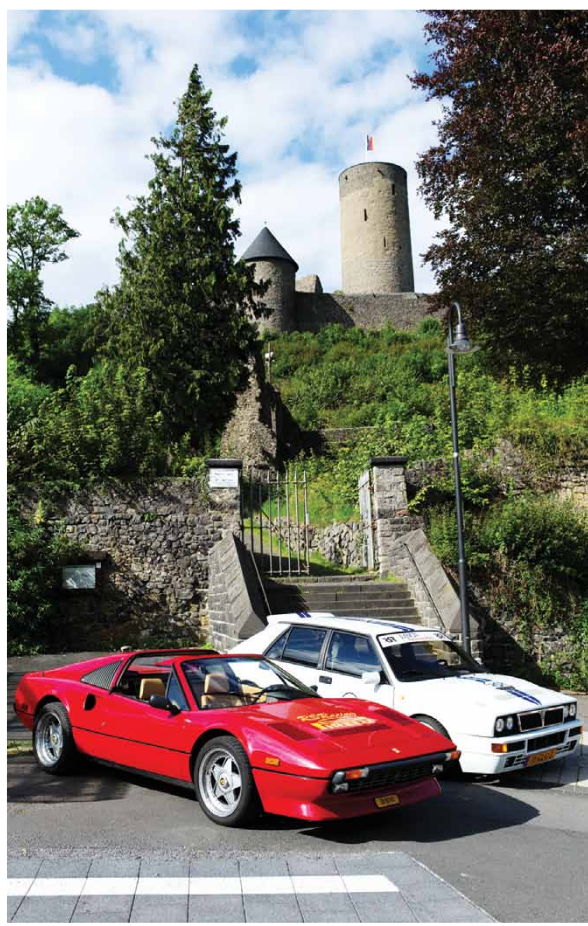
New Megane 265 a tasty prelude to the epic R26.R



Green Hell



'Classic Cars and Castles' tour lets you sample the evocative HF Integrale Evo



I then decide to try the Mégane R26.R, a car that's received so much critical acclaim it's practically already a cult classic. The experience is nothing short of magical, as the lack of sound deadening material and the engineers' focus on lightness add to a much rawer and connected feel as the car kisses the kerbs and slingshots into famous corners like the Carousel. The added stiffness of the roll cage, the Recaro seats, five-point harness, polycarbonate windows and semi-slick tyres all combine to enhance the sense of occasion and make for an unforgettable experience.

The following morning, accompanied by a guide in a Lotus Exige, I head out in the Lancia Delta Integrale, together with an American couple celebrating their anniversary in a Ferrari 308 GTS. Both the Lancia and the Ferrari are low mileage personal cars of RSR boss Ron Simons, and the Lancia has suspension and engine tweaks to suit its owner. We visit a couple of castles during the day, driving on small country roads that cut through crop fields and skirt past vineyards, rising into the hills and dropping down to long lakeshore roads. The Lancia handles like a dream, with the turbocharger wastegate whistling loudly during gear-shifts as the car rockets up the roads. There is a moment that afternoon that I will always remember, as the Lancia chases the Lotus and Ferrari along a beautifully deserted and winding country road.

My three night stay in Nürburg passes by all too quickly. The village has a wonderful atmosphere, where everyone you meet is a petrolhead and has a story to share. Most people are connected to the auto industry in some way, from local businesses such as RSR, to car manufacturers and tyre companies that have skunkworks and testing facilities there. As I drove away on my last day, I couldn't wait to be back. Two weeks later, after freeing up a few hours from my schedule, I found myself making a detour to Nürburg on my way to Frankfurt for my flight home to Singapore. I call the folks at RSR and ask them to prepare the Mégane R26.R for a quick lap of the *Nordschleife*. It's that type of car, and that type of place. **TA**

[For more information, visit <http://www.rsrnurburg.com>]



"The R26.R is that kind of car and the *Nordschleife* is that type of place..."