

TRACKS WITH BENEFITS



Our itinerant track-traveller enjoys some fast and furious Spa action during his second shot with RSR

WORDS: TERENCE FOO AT THE CIRCUIT DE SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS, BELGIUM / PHOTOGRAPHS: RSR



SPA ACTION



The Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium is known to be one of the three most dangerous and exhilarating circuits around, together with the Isle of Man TT and the Nürburgring. First opened in 1922, the current configuration of Spa runs 7km long, and features some of the most famous stretches of race track in the world. The section around Eau Rouge in particular is renowned for being notoriously difficult to master. Starting with a long and fast downhill straight, you soon find yourself in a set of fast left-right-left kinks at the base of the hill, before you shoot uphill again. Clipping the red-and-white curb of the blind crest at the top of the hill, you literally fly into the Kemmel Straight, one of motorsport's fastest stretches. Did I mention that this is one fast track?

On a recent pilgrimage to the Nürburgring, I decided to add two private track days at Spa to my itinerary. Just across the border from Germany, Spa is about an hour's drive from Nurburg and features a modern trackside hotel. The guys at RSR, from whom I rent cars at Nurburg, run the official driving academy at Spa, and offer the same wide range of cars as they do at their Nurburg facility. Indeed, the BAC Mono that we rent was driven from Nurburg on the eve of track session.

RSR regularly organises premium private track days for its customers, starting with a morning track walk, where RSR founder Ron Simons

describes the best cornering lines. Full support is provided by RSR in terms of rental cars or open garages for customers tracking their own cars. The team goes a step further with great catering and a delicious lunch, whilst providing a team of mechanics on-site to cope with contingencies. RSR's driving instructors are available on an hourly, half-day or full-day basis to help hone your driving skills and let you get the most out of the day. Legendary race driver Sabine Schmitz also makes an appearance, offering blindingly fast taxi laps, drifting around the circuit in her Porsche 911 GT3 RS 3.8.

Driving on Spa seems deceptively easy, and you are soon able to learn most of the corners. A few, such as Pouhon, are wonderful, constant radius turns where you can use your throttle to control your steering angle. However, as the session progresses, the track proves difficult to master, although the ability to notice incremental improvements throughout the day is immensely rewarding and hugely enjoyable.

Back in the open pit lane, the mood is convivial, with like-minded enthusiasts from all over Europe and as far away as Australia trading driving stories. All things considered, our track days at Spa are as close to perfect as they get. We'll certainly be back... **TG**

[For more details, visit www.rsrspa.com]



BAC TO LIFE

The Mono gives new lease of life to our track-days...

WORDS: TERENCE FOO
PHOTOGRAPHS: RSR & TERENCE FOO



The only thing you need to know about the BAC Mono is that it is absolutely magical.

Built by brothers Neill and Ian of the Briggs Automotive Company in Cheshire, England, the Mono is a road-legal specialist sports car with no roof and a single, central seat. With looks inspired by the F-22 fighter jet, this outrageous-looking car is designed to provide the purest possible driving experience. Powered by a 2.3-litre 4 cylinder Cosworth engine producing 280bhp (about 520bhp/tonne), the Mono goes from 0 to 100 km/h in 2.8 seconds. It puts its power down via a six-speed sequential semi-automatic Hewland gearbox straight from an F3 race car, operated by three conventional pedals or carbonfibre paddles mounted behind the steering wheel.

Earlier this year, I received an email from RSR informing me that they had taken delivery of a pair of BAC Monos, which could be rented at either Spa-Francorchamps or the Nürburgring. I didn't



need much persuasion, and before long, found myself committed to a one-week driving trip comprising two track days on each track, as well as two road tours! The highlight of the trip would be a full day with the BAC Mono at Spa-Francorchamps.

It was cold and rainy when we arrived just after 8am at the track for our private session. Greeting us in our private pit garage was a menacing red and black BAC Mono – one of the most purposeful and serious cars I have ever laid eyes on. Given the wet conditions, we decided to start with the other cars first – a BMW E92 M3, a Porsche 981 Cayman S, and a pair of Renault Megane RS26.R hatches.

Accompanied by instructors from RSR Spa, we soon learnt the best lines for tackling the infamous Eau Rouge-Raidillon corners, and how to adjust cornering lines with the throttle through the fast fourth-gear left-hander at Poulon. By late morning, as the rain stopped, we felt ready for the BAC Mono.

As with an F1 car, the Mono's rectangular steering wheel has to be removed to facilitate entry into the car. Standing on the seat for a moment, I drop myself into the interior, eventually sliding down and forward with outstretched legs in order to reach the pedals. I find myself seated more horizontally than I've ever been in any other car, acutely aware of how close I am to the ground, which keeps the centre of gravity as low as possible.

The steering wheel pops back onto the car and lights up with a big "N" on the display. I push the start button and the engine fires into life with a deafening bang, followed by a low, raspy idle. I depress the clutch and flick the right paddle on the steering wheel to ease the car into first gear. The mechanics push the car into the pit lane, signalling for me to clutch in and shift to second gear, after which I will rely solely on the steering wheel paddles for gear shifts. I can feel everyone watching as the red missile grumpily trundles down the pit lane.

I floor the gas pedal and the Mono roars along the downhill straight towards Eau Rouge. The car gently glides over the left kerb at the end of the straight, before launching itself up the steep hill, powering itself aggressively, yet sweetly, towards the blind summit. The Mono is completely predictable as it crests the hill at full speed, its SACHS Racing suspension soaking up bumps with no fuss, and allowing the bespoke Kumho semi-slick tyres to telegraph back details of the road's surface. Less than a minute into my first lap, I am enthralled by the sheer brilliance of the Mono.

After a few laps, I realise that the Mono is one of the most forgiving and compliant cars I have driven, getting me out of trouble during ham-fisted turns that I enter too fast, and smoothing out uneven surfaces with aplomb. It is perhaps not as powerful and hence as fast on the straights as other cars one could take on this track, but the lack of a windshield makes me feel permanently exposed, providing a visceral experience.

The Mono is pure magic through the turns, dancing around the corners and spitting itself out much faster than I could have gone in any other car. Simply put, it is a car that flatters the average driver, and eggs you on to do better than you could have imagined.

During the early afternoon, the sun appears, resulting in a drying track with varying grip levels. On one occasion, I shoot past the pits and approach the first hairpin slightly too fast, slamming down through the gears probably a bit faster than the RSR guys would have liked. The car slides off the racing line for a moment, one wheel struggling on a wet surface as the others find purchase on drier track. The Mono fidgets for a brief moment, and then swings around the hairpin without fuss. I am amazed by what just happened, and floor the gas again on the downhill straight, roaring towards Eau Rouge for yet another magical lap.... **TG**