BLEIFUS

A YEAR OF MAGICAL MOTORING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Kiran Jay Haslam

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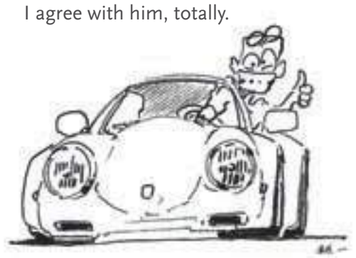
BLEIFUß

My earliest childhood memories usually revolve around two distinct themes: cars and guitars. My father was always tinkering with a new project, and in between extended restoration sessions in the garden shed, he would break out into song and start tearing things up on his guitar. It was only natural that the music of motoring would be etched on my young impressionable mind. I would lend a hand when time permitted, which means I'd frequently be scooping a 13mm open-ended spanner up off the floor to wipe it down and hang it up in its correct place on the tool board, or tuning into Len Davis' 'Bitches Brew Jazz Show' on the ham radio. As the years passed I was given greater tasks, until eventually I found myself repairing the many cars in our household all on my own. I also spent a great deal of time buying old Renaults and Volkswagen wrecks, pouring hours into cleaning them up, getting them running and then selling them off to lowly-funded university students in the neighbourhood. That would fund the next project, and then the next, until I found myself tearing up the tarmac in heavily modified Golf GTIs at the age of 19.

After owning hundreds of cars, and spending many wide-eyed hours on the racetrack in go-karts, hot-hatches and Formula Vee single-seaters, I am now a father of two, and I find myself in some of the world's finest automobiles each and every week. This is by no means luck either, for I have been dabbling in motoring journalism for some time now. It is all part and parcel of my enthusiasm and passion for cars, and to spend hours behind the wheel. A few of these articles are to be found printed in motoring publications or lifestyle magazines the world over, and many of them were lost to the hack car journo abyss. There are, however, a few that stand out each year, and in an effort to share my experiences and enjoyment from behind the wheel, I have decided to take the best moments from 2010 and to reprint them here in this limited edition print. There is a great deal of effort that goes into these reviews: four o'clock starts in the wee hours of the morning ensure great photography, and many hours of layout and art direction are spent at the helm of a MAC. For this to occur I have two of the industry's best at my side, Jerome Adarle and Jerzy Wierzbicki. I sincerely hope this will be the start of many more editions, and that you find some inspiration within these pages.

Jean Baudrillard, the great sociologist, theorist and philosopher said, "*Driving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated.*" I must say, I agree with him, totally.



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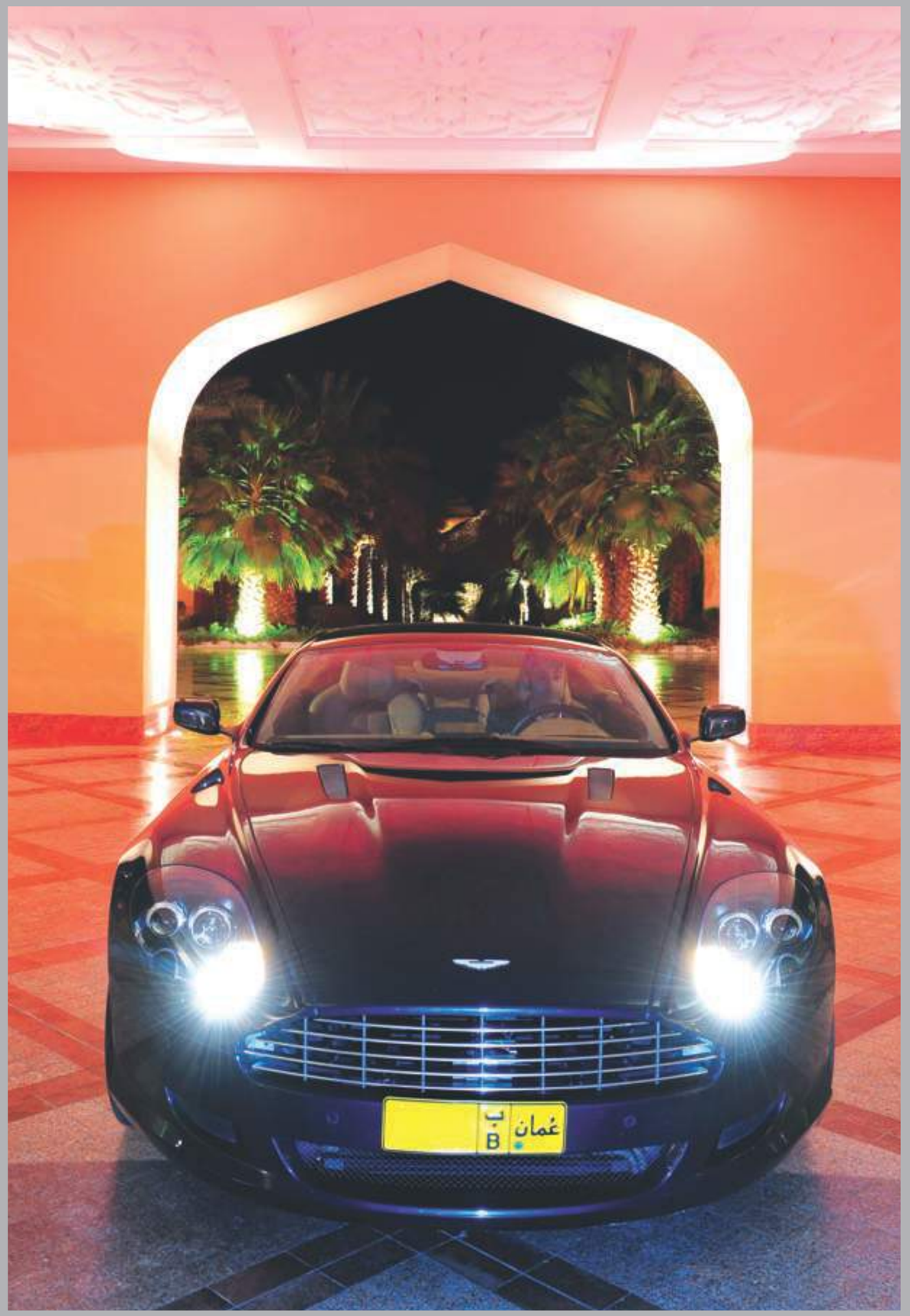


AB...CB...DB 9

1001 Nights in an Aston Martin

It is often easy to equate a possession, usually an inanimate object, to a woman. Music legend B.B. King dubbed his guitar Lucille - after a lady, the craters discovered on Venus were named after famous women, and so too were most of the great seafaring vessels throughout history. It's a method to reflect deep feelings of love or to attribute traits to the beauty or charm of the said object. It is a rather intimate approach to nomenclature, and an admirable one.

"She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred."

So said Sir Richard F. Burton in his translation of 'The Nights', in which he described the protagonist Shahrazad. In that very tale it took the Persian King 1001 nights to fall in love with her, father her three children and to spare her life. It took just one day for "Lara" – the Sapphire blue Aston Martin DB9 coupe handed over to me – to become the love of my life. For she too was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred.

In keeping with the connections of 1001 Nights, and in light of the fact that in 1962 King Hassan II of Morocco's prized possession was a DB4 GT (series IV), there was only one destination that would suffice to deliver the magic of Morocco, a James Bond film set ambience, and the finest North African and Arabic cuisine on the planet. An homage, if you will. The Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah's 'Shahrazad', tucked away in arguably the finest hotel in the world – the Al Husn – was that place.

Power
Beauty
Soul

Power
Beauty
Soul

Salade Fassia

A selection of Moroccan mezzeh, colourful vegetables flavoured with lemon juice, Moroccan olive oil and a blend of spices

The DB9 is perhaps the ultimate sports car, with grand touring levels of refinement and comfort. In a way, it is a selection of the finest things in life all combined into one vehicle that can be described simply as 'stunning'. It is in that respect the mezzeh of motoring for the true aficionado.

There is enough performance on tap to light up the tarmac, but you do so with charm and grace. It can be brutally fast, however, delivers thrust in a sophisticated manner. The parallels between Ian Fleming's James Bond character and this car are too numerous to count; just like agent 007, effectively, it is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Pastilla Bil D'Jaj

Traditional wedding pie filled with chicken, crushed almonds and whisked eggs, dusted with cinnamon and icing sugar

The thoroughbred sports car is hand built. And when I say that, I mean that. Every panel is hand beaten by artisans in Warwickshire. Men and women who have devoted their lives to making the finest luxury vehicles in the world can proudly smile about this very special Aston, and that is why you pay the price for an Aston Martin. No other car manufacturer can offer Le Mans race car performance from a product that breathes life into the term 'opulent', yet the manufacturer doesn't come across as ostentatiously luxurious. When you approach the car and notice the gloriously sculpted fenders and nose, take a moment to appreciate the one-piece front wings that house the headlights. Devoid of seam lines they are an excellent example of how far the designers have pushed the craftsman in the pursuit of perfection. This is a car designed for the traditionalist, who still needs to ceremoniously grace the red carpet, with all of the lights and cameras in tow.

Duo of Briouates

Baked crunchy filo pastry envelopes filled with minced meat and spicy seafood

So how does the DB9 deliver enough poke to jettison a secret agent down a Parisian street at the speed of light? Well, some of that is indeed cinematic magic, but I can assure you the car still has spicy supercar-like capabilities. An all-alloy (read 'lightweight'), quad-camshaft, 48 valve, 6.0-litre V12 exudes (that's a polite way of saying 'pumps out') 470bhp and 600Nm of torque. You can top 306km/h and do the sprint to 100km/h in less than 4.8 seconds.

Reliability is assured. Every engine is assembled by hand and each car sports the moniker of the man who assembled it. The enormous engine mates to a 6-speed manual or 'Touchtronic 2' paddle-shift automatic transmission. I had the latter in my car, and in order to select Park, Neutral, Drive or Reverse, four buttons sit high in the centre of the dash.

Tajine Lamb T'Faya

From the city of Fes; braised lamb with onions, saffron and cinnamon served with honey prunes and grilled almonds

A Tajin is a shallow earthenware cooking dish with a tall, conical lid that was designed to extract extra flavour from the ingredients being stewed within. The designers at Aston had the same approach with the layout of the Aston Martin DB9. In order to extract sublime dynamic handling and unsurpassed traction from the magnanimous V12, the weight distribution had to be exceptional. With a front-mid mounted engine (that means the motor is behind the front wheels) the only thing left to do was to place the transmission aft of the cabin. The rear mid-mounted running gear ensures 85% of the vehicle's weight sits inside the wheelbase.

Lightly gripping the wheel, with ample visibility and a tacit turn ahead of me, I had the temerity to power the DB9 into what is soon to be a very tight right hander: tap the brakes, flick, flick, stomp... the car sits as if it were on rails and there is no overwhelming feeling of weight from any point of the car. This is something I am not used to, especially from a vehicle this refined. It is essentially Lotus-like in its tractability, but that defies its kerb weight and supreme levels of comfort. The car also bears no outlandish racecar traits such as hurdle-high side sills that make getting in and out well nigh impossible.

Tajine D'Jaj M'Kelli

From the city of Tetouan; braised baby chicken with onions, infused with garlic, ginger and saffron, served with Moroccan olives and preserved lemon

The DB9 is true to the marque's roots. It is the best of the best, but not overdone or outlandish. Understatement and restraint are the backbone of the DB9's brilliance. Those who know they are the crème de la crème, would never ever state that they are. Imagine James Bond waltzing up to Dr. No and saying "Look here Doc, I'm that super spy who repeatedly cheats death, shamelessly fraternises with super models, and is going to foil your plans for world domination."

The car's exterior is organic and pronounced. Wide arches mellifluously morph into sleek sides and a low-slung roofline melts into a gilled and deliciously vented bonnet. Nothing is out of place. It is gorgeous.

Tajine Hammour Fassia

Fresh Hammour fillet marinated in olive oil, lemon juice, garlic and an array of spices, cooked with potatoes and bell peppers

Wrapped in Sahara Tan leather, the sumptuous seats are the bee's knees of trimming. Finely stitched and inviting, the Caspian blue carpeted cockpit is a very pleasant place to be. A steeply curved centre console connects the dash to the seating arrangement, visibility all around the car is excellent, and the Bamboo Veneer facia panels and trim are sensational. Why I have not seen this in any other car I've tested before is beyond me. The small circular stained notches (from where the next conical bamboo shoot had sprouted) leave an irresistible and remarkable pattern in the grain. It is, in my mind, classier than carbon fibre, chrome or a heavy mahogany lacquered veneer, and it is typical of the details that can arise from the intricate approach of handcraftsmanship.

Lara's key and engine-start mechanism is rather glamorous, and her gauges, buttons, stalks and dials ooze the technical prowess and quality of a Swiss chronograph. The seat release that allows you to access her petite rear seats is electric, and so too is her glove compartment release. Multimedia is controlled by a joystick on the centre console, and the SatNav is a hidden compartment pop-up touch screen. I just love a car that connects so easily to the mobile phone in my pocket and can connect me to the world via Bluetooth with such clarity and ease.

Couscous R'Dra Fassia

A chickpea, sweet onion, raisin and crushed almond blend traditionally served at wedding ceremonies

From within the car the exhaust note is only throaty under hard acceleration. Traction control and ABS are on hand to save the day, and although it is almost addictive to 'point and squirt' this car, driving it around town at low speed is simply wonderful. The supreme levels of comfort make carrying your beautiful partner (select 'wife' or 'girlfriend') around town a joy, and the road presence of this marque is yet to be eclipsed by any other manufacturer in the world, be they German, British or Italian.

With plenty of clean air I pushed hard in the DB9, and immediately the thunder was unleashed. The brakes offer exemplary bite and the pedal pressure is perfect. The symbiotic connection between driver and car? Transcendent. The level of engagement? Sublime.

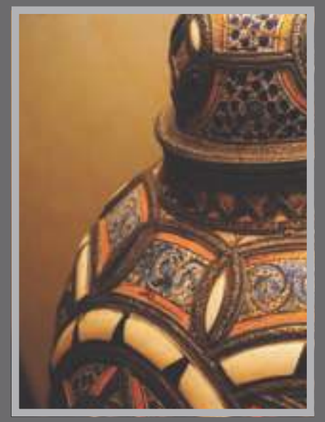
Rounafa

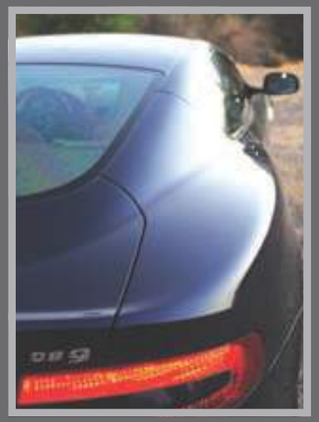
Layered pastry with vanilla cream, crushed almonds, icing sugar, dusted with cinnamon powder

The red carpet reception at the Al Husn was befitting of the car. The special menu prepared by Chef De Cuisine, Mohamed Ettaib, at the Shangri-La's fine dining Moroccan restaurant was undoubtedly in accord with the 'fantasy meets reality' world of Aston Martin. The mystical ambience of the restaurant threw me into quiet introspection.

Driving the new DB9 Coupe was equivalent to rediscovering motoring, with luxuriousness neatly folded into the heady blend of power, prestige and performance. I can't recall the last time I felt so alive in an automobile. The three key words that light up the dash display upon start up - Power, Beauty, Soul - laconically encapsulate the magic that is Aston Martin. This car now sits at the very top of my list.

*Special thanks to **Eihab Hani Kamel Attia**, Communications Executive at the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah, the good folks at Shahrazad (24776551) and Aston Martin Oman (24692625).*

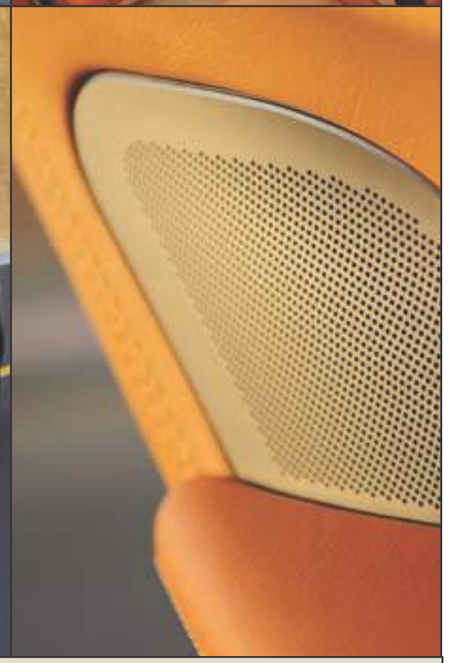




ASTON MARTIN'S
RAPIDE

Good things come in fours. The Beatles were four; there are four seasons, four main blood groups, four basic states of matter, and four elements. Wisdom teeth come in four, and as any decent rock star knows, there are four beats in a bar. Aston Martin have decided that in this world of fours, a four-door variant in their sporting model line-up would indeed be fanciful, but rather well received, especially if it were to be executed properly - what with the elite not only having ample wealth, but also kids!

We've seen this idea become a reality in recent years with Porsche's Panamera and Ferrari's new FF, however, it came at an aesthetic cost. The die-hard aficionados of both brands have found it hard to stomach these four-door variants, citing the exterior design as the single biggest hurdle to accept these cars as true sports cars. And so Aston Martin steps in with their new Rapide; it lives up to its promise with rock'n'roll flamboyance - sans reckless abandon.



Hailed as the “spiritual successor” to the company’s mid-70s Lagonda four-door, the Rapide retains the low stance and beautiful curves that the marque is renowned for, but it is more elongate than one would expect. At over 5 metres in length, it is 254mm longer than the DB9, with an extra 63.5mm in height, so there is sufficient legroom and headroom to seat adults in the back.

The rear seats fold down creating an 886 litre “flat bed” that could easily hold several suitcases and two golf bags - should you wish to indulge in a weekend putt in a neighbouring country. The 1000watt BeoSound Rapide package, developed by Bang & Olufsen, is so advanced that it utilises sensors on the seatbelts to identify the number of occupants and to tailor the sound in the cabin accordingly. It is crystal clear and precise, yet retains tremendous warmth and depth. It is impossible to fault.

Aston’s “swan wing” doors are a superb feature here in the Middle East. Designed to avoid nasty scuffs from curbs, they open up (and out) at an angle of 12 degrees, which really helps given the ridiculous height of some curbs and footpaths in these parts. A lot of the technical aspects of this car have been carefully considered and strikingly implemented. In fact, there’s a great blurb on the Aston Martin website where the company’s Vehicle Engineering Manager, Simon Barnes, speaks openly about the real world tests conducted in the middle of summer in the harsh Kuwaiti desert. And if that isn’t enough to implant the term “reliability” on your impressionable motoring minds, the Rapide took part in the gruelling Nürburgring 24 Hours last year, where, in standard production guise, it accelerated through its gears 13,534 times over 3,397 kilometres to complete the race without fault. The Aston Martins of today are indeed special.

The fit and finish is stunning, bordering on exorbitant. The exterior? Evocative; if you love the DB9, DBS or Vantage, you will stand beside this car, scratch your head, drool, and ask: “How did they manage to design four doors into this incredibly sleek, incredibly chic, car?”

Well, they did manage. There are a couple of key attributes to this car that define the vehicle’s niche: One - effortless power comes from a segment leading 6.0-litre V12 that belts out 470hp and 601Nm of torque. Two - the vehicle is practical yet retains the elegant styling of a true sports car. And three - there has been no compromise when it comes to handling.

Fully laden, it has a uniquely neutral balance, with no weight felt fore or aft of the driver. Splendid 390mm brakes torture the tyres to ensure this car stops as fast as it accelerates. The sumptuous interior befits the purposeful character of the car, and the waves of thrust that wash over you under hard acceleration are like a cerebral massage. The car is so refined you don’t feel any jerkiness or discomfort. 5 seconds gets you over the speed limit, and a few moments later the world goes whizzing by, and the grunting, 200+ madness, begins.

Carrying excessive speed into a tight turn is a sheer delight, with the vehicle remaining flat no matter how hard you brake or how fast you wrench the wheel. Lateral grip is fantastic and defies the supreme levels of comfort and sheer serenity of being inside the quiet cabin. The “international super spy” quality of the Rapide puts a huge grin on my face. OK, so I am NOT Pierce Brosnan, but heck; I feel like I am. Oman’s “old road” behind Hamriya towards Sifa is tricky to handle in any vehicle, but the Rapide makes light work of the twisty tarmac. With excellent feedback through the steering, I weave like a ferret, darting left and right, up and down. Red-hot brakes into each turn and repeated gear flicking through to the redline out of each corner equate to motoring bliss: “vvvsssVVVZZZ… cloonck”.

And so if I were to break the new Rapide down for you, with simplicity, I would have to say: “As promised at the time of conception, this car has painstakingly been developed to deliver a truly engaging driving experience… while seating four adults, comfortably.”

Special thanks to Paul Varley of Aston Martin Oman

AUDI R8

The new Audi R8 2010 model is finally here in Oman, and thanks to the guys at Zubair's Audi dealership in Wattaya, the keys were handed over to Y so that we could sit-in, buckle-up and gently squeeze the throttle until we started squealing like kids in a candy store. We suspect that same candy store may indeed have supplied the secret ingredient for the paint job that adorned our custom "Papaya orange" V8 beast.

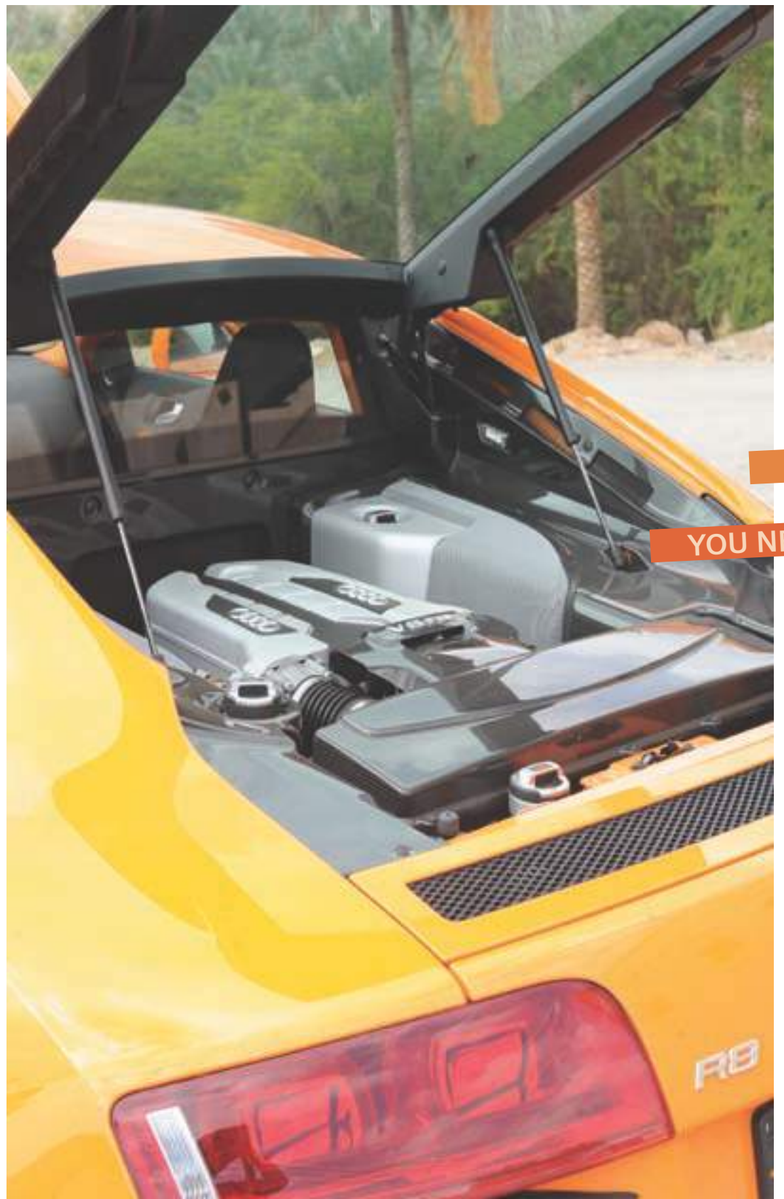
As most of you are aware, the four-ringed carmaker par excellence from Ingolstadt also owns Lamborghini, the raging bull of exotic cars. So is it a case of Italian mid-engine madness meets Deutsche diligence? Supercars are fun and glorious to look at, but seldom provide anywhere near the creature comforts and practicality that one needs in order to 'daily drive' what ultimately costs more than a house to buy. The new R8 is different. It comes at a reasonable price and is practical, too.

Part supercar, part daily driver, the R8 is an incredible combination of sure-footed power, supportive and airy styling with an injection of passion and fun that makes you drool. We drove our test car out of the dealership and headed up to our office in Seeb; along the way we got more smiles, waves and nods than the Queen of England on a royal parade. Even without the disco orange coating, the wide, menacing stance of the R8, its scowling headlights, race-bred side strips, and Veyron-like sculpting all add up to shout out to passers by "Hey! Look at me," and look, they do.

Audi's revolutionary new space frame for the R8 is constructed from aluminium and magnesium. It is ultra light, ultra stiff and ultra strong. Carbon fibre adorns the car with an F1-inspired engine bay so clean and luxurious you'd swear it was lifted from a kitchenette in Michael Schumacher's lake retreat in Geneva. Anyway, it is so glorious that if I owned this car, I'd park it in my living room, lift the clear glass engine lid, and proceed to eat my dinner off the top of the V8 4.2-litre aluminium block.

The cabin is so wonderfully designed that at 1.8 metres tall and of average stature, I have heaps of room in every direction. You sit at a nice vantage over the front hood and side sills, and the controls and panels are all in good reach. A carbon-fibre shell cocoons the driver, and the wrap-around feeling is more 'exotic sports car' than Audi sedan, even though a few switches and stalks are borrowed from a run-of-the-mill A4. It is, however, well clad in glorious fine nappa leather, soft and inviting, and with precise orange stitching to boot. I liked getting in, it was easy and the flat-bottomed steering wheel is the perfect thickness and size in your hands. A straightforward key-in-the-ignition start, and the V8 burbled, tightly. You can see clearly out to your left and right, rear vision is wide and high, and side mirrors catch the road, adjacent lanes and those glorious angular rear arches with ease.

Audi have really taken design cues from Lamborghini for the R8, with the little embossed logos on leather – with its stitching, finely needled by the hand of an artisan – tiny sun visor flaps, knurled aluminium knobs, precision-machined gearlever and surround, and of course carbon fibre trim. The instrument cluster is magnificent, and upon start-up the needles momentarily max out and settle down to display idle information. Our test car was fitted with a paddle-shift R-Tronic 6-speed transmission, the paddles of which were mounted behind the front face of the steering wheel. A tap of the index finger and you could shift up (right) or shift down (left). A trip computer and of course the greatest build quality in the automotive world, by way of buttons, stalks and dials, encrust the steering wheel, doors and centre console. In my opinion, if you consider the volume of cars they sell each year, Audi's quality is yet unsurpassed by any other mass-production carmaker you may consider a peer.



The engine is mounted in the only place it should be for a machine purpose-built for high speed and cornering, in the middle of the car.

A glass hatch exposes the direct-injection eight-cylinder unit from Audi to all and sundry. It is impressive to the eye and to the ear, with 420hp peaking at 7800rpm. The redline sits a shade over 8200rpm, which indicates a well-blueprinted combustion process, and is only achieved by an unusually long stroke. Audi calls this high-revving design HDZ. It is, however, the 430Nm of torque, a by-product of HDZ, that really gets this baby moving. It comes on strong low in the rev range, and seems to be a flattish curve of 'neck-snapping' proportion. Fearless engineers expecting high lateral forces designed a dry sump oil system into the new R8. The bonus to the highly sought after uniform oil feed is the flat sump pan that allows a lower positioning for the engine within its bay, so the weight sits lower to the road and optimises handling. At the R8's top speed of 301km/hr that little design detail makes all the difference.

'THANKS TO ITS OUTSTANDING DESIGN, WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION, ENGINE PLACEMENT AND QUATTRO TRANSMISSION, YOU NEVER QUITE FEEL LIKE YOU ARE BRANDISHING A DANGEROUS WEAPON.'

After a few hours of inner-city traffic and cautious driving it was time to 'blow out a few cobwebs' and with the mutterings of an old fort to be found in a tiny secluded village emanating from our photographer, we headed out to the mysterious destination.

The R-Tronic is perhaps not everyone's cup of tea. I am, and always will be, convinced that regardless of the new transmission systems around today - capable of shifting at a fraction of the rate we mere mortals can with a gearlever - a manual gearbox is the only way to go. That said, once the R-Tronic was slapped into 'manual mode', the precise paddles made light work of fast changes and engine blips. The automatic mode allows a normal setting and 'sports' settings – the latter will hold the revs higher and longer – but both auto settings tend to lunge through the changes, so I found myself seeking out the manual mode for smoothness and interaction.

In just about any gear, with the sudden press of the accelerator pedal, the R8 can violently pin you to your seat and the 4.2-litre V8 screams up to the redline. It is fast. Wonderfully, exhilaratingly, predictably fast. Hustle it through a few bends, turn in tight, bury your

right leg and wham! You surge forward as precisely as you place the front end. Feedback is marvellous and the steering is definitely weighted 'à la Gallardo' - heavy. The four wheels in connected motion don't fight the tarmac, as the Quattro system never splits the power delivery fully; rear wheels always get the benefit of the traction on offer and so under-steer has been reduced. Over-steer is near impossible, even without the electronic failsafe switched on. When you pilot this thing, you feel like a superhero. And in my case, just as superman brazenly sports his bright red undies on the outside of his costume, I am in a fluorescent 'Papaya Orange' Audi R8 in the district of Al-Seeb.

Electro-magnetic fluid replaces the oil in the car's shock absorbers, and so at the push of a button a harder 'sport suspension' setting can be engaged. For the road surface in Oman this setting is fine, as we don't have to deal with train or tramlines in this country. Ride hide can be an issue, so speed humps need to be approached cautiously. The titanium-finish forged 19" rims shod with 235/35 rubber up-front and 305/30 out the back, deliver immense grip.

In terms of options, as this car was spec'd out to the max, it has it all. CD, SATNAV, Audi Exclusive Trim, Custom paint... I don't need to list it out for you, as it is quite easy for those interested to pop down to the Audi showroom to see it for themselves. Our test car retails just a notch above the mid-60k mark, and at that price puts you in one of the best and most unique Audis ever built.

Audi was quick to bolster the pegging of the original R8 to a new 911 or Nissan GT-R. A wildly confident pairing, however, one that seems to sort of fit this newer version well. When you strap yourself into a new 911 or GT-R and refrain from holding back, there's that sensation, that just like a child flirting with disaster, you are pushing something very potent to the edge. That potency and sense that you 'may very well lose control of things at some stage', is really the thrill of it all. My only niggle with the new R8 is that thanks to its outstanding design, weight distribution, engine placement and Quattro transmission, you never quite feel like you are brandishing a dangerous weapon. On top of that, you have practicality in a car that in every other way wishes to buck the system to deliver you a unique driving experience. Driving the R8 for the day got me thinking: perhaps the taming of the beast is not that greatly hallowed ground that carmakers have been seeking after all; the 'beast' part is what makes a supercar, well, 'super'.

Those who think likewise and want to drive a mechanically intimidating sports car can always count on a vehicle made by a 'Signor Giacomo' (in a small Italian production plant out there somewhere) to deliver the goods. Others may find hope in a carmaker intent on sticking its engines right out the back, making many wives widows in the process. In fact with the current choice of cars on the market, and with 0-100 times in the region of 3.3-4.6 seconds, a wide range of supercars are now available to suit every taste.

Luxury, state-of-the-art design and refinement, efficiency, comfort and prestige; if an extremely polished ride that is still able to switch over from 'Fritz the Mouse' to 'Siegfried the Destroyer' is what you seek, then look no further than Audi's glorious new R8.

'It is so glorious that if I owned this car, I'd park it in my living room, lift the clear glass engine lid, and proceed to eat my dinner off the top of the V8 4.2-litre aluminium block.'

FEEL LIKE A STAR THE NEXT TIME YOU TREK ACROSS OMAN

Q, as a character from Star Trek, always intrigued me. Played by John De Lancie, 'Q' represented omnipotent power, albeit comedic and rather dramatic. He was the only true adversary to the Enterprise's captain, and like Audi's new 'compact off-roader' - the Q5, he was capable of being anywhere at anytime!

Actually it is all rather paradoxical that I start this review off on a Star Trek bender; indeed it is all rather Star Trek that I use the term 'paradoxical' instead of 'ironic'! The gleaming white Q5 we are getting acquainted with is, after all, a little Starship Enterprise-like. The model is S-line equipped, which means you get sporty front and rear bumpers, side grilles, door strips and a diffuser insert; a radiator grille with chrome vertical bars, door sill trims with S-line logo and aluminium loading strip for the boot, an S-line logo on the front wings and fog lights with chrome trim. The result is even more aggressive looks with a touch of class and sophistication over and above the standard car.

The interior is textbook Audi: functional and ergonomic, yet utterly glamorous. The build quality is, as expected from the Ingolstadt carmaker, superb. The technology in the multimedia system laid out in the centre console would make any iPhone 'tap bunny' happy. It is intuitive and tactile, with large knurled dials as your primary interface. Again, all stalks, buttons and knobs are chunky and large, and within easy reach of the driver. The dash is ever so slightly skewed towards the driver and whether at the helm or in the back, the leather seats comfortably, yet supportively, wrap around you. The panoramic roof takes care of the Manhattan skyline, should you suddenly find yourself being 'beamed up' and transported across to the east coast of the United States en route to your weekly shopping spree in Qurum – Scotty! If not, it is handy for bringing natural light into the cabin and opening up the space to resemble images from a French architectural magazine. It is fabulous.

The versatile interior also offers rear seats that fold flat at the release of two catches, increasing the cargo capacity from a useful 540 litres to a whopping 1560 litres! You can accommodate a full family with pets or even a leisure lifestyle that demands ample space.

Audi is proud of the Q5 being the largest vehicle in its segment. It is a longer wheelbase than VW's Tiguan, but still compact compared to its bigger brother the Q7. The shared technology with VW means you get stratospheric reliability and performance with that added Audi touch of class; lovely fabrics and colours are available and on our road tester, glorious 20-inch alloy wheels, too!

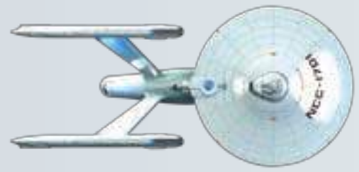
Yes, the Q in Q5 denotes the Quattro permanent all-wheel drive underpinnings. Coupled with clever suspension and impressive technology the car is dynamic and ready to go off the beaten track. The front and rear offer a 25 degrees angle of approach and departure; ground clearance is 200mm and with a wading depth of 500mm the Q5 can tackle any wadi in Oman. If dunes are more your forte, Hill Descent and specially mapped ESP and ABS characteristics make sand and gravel a breeze.

The 2.0-litre Turbo FSI engine spits out 211hp and 350Nm of bitumen warping torque at 1,500rpm. The high-torque engine, albeit frugal at just 8.5 litres per 100km, takes the SUV from a standstill to 100km/h in less than 7.2 seconds. The 7-speed S-Tronic dual-clutch transmission splits the power 40/60 front to rear and you can electronically select a mode that best suits your driving style and terrain, optimising driving dynamics and suspension at the push of a button.

Its sports-car-like drag coefficient (0.33) is a reflection of its striking proportions with a low roofline exemplifying its wide stance and 4.6 metre long body. You can easily tow a boat or trailer of up to 2.4 tons, and roof rails that communicate with the ESP (to inform the car that there is a higher centre of gravity) are extremely clever and practical. EID camping trips here we come!

As an old hat in German SUVs I really enjoyed my time behind the wheel of Audi's Q5. The car is brimming with creature comforts and technology, making iPODs, DVD, and TV all a joy to operate; Bang & Olufsen developed a high-end audio system that is luscious, spacious and clear. The advanced parking systems and adaptive cruise control are all intuitive, and visibility is excellent for both driver and occupants. The high level of safety is embellished with front seat belt force limiters that integrate with the airbags and ultra-high-strength components have been used in the monocoque.

Audi's Q5 is actually the car for a hip young family that don't need the size of a Q7, but still want the glamour and luxury. You don't actually feel any compromise with space as the sporty off-roader is cavernous and thus oxymoronically utilitarian. This vehicle is savvy and sophisticated, technologically advanced and more than capable off-road over Oman's gruelling terrain. Wattayah have it priced well, and Ramadan is perhaps the perfect time to jump in and drive away. Engage!



EIGHT ON TWELVE

When Audi first launched its A8 model range, it did so knowing that the austere presence of the marque, a new flagship luxury limousine, and the carmaker's notoriety for technical innovation, would bode well with the wealthier, conservative crowd. That was back in 1994. These days, Audi is perceived as one of the most progressive car companies around, and its many variants have captured the hearts of an altogether different crowd. In fact, in many countries it is considered way more hip than its rivals, and their long standing "Vorsprung durch Technik" (progress through technology) campaign not only summed up things perfectly, but went a considerable way towards re-writing Audi's brand image over time. The first A8 was kind of like Wes Montgomery's 'Four On Six': timely and honest, but progressive enough to make its mark, and ultra smooth as a 'cufflink carriage'.

"The performance and character of the A8L with its 12 cylinders and blistering performance is far too enticing to relinquish control over to Jeeves, but should you require first class, airline-like reclining seats with an electric foot rest and massage function, you'll love playing passenger in this car"

Today, Audi's stellar build quality is currently unmatched by its rivals, and every Audi employee that I meet these days seems to be living the brand promise. So it was an absolute delight to receive word that Audi would be sending me to Munich, the epicentre of German hospitality, to experience the all-new A8L (long wheel base) and to discuss the four-ringed innovations that abound on this car. And it was here, in the heartland of the carmaker's largest rival, that I was treated to a smörgåsbord of phenomenal motoring. I was ready and waiting with my lederhosen and as I had been tipped off that I could pilot my car, without speed restrictions, to Salzburg, I was keen to yodel, too.

"So you're basically on a leather-clad recliner in a living room on wheels, with enough hi-tech 'shock and awe' at your fingertips to blur the lines between fiction and reality"

The new A8 is much sportier looking. It has angled LED laced headlights that frame a smiling frontend with a massive extended vertical grill. The car is a perfect balance of 'menacing' and 'docile'; it still retains a regal image and this alone should see the gentry seated in the back, window down and arm out of the window, waving like the Queen. It has, however, the most impressive build quality of any modern production car, and it can easily take design awards for an ergonomic interior that is as luscious and elegant as it is spacious. And by spacious I mean really, really big. The new long wheelbase variant is now 5.27 metres long, 1.949 metres wide and its rear legroom has benefitted from the additional 13 centimetres.

The world of self-drive once again collides with chauffer driven luxury; for some – like myself – the performance and character of the A8L with its 12 cylinders and blistering performance is far too enticing to relinquish control over to Jeeves, but should you require first class, airline-like reclining seats with an electric foot rest and massage function, you'll love playing passenger in this car.

"Heads, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes." Inside the car, in just about any seat, you can bask in the opulence of ample head, shoulder, leg and knee room. A glorious glass sunroof ensures that you really experience 'Zen' in the car, and the revised length of the doors facilitates getting in and out. If you choose to hop in sporting your favourite pair of suede deck shoes, you'll probably take delight in the beltline interior design of the A8L, with its elegant 'wrap-around' element reminiscent of a luxury yacht. In fact, big money boating is to be had up front, too, with the transmission selector designed to resemble the thrust lever from a yacht! Hoorah!

Innovation; or should that be innov-A8-tion? The all-new A8L is brimming with enough wonderful technology to make Tokyo's cityscape look pastoral. The gear lever communicates with the transmission electronically, control units read the road ahead and implement state-of-the-art assistance and safety systems, there's night vision, and as a world first, the new A8L also features a touch pad to control its exceptional multimedia interface (MMI). Oh, and should you be hauling four passengers along with you, each with an iPhone in their left hand and an iPad in their right, and if each of them wished to browse the internet on their devices simultaneously, then the A8's MMI WLAN hotspot supports eight WiFi devices at any given time!

So you're basically on a leather-clad recliner in a living room on wheels, with enough hi-tech 'shock and awe' at your fingertips to blur the lines between fiction and reality. But how does this 1880kg flagship Audi drive? Although the kind folk at Audi had every engine option available for my sojourn to Salzburg – there were five engine options to choose from – I made a beeline for the 500 horsepower 6.3-litre 12 cylinder, intent on a spirited drive on which I could intensely connect with all 600Nm of torque from the direct-injection 'dubble-ya' engine. Four banks of three cylinders perched 15 degrees apart form a W configuration that spans an overall 72 degree V that weighs just 247kg. I scoured the car for all of the key attributes that were explained to me during the technical briefing, and immediately made myself at home behind the wheel.

In an A8, on the A8! With the MMI touchpad accepting my input, the SatNav prompted me down a few B-roads, enroute to the Red Bull Hangar, via the A8(E52) and A1 that connects Germany to Austria. The W12 is sublime. At an extremely low 1800 rpm, neck snapping acceleration and the most communicative feel hurl me down the derestricted roads. The B-roads gave me a few 0-100 sprints that would shame most sports cars, but the woolly-mammoth herding, sheer brutality of this car came on strong when I eclipsed 250km/hr. This I did repeatedly, until NL stickered caravans hogging the fast lane put an end to that. At high speed this is one of the most agile vehicles I have piloted. The adaptive 'servotronic' power steering is precise, weighty and directly connects you to the road surface. The car feels 500kg lighter than it actually is, and the chassis feels stiff and rigid. The 8-speed transmission keeps the revolutions where they should be, whether you desire relaxed efficiency or seamless thrust. This is Ingolstadt's warp speed wagon.

All of this luxury comes to a halt with what many claim to be the largest brakes of any passenger vehicle on the planet. Even our old chums at Crew, Warwickshire and Goodwood are striving to match the 400mm rotor and 6-piston caliper's braking force. I am thoroughly convinced: the all-new A8L W12 is easily Audi's flagship product. Take the first incarnation of the A8, revise it to be the most seductive combination of refinement, space and performance, and add everything that's possible – 21-inch alloys, ambient lighting, leather, suede, chrome, veneer, WiFi, fuel efficiency, and prestige. What you now have is twice the car that once was. Eight on Twelve.

Although Audi's new A8L W12 is not exactly cheap, given what you get, it is a heck of a lot of car for its price. It is destined to be the first choice for most folks wealthy enough to afford one in Oman. And as it's addictive 4.7-second acceleration and adrenalin pumping propulsion is wrapped in a conservative skin, it puts the Queen back in Steve McQueen.

ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT

It all started three weeks ago. The phone rang. “Hello?” I answered. Insert niceties, niceties, blah, blah. “...” the caller stated. “Oh?” I responded and immediately the ‘Rockstar of PR’ on the other end explained: “A handful of journalists are invited to drive every Bentley in the manufacturer’s existing line-up to Sifa beach, exchanging cars along the way; are you interested in joining us?”

My response was simple, albeit it a little crude: “%$@! yeah!”

Bentley is a carmaker like no other. Born in the days of gentleman racers, the marque is synonymous with luxury, speed, fine craftsmanship, forced induction and glorious large-capacity engines - boasting more power than the city grid of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. They are exclusive vehicles, handmade and full of details that will literally blow your mind. It is not often that one gets behind the wheel of a Bentley, so to be given the opportunity to try out the product range and take one of these beautiful vehicles for a thorough workout a few days later, was an incredible experience.

For many years, Bentleys were crafted alongside Rolls-Royce vehicles. The two brands are, in an exclusive sense, linked. But come 1998 Rolls-Royce and Bentley parted ways, and surprisingly took very different paths, despite both brands joining larger German car firms. Definitely the more sporting and driver oriented of the two brands, Bentley, now sits plumb in the middle of Volkswagen’s enormous umbrella. I spoke to Christopher J Buxton, Regional Director for Middle East, Africa & India - Bentley Motors Ltd, who gave me the sense that this seems to be a crucial component in Bentley now dominating the high-end luxury car segment. There is an inherent strength in its parent company, so coping with costs and funding ‘non compos mentis’ levels of research and development is now possible, whereas in the past it simply wasn’t.

I say dominating in the sense that their cars are made to be driven. Bentleys of today are so refined, yet so sporty, that no racing driver would ever argue that they sit alone in the upper echelon of real driver's cars. They are, however, expensive. You pay for quality, unseen, unheard and hence often overlooked quality. Peel apart every layer of a Bentley and what you find is that every component can be linked to the person who painstakingly assembled or crafted it; by hand. It takes approximately five months for a vehicle to be completed and the UK based state-of-the-art facility in Crewe releases just 10,000 superb vehicles each year.

When I met with Chris a few days after the press trip, he shared with me his passion and excitement for the brand. "As a customer, what you see and feel is a pure Bentley experience; you find we still produce vehicles that stick to their roots of racing. An example of this is our 'speed' variant, which is linked to our DNA. Speed is in our blood at Bentley, and it's in our customers' blood, too!"

'The torque generated by this wonderful powerplant is staggering and kicks in at an rpm, so low, that the engineers have seemingly managed to warp time and space; **650Nm catapults you forward from 1600rpm and continues to tear the very fabric of reality apart, all the way to 6100rpm.**'

Explaining the efficiency its VW group ownership brings, Chris outlined how the British quirkiness of Bentley – think Bentley Boys era - has been embraced by the current Chairman Dr. Franz-Josef Paefgen and the company's brilliant engineer Dr. Ulrich Eichhorn. "They are both hands on, dividing up their time and visiting various stages of the production process; Dr. Paefgen's attention to detail is spooky." Rather than being governed by 'bean counters', it's the engineers who rule the roost at Bentley. That, my friends, is what makes the brand so fabulous; things are done for the sheer brilliance of it all.

Now, to furnish these stunning marvels of automotive design, no expense is spared. Bentley prides itself on fit and finish. I walked around my metallic 'Crystal Blue' 2010 Continental Flying Spur and felt the austere and refined exterior somehow compelling. It is presidential in appearance. Stately.

It is a large vehicle, which the carmaker claims provides 'space for life' and 'cutting-edge performance'. Its flanks and angles curve over a striking grill and end at two large chrome tailpipes.

When you sit inside the car as a driver, forward passenger, or in either of the rear seats, you are overwhelmed by the sublime comfort and sheer luxury. It is opulent, but not over-the-top or gaudy. Our car was trimmed in 'aquamarine' and 'linen' leather, with diamond-quilted hide on the seats and doors. Bentley sources its leather from special farms that must comply with Bentley's strict standards. No barbed-wire fences or parasites means no perforation to the cowhide; you see, cows like to lean up against periphery fences. Special farms in Argentina and Sweden currently offer a tick-free environment and wooden fencing. Long continuous runs of supple leather are then fabricated into seats, headlining, dash trim and door sills. Knurled chrome knobs and 'organesque' flute styled lever-pulls on the air vents are stunning touches. You can truly feel that pride went into fabricating every inch of this vehicle, and as an occupant, you are left touching and lusting over every feature, be it wrapped in sumptuous leather or sporting flashes of glistening veneer.

Specified with a Mulliner package, our test car was indeed unique. Mulliner is 'personal commissioning' with a heritage that dates back 270 years, and on a Bentley flying Spur, offers heightened and unbridled refinement. Bespoke is Bentley and Bentley is bespoke. The lengths to which Bentley will go to accommodate a customer is an article all in itself. Chris told me of one customer who demanded stitching in a particular colour; the designers quickly set about sourcing the thread, but felt it was untested to withstand the conditions that their normal threads can tolerate, fearing it may not hold up over the course of time. They quickly set up a car, incorporated the thread into the interior trim, and parked it out in the desert for 6 months to see how it fared. "One customer requested press-stud bolster pillows for neck support in the headrests. As the car was destined for the stricter US market, the request resulted in crash-tests and 'compliancing' to the sum of US$250,000!"

I felt really at home discussing all things Bentley with Chris. He is not a sales rep but a brand ambassador, and comes across with sincerity and down-to-earth honesty, which is rare for a man in his position. When he described his role at Bentley he said, "I act as a direct link to customers. I am the connect... the conduit between all of my customers and the factory designers."

State-of-the-art technology and every creature comfort one could require is to be found in this car. I don't want to dwell on multimedia, Bluetooth, SatNav, iPod connectivity, 4-zone climate control, steering wheel controls, safety features and the rest of that stuff, because to put it simply, in a Bentley it is all there; and it is simply the best money can buy. I would, however, like to add that this car was optioned with wonderful lambswool rugs. Now, at first you may relate the plush thick wool to a pair of exaggerated Hello Kitty bedroom slippers, but these mats are an excellent touch. Should you look upwards, there is an electric solar-panel sunroof that powers the ventilation while the car is stationary.

Taking off from a standstill is impressive in this large and comfortable car. A 12-cylinder 6-litre engine breathes through not one, but two turbochargers and develops 552bhp. The torque generated by this wonderful powerplant is staggering and kicks in at an rpm, so low, that the engineers have seemingly managed to warp time and space; 650Nm catapults you forward from 1600rpm and continues to tear the very fabric of reality apart, all the way to 6100rpm. Wow; even Robert A. Heinlein couldn't have fathomed that. Assembled by hand, it takes 11 hours for the world's most compact and potent 12-cylinder engine to be completed. It is of course the same basic W-12 found in VW's Phaeton, however, in the Bentley, it is completely remapped and massaged by gurus, and now breathes fire. A gruelling development programme saw the engine undergo a punishing test of non-stop acceleration, non-stop deceleration and continuous running for 500 hours straight. As Bentley states with efficacy, that is "four hours short of three weeks."

When you bury your foot in the flying Spur, the horizon appears much closer. Instantly. Cue Heinlein again because this 2.5 tonne luxury ride achieves what can only be described as warp speed: 0-100km/h in 5.2 seconds. The sense of speed, however, is contained by a silent and blissful experience.

The gentle roar of the W12 washes over you, and you really feel like you are aboard a private jet. For the driver, tactility is there; the steering provides ample feedback with an excellent weighting. The brakes are by far my favourite element as massive calipers clamp down persuadingly on enormous discs when applied with the perfect amount of pedal pressure. Ride height and suspension can be adjusted via electronic controls to stiffen up the ride, at virtually no sacrifice to comfort. Oh, by the way, at this point in time I should state: some of you may think this is all too much to process, what with out-of-this-world luxury and performance in abundance, but there is a faster version of the Flying Spur available. The 610hp Flying Spur 'Speed'.

The Middle East is an important market for Bentley, and according to Chris we favour colourful and flamboyant cars over here. Factory employees can easily identify a Gulf bound car and according to Chris this really brightens up the production line! Just about anything a customer desires can be fabricated. "As long as it is legally sourced, compliant with regulations for the destination country, and that it actually physically works as a material choice or concept, we can do it."

There is a pride, tantamount to the dedication that every Bentley employee I have spoken to harbours. Chris Buxton had it, Bentley's Brand Manager in Wattayah - James Armstrong - has it, and when you sit inside a Bentley it is evident throughout.

Fabulously crafted vehicles for the 'spare-no-expense' fabulously wealthy; but you do get something for free, something you can't get from any other carmaker on the planet. Old World charm.

Bentley's New Mulsanne

6&3/4. In litres, that's the capacity of the twin-turbo V8 lurking under the bonnet. There's cow skin, wood, inlays and metal everywhere, only, Bentley folk refer to it as 'hide, veneer, marquetry and chrome'. I'm in the all-new Mulsanne and it is my sole mode of transport for the next few days, and in much the same way medieval aristocracy booted out terms of the 'common man', deftly substituting them with ever so eloquent French derivatives, Bentley expelled the notion of having anything synthetic on display in the cabin; you won't see panels that merely resemble these materials in the car. Instead, what you see is the real deal, and at 5.57 metres in length, 2.2 metres wide, and tipping the scales when laden at over three tonnes, this enormous bespoke Bentley is the 'bees knees' of motoring.

The new Mulsanne is a mighty step in the right direction for those that still want the dichotomy of 'waft' and 'thrust'.

Named after the famous straight at Le Mans, in the Pays de la Loire region of France, this new Bentley is indeed a fitting tribute; effortless performance and unrivalled refinement is what Bentley means when they talk about their “fusion of extremes”. But this is not the first Mulsanne in the company’s history; in 1980, the original Mulsanne model was introduced, and stayed in production for a period of twelve years. So what’s the big deal about the new Mulsanne, I hear you ask. Well, thirty years ago the idea was simply to create a vehicle, regal in nature, that could comfortably seat four ~~adults strapping lads~~ ‘Wookiees’, but had enough power to make a heck of a lot of metal go from zero to 100km/h in about the same time it would take you to say “The 7 foot 2-inches tall actor who played Chewbacca was Peter Mayhew.” As an iconic Bentley, the new Mulsanne might hark back to a time when disco was first discovered, however, today, it is an altogether different vehicle, so you can to take this chunk of superformed aluminium from zero to 100km/h in about the same time it would take you to say... “Chewbacca”.

I used to think Bentleys were for stuffy aristocrats intent on hobnobbing with diplomats whilst sipping Pimm’s No.1 and questioning the hired help about the canapés; and once satiated on pomp, prone to prod Jeeves’ shoulder whilst insisting he keeps well below the speed limit en route back to Kensington. Not any more. Not since I got behind the wheel of a Continental GT, a Flying Spur Speed, a Continental Supersports, and now, the all-new Mulsanne.

I’m a car nut. As such, I’d normally write about seamless gear changes, Nikola Tesla inspired electromagnetic suspension, and a myriad of other technology that originated in NASA spacecraft - but not this time. This time it is all about the experience at the helm, and not the new fandangle bits ‘n’ bobs that make it worth its weight in gold. A proper Bentley makes you do that, you see. You forget the outside world from within the most luxurious cabin on the planet, and you just smile like you’ve been crowned King. Sure you’ve got a 505hp 6.75-litre V8, with not one, but two turbochargers, sculpting you through traffic, and 1020Nm of torque at 1750rpm... wait a minute - ONE THOUSAND AND TWENTY? At an engine speed that is lower than your typical Barry White melody? Yes.

But all of this power - and we’re probably talking more power than that required to supply an obscure country in Africa – isn't delivered in some supercar-esque manic style: it is as smooth as silk and euphonic. Jumbo jet-like. It adds to that sense of majesty, like knowing you can win a war with an enormous army at your flanks, without the need to get your hands dirty in the process, and afterwards indulging in lashings of ginger beer, too! It’s a rear-wheel drive ‘Grand Tourer’ of such weight and magnitude that it turns heads and encourages road users to get out of the way, but not with a raucous exhaust note, just with an overwhelming sense of prestige.

The new Mulsanne is a mighty step in the right direction for those that still want the dichotomy of ‘waft’ and ‘thrust’. The balance and handling of the car is indeed biased towards comfort, but to be honest, you want for nothing once you are behind the wheel. Instead of pressing hard through turns, I was content to “potter around”, until I realised that, unbeknownst to me, I was actually breaking the speed limit. The seats are impeccably trimmed and glorious to be in, the 2200watt Naim sound system is pretty much the height of sonic mastery, and the hand-crafted touches – especially the book-matched Burr Walnut tray tables in the rear and electronic organ-like vent flutes on the dash - are not to be found anywhere else in the motoring world.

I have been told that field tests and customer studies resulted in the optimum length of pile in the carpeting equating to 1.6mm – so that is what you find in the car. A clever magnetic connector snaps onto a charging point on the rear of the car. The audio system won’t reach distortion until your ears are bleeding. Every seat sports a massage function. There is no compromise in this vehicle, whatsoever. Oh, and Bentley have introduced one switch to either heat or cool the seats; you press + for warmth and – for a blissfully cool seating experience.

My Gazelle exterior Mulsanne, with its ‘Shortbread’ hide trimming and ‘Highland Hare’ touches is quite possibly one of the best Bentleys to have ever been built, and although at this spec it is priced at 136,000 Rials, it is worth every penny; for there is nothing that compares to the new Mulsanne from Crewe.

*Special thanks to **James Armstrong** of Bentley Oman*

CHALLENGING
THE VANISHING POINT

1162 miles or 1870 kilometres in 15 hours. That's the bet Kowalski takes in the iconic action-road movie 'Vanishing Point'. He must drive from Colorado to San Francisco in a blown 1970 Dodge Challenger, and the clock is ticking. That was back in 1971. We've got less distance to travel in order to get a few 100kms deep into the heart of Oman behind the desolation of Fanja, but also less time to do it in. In a few hours the sun - the bringer of drab skies for exemplary car photography – will have risen. It's time to shake a leg.

AL MAWALEH - MONDAY - 4:02 A.M.

Thirty-nine years later and we find ourselves in Mawaleh North. It's dark and the Markaz Al Bahja carpark is empty, except for a Shanfari automotive flatbed, ticking over at idle in the corner. The driver, Khamis, steps out and welcomes me. It is Ramadan so at this odd time of the night there's traffic on the road; more so than usual. A glorious beast sits atop the truck, yet untouched by any other man as intent on lighting up the tarmac in it as I am. I got here in the exact same car, only in Crystal Pearl Black and not burnt blood orange, so I know the car well.

With a modified pursuit car, a glamour car, photographer, extra driver and the loaded flatbed in tow, we set off. The burble of the 6.1-litre Hemi V8 is slightly muffled at idle, but bury your right foot and a roar, not unlike that of an inebriated Incredible Hulk, fills the cabin. We're sideways in the carpark because "oops", I switched the ESP off.

FANJA - MONDAY - 4:58 A.M.

We've just made it passed Wadi Fanja and a dim distant light fills the sky. The ride in the SRT8 Challenger is supple. A little 'boaty' around tight bends; 'Americanly' so. By that I mean not entirely unexpected in this car. The steering wheel is large enough to make any ex-bus driver happy, but for me it is pleasantly accurate for a car that pays homage to a 70s icon. The dash and dials, likewise. The black steed I am throwing about has a 5-speed Autostick transmission, and oddly, I like it. The orange car in front of me on the flatbed is a 6-speed manual, so I am eager to A-B the two cars, but I'm afraid that my bias for stick shift will prevail. Two xenon headlights and two amber fog lights surrounded by an egg-crate-style grill penetrate the dissolving darkness.

DAMMAH - MONDAY - 5:23 A.M.

We pull up and immediately start unloading the car. It is outrageously muscular. The way in which the design guys at Dodge have managed to take the classic 70s Challenger look and bring it into the modern age is without a doubt one of the greatest feats in American automotive history. This neo-Challenger is big-hipped, chunky and muscular – as I said before, exaggeratedly so – yet it oozes sex appeal. It's large flanks look superb in the iconic Hemi Orange colour scheme, and the manufacturer claims 'one look is all it will take' to know this car means business. I must agree; it took all of about 10 seconds before I started salivating over the 'Yank Tank' in Shanfari's Wattayah showroom.

20-inch forged Alcoa alloys shod with fat rubber really ignite the flanks of this car. The slab-sides break at a crease point and the upper portion of the car reflects the rising sun whilst the lower portion remains flat and flavoursome. This has got to be one of the best looking modern muscle cars to date; I probably think that because of its 'true to the original' form and flare.

'This car is a fantastic homage to what cars were once about; unique rides with each manufacturer offering something the others didn't, with no dilution from some Bluetooth earpiece-wearing marketing manager's quips of selling more cars. If you liked brutish, you drove brutish. Dodge's Challenger SRT8 lets you do just that.'

The seats are excellent, and large enough to satisfy an irritated and heavily pregnant woman - I should know, I've spent enough time with one recently. (Note to self: Obtain SRT8 before having to do the emergency dash to MPH's maternity ward.) The cockpit is simple, as is the fit and finish, and if you pop the rear hatch you find insufficient space due to a real 20-inch alloy spare wheel. But I like that. Let's make no bones about it; this is a muscle car for tearing up a quiet stretch of road. It clearly isn't trying to be anything that it is not.

AL JAYLAH - MONDAY - 6:11 A.M.

We've got our 'money shot' and we are heading back to Muscat. In the boot there's also a tool kit, extinguisher and an enormous Kicker 200-watt sub-woofer, which plays its part in the clear and punchy 13-speaker sound system. Should some Mexican gangbanger carjack you out in the desert (a common concern for us here in Oman, I know!), in accord with US federal safety standards Dodge have ensured there is an internal release catch, so you can get out if the would-be assailant locks you in the trunk. It comes with a self-explanatory diagram - just in case you're illiterate, or only proficient in Spanish.

Sans traffic and with a few hours to kill before returning the car it was time to experience the most powerful naturally-aspirated Hemi to have ever graced a Challenger's engine bay. 425hp and 570Nm of thumping torque gives the car concrete mashing acceleration. In less than 5 seconds you are breaking the speed limit and at high speeds the car doesn't feel nose-heavy. I prefer the manual on these twisty mountainous roads; you can accurately gear down and stomp at any apex to lunge forward and attack the horizon.

The athletic retro-coupé sports massive brakes care of Brembo; although pliant, the suspension is stiff enough to maintain decent levels of grip on bitumen. The ESP is excellent, and on par with the best systems out there. It is clever and doesn't totally choke the power once traction is broken, so the car can still feather around a turn without the backend stepping out too far. You can still be a hero, but for most of the drivers intent on owning this car here in Oman, it would be better to keep the 'save me system' switched on.

You get all of your mod-cons with the new SRT8: touch screen, 30GB hard drive, connectivity, SATNAV, cruise control and a sunroof. But most important of all, what you get is an iconic car that is within reach of every guy in Oman. It is a menacing and testosterone-pumping powerhouse, at a price that slaps the Japanese in the face and baulks at any European carmaker's manifesto. Yes it relies on tried and tested (read: thirsty!) technology, but remains all the more predictable and easy to maintain. It is a fantastic steed, and if you care to own one, you're a hero in my book.

The actor that played Kowalski in the original Vanishing Point film, Barry Newman, theorized, "The entire film itself was an essay on existentialism. Kowalski drives to drive, with no real purpose for doing what he's doing. He decides to give his own life its definition and meaning, with complete freedom over his actions." That sort of perfectly summed up the feeling I got whilst pushing the Challenger hard. I was driving to drive, not pansying about in a 'sensible car' that cares for emissions and ergonomically meets the needs of a modern family. This car is a fantastic homage to what cars were once all about. They were unique rides, with one manufacturer offering something the others didn't. There was no dilution in those days due to some Bluetooth earpiece-wearing marketing manager's quips of selling more cars. If you liked brutish, you drove brutish. Dodge's Challenger let you do just that back in the day, and thanks to this wonderful car, you can still do so today.

I wish they all could be California...

'Poised and balanced I brake hard a little late into the turn and the car doesn't get ruffled; with enormous grip I quickly bury the accelerator and the California pulls straight out of the bend with enough ferocity to quench my racer instincts.'

It is a Grand Touring Ferrari. For Tifosi, no other colour could possibly suffice other than Rosso Scuderia, although from several pictures I've seen, I'm quite partial to 'Abu Dhabi Blu'. In homage to the 1957 250 GT 'California' model, this is the all-new Ferrari California, the first V8 monster in what is said to be Ferrari's most aerodynamic road car to date. But that is just one of the 'firsts' for Ferrari, for in developing this vehicle they premiered a fantastic folding metal roof, multi-link rear suspension, a 7-speed dual clutch transmission and a V8 with direct injection technology. I'm on board a flight to the Emirates, and yes, in strange coincidence, the Beach Boys are indeed harmonising through my headset.

However many technical innovations Ferrari brings to the table with its new California, it still sits aplomb a sea of passion, where 'rosso' coloured waves buffet a ship of souls that throw caution to the wind and develop the most flamboyant, yet elegant, of sports cars on the planet. It takes conviction and unwavering belief in the product to do so, and inspiration lags not far behind the mindset of all Ferrari employees. Take Ghita Mejdi for example, Ferrari's PR and Press Manager for the Middle East and Africa, she is enthusiastic and truly passionate about the marque – and she can give most car journos a run for their money with engine displacement 'factoids' and what not. In many ways, meeting her and being comprehensively briefed on the car set the tone for the very special test drive that followed. It was a test drive that completely and totally altered my long-standing attitude towards Ferrari.

Ferrari California Exclusive

Approaching the California you very quickly dispel the notion that this car could be a convertible. The angular lines, low roof line and sweeping curves make it one of the most impressive performance cars I have ever seen, and its proportions are 100% sports coupe. It is perfectly formed, as if sculpted by artisans, and with Pininfarina sketching out its profile you would expect nothing less than perfect. The car's 'smiley' front end is directly connected to its 1957 predecessor, with a wonderful grill and bulging bonnet scoop hinting at passers-by that this car means business. The rear end is raked much higher and its slab sides create an overall aggressive stance. The rear trunk and panelled rear pillars are the only tell-tale signs that roofless motoring pleasure lurks.

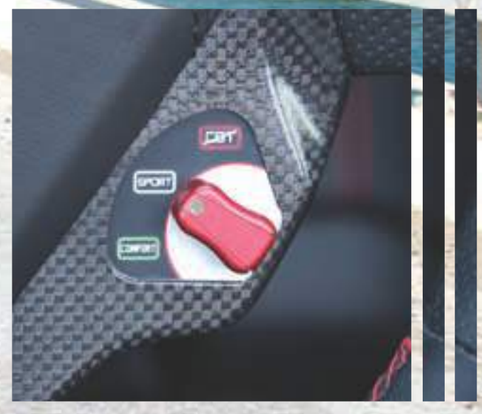
Getting into the car is wonderful. It is easy to do so, again a departure from most supercar layouts, and the Bertone interior is lavish yet a little brutish. There is a juxtaposition of materials, from a black metal grill extending from the dash to the front glass, to the supple leather clad seats and panels. The seating position is infinitely adjustable and I found the bolstering spot on. There is sufficient room for the tallest of drivers, and visibility is exceptional. It's a push-button start, but you still get a key, and ergonomically everything makes sense when you are behind the wheel. All of the mod-cons are displayed on the touch screen multi-media system, and the stalks, buttons, dials and fixings are all sensational to touch and to look at. Aircraft inspired turbine-like air vents sprout off the dash. Encased in carbon fibre they are cleverly crafted and tactile. The centre console is another carbon-fibre goody that gorgeously accommodates a small area for phones and trinkets, and perhaps most important of all, houses a switch to open and close the roof. It is eye-catching and reminiscent of something from the helm of a Romulan war bird. (Oh-oh a star trek reference!)

It takes just a few seconds and the seamless and quiet operation is complete. The roof is down and the world is all around you. Instantly I am in California. Well, not quite, but the cityscape that is Dubai has never looked so good. With the Burj Khalifa towering over me I set off towards Fujeirah, to the promise of twisty roads and clean air. It was there, I was told, that I could make use of the ~~CST~~ setting of the Manattino on the steering wheel. OK, let me re-phrase that, I was told in no uncertain terms I could go from 'comfort' to 'sport', but I guess my fingers may have clumsily clipped the Manattino one notch too many? Well only once, on a small stretch of road with nothing hard or large in close proximity! Ferrari have developed three settings that will see you piloting the car with ease around town, on the open road, or on a race track at the weekend; each setting optimises throttle response, suspension and handling, and progressively backs off the traction control and safety settings, until eventually all you have is ABS.

In fact, the Manattino controls the F1 Trac Evoluzione system. It actually does a lot more than just progressively back off system controls. To optimise high performance driving it calculates the level of grip required at any given time and continually makes lightning-fast adjustments to the vehicle's dynamics. The result is smoother throttle response and a horizon warping 20% increase in acceleration out of a bend! From a standing start Launch Control can be activated to encourage a sub-four second 0-100km/h time, and the 7-speed dual clutch transmission is absolutely breathtaking. Absolute seamlessness. Resolute.

The front engine configuration of the V8 places the all-aluminium 4.3-litre exceedingly far back in the chassis. The result is a weight bias of 53:47 - front to rear. Power is rated at 460cv, which for the uninitiated refers to 'cavalli vapore' or steam horses. It is a unit of measure that equates to horsepower at 1cv : 1.01387hp, so the California weighing in at a scant 1630kg (remember it is a hardtop convertible) has 466 horses to catapult it down the road. Its tarmac melting 485Nm of torque comes on strong low in the rev range, with 75% of propulsion proliferating from 2250rpm. It is tractable and literally addictive. Stomp your right foot and hang on because this is where the passion – directly injected of course – ignites. And though in corpus this very test car is red, deep down inside it is rather green. The California complies with the strictest Euro 5 and LEV2 standards, resulting in a combined cycle of 13.1-litres/100km and emissions of less than 306g/km of carbon.

I closed the roof and got fancy with the paddles. Although the magnificent steering wheel obscures a few stalks and buttons, it is the interface for a wonderfully weighted and balanced vehicle. The shifts are glorious and the turn-in is tight and communicative. This is perhaps the highest build quality of any Ferrari I have ever piloted, and that, combined with a natural tendency for a heavy right foot, sees me scream into a series of hard right turns on an uphill climb towards Kalba. The car is nimble and weight distribution is fantastic. Poised and balanced I brake hard a little late into the turn and the car doesn't get ruffled; with enormous grip I quickly bury the accelerator and the California pulls straight out of the bend with enough ferocity to quench my racer instincts.



The throttle note burbling out of the exhaust is bang on what it should be, and the massive ceramic brakes are surreal. I quickly paddle up to 7th gear and settle down at a gentle cruising speed. This is a Grand Tourer, with four seats and ample headroom. (I'm not being facetious, I mean with the roof up!) I stop to take in the sights and catch a few images with my trusty Nikon, and it is time to head back to the big city lights.

Now, I'm the kid and Dubai is my candy store. The roof is down and although I have a car with a rear seat delete specification, I can see that the golf clubs could easily be ousted and my two children comfortably seated in the back. This car is probably close to Ferrari's finest motoring moment, for you get practicality coupled with soul. Raw emotion meets admirable design, and exhilarating motoring can be had with the top either up or down; it is not a fence sitter, nor is it a watered down supercar. The great Spanish writer Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo once penned the tale of Queen Califia, in which he stated:

"Know ye that at the right hand of the Indies there is an island named California, very close to that part of the terrestrial Paradise, which was inhabited by black women, without a single man among them, and that they lived in the manner of Amazons. They were robust of body, with strong and passionate hearts and great virtues."

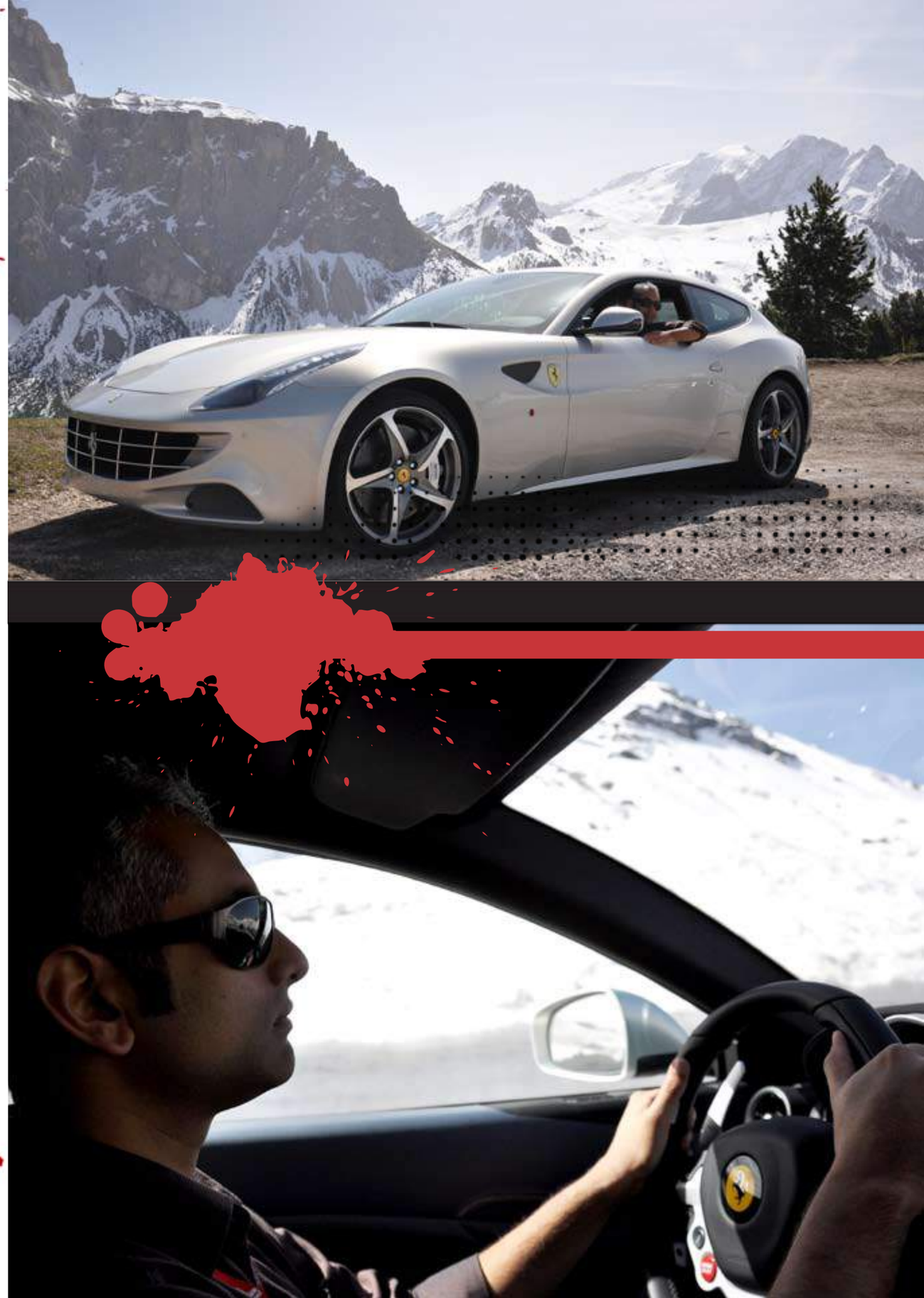
And that essentially sums it up. Robust of body, with a strong and passionate heart and of great virtue: the Ferrari California. I'd gladly put my set of German car keys down for a spell. I am now a huge Ferrari fan.

EL DUENDE

'Flamenco Ferrari' Has Me On My Hands and Knees.

What a shot of espresso does for one on an empty stomach is precisely what Ferrari's new stallion will do to the notion of 'grand touring'. This is, perhaps, why the Maranello carmaker states the new 651hp, V12, four-wheel drive, four-seater, is the very "pinnacle of achievement in the extreme GT segment." Extreme GT, eh? Well yes, it is almost sinister in its manic propulsion, but it is also so refined and so finessed, that one could liken it to a flamenco guitarist. You know, greased hair that is neither too short nor too long, flailing atop a dynamic physique dressed in tight designer jeans and tapping away in a pair of Salvatore Ferragamo Python loafers. When one such hot-blooded virtuoso launches into an AK-47-esque sonic assault, he'll probably leave you trembling with your arm hair standing on end. Tener duende!

That is exactly what this new Ferrari did to me. Indeed, it is also an assault on the notion that "you cannot lap the Nordschleife in a car that comfortably seats 4 adults and one that will shame Astons, Porsches, Lamborghinis and Mclarens when pushed to the limit." Ferrari has left those non-believers rather bruised and battered, I'm afraid. It all started in 2004, and seven years on, we're driving Ferrari's greatest achievement to date, the FF.



Winding through the Alps in this glorious beast, the turn-in is sharp and the steering is precise – paradoxically, both brittle and smooth. I look into my rear-vision mirror and I've got a passenger in the back who is in awe of the snow-capped passes we're traversing, and to my side sits Henri, a rather solidly framed South African motoring guru. We're all rather tall, yet are seated comfortably, and I'm pressing hard. The FF is quiet but returns a delicious rasp when baited, and bury your foot and… Whizz-Bang-Wap!... you tickle the mathematical constructs of the space-time continuum, regardless of what gear you are in or what gradient you are attacking.

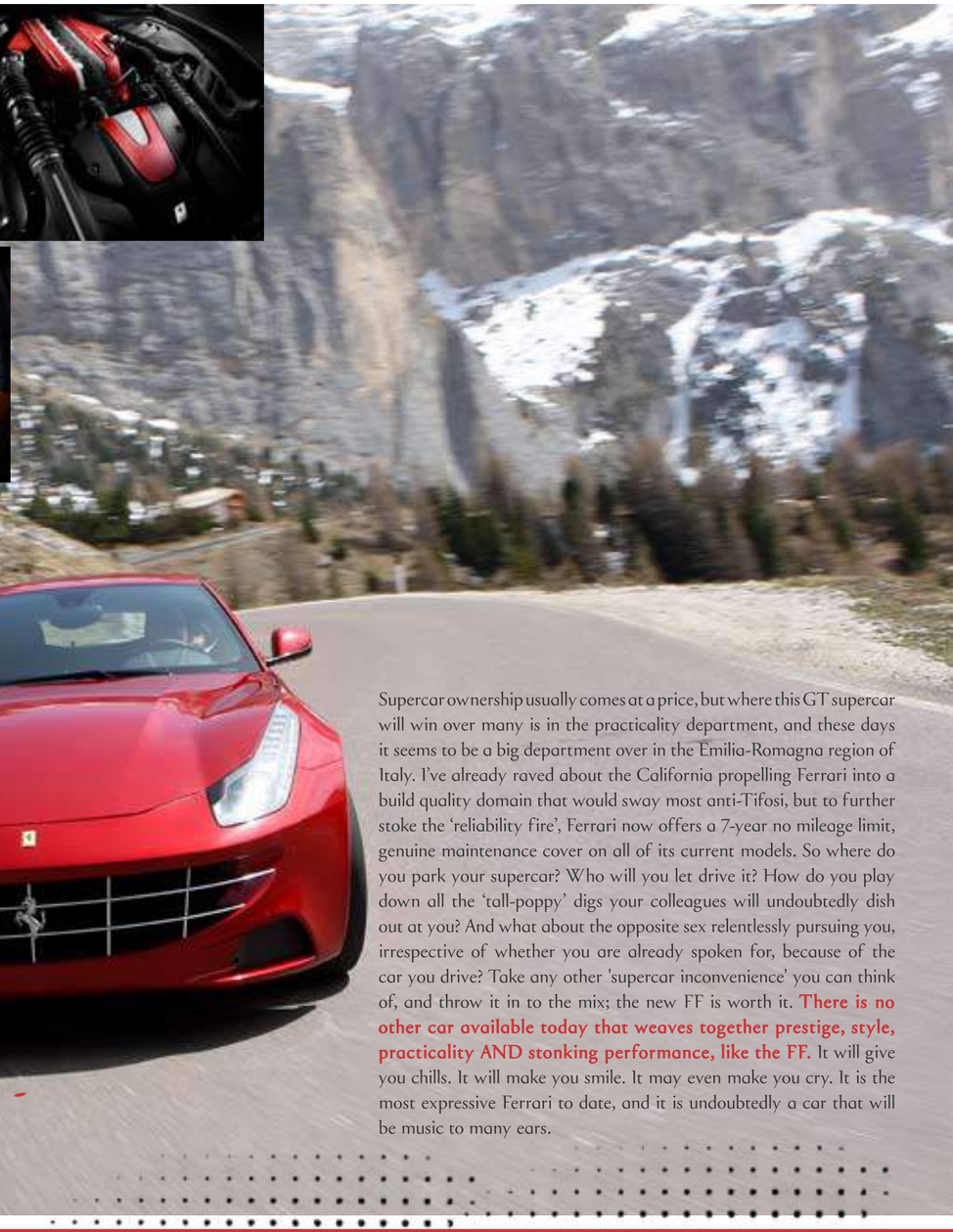
Most textbooks (or in this case Wikipedia) will tell you "A small force applied for a long time can produce the same momentum change as a large force applied briefly, because it is the product of the force and the time for which it is applied that is important." So what about a large force applied for a long time? The mid-front mounted naturally-aspirated V12 produces 502Nm at a mere 1000rpm, and has a torque curve that slopes positively all the way to 6000rpm, where it dishes out 683 Newton metres of the big 'T'. At 8000rpm you get 651 horses, and all of this equates to an almighty shove in the back – so brace yourself!

The FF is 4.9 metres long and 1.95 metres wide, but sits squat at just under 1.4 metres in height. It is aggressive and impressive; the early press images did a grave disservice to the styling team. Chatting to the Press Office at Ferrari S.P.A., the manufacturer is well aware of it. But now, in the flesh, it matters not, because it is as glorious as any other Ferrari before it. The roof angle is not all that square, and the flanks of the car rise to a voluptuous rear-end. The front three-quarter view of the car is pure Ferrari, and the rear will grow on all ye naysayers. Take a closer look at the rear lights and you'll notice they're flanked by cleverly crafted ducts that allow pressurised air from the undercarriage to vent out the back. Dubbed as 'base bleed', this design reduces rear turbulence, and in combination with a rear diffuser, increases laminar flow. That means, aerodynamically, it's slick.

The interior is as sumptuous as anything else I've driven, bespoke or otherwise. The fit and finish is spectacular, with fabulous seats and novel ergonomic touches rounding off the cabin. The steering wheel is home to most of the controls, and indicating took some getting used to. Gone are the stalks and levers; they've been replaced with buttons. So like some hobo hitchhiker, you now use your thumbs to indicate. Designed to accommodate a large driver as well as rear occupants up to 6 feet tall, the FF is roomier than you'd expect. You can stow 450 litres of luggage with four passengers in the car, and if you drop the seats flat that opens up to over 800 litres. During the official stuff, I caught a glimpse of a visual depicting a Labrador seated in the rear compartment. This may be a little far fetched, but skis, golf bags, scuba gear and suitcases pose no problem.

Back at the helm, I find a flat strip of tarmac and engage launch control. The 5-position Manettino (which now offers a setting for optimised driving in snow and in wet conditions) is probably where it shouldn't be – allowing me to go a little berserk. I drop the hammer and we're off; just a little squirminess. The sound of nature's forces in turmoil are my soundtrack. 0-100km/h in 3.7 seconds, and there is nowhere near enough room to get up to the car's 335km/h limit. **This. Car. Is. Stunning.** Keeping the speed up via the awesomely fast 7-speed DCT transmission, I dip into several treacherous turns and immediately I feel the two wet clutches in the power transfer unit directing torque to the front wheels; the sensation is similar to that felt from torque vectoring systems in other manufacturers' cars - where there is that slight give and take for traction's sake, however, this is delivered under power and not as a brake 'intervention'.

The FF will undoubtedly do well in Oman. Although they surrounded the car with snow and ice for the official launch, in many ways the FF seems to have been specifically crafted for the mindset and expectations of the Middle East market. In these parts we want the space and practicality, but the flamboyance and performance, too. Unlike many other supercars, getting in and out of the FF is not cumbersome but rather graceful, and will titillate those wearing national dress or even ladies in evening gowns, so I imagine we'll see quite a few FFs at regional red carpet and VIP events in the near future.



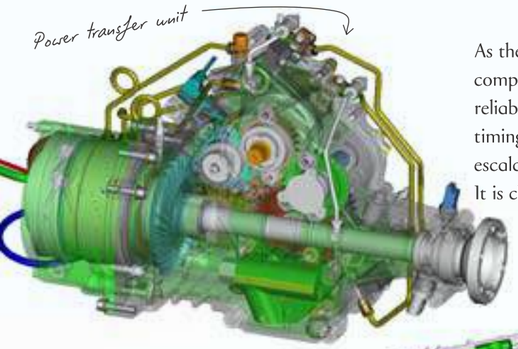
Supercar ownership usually comes at a price, but where this GT supercar will win over many is in the practicality department, and these days it seems to be a big department over in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. I've already raved about the California propelling Ferrari into a build quality domain that would sway most anti-Tifosi, but to further stoke the 'reliability fire', Ferrari now offers a 7-year no mileage limit, genuine maintenance cover on all of its current models. So where do you park your supercar? Who will you let drive it? How do you play down all the 'tall-poppy' digs your colleagues will undoubtedly dish out at you? And what about the opposite sex relentlessly pursuing you, irrespective of whether you are already spoken for, because of the car you drive? Take any other 'supercar inconvenience' you can think of, and throw it in to the mix; the new FF is worth it. **There is no other car available today that weaves together prestige, style, practicality AND stonking performance, like the FF.** It will give you chills. It will make you smile. It may even make you cry. It is the most expressive Ferrari to date, and it is undoubtedly a car that will be music to many ears.

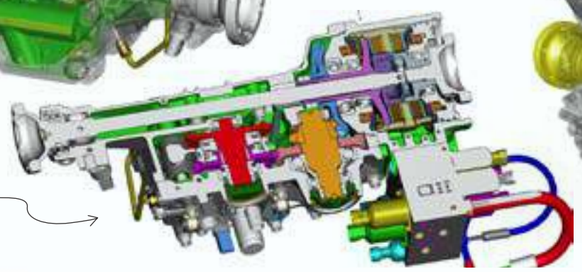
Now, let's get technical.

First off, this car's 4x4 system is revolutionary for a supercar, and is clearly a fantastic byproduct of a mid-front engine layout. The power transfer unit is Ferrari's way of eliminating a heavy front differential, along with its associated driveshafts. Instead, an electro-hydraulically actuated unit, compact in size and low in weight, houses two wet clutches that independently direct torque via a dual-gear system to either left or right front wheels – independent to what is going on out the back! Thanks to this unit, the car also benefits from a 47/53 front/rear weight distribution, making it just a touch more fun when attempting a too-fast-too-furious-esque power slide.

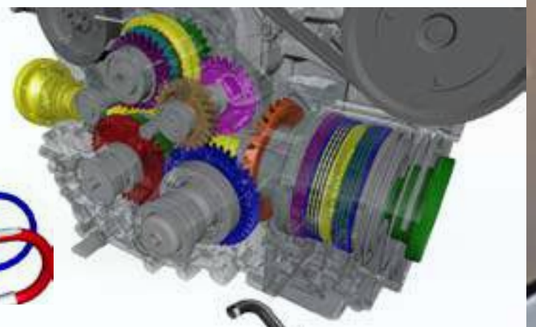
Dry sump reed valve scavenging system

Power transfer unit





Actuator



Finally, true to the exhibitionist hiding deep within most supercar owners, the FF features two intake pipes with diaphragms, that capture air intake pressure and feed that sound directly into the cabin. The result is a slightly raspy and throaty aural note that permeates your personal space whilst you drive. As Ferrari's technical wizard, Nicola Pini, points out: "The fun of going fast is not just feeling it, but hearing it, too!"

These little doohickeys pipe a whole load of 'rasp' into the cabin!

Take a closer look at the rear lights and you'll notice they're flanked by cleverly crafted ducts that allow pressurised air from the undercarriage to vent out the back. Dubbed as 'base bleed', this design reduces rear turbulence, and in combination with a rear diffuser, increases laminar flow. That means, aerodynamically, it's slick.

THE PURRFECT OVER

Now you may be thinking, “why cricket?” It’s simple: The British invented cricket, the Indians adopted it, and the game quickly became a way of life. Many might argue that India now ‘owns’ the sport. Similarly, in 2008 the British Marque, Jaguar – then in the clutches of the Ford Motor Company – was taken over by Indian industrial leviathan Tata Motors, and since then the brand has experienced a rebirth. A rebirth of cool.

Alright chappies, I guess Jaguar has long been considered the regal choice in British motoring; the ‘cuff-link carriage’ for most businessmen who have ‘made it’. So a pumping powerhouse of brute force in a bulging, growling package that is still refined and austere seemed to be a fantasy notion for the pussycat. Well not anymore. Whereas before the carmaker was more Prince Philip than Prince Naseem, with the Indians at the helm it is now the Sanjay Dutt of sports cars. Brutally savage.

The Jaguar design wizards’ – Ian Callum and Julian Thomson – innings came in 2007. They developed the Concept-XF, which immediately went into production. The resulting XF model range went a considerable way to overcoming the carmaker’s slump. It was a clever car, well designed, functional, and gorgeous to look at – albeit a little Ford-like. But the mad scientists in the Jag lab did something wonderful, shoehorning a V8 supercharged performance engine into the feline. The car we are reviewing today is the ‘massaged’ version, the all-new 2010 XFR, with a 5.0 V8 (of forced induction) that now spews forth 510 horsepower and 625 Nm of torque.

Our Kyanite Blue Metallic example stood ready and waiting as we entered the MHD showroom. It was prepped and shimmering. The car is curvaceous but punchy, with an overall aggressive stance and sits on delicious 20” Nevis Alloys. The smiling front end, with plenty of chrome, is crowned by a bulging bonnet. It is deceptively large and getting into the car you realize there is ample space (headroom and legroom) for four adults. Keyless start results in a large chrome dial rising up out of the centre console. Scroll to the left or the right to select park, reverse, neutral, drive or sport mode; the air vents also open on start-up and the interior illumination includes Phosphor Blue ambient lighting. The cabin is ergonomic and the seats are well bolstered and comfortable. Everything is electric and the design lines all sweep towards the touchscreen multimedia system in the centre of the cockpit. Climate, navigation, communication (bluetooth), vehicle set-up, audio, and television are all tappable on the 7” display.

JAGUAR

'Any more than 500hp and 600Nm of torque will often spell 'dog on linoleum' handling in a road car, but throw in the Active Differential Control and 0-100km/h is a wonderful affair, catapulting this high-performance saloon towards the vanishing point within 4.7 seconds.'

Taking off from a standing start the car delivers massive amounts of torque. The 5-metre long saloon is nearly two metres wide but visibility is excellent. The ride, although supple, is still very focused towards those with sporting intentions, and the Adaptive Dynamics mode (once depressed) analyses body roll, steering, wheel inputs and the road surface 500 times a second to electronically adjust the dampers for handling precision. Any more than 500hp and 600Nm of torque will often spell 'dog on linoleum' handling in a road car, but throw in the Active Differential Control and 0-100km/h is a wonderful affair, catapulting this high-performance saloon towards the vanishing point within 4.7 seconds. The XFR is playful when you repeatedly perform this trick, primarily due to its rear-wheel drive platform. I think that the tail happy 'flick' is something we have lost in recent times - with most manufacturers now opting for drive taking place at all four corners of the car to cancel out this effect - but it is something very special. It is sheer hooliganism, but in the refined Jag a dichotomous characteristic.

Unique R package interior

14-speaker 440watt surround sound system

It's 5am. That's either Mr. Bean, Ms. Daisy or the great cricketer Hemin Desai in the back!

Eight V-configured cylinders, with a high compression ratio of 9.5:1 gorge on fuel and air via 32 valves. The engine is bang on 'square' with a 92.5mm bore and 93mm stroke, hence offers reliability due to less piston friction than in an undersquare engine and it being less 'high-strung' than an oversquare engine. It is the same formula as used in Bugatti's Veyron, and in this Jaguar it is seductively smooth. In-gear acceleration is nigh on effortless with 120-180km/h leaving other cars on the road 'out for a duck'. It is the best Jaguar I have ever driven, immensely muscle car-like and a delight to potter around town in, too. In fact in many ways it is Jaguar's answer to Australia's Holden Special Vehicles (HSV) – brutal in the most addictive and seductive way. Surprising. Sort of like Harry Potter's friend, Hermione Granger, becoming the Cat Woman. Meow… Thump!

With softgrain leather, a 440watt Bowers & Wilkens 14-speaker surround sound system, flashes of veneer and chrome, cruise control, state-of-the-art entertainment and safety, and a cracking R-performance braking package, the XFR is one of the motoring world's best-kept secrets here in Oman. There are still only a few units on the road, but my guess is that anyone who spends an hour behind the wheel will commit to buying this car. It is driving brilliance and at RO 33,950 more bang for your buck (revs for your rial?) than anything else on the market in its class. If you head down to MHD and tell them you read about how "you simply have to buy an XFR" in Y Magazine, you will not only get 5 years (or 250,000kms) factory warranty and Total Care Assistance throughout the Middle East, but you might also be able to twist a few arms and squeeze a sensational discount out of MHD's on-road price. Just find the 'bowler' and lay into his bowling arm. Ramadan might be the perfect month in which to do so.

Special thanks to Amit Sampat, Hemin Desai, Charbel Abinader and the InterContinental Muscat.

Largest capacity boot of any Jaguar.

20-inch Nevis alloys and massive brakes

Lamborghini's New **SuperLeggera.**

Penso che I mei reni si siano spostati.

Italians created the word "leggera" to describe an item that is light, or low in weight. And super... well that is the word they devised to say something is...umm... "super".

Lamborghini's 560-4 Gallardo is a monstrous vehicle. Its mid-engine layout, low-slung angular body, wide track and 5.2-litre V10 is manic enough to scare off Tifosi, and loud enough to victimise the likes of Koenigsegg, Ascari and Zonda owners. So what were they thinking when they decided to shed a further 70 kilograms from the aluminium space frame, "carbonfibre-ize" both structural and aesthetic items, and extract ten extra horses from the fire-breathing lump that revs freely to 8500rpm? Enter the new Gallardo 570-4 "Superleggera".

To get to the bottom of this I had to drive the Superleggera for a few days, and keep in the back of my mind the current climate the alternative Italian carmaker finds itself in. With the gargantuan Volkswagen Group now behind the marque things have indeed changed. We presently see mid-engine Audi's taking the market share away from 911s, Bugattis breaking land speed records, and Lamborghinis that are... user friendly?! And unlike precursor Superleggeras, real world driveability has stepped to the fore in this new model. This is indeed the case in the latest incarnation. It is like the craziness of Italians, financed and engineered by Germans. Molto wunderbar!

Our stunning white example stood waiting in front of the Shanfari showroom. Its luscious black Alcantara interior - finely seamed with white stitching - adorned the roof, dash and racing seats. Carbon fibre door trims – magnificent one-piece mouldings – and a leather strap instead of a conventional door handle, are the first signs that this is no ordinary vehicle. Carbon fibre is used so extensively that the kerb weight of this Lambo is now 1340kg. But that comes somewhat at a price; you can't wind down the windows, as there is no mechanism in which to do so hiding inside the doors. So throw that word "convenience" out of the window – oops sorry, they don't go down, do they - throw that word out of the "door" the next time you need to pluck a parking ticket from an airport car park boom-gate.

Unlock the car and even if it's dark you can see the glorious engine, thanks to swimming pool-like light emitting diodes gloriously lighting up the rocker covers beneath the clear glass lid. It is stunning. The jump-in and start-up routine is simple: this Lambo has a key, which you stick in the ignition and turn. Yeay! The 'robotised e-gear system' gives you six gears that you can toggle through with column-mounted paddles, and they do so faster than you can blink. Even if you've got the gift of speed blinking, just like Ralph Macchio (aka "Eugene") at the end of Walter Hill's epic blues film 'Crossroads', this fantastic gearbox will impress you. Yes sir-eee, it'll impress Jack Butler, too!

Reverse comes awkwardly by way of a lone button on the left-hand side of the dash, which is not ideal if you want to make a three-point turn in front of oncoming traffic! The centre console features three modes to tickle you senseless. Centrally located is an all-caps "A" which keeps the 'box in automatic mode. The exhaust note is raspy but certainly not offensive, and you can commute through traffic happily, piloting your lightweight race demon with ease. I pull over and depress the button to the left of "A" that selects the "ESP-Sport" mode. Immediately the V10 bleats out a throaty snarl and all of a sudden you've got the 'lord of the jungle' hiding out in your tailpipes. Gear changes are optimised for frenzied acceleration in this mode; suspension, no matter what you do, is 'racetrack firm'. Although things can get a little fidgety over a bumpy surface, there is steadfast German practicality lurking in the shadows; you can raise and lower the ride-height at the press of a button, which makes tackling Muscat's vicious speed humps a breeze. So it is time to test both the car and my mettle. Time to flat-out accelerate on an open stretch of road. It's 5:23am and there's not a soul in sight.

Oh. My. Gooooooooooo-Aaaaarrrrhhhhgggg!

I think my kidneys have moved.

The neck-snapping acceleration is more terrifying than any alien Sigourney Weaver ever dealt with. This is one seriously fast Lambo, dishing out gut punches with every gear change. The exhaust screams for glory and down changing releases yelps from the 562 horsepower direct injection beast behind you.

For serious drivers with a soft spot for supercars, in "Corsa" mode it's no holds barred "how's your father?" – only with a crash helmet and nomex underpants mandatory apparel for the 'illicit fling'. And fling it does; with 20% of the 540 Nm of torque spinning the front wheels, and the other 80% crumbling the tarmac from the rear via 295/30 19s, you can get a little drifty in the Superleggera. Due to the absence of driver assist, I'd advise prospective owners not to use this mode if they value perfectly straight panels on the outside of their car.

Visibility, although a huge improvement over the Bolognese bulls of yesteryear (think Countach!), is still a little obstructed by the roofline rails that extend down to the rear arches. It is liveable, and with an excellent rear camera system incorporated into the multimedia package you can always precisely carry out reversing manoeuvres. Getting in and out of the car is your regular supercar affair, and the fantastic carbon-fibre shelled seats limit even

the slightest lateral movement – albeit still wide enough to accommodate larger framed drivers. A flat-bottom Alcantara steering wheel feeds the minutest road surface details back to the driver and is a sheer delight to grip.

380mm carbon ceramic brake rotors are ferociously clamped by 6-piston callipers upfront, and the pedal feel is sublime. Throwing the car into a tight turn at excessive speed and riding heavy on the brakes results in moderate understeer, but the vehicle is light enough to be pulled back in tight by burying your right foot and unleashing blistering power. There is so much grunt on tap; thanks to the Superleggera's low mass you can really manipulate gravity, however, I wasn't able to get wild oversteer out of this rather special Italian beast. All signs point to a car that could outdo any rear-wheel drive wagon from Stuttgart or Maranello; on track; in poor weather.

Whilst I don't condone extreme driving anywhere but on a racetrack, a stretch of deserted road at an ungodly hour and the chance to take my wife for a quick spin proved too alluring. Moments after a standing start to 100km/h dash – achieved within 3.4 seconds I might add! – my wife felt nauseous; and by the time I had completed our 'brace yourself' drive back home, her throat was hoarse from screaming at me in a state of fear and tumult.

Thanks to permanent all-wheel drive technology, most of the time the Superleggera is predictable, however, you can easily dial up 'dangerous'. The car seems to prompt you to edge ever closer to the limit. I mean, it is like inviting the Insane Clown Posse down to premier jewellers Tiffany & Co. – to do an impromptu gig – instructing them not to steal or break anything, then egging them on to "go nuts" like they've never gone before. Should Lamborghini be putting SatNav, DVD, a rear camera and practicality into a lightweight variant?

The answer is simply, yes. Why not? If you've got RO 128,000 sitting idle in your 'new car fund', you'll enjoy living with the Gallardo 570-4 Superleggera as a daily driver, pottering around town, embarrassing 430 Scuderia owners when you visit Yas Island on weekends, parking at the Shangri-la, wedging a small suitcase into the front trunk, and turning heads wherever you go.

This car is addictive. Manic, but utterly, utterly, addictive.

Lotus EVORA

In 715, the Portuguese city of Évora - then known as Ebora Cerealis - was subjugated by Moorish forces under the command of Umayyad general, Tariq ibn-Ziyad. With its name gently morphing into Yaburah, the township prospered and was the home of then famous poet Abdul Majid ibn 'Abdun Al-Yaburi, before Gerald the Fearless (now that's a name!) wrenched it back in 1165, on behalf of Portuguese King Afonso the first.

In 1507, the Portuguese sailed into the Gulf of Oman and seized control, bolstering their seafaring stranglehold in the region by establishing a permanent garrison on the island of Hormuz. It wasn't until 1650 that imam Sultan bin Saif would regain control, bidding farewell to the Western European occupiers.

So what does all of this have to do with a seriously fast, lightweight Lotus? Well, this new car bears the name Evora, and coincidentally, here in Oman, under the crusty and ornate Portuguese-style verandas of Muttrah, we are putting the new 2+2 sports coupe through its paces.

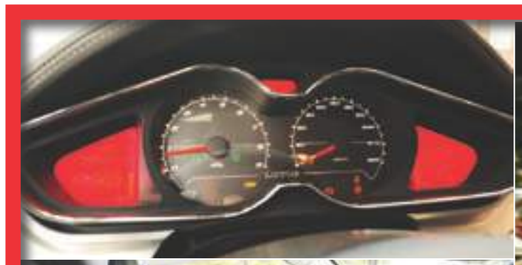
Verdadeiro ou falso?

In less than one year of production, this all-new vehicle from Lotus has taken the title of ‘Britain’s Best Driver’s Car’, according to Autocar Magazine. Stalwart motoring publication Evo ruled it ‘Evo’s Car Of The Year’ (ecoty); but is all of this just British pride? Or does the Evora deserve all of these honours? This is the second Lotus that I have had the pleasure to ‘live with’ here at Y, and in many ways I may have gone about things all wrong. The first car, an Exige Cup 260, was, without a doubt, one of the purist and most impressive vehicles I have driven to date - vigorously, I might add! Lacking refinement, and in some areas sensibility, the Exige is a totally different beast to the Evora. Lotus’ new mid-engine 4-seater is much tamer, with mild manners, extra seats, creature comforts and it even has a rear window so you can see out the back! The order in which I experienced these two cars could play against the Evora; for how can you top Lotus’ most potent “road-slash-track car” to date?

This car is much larger, and that equates to ample interior space, legroom, headroom, and a crumple zone. Typical car stuff that Lotus usually does away with is loaded into the car. Sound deadening, carpets, roof lining, cruise control, a multimedia player, speakers, traction control, homelink, interior lights, armrests, comfy seats, ABS and airbags. And it is all top-notch stuff too, with a special multimedia/DVD system care of Alpine – that can be ejected from the car and used as a portable device. Nifty! The twisted angular stance of this vehicle is certainly intimidating. It has exotic car bulges and a clear glass engine bay lid. There is no overhang at the four corners. Scoops and aggressive intake and ventilation grills break the smooth contour of the car’s lines. My gleaming Ardent Red test car turned heads everywhere it went.

Although some may find it cumbersome to step in and out of the Evora, it is a much more comfortable entry and exit experience than its pint-sized siblings. The cabin is rather interesting, with an angular dash, fighter plane inspired handles and centre console, and the most magnificent brushed metal buttons and dials. There is an overall ‘sci-fi’ smooth finish to the swooping dash curves and panels, and an instrument cluster that will probably titillate ‘Trekkies’. A small adjustable steering wheel sits in front of you, and in true Lotus fashion, everything is within reach. This car is a 2+2, which means it has rear seats. Whilst the war rages on over the actual usability of these seats, Lotus is offering a 2 + ‘zero’ option, and if I were to buy this car, I’d probably go that route. What is startling about this car is its correct classification; ok, so the rear seats may not be all that practical, but let’s not forget, this is a mid-engine vehicle. The trunk is aft of the engine bay, and petite. It holds up to 50kg and instead of a spare wheel, you get a tyre sealant pressure pack.

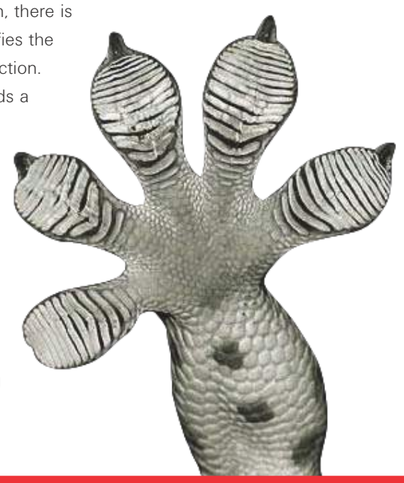
As a driver or passenger you are perched very far forward in the chassis. The inner tub has a large bulkhead on either side of the footwell, where the wheel cavity eats into your legroom - which here in Oman results in the driver having to cock his left leg inwards in order to depress the clutch pedal. Although not ideal, you quickly get used to it, and it is a small price to pay for mid-engine motoring, and superb weight distribution.



Diálogo

The handling of this car is magnificent. It is much more softly sprung than the Exige, or at least the longer wheelbase implies such, so you really need to carry a lot of speed into a turn to appreciate just how sure-footed the Evora is. The car displays monstrous levels of grip. Gecko like grip. In fact, the tiny hairs on a gecko's foot are so microscopic they don't grip irregularities on a surface but form molecular bonds that create electrodynamic attraction between the reptile's foot and the surface upon which it is walking; the Evora seems capable of achieving the same feat, because after a few hours in this car you feel it could easily crawl upside down even on a polished glass surface!

The feedback from the road surface is so strong and direct that if Lotus could bottle this form of 'direct communication', they could indeed sell it to troubled couples pondering a visit to the Dr. Phil show. With Lotus' hydraulically assisted power steering, every nuance is felt. Flicking side to side in a natural and raw motion, there is little twist and body roll, which defies the car's modular and bonded construction. When pushed hard, this car rewards a confident driver with razor sharp responsiveness, but still retains a supreme level of comfort for everyday on-road use.



The Toyota sourced V6 – à la Camry, but with a serious ECU re-map - is mated through a 6-speed transmission. The clever lads at Lotus have found the right gearing and required strength from the Toyota unit and it now works very nicely in this performance car package. 276hp and 350Nm of torque at 4700rpm catapults the car to 100km/h in just 5.1 seconds, and as kerb weight sits at a lean 1380kg the engine feels very 'revvy' in this chassis. I kept jumping into the 7s before gearing up, and at higher RPM the normally sedate exhaust note really opens up with a raw and edgy throatiness. Flying into tight turns and stamping the exceptional brakes is sort of addictive. 350mm ventilated and cross-drilled rotors and 4-pot callipers are tucked behind ultra-light forged alloys shod with sticky rubber - 225/40 ZR18 at the front and 255/35 ZR19 at the rear. Scrubbing off speed - 'muito-efficiently' - the car remains balanced and is poised for take off, again. This 'semi-automatic handgun handling' means I am smiling. Yep, life is good behind the wheel of the Evora.

Sumário

As with most cars I test, the question I inevitably get asked is, "Who is this car for?" Here in a racetrack-devoid Oman, with only a handful of club racers willing to indulge their senses, refinement and exotic looks are typically the key selling points - which the Evora has in spades. For around RO 34K, you get a cracking chassis, mechanical reliability, and the most liveable car Lotus has ever produced.

Just as the residents of Évora whole-heartedly embraced the traditional Portuguese dish of Bacalhau, the racing fraternity only have eyes for Lotus; hardcore motorists who throw caution to the wind and have no concern for comfort or refinement. But just as the once impossibly tough, salty and dry codfish softens up to a juicy mouth watering gastronomical delight, it seems so too does Lotus' race car ethos: the all-new 2+2 mid-engine Evora is a refined vehicle and a delight to drive as an everyday car.

Bantamweight Brutality

LOTUS EXIGE CUP 260 TEST DRIVE

In March of this year, British racecar gurus, Lotus, revealed the fastest car they have ever made. The 2010 Lotus Exige Cup 260. Here in Oman, at the Shanfari showroom, I was handed the keys, and told in no uncertain terms to “find the magic that is Lotus.” I believe I may have done just that.

Now in most car tests, it is customary to tell you what you would get for all of your hard earned money if you were to purchase the car being reviewed. But here, with this Lotus Exige Cup car, we are going to tell you what you don’t get. There’s no stereo or speakers, no carpet, no electric seats, no powered mirrors, no power steering, no cruise control, no interior cabin lights, no storage compartment or glove box…

…no rear vision mirror, no rear window, no bonnet struts on the engine lid, no sun-visors, and no battery cover. There is, however, the most amazing 260hp 1.8-litre engine mated through a 6-speed manual transmission, sitting aplomb, in what could possibly be the world’s finest chassis in automotive history.

Carbon fibre and aluminium are utilized to keep weight to a bare minimum, and rigidity is now somewhere past Jupiter enroute to Mars! The car is so taut and stiff, it is like the manufacturer dips each vehicle in a tub of ‘rigor mortis’ before the Exige leaves the assembly line. The entire vehicle weighs in at just under 890kg, and to quote Lotus founder and engineering genius Colin Chapman, “Adding power makes you faster on the straights; subtracting weight makes you faster everywhere.” Profound words, and believe it or not, I repeated that line in my head as I grappled with the carbon fibre side sill and clambered – free from comfort and grace – into the cockpit. I was sure at that point in time my few days behind the wheel of this barely road-legal racecar would be something to remember.

Around about now, all of you Lotus fans out there are probably thinking: “Surely, it’s impossible to get any lighter or nimbler than the Exige S, right?” Wrong. The Exige Cup 260 is indeed ‘impossibly faster’ and lighter, too. The race-ready interior is a very comfortable place to be - once you have ‘assumed the position’ that is - and the tiny steering wheel facing you is in close proximity to the brushed aluminium gear stick. The HANS seats are pure race shells, FIA approved, with very little comfort sewn in, but you don’t feel any discomfort after a long drive as lateral movement is obliterated by the carbon fibre shell. The sticker smacked on the side of the seat states boldly that wonderful term ‘homologation’. Our car was fitted with lap/sash retractable seatbelts, a sensible option that alleviates the burden of living with a 6-point safety harness every time you want to pop ‘round to the shops’. Ladies, that means you can wear a pencil skirt whilst driving, if you so desire; and gents, you are not likely to outdo pop star Prince’s genitalia-defiant squeaky falsetto as you wince under hard braking.

With a standard key in the ignition and a twist to the right, the dash panel illuminates. A button to the far left of the cockpit starts the engine, and the throaty roar that fills the cabin is a sure sign that the 1.8-litre unit, sourced from Toyota, is balanced, blueprinted, and capable of breathing fire. It is sort of a match made in heaven: Toyota’s indestructible Celica 1.8 four-cylinder sits mid-ship in a lightweight chassis that more resembles a go-kart than a car. But to go that extra mile - in a sort of smart-aleck-blokey-pub-dart-game maneuver of one-upmanship - Lotus has supercharged the VVTL-i variable cam unit, squeezing a stomach churning 260 horses from it. It revs freely to 8000rpm, and transiently to 8500rpm. The chain driven double over-head camshaft technology in the unit can be felt (and heard) when you depart 6000rpm and attempt to max out the revolutions on the power curve. Power delivery is sublime and coupled (via a lightweight flywheel) to six well-thought-out close ratio gears; the clicky and tactile transmission means dollops of power can be unleashed just about anywhere and at anytime.

Taking off, you immediately feel the weight – or lack thereof, I should say. It is crisp and tactile. Every nuance of the road is felt and heard and you can't help but ponder that in recent years, you may have been misguided by manufacturers squeezing so much into a performance car that they have forgotten, as you have too, what a performance car actually is - raw. This is an amazing platform with a wonderful engine and gearbox, tremendous brakes, and neutral handling. Just, no frills. Turn in sharp and the feedback is immediate. It is responsive and heavy – steering wheel attached to column, column attached to rack, and rack attached to hubs shod with wheels and semi-slick tyres, fighting the tarmac to change trajectory. Okay, well that may be oversimplifying things, but you get my point. (♪The leg bone's connected to the knee bone!♪) The sensitivity and response is unblemished, and the result is absolute confidence and communication with the road surface. Snapping up through the gears the engine seems to never run out of the good stuff, eagerly screaming to 100km/hr in 4.1 seconds. Continue with a heavy right foot and you will see 160km/hr in 9.9 seconds, as air gushes into the roof scoop and into the supercharger intakes. Air-to-air intercoolers see to it that the sealed supercharger (requiring no engine oil intake and offering supreme reliability) gets cold gulps of air to force into the cylinders for a very volatile explosion.

'The car is so taut and stiff, it is like the manufacturer dips each vehicle in a tub of 'rigor mortis' before the Exige leaves the assembly line.'

The clutch is heavy. Racecar heavy. The rear vision mirrors offer a sneak peak (at best) of what is behind you and beside you. You do feel a little scared when you first push hard in this beast, especially in the midst of Muscat's mad traffic, mostly due to visibility factors and the lack of any semblance to a crumple zone. Fortunately for me, the car's Burnt Orange paintwork garnered more attention than necessary, with both road users and authorities flagging me down to find out more. The composite fiberglass body is insect like and if this car were an arthropod, you'd swear it was venomous. Black highlights sculpt the outlandishly flared fenders, spoilers and rear wing. The angular sides scoop into the wheel wells and super lightweight alloy wheels – which Lotus claim are the lightest alloy wheels in the world – scarcely conceal AP racing 4-piston calipers and cross drilled discs.

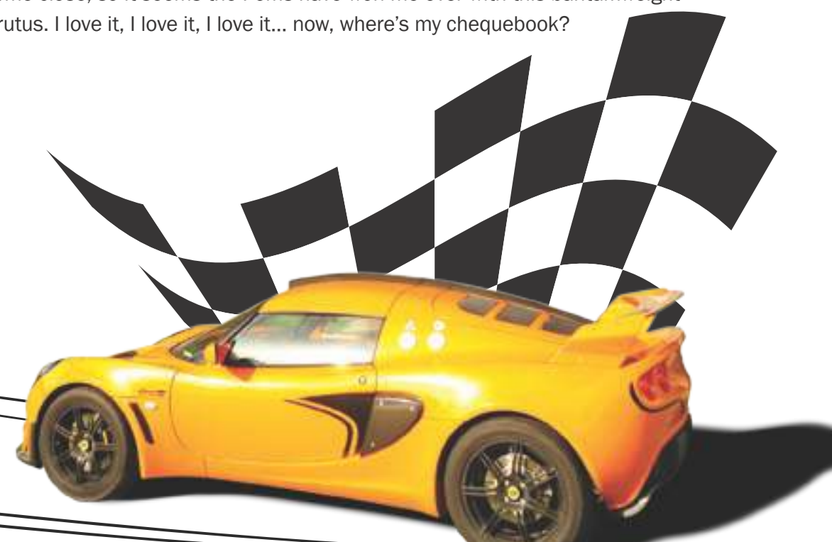
Pushing the Cup 260 hard is the most visceral and liberating feeling one can have on-road. As the universe zips past, distorted and twisted, the rage of the engine just behind you is overwhelming. At high speeds, under hard acceleration, gently lifting off the throttle results in a whistling sound comparable to a warrior's sword being sheathed. "Schweenk." It sent shivers down my spine, and it was addictive. The front air dam, splitters and rear wing keep you pinned to the road and the Ohlins two-way adjustable dampers, ride height adjustment, and adjustable front anti-roll bar allow you to dial in a suspension setup that is perfect for you.

This car is not for the faint-hearted. You can throw it around turns and stamp on the brakes; the handling is neutral, with no signs of oversteer or understeer. An Accusump oil accumulator unit inhibits oil starvation even under extreme cornering. Like most mid-engine cars, if you find that limit, anything beyond it will result in an immediate spin around a central pivot point. Once that happens there is no coming back, however, you would have to be trying to out do a superbike on a twisty track in the wet to get to that point in this lovely little Lotus.

The car is actually one of the most revitalizing and invigorating experiences I have had. It was a detox treatment for my watered down production car sensibilities, and I owe special thanks to Sheikh Nizar Al-Shanfari and all of the guys at Lotus/Shanfari Automotive for the glorious experience of piloting this car half way across the Sultanate.

Whilst it targets weekend club racers who love to use their cars on-track (a limited pool of car fans here in Oman who sporadically soldier over the border to Yas Island or the Dubai Autodrome to get their kicks) the Lotus Exige Cup 260 is pure, unadulterated driving pleasure. Shanfari has it priced at around RO30K, and yes, you can have air conditioning fitted as an option - whew!

This is a road-legal racecar with a power to weight ratio of 288hp per tonne - that is equivalent to your average family car having 500hp! However, remember that power seems exponentially greater when you remove weight. You cannot find more adrenalin pumping fun in any other hardtop production vehicle man has conceived of to date; The Americans, Japanese... even the Germans can't come close, so it seems the Poms have won me over with this bantamweight Brutus. I love it, I love it, I love it... now, where's my chequebook?



FAST, FURIOUS AND FUN: IT WORKS FOR ME!

A smart alec comment directed at a GM during a golf tournament last week led to an instant phone call to a marketing manager, which in turn led to an encounter with a sales manager who requested my presence in the MINI showroom in Qurum. He then escorted me outside Al Jenaibi International's showroom to a MINI ready and waiting in the wings.

Ticking over at idle - with surges of oil warming up the tiny little power plant housed in a body that shouted 'let's race!' - this was no ordinary MINI. It was a 2010 John Cooper Works, 211hp 1.6-litre MINI Cooper Hatchback, loaded with enough goodies to have me grinning from ear to ear.

Co-founder of the zippiest and most enigmatic British hatch, John Cooper has been producing 'works' versions of the Cooper S, Convertible and Clubman for several years now. I know many owners of million dollar exotics, who still insist on owning one of these great little cars.

Why? Because there is no greater fun to be had on the road today from a car that is priced below RO 20,000, and I say this having just spent a great deal of time in a bunch of prestigious rides touting three times the horsepower and price tags that soar well above this special little MINI.

Take the essence of a great ‘Groupe B Rallycar’, (think 205 T16, HF Delta Integrale or R5 Turbo), add Fritz’s precision and control, Ludwig’s approach to build quality, one pint of British racing heritage, a bucket load of ‘I can pull any chick on the planet’ care of Robbie Williams, and add a dash of ‘serious weekend club racer’ enthusiasm and you have the John Cooper Works tuned 2010 model MINI.

As a seasoned veteran of club racing in a Renault 5 and turbocharged Mk1 Golf GTi, I can attest to the sheer driving pleasure of this wonderful little car. Whilst the regular run-of-the-mill MINI is good, this little gem of front-wheel-drive motoring magic is simply marvellous. Motoring madness comes care of BMW, with their twin-scroll turbocharging technology powering the 1.6-litre power plant, squeezing out more enthusiasm from the four-banger than that seen at a juvenile beauty pageant in Texas. 211 enthusiastic horses and 260 Nm of torque to be exact, directed down to the tarmac via a 6-speed Getrag gearbox. This car is only available with a manual gearbox, so if your idea of a sporty drive is putting it in ‘S’, you may need to reconsider your driving capabilities, and sulk back to Magic Planet to play SEGA rally with your tail between your legs, because this is a REAL driver’s car.

The cockpit is beautifully appointed with Alcantara Recaro racing seats and a sports steering wheel. Our test car had carbon fibre, DVD SATNAV, USB, Bluetooth, parking sensors, a sunroof, superb 17” alloys, bulging bonnet scoop and an aerodynamic bodykit. It is a hip place to be. MINI has a funky light package that allows you to toggle through various ambient lighting colours. The rest of the mod cons like keyless entry and start/stop, airbags, ABS, and traction control are all there. So how does this little beast drive?

The clutch is not as heavy as you would expect, which is great for toying around in city traffic. The gear change is tight and clicky, with just a little play on the stick. The pedals are nicely situated and accommodate ‘heel-toe’ changes. The twin-scroll turbo comes in at a shade over 2200 rpm and spools up quickly. Power is delivered with a sledgehammer of thrust and spinning wheels in first? Guaranteed. Second? Assured. Third? Often the case if you are pushing hard. The dash to 100km/hr is reached within 6.5 seconds of take-off. This little MINI gets up and boogies. It is feverishly fast and sure-footed, and the connectedness to the road, steering feedback and tight handling make this one of the best drives money can buy. I love this car.

Whilst one may baulk at its toy car dimensions and stance, the technology and development evident in the 2010 incarnation shames most other sports cars on the market, irrespective of price. There is virtually no torque steer that emanates from this monstrously quick front-wheel-drive, and the crispness of the brakes and low mass of the vehicle all result in more fun than you can poke a stick at. And whilst MINIs are immensely popular with the ladies, this particular variant is a true racecar for the road that many a man would lust after. I am not talking about ‘nancy boy’ metro males either, nope; I am talking about hairy knuckled, burly blokes.

It takes a very long time before this MINI runs out of steam, and so it is demonically fast for road use. I blasted up towards the village of Sifa, taking the tight and twisty old road that scales the heights of Ruwi and Hamriya. The JCW is a practical car and surprisingly unfriendly speed humps didn't dampen my spirits. Ground clearance is sufficient and suspension is crisp enough to offer maximum grip yet high levels of comfort. There is a 'sport' button, that once depressed stiffens up the steering, making it go-kart heavy and superb for high speeds. The dials and displays take a little getting used to if you are not familiar with new MINIs, but everything remains within close proximity of the driver.

There is a raw driving appeal that comes with the JCW. I only wish we had a one-make series here in Muscat so that the car could be used in-line with its purpose. The 2010 John Cooper Works MINI is not only a beacon for highly tuned hot hatches, but serves as a reminder that a lot of fun can come from small packages. Whilst its pricing structure is a little high, most folks know that you have to pay to play, and if you really want to play, I suggest you head down to see Elias at Al Jenaibi Int'l Automobiles today; of the four JCWs in Oman, two have already been sold!

Test Drive: Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution #10

EVOcative

'The car is exceptional when pushed to the limit. Wring-out the turbo around a hard turn and it handles like it's on rails. The light, agile and sure-footed Evo X makes most other sports cars seem like Great Danes clambering around on linoleum floors.'

Honour. Respect. Tradition. The Japanese are generally sensible people. In 1917, a seven-seat motorcar rolled out of the Mitsubishi Ship Building Company. It was a hand built sedan with a 35hp inline 4-cylinder engine. Showcasing fine Japanese craftsmanship, it was capable of 32km/h.

Built for aristocracy, the fledgling carmaker's 'Model A' was reliable, comfortable and refined - all quite sensible traits, really. Fast forward 93 years and it seems Mitsubishi has given the royal birdie to aristocrats and tossed refinement to the side - like a slice of rotten fish at a top notch sushi bar – because the 10th generation Evolution Lancer is far from refined; it is not your regular Lancer on steroids, either. It is a rally-bred-pumping-powerhouse of technology and thrust; a veritable angry samurai, jacked-up on Redbull and avenging the death of affordable supercars. It is sublime, albeit the pin-up-poster star adored by Tommi Mäkinen and Lara Croft's love child, and every other boy-racer nerd on the planet for that matter. It is about to be Blu-Tacked up on Y's office wall, because for under 15,000 rials you'd be hard pressed to find any other car with so much oomph.

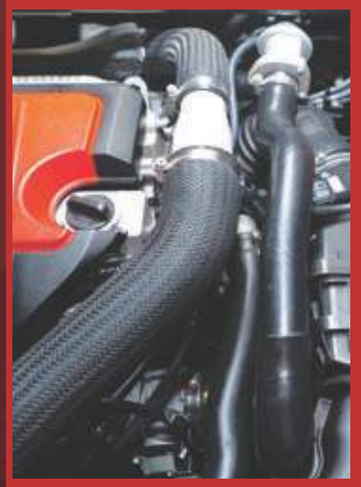
腐った魚

I grabbed the keys from Sarah Chaplin over at Zubair's Azaiba showroom, and slipped her a wry smile. My lean and mean Phantom Black 'Evo' was waiting out the front with the sun gleaming off the pearlescent paintwork. At first glance there is no mistaking this vehicle for being a tamer road going version of Mitsubishi's rally monster. Flared arches, a frog-like squat, intakes and cooling grills clad the angular lines of the Evo X. A wide smile – care of the intercooler sitting above the lower valance – takes its cues from a fighter jet. Much more aggressive than that of a regular Lancer, the car sits atop spectacular 18-inch BBS ultralight alloy wheels and of course there is, that rear wing.

But you don't just stand around and look at this magnificently priced sword wielding warrior, you open the door – "clunk" – again very Lancer–and jump in. The cabin is not overwhelmingly different, as Mitsubishi has definitely decided that home is a very nice place to be. Everything feels very Lancer-ish, however, the seats immediately steal the show. Care of Recaro, they are race seats WITH practicality and comfort designed in. Immensely bolstered and supportive you immediately know that lateral movement has been obliterated. Good seats make a car. Great seats make a great car. The Evo X has exceptional bucket seating.

The overall Evo experience has, and I presume, will always be, a gamer's delight. Sony Playstation, Wii and Xbox 360 addicts have just found their perfect real world match. Keyless start breathes life into a well-illuminated dash, and a slightly suffocated roar is released from the tailpipes at the same time. The click, clack, tap of buttons pulls up the info you really need and all attention falls on the SST transmission switch below the leather clad gear lever knob. SST is the twin clutch system developed by Mitsubishi, based on the paradigm shifting technology VW released a few years ago known as Dual Sequential Gearing or DSG.

It is essentially two independent shafts, one with three odd number gears, and the other with three even number gears. An electronic module controls the clutches, and the result is instant access to the right gear at the right time. The automatic 'box is faster than any manual gearbox could ever be. There is a 'left-down, right-up' set of paddles on the leather-trimmed steering wheel, but to be honest, on civilian roads who needs those? With TC-SST you can select 'normal', 'sport' or 's-sport' modes. The 's-sport' is actually intended for track use only, but I must admit it is addictive to keep it in this mode! The drastic change in gear shifting, and timing is savagely fast – samurai sword fast. The acceleration and behavioural changes are severe.

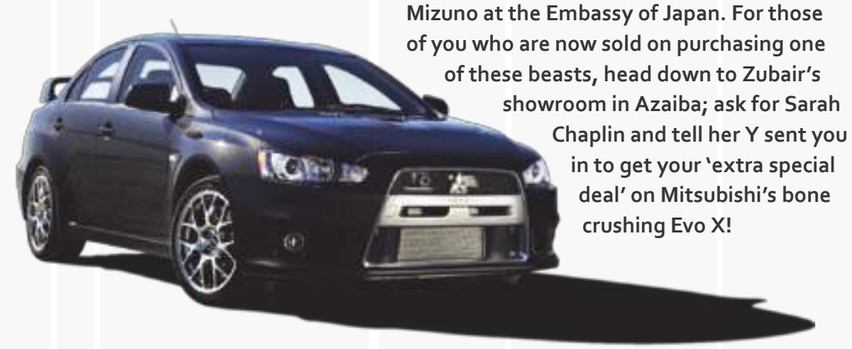


This little beast's 2.0 MIVEC twin-scroll turbocharged engine is now 12kg lighter than its predecessor – the merit of an all-aluminium block – and screams out with 291hp at 6,500rpm. At 3,500 a flat line of torque sits plump at 366Nm - all useable power. The reduction in weight means the new Evo X tips the scales at 1,595kg – it is light and hence nimble. All-wheel drive comes courtesy of the Evo's insanely complicated 'Super-All-Wheel Control' (S-AWC), made up of four sub-system controls. The good news is that you don't need to do anything other than select which mode you want, and whether you want the safety net on or off. Active Centre Differential, Active Yaw Control, ABS and Active Stability Control deal with driving and braking forces as well as longitudinal and lateral behaviour. Do we stay in 'tarmac' mode or switch to 'gravel'? Ripping up tarmac was the order of the day and with my right foot planted, all of the systems seamlessly delivered the right amount of power to all four wheels. Gobs of torque; tractable, divine, bitumen mashing torque.

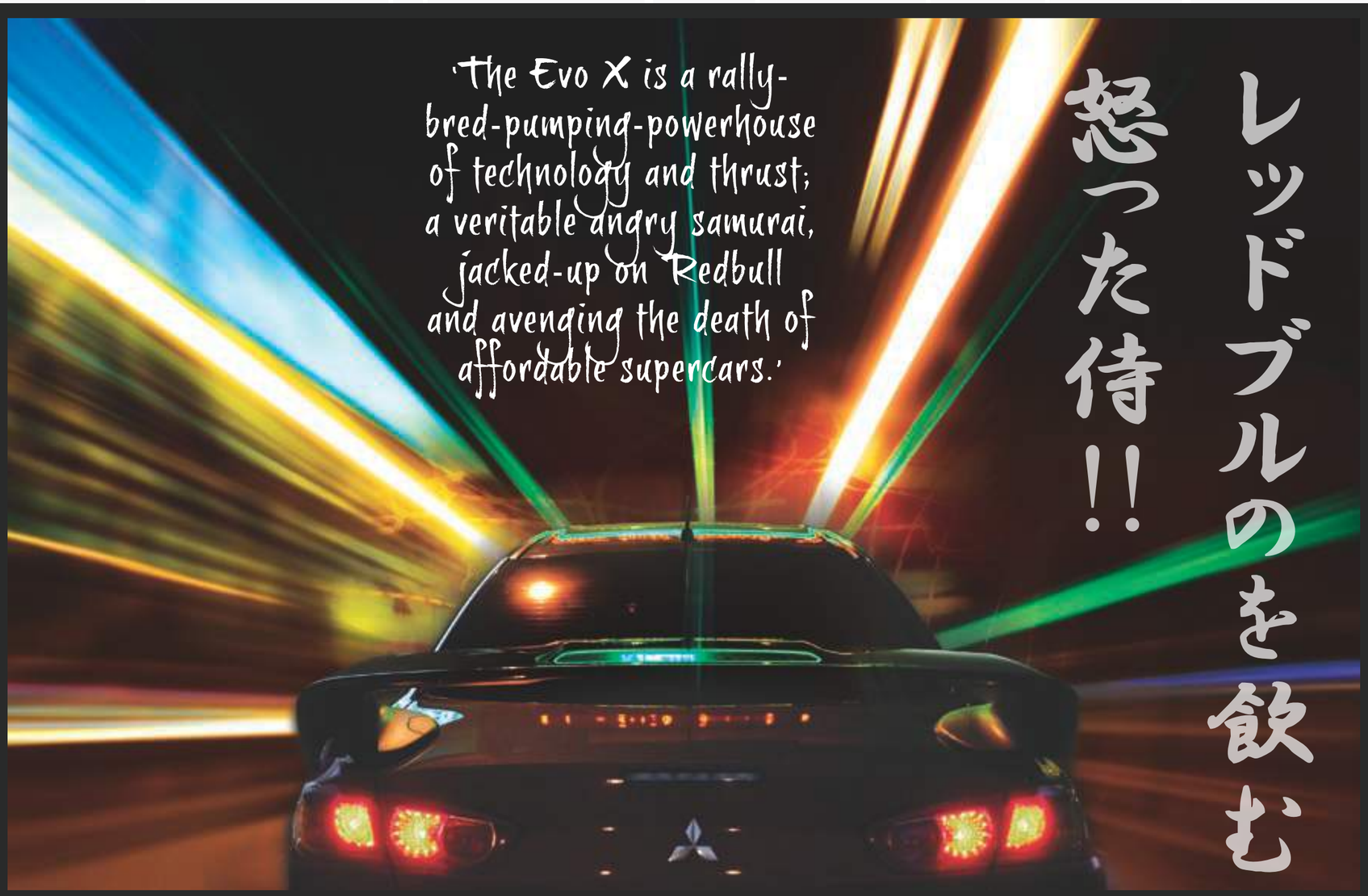
Suspension is stiff, but still comfortable - thanks to Bilstein struts and Eibach springs, a wide (and low to the ground) stance, longer wheelbase and little or no overhang at all four corners. The car is exceptional when pushed to the limit. Wring the turbo 2-litre flat-out around a tight chicane or hard turn and it handles like it's on rails. The light, agile and sure-footed Evo X makes most other sports cars seem like Great Danes clambering around on linoleum floors. The monster brakes are sensational, and they seem to get better the harder you use them. The overall package is 'a lot of car'. Did I mention all of this comes at a shade under RO15k?

In its 10th incarnation the Evo X is slightly tamer than its predecessor the Evo IX. It is more sophisticated, albeit a lot softer, than the Evo III of yesteryear, but that is not a bad thing by any means. At the special price that this car is currently being offered, you get a lot of bang for your buck. You get a fabulously free-revving engine, advanced transmission, dynamic chassis and enough electronic trickery to appeal to the most tech-savvy of auto fiends out there.

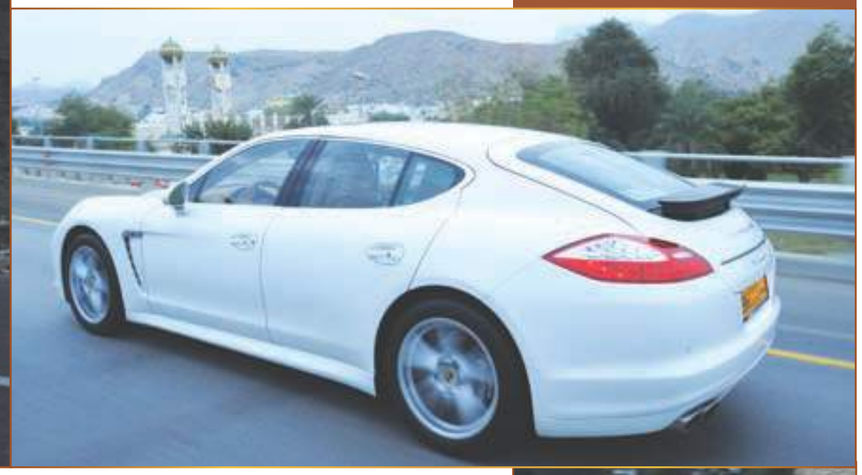
All of the mod cons are thrown in too, with a Rockford Fosgate sound system – complete with 'subwoof-woof-woof-woof-er' – trip computer, adaptive lights, seven airbags and climate control. But all of that matters little, because you really just want to switch off all distractions, jump in, rocket to 100km/h in 4.9 seconds and then start living in the realm of fantasy, where YOU ARE Tommi Mäkinen and Lara Croft IS that tasty chic sitting next to you, egging you on to push the pedal to the metal!



Special thanks to our friends Makino and Mizuno at the Embassy of Japan. For those of you who are now sold on purchasing one of these beasts, head down to Zubair's showroom in Azaiba; ask for Sarah Chaplin and tell her Y sent you in to get your 'extra special deal' on Mitsubishi's bone crushing Evo X!



Panameraculous!



Now let me just start off by saying I am a real Porsche enthusiast, and that is putting it lightly. I fancy myself a purist in fact. With two precious steeds from the Stuttgart manufacturer already in my garage – one built in 1973 and the other a limited edition anniversary model 911 - I would not hesitate to add yet another one to the collection. Why? Because Porsche knows how to make fabulous sports cars that reward dedicated drivers with an experience like no other. So when the four-door, four-seater Panamera was launched recently, the many years of speculation as to whether or not it seemed like a good idea were over.

I sat in the car and looked over it many times before driving it. I enjoyed the interior layout and design immensely and peeked under the bonnet; crawled underneath the car and did a fair bit of tyre kicking. I was however still sceptical. Why would the finest production car manufacturer of them all dilute their pedigree with a car designed to be comfortable carrying four adults? Surely a decidedly sporty experience for a driver used to the rocket-strapped-to-your-back appeal of a 911 would not be obtainable from this platform. How very wrong I was.

'The sporting appeal of the Panamera S is so close to that of a dedicated sports car that you honestly believe you are driving something half the weight and half the size.'

A late phone call to Tariq Al Zadjali of the Porsche Centre Oman, and an agreed start time of 6am the next morning meant we were in for a real treat. A pursuit car was laden with camera equipment and a crazed 'Pole' wielding a camera started leaning out the side window to take pictures, erm… I mean our photographer Jerzy. We were ready to head off.

The sparkling LED lights shone from the crisp Carrara White exterior of our Panamera S test car. Equipped with a Sport Chrono Plus package and 7-speed PDK (the design of the decade for the automotive world - literally two gearboxes and one clutch that enables gear changes at the speed of light) our car spec'd at 400 horsepower; 500Nm of torque at a low 3500rpm enabled the two tonnes to rocket to 100km/hr from a standstill within 5.2 seconds, and pegged the top speed at 283km/hr. Oh, and 'Sport Chrono Plus' also gave it 'launch control', but more of that later.

'Luxor Beige' leather upholstery and delicious flashes of 'Anthracite Birch' trim wrapped around me as I adjusted my electrically controlled and internally air-conditioned seat up. Immediately one feels transported to a world of fighter planes and starships. The dramatic cockpit is drop dead gorgeous and the fit and finish is superb. It is Porsche in every way, refined and elegant but seriously functional. There is a button for just about everything. 'Click' – rear window shades go down, 'click' – sport plus mode is engaged, 'click' – rear wing is deployed… I was like a kid in a candy store. Four well-bolstered seats that a 911 driver would be all too familiar with are equidistantly positioned with ample space for long limbed occupants, and are of course infinitely adjustable. A centre console extends to the rear and offers passengers control over four separate climate zones, and the ability to nudge the seat in front of you forward, too. There's a lot of headroom as well. The spacious cabin offers supreme comfort when compared to its rivals – notably the CLS 63 AMG entry from Mercedes that feels a little more cramped in the back than the Porsche.

The keyless start isn't a tacky novelty button, but rather a hard plastic turnkey positioned in the regular Porsche ignition area. It may not be a glamorous start/stop function, but it is quintessentially Porsche nonetheless. The Panamera's luggage space, although not large, is still sufficient for a full load of passengers to stow their luggage – as long as the luggage cases are the proper Porsche jobbies that cleverly stow away in the compartment. The rear hatch opens up and closes at the push of a button, and when fully open allows flat-bed loading so that objects can slide straight in and out without having to be lifted up. Neat.

The exterior styling of the car is indeed unique, and although at first it takes a little getting used to, the more you look at it, the more you relish the subtle styling cues that link to the 911s and 356s of yesteryear. In the course of the day, the sculpted front end and rear quarters grew on me. The car is immensely squat, with an almost two-metre wide face swooping up and over to form a curvaceous and sleek profile. This offers the chassis the lowest centre of gravity over any other car in its class. Aesthetically it seems very organic, and hence timeless. Organic designs seldom tire the eye and remain fresh for many years; that may be the sole reason why the '911' is one of the greatest design studies in the world, and so the formula may apply here too in the Panamera.

The V8 4.8 litre direct injection engine lurking beneath the bonnet is naturally aspirated and spirited. It revs easily to 6500rpm and sounds magnificent. A gentle throaty note lingers with the right pedal depressed and 'gobbs' of torque — 500Nm to be exact — come on strong at 3500rpm. Instantly the car is neck-snappingly quick and defies its unladen weight figures. I am used to big cars with V8's — I grew up with them all around me — usually Aussie V8, 5.7 litre monsters intent on drinking up every drop of fuel around, but this engine is different. It is refined and efficient. The power is there when you need it and 400 horses are a perfect complement to the size of the car. And what a size it is. Just under five metres in length, the 4-seater is definitely a Grand Tourer and deserves to bare the moniker of GT. Our rear-wheel drive Panamera S screamed to 100km/hr in under 5.2 seconds and continued to pull us well past the 200 km/hr marking on our dial with ample power in reserve. The stability and car control at great speed is confidence inspiring yet provides enough feedback through the steering to let you know when to back off, although the steering weighting may appear a little light and not quite precise enough for fans of the 911. But it is a different car, isn't it?

And that is where this luxurious beast really shines, albeit greying a few lines. The sporting appeal of the Panamera S is so close to that of a dedicated sports car that you honestly believe you are driving something half the weight and half the size. Upon turn-in the rigidity of the chassis is breathtaking and the pivotal centre – something I discussed in great detail with the great Porsche journo Ian Kuah – is far enough back in the chassis to make lateral movement non-discernible. The result is that rear occupants stay in their seats during a 'sporting drive' and do not feel the slightest bit nauseous.

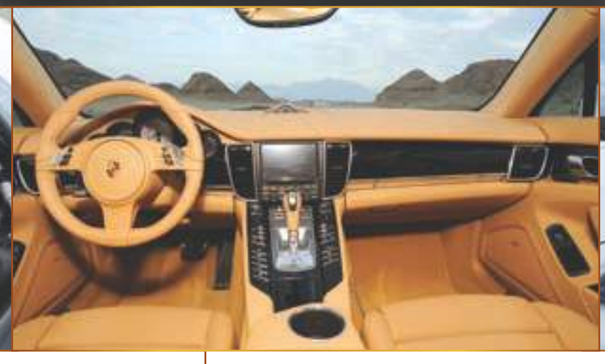
Sport Chrono Plus is a little costly, but well worth the addition to your options list. It not only pumps up the performance in terms of handling, stiffness, and power, it also gives you 'launch control'. Use your left foot and stamp down on the brake pedal, and keep it down. Place your right foot on the accelerator pedal and push down firmly, too. The revs will scream up to the redline with the car stationary, the display adjacent to the rev counter will flash up a message stating: 'Launch Control Activated!' and low and behold you are ready for a take off that pretty much equals that of a fighter plane. Simply dump the brake pedal and the car momentarily spins the rear wheels and in a controlled motion pins you to your seat, makes gravity appear 10 times stronger than it actually is, and with blurred periphery vision catapults you forward. You have just unleashed a monster.

Throughout the day of focused driving, the Panamera remained markedly comfortable. It is soft enough to chauffer around VIPs and still maintains high levels of grip. The cabin is quiet and you barely notice the outside elements even at great speed, so much so that sometimes you forget you are actually taking things at a great speed. Other comforts include a very clever periphery system that utilises a large screen and rear camera. The 'SatNav' display pops up in a dial on the dash panel that can be used for the trip computer details, too, all at a thumb scroll from the steering wheel. Now that is another nifty idea that every other manufacturer is sure to adopt.

1

1. Rear wing deploys at 90km/hr, and varies at 8° to 16° in angle, depending on speed. Alternatively, it can be activated at the push of a button.
2. Porsche DNA: The gorgeous curvacious rear arch.
3. Rear occupants are in control of seats, AC and shades.
4. Launch Control: Left foot on the brake, right foot flat on the floor... Wham!
5. Rear camera and guide lines make parking a breeze.

2



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Most enthusiasts are comparing the new Porsche to Maseratis, Mercs, or even Cadillac's CTS-V. They are way off the mark. In my opinion, there is nothing else like the Panamera on the market yet, unless of course you look to aftermarket tuners like Brabus. To put it simply, a car so wide, so long, so heavy, so nimble and yet so luxurious, is a package yet to be achieved by any other manufacturer. However, having said that, I am convinced Audi's 4-door V10 RS6 will give the Panamera a run for its money, but perhaps at the price of comfort and refinement – we may have to look into that a little further! For those with a tad over 55,000 rials as their budget, you simply cannot overlook the greatest car to have been developed and produced in recent motoring history – the Porsche Panamera S.

Porsche's Transsyberian Express.

The TransSyberia Rally was regarded by many as the most challenging off-road race on the planet. With its route constantly evolving, in 2008 participants of this great rally made their way from Moscow, blazing across a 6600km trail through Russia and over the Ural Mountains to the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar.

With a scorching desert, gail force winds, subarctic forests and extremely rugged terrain, the rally was not for the faint hearted. So perhaps there was no better place to bear in mind whilst developing an off-road rally-race Porsche based on the naturally aspirated Cayenne S, that would not only claim triple victories two years consecutively, but capture the hearts of car enthusiasts the world over.

The good folks at the Porsche Centre Oman – SATA offered us a very special test-drive, in response to my claim that the harsh climate of Oman is the perfect proving ground for the 2010 Porsche Cayenne S Transsyberia. With brutal rock formations twisting mountains into cavernous wadis, soaring temperatures and powdery dunes, the backdrop was apt to replicate the harshness of Mongolia's final stage in the torturous TransSyberian Rally. Boasting 405hp and a thundering 500Nm of torque, this road use 'rally special' is more than just a cosmetic homage to the vehicles used in competition. Power and speed are coupled with safety, reliability, and tractability.

Visually the Cayenne S Tanssyberia is striking. Drawing from racing tradition, contrasting colours have been used to highlight the wing mirrors, intake blades, spoilers, wheels and side logos. The vehicle's appearance matches its sporting promise with stainless steel skid plates and roof-mounted spotlights resulting in an aggressive stance. Our Crystal Silver Metallic specimen with orange highlights was priced just under RO 40,000 and turned heads as we powered down the back roads of Barka. Our destination was a special area in the foothills of the Al-Hajr mountains offering a myriad of troubling obstacles, flowing riverbeds (wadis) and a pedigree goat farm, too.

The cabin is superb. It is a really nice place to be. Trimmed in Alcantara leather, the steering wheel offers comfort and grip, and the seat inserts, rooflining, window pillars, and sun visors are tailored from the same ultra soft and luxurious material. Sumptuous black leather adorns everything else and orange trim highlights the stylish interior. The dials and gauges are all colour coordinated, so too is the stitching on the wheel. Every creature comfort is on hand with a stellar multimedia system, care of Bose, and an in-dash SIM card slot for your mobile phone. It is easy to use, intuitive and the acoustic package in the cabin shines with concert hall clarity.

There is an indicator line on the steering wheel so you know where 'top-dead-centre' is, should you get wickedly crossed up - which can only happen with the PSM switched off. PSM (also known as 'Please Save Me') is Porsche's answer to maximum traction, whilst also allowing the car not to bog

down under stifling safety controls. The system has evolved dynamically and is now better and stronger than ever before.

This more than capable off-roader weighs 2.5 tonnes but you would never guess it. The chassis is taught and rigidity is high. The intentional lack of a sunroof makes a huge difference here, and to be frank, with 50+ degrees Celsius the everyday norm in summer, I don't see the need for one in any luxury car in Oman. In a style and flair that only Porsche's R&D centre in Weissach seems capable of, function meets design amidst a sea of quality, prestige and performance. There is a pronounced sportiness to this Cayenne S special, over and above the standard model, due to the 62 percent split to the rear wheels, air suspension and Porsche's Active Suspension Management.

Whilst at first I questioned just how different the Transsyberia could be over the standard S, I now no longer do. It feels much more aggressive on the road, and in-gear acceleration is stunning. 120km/h to the 'two-oh-oh' mark is an exhilarating flash – 2 seconds quicker than the standard Cayenne S. The 4.8-litre V8 has received a 20hp Botox jab in the form of a DFI VarioCam Plus engine that

previously graced the engine bay of the GTS variant. With 405hp at 6500rpm and 500Nm of torque kicking in at 3500rpm, 6.1 seconds is all it takes to hit 100km/h. Hustle it does.

The GTS' shorter final-drive ratio also makes a huge difference, and mammoth 6-piston callipers up front, and 4-piston callipers at the rear clamp down on enormous discs with the force and bite of Thylacoleo carnifex. For those of you who don't know this beast by name, I am referring to a 25 million year-old marsupial lion that lived in Australia during the Ice Age, with the strongest jaws of any living or extinct carnivore in the history of our planet. There are a limited number of Transsyberia spec Cayennes in Oman, so eventually they may be as rare as ole' carniflex, too!

Off-road prowess is further enhanced by the excellent clearance the car offers, so you can wade in water 555mm deep and attack boulders with conviction. The air suspension is adjusted electronically by the flick of a switch and height ranges from a 'low level loading' setting to a 'special terrain' off-road setting. In the latter mode I navigated over a great crevasse riddled with boulders and soft sand. Even though our test car was riding on performance tyres and optional 21" alloys, the Transsyberia clearly demonstrated dexterity on rugged terrain.

Sure the Cayenne S, and particularly in this guise, is a fast car, however, it is startling that Porsche have mated exceptional on-road performance and supreme handling with a more than competent off-road vehicle. Many originally thought that the Cayenne was a bottom line vehicle that would ultimately rob Porsche of its racing pedigree, performance advantage, and high build quality notoriety - something that almost every other carmaker out there is still playing catch-up to. Having driven every model year Cayenne S to date, as well as the GTS, Turbo and Turbo S, this special edition Cayenne S is so much more than just a glorified, tarted up Cayenne S. I absolutely adore this car.

The term 'emergence' is used to describe the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions. It is in effect a term coined by scientists and philosophers perplexed by how something can appear to be greater than the sum of its parts. Sure, the 2010 Transsyberia Cayenne S would make a great case study for some nerd studying integrative levels and complex systems, but for the rest of us it is a fine example of stunning design, luxury and 'must have' performance all rolled into one stellar vehicle.

CABRIOlet the sunshine in!

Yes, indeed this car's roof does fold down, making it a cabriolet. But unlike most manufacturers - who compromise structural rigidity for open air motoring – Porsche, and its new 911 Turbo in rag top format, offers the very best open air motoring money can buy. Storming performance is abundant, and with PDK seamless acceleration is assured.

I stepped into a seductive cream white test car, fully loaded and optioned with a Carrera Red natural leather interior. White stitching and smooth leather adorned just about everything in this car, including the slats on the air conditioning vents! PDK, Sport Chrono plus, adaptive sports seats (with driver memory package) and a host of other Porsche 'exclusive' goodies were incorporated into this gleaming example of engineering excellence.

Now, there are two main reasons why I was given this car. Firstly, as I have never been one to opt for a cabriolet - preferring coupés, it was high time I experienced just how good the new 911 Cabriolet is. And secondly… well let's just say my mission was to 'actually' test out if the 911 Turbo Cabriolet could really be used as a family car. Given my recent 'family holiday' experience at Atlantis in Dubai, all paths merged, and thanks to Anja Wood of Porsche Middle East, I was able to put the much-coveted car through its paces on-road in the UAE.

So, to the specs, and the 911 is clearly still a class-leading daily driver supercar. With the 'anti' being upped to 3.8 litres in the horizontally opposed six-cylinder department the car now pushes out 500hp and 650Nm of torque. As our car was fitted with a PDK transmission a Sport Chrono Plus package provides launch control and an 'overboost' function, making torque figures rise to a buttocks whooping 700Nm. Acceleration from zero to 100km/h takes a mere 3.5 seconds and the twin-turbocharged, twin-intercooled 911 will rocket all the way to 312km/h.

Yep, indeed, the power is there to haul a family and their luggage, but can that really be done? The 911 has always had space for luggage, and the new car's 105 litre trunk – albeit compact – can accommodate Porsche designed luggage for a weekend getaway, with enough room left over for Hello Kitty, too! Along with luggage, Porsche has developed baby strollers and child safety seats, so the little ones can enjoy motoring along at a tremendous pace, with the top down, too! We managed to get a child safety seat in behind the front passenger seat, and although you really need a front passenger with rather short legs (cue my wife), it is doable. My daughter had enough legroom for the seat to be securely fastened and in position, but to borrow a phrase from my local real estate agent - let's just say things were a little 'cosy' in the cabin.

The new cabriolet is a well-crafted car. Wind noise has been drastically reduced and the mechanism for stowing the top away (and closing it up again) is actuated at the push of a button and occurs in mere seconds. With the top either up or down the car provides motoring madness, and a heavy right foot is rewarded with neck snapping acceleration and enthusiasm from all of the occupants on board. My two-year-old loved it, and wailed along happily with the VTG turbochargers coming on strong.

In Porsche's new 911 turbo Cabriolet you get all of the glitz and the glam of a convertible, however, dichotomously, you also get incredible torsional rigidity and staggering performance. You can easily drive this road rocket to a racetrack and keep the coupés at bay, but keep in mind you should probably take the baby seat out before you attempt to do so!

Dr. JEKYLL and MR. HYDE

The new Cayenne is effectively the third generation SUV from Porsche's stable, however, it is not merely a face-lifted evolution, but a phenomenal advancement of the initial concept of creating a luxury SUV of true Porsche pedigree. We were invited to test drive the new Cayenne – in both 'S' and 'Turbo' guise - just weeks before its official regional launch, in the Emirati desert, where terrific tarmac roads end abruptly and scatter into winding dirt trails that eventually disappear into powdery red dunes. Over two vastly different terrains two differing characters emerged from one vehicle. This is the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

I entered the Majlis tent at the Bab Al Shams Resort to be greeted by Anja Wood, Porsche Middle East PR Manager. Mrs Wood pre-empted my enthusiasm by saying in a characteristically German and matter-of-fact-way, "After we tell you all about the new car, you are not going to sleep Kiran, not until you drive it" and having just ignited a fire, she deftly introduced me to Herr Klaus-Gerhard Wolpert, Head of the Cayenne Model Series, Porsche AG. Herr Wolpert is perhaps THE best person to impart Cayenne knowledge onto a car journo such as myself. He has been with Porsche since the early 80s, skilfully playing his part in the motorsport division and then being tasked with finding a new Porsche product. He is responsible for the Cayenne. That may be putting it simply, however, that statement is about as accurate as I can get. Wolpert immediately took to explaining the philosophy behind the new car, and his presentation to the media went into the finer details – both aesthetic and mechanical – that now places Porsche's new Cayenne range light-years ahead of the rest.

I immediately felt at home in the new car's completely restyled interior. It is a very comfortable place to be, and the design cues that pay homage to the Panamera are still strikingly different to the sports GT, and therefore not disappointing by any means in the new SUV. Speculation had it that a 'parts bin' mentality might overshadow the new Cayenne - I can now alleviate those woes and tell you: it doesn't. The centre console rises up toward the dash, and re-designed instruments cluster before you; rounder and sharper bezels are a welcome sight. This is the new Cayenne S. Its 4.8-litre V8 engine now boasts no less than 400hp, and it mates nicely to an 8-speed Tiptronic transmission. You may ask "why no PDK?" To put it simply, this 8-speed is just so good and the car is so capable off-road, that a shrug will suffice as the answer. The active all-wheel drive rockets to 100km/h in 5.9 seconds and tops out at

258 km/h. Impressive figures, yes? Well, here's the clincher, CO_2 emissions are now rated at 245 g/km and the vehicle returns a combined cycle figure of 10.5 ltr/100 km – that's a bee's knee under 27 mpg for all you imperialists out there!

Rough and rugged tracks we traversed, only you wouldn't know it. The suspension systems are so good on the new vehicle that ribbed and rutted roads go unnoticed. We set the comfort setting to 'sport' to stiffen up the suspension, in an effort to

eliminate bottoming out on sand at the end of a steep descent down a dune. Ride height was raised by 27cms so you don't even bat an eye at large obstacles. The off-road setting tailors gearing to suit the terrain, providing additional traction and power. Hill descent and auto-braking controls made towering dunes no menace to us.

Riding on gorgeous 20-inch RS Spyder rims over this terrain may have been an act of motoring superficiality and hence thoroughly inappropriate in an off-road test. Due to unavoidable circumstances, smaller rims were not available for the testing. It was indeed our 'Paris Hilton moment', but it served us well and something great came out of it. We witnessed how very capable on soft sand and taxing off-road conditions the new Cayenne is, regardless of 20-inch rims and low profile performance tyres.

The presence of a real ex-rally Transsyberia Cayenne meant we pushed really hard. With the rallying monster looming in the background and ready to bail us out of grief, as hard as we tried to get stuck, we simply couldn't. There were a few moments of beaching amongst the other cars - we were all trying to find the limits of the car, after all - and so whilst the team bailed the odd car out of 'stuckdom' we sat back and enjoyed the creature comforts of the new interior. The Burmester audio package is incredible. I only wish I had a copy of Zeppelin's opus track "Achilles' Last Stand" instead of having to rely on Emirati FM stations for sonic pleasure, it would surely have done the system justice. Led Zeppelin probably didn't know it at the time, but that 'stairway' they sang about leads to the new Cayenne's ventilated seats. Rather than blowing A/C into the small of your back, Porsche's clever system draws cabin air into the seat, and the vacuum created sucks heat away from your body. It is heavenly. Just ask Bahrain's media tycoon, Nick Cooksey all about it!

4.7 seconds is all it takes for the Cayenne Turbo to hit 100km/h, the car can comfortably reach 278 km/h and lean, green, fighting machine figures sit at 11.5 ltr/100km for consumption and 270 g/km for CO2. The entire Cayenne line-up benefits from a drastic reduction in weight over the previous model. Herr Wolpert informed me that they were able to reduce the new vehicle's weight by 250kg, however, technology (tipping the scales at 70kg) went back in, so the real world weight saving is now 180kg. If you keep in mind that the new car is larger and has an extra gear or two, plus a 16 speaker sound system care of Burmester, this figure is actually nothing short of miraculous. Wolpert broke it down to two decimal places and stacked up the areas in which they found the savings. Coefficient of drag, lightweight materials, rolling road friction, start/stop functions, final drive ratios... no stone was left unturned.

The V8 Turbo variant now breathes fire via two turbochargers. It is absurdly powerful. It efficiently combusts a delicate mix of directly injected fuel and air within its 4.8-litre capacity and releases power to the tune of 500hp. Again, no PDK, but the 8-speed has the right gear at any rpm to maximize the impulse of 700Nm of torque. Yes, s-e-v-e-n-h-u-n-d-r-e-d-N-e-w-t-o-n-m-e-t-r-e-s comes on strong at 2250 rpm. In fact, I recall Professor Richard Feynman once summing up quantum mechanics as "Nature as she is – absurd." I would have loved to have had Feynman seated in the passenger seat as I barrelled down the deserted tarmac roads towards Al Ain. The very nature of the new Cayenne Turbo is absurd.

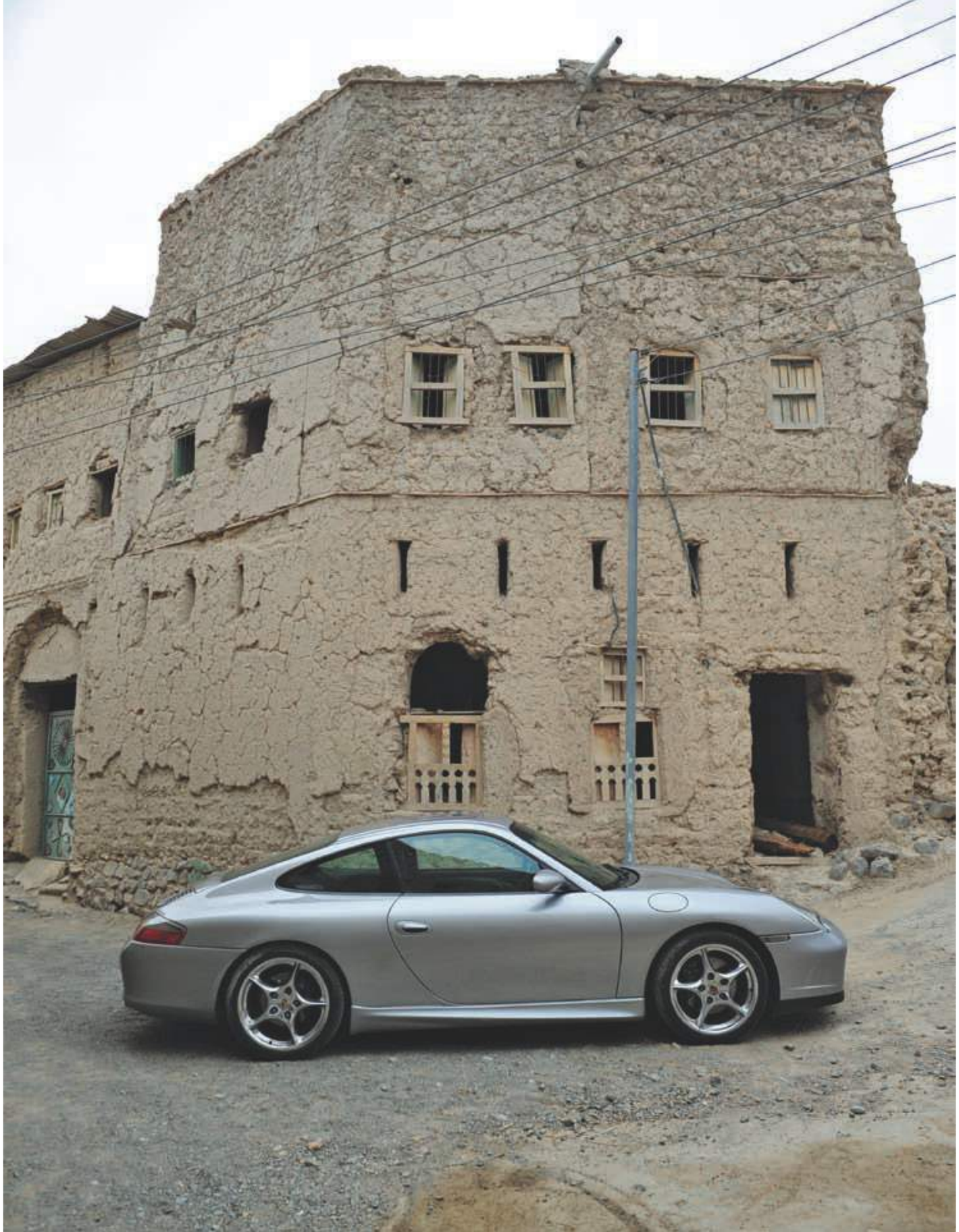
So is the Cayenne a Porsche or is it just a glorified Touareg? Well, as hotly contested a topic that question was back in 2004, in 2010 it isn't. Yes, for reasons of practicality and profit, a shared platform exists, but the new car is finally able to crush all questioning. Porsche DNA. It is as simple as that, and it translates into two main areas: driving dynamics and styling. Short of claiming "all the R&D people that worked on the new Cayenne" were in fact great sages, the car now gleams 'Porsche' and performance. The bonnet is now back to 911 proportions and adorned with a hood emblem. There is a central focal point for all of the design lines extending forward. The result is a sleek and sporty snout that undercuts the overhang, a la 'shark', hence 911. Intake grills have been redesigned and appeal to my 996 and 997 sensibilities. It is aggressive and menacing but retains a sleek and sophisticated smile.

Daytime running lights highlight the front end, and a return to sports car style side mirrors is also noticeable and appreciated. Low and curvaceous, it is a departure from the previous models boxy shape and the rear end is particularly rounded.

Driving dynamics, that's where the new model shines. There is no compromise. Gone are the days of suggesting you need a vehicle for off-road use and another vehicle for on-road affairs. The new Cayenne is testament to that, and every other carmaker on the planet offering an SUV in their product line-up, will probably mess their pants when they experience the new Cayenne. Our on-site rescue team comprised of professional drivers, one of which hailed from these parts (he spent 20 odd years cruising around the desert in the 'you know what' from 'you know who') and they all believed this car is now on par with the best off-road vehicles out there. I think so too. On-road performance is shattering, and reveals the split personality of the Cayenne. You feel the weight savings and pedalling hard through tight turns and tricky roundabouts revealed true sportscar performance. The car feels smaller and tighter; more nimble and sharper. It is responsive and delicate, yet sure-footed and almost five centimetres longer than its predecessor. The 8-speed pins you to your seat irrespective of the rev range, directing that massive 700Nm grunt to the road superbly. You confidently carry so much speed in the car that when you look down to the gauges momentarily, more often than not you are shocked.

Years ago I questioned the inclusion of the Cayenne in Porsche's product line-up. I was then, as I still am today, a purist of sorts. Whilst I will gladly embrace technology and change (I am no 'aircooled puritan') I initially felt that the sporting nature of the brand might get diluted from the addition of an SUV. How very wrong I was. The next generation Cayenne, the very same vehicle that I spent the better part of a day squealing tyres in, is by no means a dilution of anything. It is stunning in every way.

Off-road, it is a fantastic recreation vehicle, complicit in Dr. Jekyll's scheme to hide something. Competent, strong, dependable and sure of itself, you can go anywhere in it. Free of roads, it is a wonderful tool of exploration, but take it on track or on an open road and Mr. Hyde soon reveals himself. Your heart will skip a beat and the horizon will be 'that point below the bridge of your nose'. Savagely sophisticated and poised for one thing alone: brutally graceful motoring magic.



40 years IN OMAN

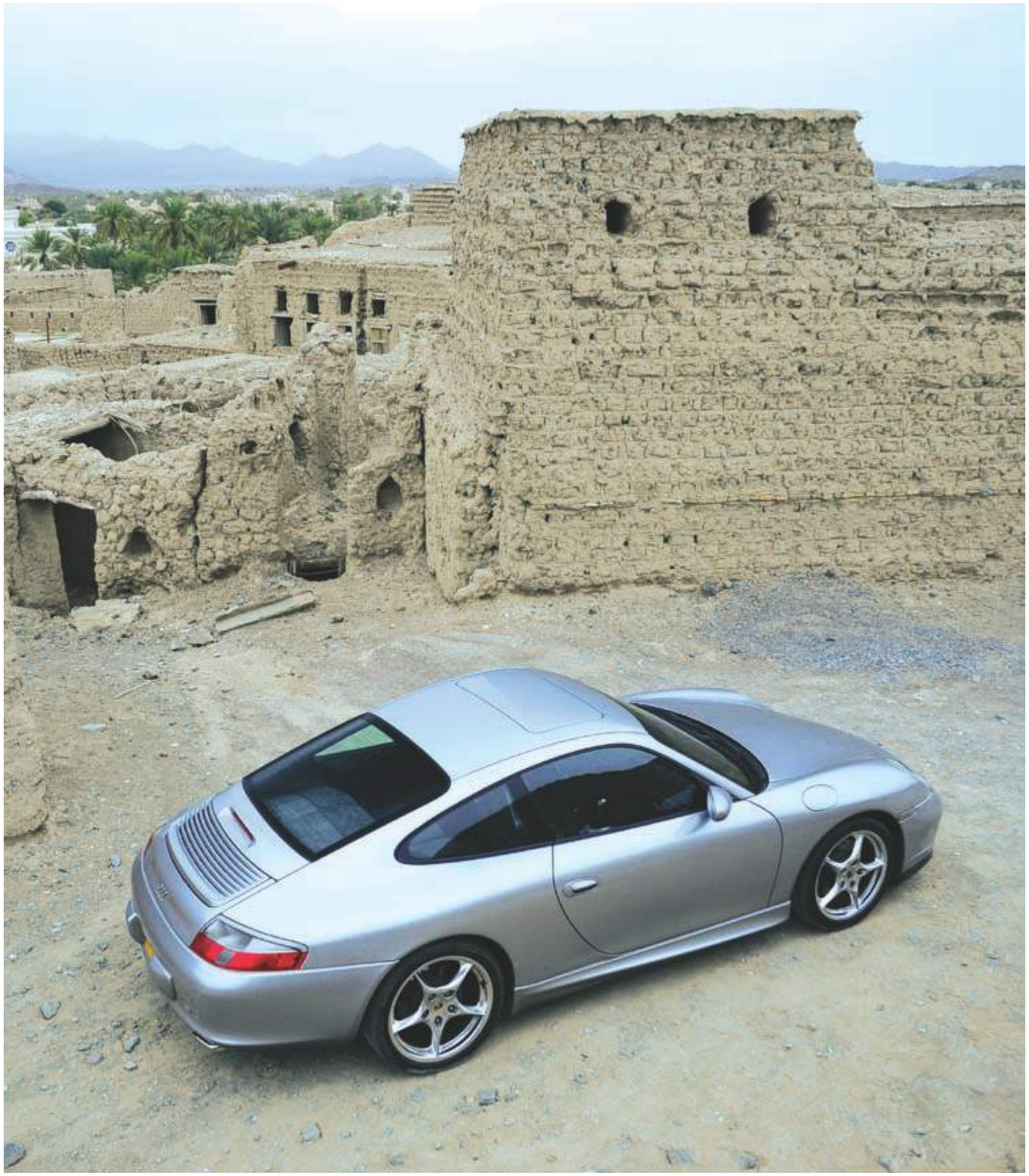
Forty. That's a rather remarkable number - especially for the special car we are currently barrelling down the motorway in - for this year marks the 40th anniversary of the Sultan's rule in Oman. And here we are, in Oman. It is also the designation of this rare 911, manufactured to commemorate 40 years since the debut of the 911 series at the Frankfurt Motor Show back in 1963. It is simply known as the '40 Jahre' to most collectors, and here in the 'battle-axe's blade of the Gulf' it is a one-of-a-kind.

We're heading 250 kilometres out of the capital, towards the deserted interior and over a stunning backdrop. In the remote parts of the country you see the evidence of tectonic activity, which contributes to a breathtaking scene that could easily have come from a 50s biblical tale adapted for the big screen. Massive crevices lined by wedges of rock face angled out of the ground. Our destination is the village of Bahla in the Dakhiliyah region, listed by UNESCO as a world heritage site. The ruins of Bahla are believed to date back to the pre-Islamic Persian occupation of Oman, and the present day abandoned and dilapidated mud-brick structures illicit a sense of foreboding amongst locals. It is the centre of witchcraft and hoodoo shenanigans, but right now it's Ramadan in Oman, so we've been told the Jins - spirits of black magic - are on vacation. Whew!

The drive south weaves though mountains and opens up onto lengthy stretches of blacktop road with ample visibility and very few speeding cameras. In these remote parts furtive driving, and a keen eye, has this 911 rewarding the driver with a beautiful rasp above 5000rpm. At the time of its release it was the second most powerful naturally-aspirated 911 ever produced by Porsche. The M96/03 3.6-litre was massaged with an X51 'Carrera Powerkit', boosting the output to 345hp at 6800rpm - with 370Nm of torque at 4350rpm.

Before rolling off the production line, the factory increased performance with a new intake manifold, intake pipe supports, larger 48mm exhaust manifold; new cylinder heads with optimised CNC-milled inlet ducts, new camshafts with a larger valve stroke and modified inlet/outlet timing, adapted valve springs, a partition box in the oil pan and a remapped DME control module. The car also received a new underside transmission panel and an additional radiator; and a modified front spoiler – and no, although it may look the same, it is not that of the 996 Carrera 4S!

The unit is oversquare - 96mm x 82.8mm - resulting in a ratio of 1.16:1 - hence the high engine speed for power and torque figures. Lower frictional loss and reduced stress on the crank are two characteristics that highly-strung horizontally opposed engines can capitalise on, so compression is a pressing figure of 11.3:1 in this guise. We press hard and ring it out to 7300rpm before shifting up. It is sublime. The rear wheel drive 996 also sports a mechanical differential lock with a locking effect of 22 percent in 'traction' and 27 percent in 'coasting' mode, resulting in absurd propulsion under hard acceleration. The car sits on 8J x 18s shod with 225/40 ZR rated rubber up front and the 10J x 18s on the back fatten the width out with 285/30 ZRs, making the rear track 1500mm wide.



It looks fantastic in GT-Silver Metallic, the only colour it was ever offered in. The gleaming chrome 18" wheels are not aftermarket jobbies, they are factory stock. In fact, the owner prides himself on the fact that in the region, he has one of only a handful of 911s that are still original and as the factory intended tem to be; the trend in these parts is to modify, modify… then modify some more. Even the GT2s are modified in these parts! The side sills are taken from the 996 GT3, and the menacing turbo-look front spoiler features colour-coded grills.

"I love the fried-egg headlights on the late model 996s. It makes the car look aggressive and venomous. And I find the straight upper edge of the rear bumper appealing too. This car is very dear to me, and although I regularly get to drive the latest sports cars in my profession, there is a magic I feel when I pilot this 996 on an early morning blast out of town" the owner maintains. He would never consider a 997 over his '40 Jahre', although he'd gladly have one of each! Here in the Sultanate of Oman a Thursday/Friday weekend exists, with the working week starting on Saturday. The car ritually gets cleaned by its owner every Friday, and then taken out for a little fun.

Inside, the car was trimmed in a special charcoal natural leather. The headlining is Alcantara and the centre console, instrument rings and seat backs are colour-coded GT-Silver Metallic. The lever on the 6-speed manual transmission (the only option on the '40 Jahre' model) sports a GT3 style shift pattern inlay, and lying ahead of it on the centre console is a small plaque indicating the series number and anniversary logo. This car is number 361 out of 1,963. The two-stage heated sports seats feature a special grained leather centre section, and the car features a sunroof and an excellent 11-speaker Bose surround system and 6-CD stacker.

‘This is quite possibly the best naturally-aspirated package the factory has produced to date, and it’s a rare bird. It’s almost a GT3 in sheep’s clothing, only without the wings and with a lot more class.’

The owner of this 2004 model 996 '911 40 Jahre' is fastidious to say the least. With a penchant for ProTech products, he is somewhat anal about this car, and gloriously bleats out to all and sundry that his wife is very near slapping him when they go for a night out, for he makes her walk from the far end of the carpark when they reach any given destination. "It's to avoid having someone open their door onto my car or lean up against it!" He explains. Now at seven years since its manufacture date of September 2003, the car has taken first place in the annual Concourse d'Elegance, three years consecutively. The car was originally delivered with luggage cases, a special key fob and wallet trimmed from the same leather as the interior, so the owner proudly displays the latter two each year at the Porsche parade.

The interior of the car is remarkable, given the soaring summer temperatures of Muscat. Most years the mercury will rise past 50 in the summer months, with anything below 40 degrees Celsius being a 'cool day'. Although this car is spared from track day punishment during the summer time, the cooler winter periods (24-30 degrees Celsius) result in club racing fun. The Porsche Club Oman is extremely active, with a bunch of die-hard Porschephiles at its core. Oman is a massive country with a small population - a scant 3.4 million, and the infrastructure and roads are truly superb. It is also a car haven, with prominent families all hoarding car collections. In Oman, zero crime, low import duties, non-existent income tax and petrol priced at USD 0.31 cents per litre, makes sports car ownership all that more rewarding.

In 2007 and 2008 this '40 Jahre' was used as a daily driver, and back then, as the only car in the household, was used to transport the owners new born baby girl from the hospital back home. It has since clocked 49,700kms and is regularly maintained by the dealer. With no accidents the car has only endured routine servicing and fresh PZero Rosso tyres, oh and the replacement of the black plastic trunk liner – which cracked from the heat and harsh Omani sun. The Michelin Pilot Sport tyres fitted at the factory for Middle East bound cars have not lived up to expectations in these parts. On-road temperatures are stratospherically high and the rate of wear is well below par. The Pzeros are new, but well run in, so we have sturdy boots in which to tear up the tarmac.

At its launch the car was priced at € 95.616,00 and these days market value sits at about € 38.000,00 for a mint example, low mileage car. That's a lot of car for your money, and a collector's item at that, too. Remember the car is almost as quick as a current model Carrera S. But there aren't too many around. Certainly not in the Middle East, and if there are they've most likely been molested.

With clear roads and dawn breaking we meander through the small village and out onto some remote roads. Twisting tarmac splices the rock face and it's time to bury the right foot. Click-click-click and the gears interact nicely with where we shift in the rev range. The factory-fitted short shifter takes a little getting used to. It is easy to find 5th instead of 3rd and when taking off from a standstill 1st can easily become 3rd. The car is raucous above 5000rpm and its nice to bleat it out in second at the apex of a tight corner. Traction is sensational and within seconds we are rocketing towards the horizon line. The 0-100km/h dash takes 4.9 seconds, and this 7-year old example still feels that quick. We try to attack its top speed of 290km/h on a clear stretch of road, however, 996 wind noise gets the better of us and we back off the throttle. Although the 997s are much better than the 996 series in this department, Porsche still needs to sort this out.

The steering is crisp and responsive, as only a 911 can be, and the brakes still grip like the car has rolled out of the showroom. We turn in on a tight right at the top of a hill and back off the throttle to nose the car closer to the Armco railing; a quick dab of the brakes and we throw it into an immediate left hander, a little ruffled, hard acceleration pulls us away onto another straight and at that moment dawn breaks. The rising sun in Oman glistens off the front fenders, exemplifying their curves. This is quite possibly the best naturally-aspirated package the factory has produced to date, and it's a rare bird. It's almost a GT3 in sheep's clothing, only without the wings and with a lot more class. I am totally smitten.

GEE TEE

Over|view

Vee Dub's Golf has always been a favourite fast hatch for those with a penchant for storming performance squeezed from a small, practical, and indestructible five-seater. Little or nothing overhangs the four wheels of the car and aggressive lines accentuate its sporty shape. A Dr. Who Tardis-like interior seems much larger than the exterior dimensions of the car, and folding seats mean space is certainly no issue for those carting around shopping or hobby items.

Performance has always been assured with highly developed 4-cylinders the engine of choice. In recent years turbocharged variants have come to the fore, delivering massive amounts of torque and offering drivers efficiency, too.

When the car debuted in 1974, it was to set in motion a chain of events, quite unlike any other in motoring history. Here was the famous German carmaker doing an about face, and switching the flat-4 engine that drove the rear wheels via a swing axle – as seen in the Beetle – to an inline-4 transverse mounted front engine powering the front wheels. Badged the Volkswagen Golf (and 'Rabbit' in the US), the car made every other carmaker on the planet sit up, and take note. Just two years later, in 1976, the astute automotive manufacturer went one step further, with a highly tuned 1.6-litre powerplant gracing its engine bay. Developing 110hp, the car weighed in at approximately 850kg, and its stunning performance, magnanimous grip and 'wolf-in-sheep's-clothing' appeal left many a Porsche 928 owner eating dust. It was the Golf GTI. And no other front-wheel-drive ever since has come close to capturing the sheer driving brilliance of VW's iconic 'hot-hatch'.

Thirty-four years on, and the GTI has experienced a tremendous evolution. From Mk1 guise through to Mk2, Mk3, Mk4, Mk5… and here we are in 2010 enjoying the refined, but still fiery, Mk6 Golf GTI.

The an|gle of app|roach

Our test subject was a Tornado Red example, although deliciously red is probably a better way to describe the colour. And so, this is where we need to start off with the superiority of Volkswagen's build quality and excellence.

In my opinion, at the price point level VW's range sits here in Oman, they are the highest quality production cars on the planet. The bodywork life expectancy and corrosion warranty are testament to that, and it all comes back to that German philosophy of making cars that will last a lifetime. The doors, seals and 'thud' you encounter when you gently close a door with just your fingertips is one of the best examples of great build quality. Jump into the Golf and you quickly realise that the materials used are far superior to many other cars on the market. The design kicks in to compliment function, and it doesn't take long to feel at home in the cockpit.

GOLF GTI

Beautiful round dials, black stripe inserts, fat stalks and a thick flat-bottomed steering grace the dash. An excellent multi-media system lurks behind a wonderful 6.5 inch touch screen display that is easy to navigate. The sports seats are superb; well-bolstered they keep you in place, in comfort. GTI is embossed into the headrests, which adds a touch of class to the interior trim. In the centre console, the homage to the golf ball gearlever shines brightly, only this time it is a smoother reproduction with DSG blazoned on it. The steering wheel features shift paddles, a link to the car's genetic disposition for motorsport. A sunroof, rear-view camera, park assist and twin chrome-tipped exhaust round off the options on this car.

De|press the Pe|dal

The DSG means exceptional acceleration. Yes, this is the very same 'box' that I keep harping on about here at Y. It is the one invention that years from now will be viewed as the turning point of gearbox technology in production vehicles.

It is what every other carmaker on the planet is copying, and it is sublime. Via programming, the shifter or steering wheel paddles, this is essentially two gearboxes working seamlessly, with a clutch mechanism that slaps between the two to ensure pre-selected gears to transition in a fraction of a second. Just 80 milliseconds separate the gears. There is no interruption to the power flow and changes are not noticeable. One, two, three, four, five, six… and you are cruising at a top speed of 240km/hr.

The direct injection engine displaces two litres and 0-100km/hr is completed within 6.9 seconds. It barks out with 210 horsepower and 280Nm of torque punishes the bitumen as of 1700rpm. That brutal figure is so close to the car's idle speed that it is no wonder this little hatchback shames V6s, and V8s. I once witnessed a Mk6 GTI out-accelerating a 911 Carrera in gear. When the event happened, both cars were catapulting from 120 to 180km/hr. Kids, we did this on a test track, so please don't tackle speeds such as this on-road!

The Golf GTI is front wheel drive, with as close to neutral handling as 'Germanly' possible for such a platform. Push into a corner hard and naturally enough the car will understeer, and no matter what you do - even foolish mid-corner stamping of the brakes - you can never get the car crossed up and dishevelled. It is extremely stable, and the massive brakes tucked behind the 18-inch 'Detroit' alloy wheels clamp down with ferocity. It is delightful to brake from excessive speeds with such sure-footed grip. The weight transfer acts in favour of grip and for once the laws of physics are predictable when you have thrown caution to the wind. Just in case you do decide to go nuts, VW has ABS, EBD, EDL, ESP, XDL and HAS systems constantly monitoring your every move. If that isn't enough, there are seven airbags in the Mk6. Knee, curtain, front, side, rear protect the driver and the passengers.

Eff|iciency

7.4-ltrs per 100km. That's the real world combined cycle figure, which means you get a lot of bang for your buck.

The 55 litre fuel tank will easily see you through a week of work and leisure activities. 173 g/km of CO2 is the only waft you'll leave behind for the next generation of Golf enthusiasts, so VW have definitely nailed it.

I absolutely loved this car. Although it will be forever popular with young guys who aspire to own R8s, 911s, AMGs and M3s, there is a precision and focus that the GTI offers, coupled with affordability that still makes owners of supercars very happy when they drive a GTI. Myself included. It is a sexy package; style, speed, practicality, cutting-edge technology and heritage are all combined within a car that is priced perfectly. Every girl I know who has ever driven one - wants one. And be it for aesthetic reasons or for the 'simply sophisticated brutality' of the car, every guy wants one. There is a healthy club dedicated to Golf owners here in Oman, and sites such as golfgti.co.uk are immensely popular for owners to exchange information. When you enter the world of VW Golfs, you will not regret it. The passion of GTI ownership will always live on within you.

"That notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity and pitch soe'er,
But falls into abatement and low price
Even in a minute. So full of shapes is fancy,
That it alone is high fantastical."

– William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

Sumptous leather and California Burr wood trim

Rolex Day-Date II

Phaeton offers bluetooth as well as a customised in-car mobile handset

Smooth as Caramel at Maximum Thrust.

There are 12 months in a year; 12 items make a dozen, 12 divides the hours of the day from the night, 12 semi-tones exist in the western musical system and there are 12 signs in the zodiac. In Islam, there are believed to be 12 legitimate successors of the Prophet, the Hindu deity Surya has 12 names, there are 12 days of Christmas and there are 12 basic hues in the spectrum of colour. There are 12 numbers printed on the face of a wristwatch.

Twelve is a sublime number, a number that has a 'perfect number' of divisors, and twelve is the number, in thousands of rials, printed on the price tag of a very special Rolex. The 'Day-Date II' by Rolex doesn't shout 'Look at me!' yet captivates with its precision, prestige and charm. Without twelve grand in my pocket and the need to head over to Khimji's House of Watches to photograph this special watch, I was in need of a special car to do just that. I was looking for something regal and conservative to drive – like the Rolex. Twelve is indeed a special number, and it is the exact number of cylinders found in the very special car I had chosen for my task, the Volkswagen Phaeton W12. For this particular test drive, Shakespeare's words are fitting, notwithstanding thy 6-litre capacity!

The Phaeton is a wonderful place to be

The 2009 VW W12 Phaeton is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Manufactured by hand at Volkswagen's incredible 'Transparent Factory' in Dresden, its austere exterior promises luxury, yet hides the drama associated with red carpets, embassy parties and wealth. Although flashes of chrome trim, impeccably flush panels, enormous rims and a wide stance suggest this may indeed have some bite; the car looks very safe and quiet. The wolf is still asleep.

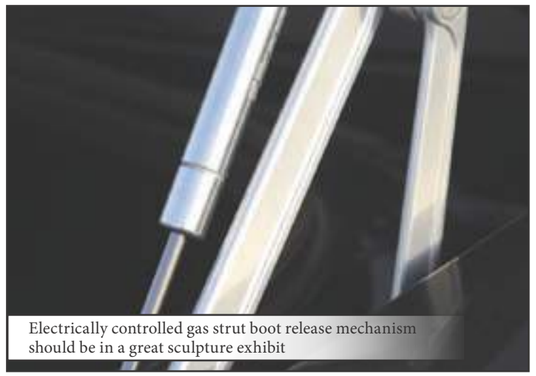
Approach the car with the key in your pocket and the door locks disarm. Keyless entry is augmented by keyless start, and the interior is wonderfully exclusive. The fit and feel of the cabin is equivalent to an exotic car priced out of the stratosphere; Californian burr wood and chrome-plated trim supplement the soft leather trimming and a huge display acts as ground control for every electronic function the car offers. Your eyes are rewarded by incredible detail work. It is the stuff of fine artisans; inlay work adorns the grab handles and a regal analog clock is set into the dash. It is, as VW promises it to be, a place of 'up-to-date elegance' and 'balanced aesthetics'; there is certainly nothing superficial or glitzy about the Phaeton. It is sort of James Bond in character; straightforward but uber seductive.

It is 12-noon, so I bid Mr. Syed Sohraab Hasnain, Brand Manager at Wattaya Motors Volkswagen, farewell. Immediately the quietness of the cabin captures my attention. It is an extremely peaceful and serene place to be, and I gently motor out of the service road and onto the freeway. The Phaeton is wide, however, visibility is excellent. I fiddle around with a few knobs and buttons, of which there are many, and settle down to enjoy the car with the suspension in 'comfort' mode and an 'I'm in no hurry' attitude.

The long wheelbase 5-seater is built upon an innovative body structure, designed to withstand extended periods of use over and above the 300-kph mark. The self-levelling suspension can be selected for comfort, sports or even uneven surfaces, dynamically adapting to the driving conditions often encountered here in Oman. Legroom in the rear is generous and the height of the cabin defies the car's low and sporty appearance. Every occupant enjoys privately controlled climate and multi-media. The comfortable and supportive 18-way front seats and 10-way rear seats are all electronically controlled, with memory functions and every element infinitely adjustable. The Phaeton offers a clever addition to eclipse what every other carmaker offers; you can program your personalised car settings into your key, enabling the mode to be activated when you use your key. If another member of your house uses the other key, their personal preferences are activated as soon as they take to the driver's door, as the car communicates with the key and reacts accordingly. Not only does the car offer the comfort to cater for both self-driven and chauffeur-driven use, the technology backs it up, too.

Rear occupants benefit from LCDs in the headrests and a multi-media environment that leaves you wanting for nothing. There is a 6-disc CD changer in the dash and single-slot DVD, too. The rear luggage compartment offers a 6-disc DVD changer and in the cockpit, ports and interfaces are all within easy reach. To beat Oman's heat, all doors have pull-up sunshades and the rear parcel shelf shade motors up and down at the press of a button. The car offers ten airbags and active head restraints that actuate forward to cradle your noggin with precision to within one thousandth of a second.

Two V's make a W!


Electrically controlled gas strut boot release mechanism should be in a great sculpture exhibit

Gangsta' Cool

Extreme comfort and awesome power

It's the little touches that make this car great

Climate control and multimedia for rear occupants

Keyless start/stop and conventional gear lever controls

Display shows climate, multimedia, camera, Sat Nav, AC, telephone and trip details

Our glorious black demo car refracted light 'mercuriously' like a grand piano on stage in the Albert Hall. Funnily enough, I inserted the Beatles 'Sgt. Peppers' album on CD into the system and gave the 12-channel, 270 watt system a workout with 'A Day In The Life'. The acoustics of the cabin do justice to the system and to George Martin! High-end audio emanated from the twelve speakers and for those who prefer to match great audio with visual imagery, the Phaeton also offers TV functionality.

So far, so good. I am convinced that the regal nature of this car fits in well with the design, technology, safety and ergonomics. But how does this 2.4 tonne hand-crafted luxury sedan drive? The hours that followed involved magical moments on tarmac, all within the regulated speed limits of course.

560 Nm of torque, at 2750rpm is shattering. Bone shattering. The car surges up to the speed limit within 6 seconds of stepping on the pedal, and the power delivery is smooth. Caramel. Mellifluous. 450 horses peak at 6050rpm and this cuff-link carriage reveals its true nature. The wolf finally awakens.

With sport mode dialled in, ride height lowered at the press of a button, and clear space in front of me, the car can easily scream up to its 250km/h governed limit. It does so with so much thrust, that mashing the right pedal into the footwell is, well, addictive. The 2.4 tonnes miraculously diminishes to make the car feel light and nimble. 4MOTION all-wheel drive provides the traction and the supremely geared 5-speed tiptronic 'box is touted to be indestructible. With 30% more volume than comparable systems, the Phaeton's air suspension does indeed react faster to adapt and dampen the ride.

The sportiness of the W12 exceeds expectations. It is Grand Prix fast. Jack Brabham fast. Six litres of cleverly designed V's form a W, and a perfectly balanced engine that happens to be the most compact 12-cylinder unit in the world, is shoehorned under the bonnet, and until I sat in the W12 Phaeton I never realised how essential to my happiness 12-cylinders could be.

I arrived at Khimji's House of Watches later that evening to collect my watch. (Well, not MY watch; you know what I mean.) The car park was littered with cars all priced well above my Phaeton, but my car held its own. Distinctive and charming, it was a chariot of luxury, and not only rivalled, but outperformed, everything around it.

The W12 Phaeton is unparalleled in terms of refinement, sporting appeal and comfort. Its price tag is there for a reason. You have to pay for quality, there is simply no way around it, and whilst many may suggest alternatives to the Phaeton in a similar price range, most fail to offer 12 cylinders of glory coupled with astounding build quality and all wrapped in an understated yet flirtatious body.

Punch Shot.

Volkswagen's new wolf flies under the radar: The brilliant new Golf R.

Punch Shot
/pʌntʃ ʃɒt/

Definition: A type of golf shot designed to fly lower than normal. It is hit with the ball played farther back in the stance and a shorter follow-through. The player often chokes down on the club used. Punch shots are frequently used in windy conditions.

This is the new Golf R. The successor to the R32, it is now no longer a narrow angled V6, and it is now no longer naturally aspirated. Like Ventolin to an asthmatic, the new direct-injection 4-cylinder 2.0-litre engine, force-fed on a wicked cocktail of petrochemicals, oxygen and nitrogen (oh, and that 1% of the other stuff that makes up our atmosphere), breathes life into a splendiferous chassis, making this perhaps the most volatile hot-hatch on the planet.

Let me hit you with the figures first, because they alone blur the lines between fantasy and reality. Two hundred and seventy horses charge out at 6000rpm; 350 Newton meters of axel snapping torque negate the Earth's gravitational pull at any revolution past idle; the 6-speed DSG transmission connects the dots and catapults you to 100km/h in less than 5.5 seconds. Oh, and the extra-urban fuel consumption promises you 41.5 miles per gallon! This is, of course, all coming from a hot hatch with an engine capacity equivalent to the bottle of full-fat milk that is currently standing in my fridge door.

Now, there may be quite a few of you reading this, thinking, "It looks like your everyday Golf, um… only sportier?" And you'd be right. But take a closer look and you'll notice the little R emblem on the front grill and rear hatch, the illuminated blue needles within the instrument cluster, and a myriad of touches to both the interior and exterior that can only be described as 'an exercise in German car designer restraint'. And this is where I believe the Golf shines. Like its predecessors the Mk5 R32, Mk4 VR6 4-motion, Mk3 VR6, and of course early GTIs, the new R is a real sleeper. A wolf in sheep's clothing.

"Pelle sub agnina latitat mens saepe lupina" as they say, Under a sheep's skin often hides a wolfish mind.

The manic nature of this stocky little ~~wolf~~ hatch is so glorious to behold, that all that extra-urban and combined-cycle stuff becomes irrelevant. Who wants to potter around town timidly in this little stonker? It is as if the tyres were moulded from Araldite, for no other hatch has ever given me such a sense of being glued to the road. I mean, I'm really going for it, flat-out, and I fling it through a sharp right-hand turn and the only thing that moves tangentially away from the trajectory of the car is the thought that another carmaker could deliver such a magnanimous blow from a rival hatchback. That notion went left when we went right. Oops, there it goes, the hopes and ambitions of VW's embittered competition, bye-bye!

With suspension that sits 25mm lower than the standard Golf's and a wonderful Haldex 4Motion all-wheel drive system - that is now in its fourth generation and capable of sending 100% traction to either the front or rear wheels - it is little wonder that this car is just so damn good. It will eat American muscle cars for breakfast, slay Mugen's finest, and at 15,500 rials (US$ 40,000) for the fully loaded DSG as pictured here, it will embarrass Cayman owners. Well it has to, doesn't it? It's got four doors and fits five adults comfortably, gobbles up 1230 litres with the rear seats folded down, and has the build quality of a brick ****house… ahh… you know what I mean; it is solid as a rock. And wickedly fast.

It's great when you know you can do it, but you don't. It is marvellous when others don't know you can, but you bury your right foot and slingshot past them like a Looney Tunes Tazmanian Devil, leaving only a turbulent whirlwind of air and 'fellow road-user disbelief' in your wake. You don't need a flimsy carbon-fibre-look rear spoiler, cheap decals or a broken-tractor exhaust note bellowing out; you don't need to shout out "look at me!" All you need is the new Golf R. It is clean, it is simple, it is fast and it is 'fun-tastic' motoring. Now, cue Duran Duran…

In Touch with The ground,
I'm on The hunT I'm afTer you.
Scent and a sound,
I'm losT and I'm found,
And I'm hungry like The wolf!

VW's Diamond in the Rough

Although I own and frequently drive many different cars, I immediately feel at home in a Volkswagen. Always. And here, in the recently unveiled all-new Touareg, even though things are very different from before, I still feel right at home.

Earlier in the day, a young Omani car enthusiast spotted me at the Zubair dealership in Azaiba, and asked me for my opinion about the best new car one could buy here in Oman. I thought hard before answering that question, for there are some fantastic supercars out there that now offer practicality for everyday use but have a price tag that is still stratospheric. So what was I to say? I sized up my enquirer and assumed that a regular income and average lifestyle, combined with his young age, would result in a price-conscious approach to car buying. But he seemed sporty and quality conscious and he was a motoring enthusiast, which meant he thoroughly enjoyed driving, too. That ruled out quite a bit, but left me with two letters on the tip of my tongue: V and W.

‘Cruising along at high speed is addictive, and the cabin is a quiet and cosy place to be. **The seats are much more supportive than the previous generation Touareg**, so long distance ‘errands’ are a pleasure to deal with. **I just love this car, and the great news is that VW have priced it right.**’

I have always used my influence to sway co-workers, friends and family towards Volkswagens, because I truly believe in the brand. They are the 'people's (volks) car (wagen)', after all; the Wolfsburg firm is still true to their origins. What you get for your money is incredible build quality, inspiring motoring, practicality, unsurpassed reliability, and here in Oman, excellent resale value. I still believe – and this is just my personal opinion - that for under RO 11k, the GTI Golf is the best-buy compact car around, and if an SUV is called for, the Tiguan 2.0 TSI can't be beaten. It runs circles around all the other soft 'terrain roamers' from other manufacturers. Even those priced twice as high. 'Now, before you read on, let me just state: it is my job to remain unbiased until the bitter end, so I did just that when test driving the latest evolution of VW's flagship SUV.

The Touareg is now much bigger than before, only you wouldn't know it when approaching the car. It seems to be sleeker and more compact from the interior, even though the car is now longer, with a 40mm increased wheelbase. The designers claim this is in part due to the angular lines and dipped front end, which keeps the car well within the family. It is to my eye very much a beefed-up and extended Tiguan, with a Golf's rake and stance. This paranormal enlargement means much more elbowroom and legroom inside. It also translates into a huge increase in cargo space, so if you flip the rear seats down (which happens at the press of a button from within the rear trunk), you can now squeeze in 1642 litres of, well, whatever takes your fancy!

The new interior is much more sleek and stylish. The dashboard curves away from front occupants at either end and the new centre console is clean and clever. The instrument cluster is new and features a centre screen that displays either SatNav, Multimedia or trip info, with two large dials on either side. 'Area view' is VW's new system that utilises four cameras positioned around the vehicle, piecing together an onscreen display that makes parking a breeze. It is ideal for hitching up a trailer or traversing difficult terrain. The steering wheel, stalks, knobs and buttons are all "veedub", which means they are awesome. 'De Luxe' black 'nappa' leather-clad seats with Burr Walnut highlights on door trim and dash really take this cabin to the top end of luxury motoring. Four-zone climate and the optional touch-screen multimedia interface, together with an easy-to-use Bluetooth system, make life that much easier.

The manufacturer has actually closed the gap with its shared platform partners. The huge weight savings in the latest generation come from a new 8-speed transmission - no DSG and no low-ratio transfer box. However, buyers can opt for the 4XMotion permanent all-wheel drive 'Terrain Tech' package with centre and rear axle differential locks, and a special transfer box and gear ratio reduction. We tested the standard Touareg without this option but that didn't stop us from heading off to tackle a wadi and a few dunes.

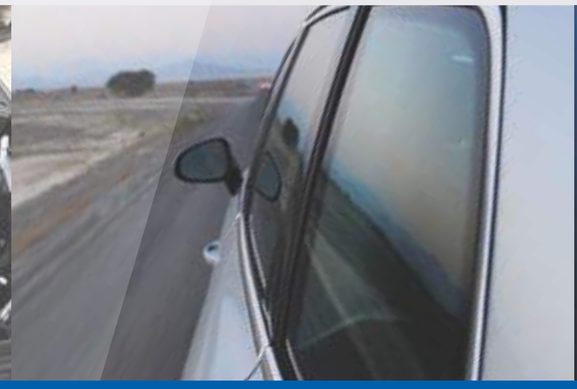
Exceptional ground clearance, a 30 degree angle of approach and departure, and a 580mm wading depth result in an off-roader that can handle a lot more than what 99% of owners will ever want it to. And it's 200kg lighter than the 2009 Touareg that I currently own!

Having shed more than a few pounds it is more of a stallion now, so we dialled in 'off-road' and leapt up onto a sand dune. The car is so light and nimble that we barely carved a rut into the sand on our way up, even though we had high tyre pressure, and of course coming down was a breeze. The new vehicle offers hill descent too. If you are going to venture into Oman's wilderness, I'd opt for the 17-inch Sonora rims. Shod with 235/65 rubber, you can definitely enjoy small rock hopping to get to that tranquil picnic spot. The dealer will undoubtedly sell plenty of cars on 20-inch alloys, all flashing about the city with a cat's lick of rubber keeping them on the road. If you are an avid off roader, fight the temptation.

The most exciting attribute of this new model is its current engine. The 3.6-litre FSI (direct injection) unit has 280HP and 360Nm of torque at 3000rpm, and although it hits 100km/hr from a standing start within 7.8 seconds, it returns a combined cycle of 10.2 l/100km. A marked improvement over the old Touareg. The engine feels more revvy too, again a bi-product of weight loss. I filled up the tank with 9.5 Rials before we took off, and I managed a 'Leadfoot Larry' inspired 600 kilometre run, with a third of a tank left at the end of the day. Staggering.

Cruising along at high speed is addictive, and the cabin is a quiet and cosy place to be. The seats are much more supportive than the previous generation Touareg, so long-distance 'errands' are a pleasure to deal with. I just love this car, and the great news is that VW have priced it right. It exudes charm and character, and its fit and finish continue to embarrass every other German carmaker around; you can feel it as soon as you open and close a door - "thump". The electronic tailgate release and close function is an excellent option for ladies (or jockeys) and although I personally don't see the need for it, VW have a Panorama sliding glass roof included in the options list.

As a veritable car nut, and VW aficionado who has indeed owned a 200 bhp turbocharged Tiguan and a 280hp V6 Touareg at the same time, I can safely say this new car is a combination of the best attributes of those two steeds. VW have once again nailed it, and if you want a stomping off-roader, the ultimate in refinement and functionalism, and an aesthetically stunning new vehicle in your garage, the new Touareg fits the bill. In the next few days I'll be giving Mr. Sohraab, the Brand Manager for VW at Wattayah Motors, a call on 24573768 to get a cracking deal on my next car – the all-new 2011 Volkswagen Touareg. So should you.



www.blyfooze.com

Kiran Jay Haslam

Editor

Being dragged around garages and factories from an early age, our author Kiran Jay Haslam, born and raised in Australia, has spent a lifetime emitting the aroma of gasoline. From go-karts to Formula Vee to Group N racing, he coupled his sporting passion with knuckle busting grease-monkey bliss. Restoring cars from ground up and developing race components through his father's engineering firm, he followed the path of mechanical engineering and by the time he had finished his academic pursuits had driven and owned some of the most fascinating sports cars the world has to offer.

Currently, as one of the most sought after automotive journalists living and working in the Middle East, he has incredible access to dream cars, and is 'in tight' with industry bigwigs. Writing with honesty and retaining his integrity, Kiran has developed a relationship of trust with leading carmakers and now brings the very best of this year's test drives to you in this book.

www.jerzywierzbicki.com

Jerzy Wierzbicki

Photographer

Jerzy Wierzbicki is dedicated to capturing the world on film. Having extensive experience reporting on behalf of the world's leading magazines and newspapers, his keen eye and conviction are evident in every single photograph he takes. His ability to play with light, form and depth are second to none, and he is considered to be one of the leading lifestyle photographers in the Middle East.

Capturing stunning photographs of a rapidly moving vehicle is no easy task, yet Jerzy makes it look easy. Rendezvousing at 4am so that we don't get any interference from the sun rising over the mountains as we press hard down a deserted back road, with a pursuit car and a photographer precariously perched on top of it, is a regular occurrence. Carmakers go to the ends of the earth to make the most stunning vehicles mankind has ever seen; it is the least we can do to make sure you see what they wanted you to see. Finite details, swooping curves, beautiful bulges and shimmering lines. Thanks to Jerzy, here at Bleifuß you can see fantastic images of the world's finest automobiles.

www.jeromeadarle.webs.com

Jerome Adarle

Art Director

Although great food, fine women, and the occasional tipple sit at the top of his list, Jerome is essentially a down-to-earth 'art guy'. The world's best advertising firms regularly knock on his door, but Jerome is not moved by agency fluff. His eye, sense of adventure and sheer speed in Adobe products, have landed him some top spots in the fickle Ad industry; yet he continues to pursue publications, for it is here that he has the freedom to create a world within a page.

Jerome painstakingly laid out the pages you see before you, and it is often that we'd joke in the office about how no one will ever pick up on that tiny little alteration that just took 3 hours to do. His standard response? "You and I know. And that is what matters." Indeed.

To read all about the **world's best cars**,
the **people** behind them,
and how they respond to
being **driven hard** in the Middle East.

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