

Ultimate Bucket list - Part 1 Spa



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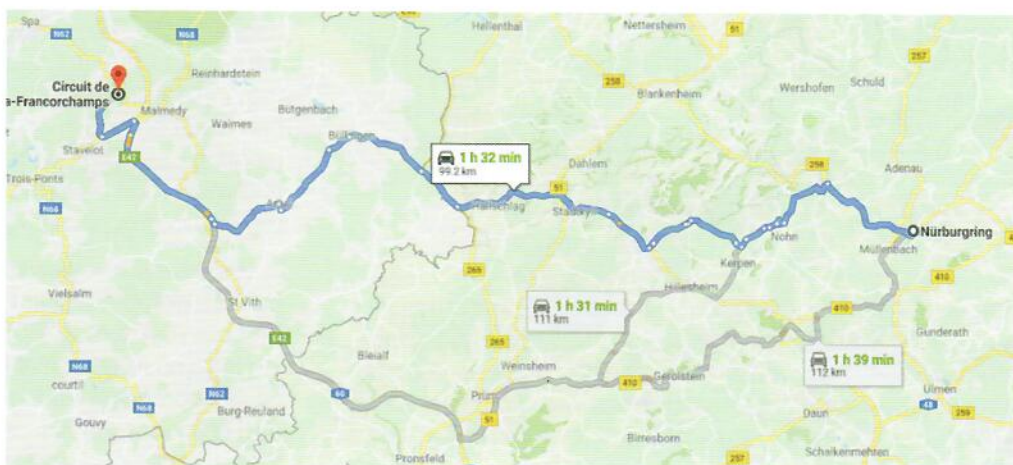
For the keen motorsport enthusiast, the fun of a track day starts well before the 'tyres hit the tarmac'. There is the anticipation and the careful preparation of your car whether for Supersprint or Motorkhana which involves attending to those vital essentials such as brakes (checking if the fluid is up to date and the correct "dot" type or boiling temperature range), heavy duty pads, steel braided brake lines, callipers, rotors; suitable tyres with the ideal tread depth and correct pressures, relatively fresh engine oil, tow hooks (x2), mounted fire extinguisher and up-to-date crash helmet.

But how often have you thought, wouldn't it be nice to simply "arrive and drive" at a supersprint? What a luxury to just focus on the pleasure of driving at the event?

A 'bucket list' 'must do' for any driving fanatic would be to conquer what would be, without doubt, the top three exciting and challenging tracks - Mount Panorama Bathurst, Circuit de Spa Francorchamps (Spa) and Nürburgring Nordschleife (the

'Ring – also known as Green Hell). For 'arrive and drive' accessibility you have Spa and The 'Ring. Alas, Mt Panorama, doesn't not allow for this activity.

Although Spa and Nordschleife are 100km apart, around and hour and a half's drive via those excellent autobahns, it feels like a driver's paradise to negotiate the awesome roads between the two circuits regardless of your rental car of choice. Be it for the green, lush forests, the stunning views or the generous speed limits.



Mid-April this year NSW BMW Club members Steve Judges, Randall and Jarrad Lumbewe commenced planning our venture of these two European racetracks – and based on prior experience with the company known as RSR (run by Ron Simons) where they had provided us with well-maintained and track prepared cars, excellent driving tuition with flexible, friendly and trustworthy personnel, it was only logical to once again book their track and car hire ‘packages’ for both Spa and the ‘Ring. After all what more could you want? The ultimate ‘arrive and drive’ experience!

For both circuits, the ‘packages’ are generally determined by how many kilometres that you wish to drive, and for Spa each lap being a tad over 7km, whilst The ‘Ring is a little over 20km in length, it is easy to ‘run up’ 200km on both tracks. Considering how far we travelled for the experience, there was no point short-changing ourselves on the day. RSR conduct ‘closed track’ days for both Spa and Nordschleife. Spa do not permit “Tourist Driving” (Touristen fahren) like they do for the Nordschleife however they do operate a few public sessions for Spa called PDE. Nordschleife has many “tourist days”, as it is for the most part, a one-way public road. It costs around €30 per lap (or does €1.50 per kilometre sound better?). I am positive most car enthusiasts will have seen the YouTube videos of the near misses and accidents at this track. Arguably, it is the most dangerous racetrack in the world and the total number of fatal accidents is undisclosed – some say (sounds like Clarkson) those who might die of injuries from an accident at the track but take life’s last breath in a nearby hospital, are not figured in the statistics of deaths at the track. For safety reasons, we opted for the ‘closed track’ day at Nordschleife – reducing risk at Nordschleife is highly recommended and should be just considered as another part of the “insurance policy”. June through to September are perhaps the better months to drive the two European tracks, obviously avoiding the cold weather and snow.



Three and half months of planning turned to reality and early August this year, it was time! We had booked the RSR Premium Track Day package for Spa, early registration was at Hotel De La Source on the day prior and it was then when the excitement for the next day truly kicked in. Upon arrival early that morning we experienced a detailed driver briefing, catering for the day, a fitting for helmets, a ‘track walk’ and generally when not on track, a laid back day, a relaxed at-

mosphere where we could have a drink (coffee and/or water of course), compare notes, lines and experiences let alone drool over the fully prepped Aston Martins, Pagani Zonda, the new Ford GT and the myriad of Porsche GT3 RS's . Our vehicles of choice for Spa included one each of BMW



M2, M3 and M4, all current models. The M2 was an RSR track prepped car, lowered, 18” Michelin Pilot Cup 2 tyres, KW suspension, half roll cage, stripped out interior (except passenger seat)



a 4-point harness and Akrapovic exhaust. The M3 and M4 were standard and with Michelin Super Sport tyres and upgraded brake pads. With any of the RSR’s BMW M cars (and other performance cars), it is mandatory to take a minimum of 1 hour of instruction, regardless of prior experience – the tuition was also considered as more insurance, and well worth it. The importance of taking all precautions is a signed liability of up to a maximum of €50,000 for the M Cars which ensures your survival instincts are on ‘Defcon 3’ and we are not so sure travel Insurance covers you in case of a severe mishap either.

You may well ask, can you drive your Hertz, Europcar, Avis or Sixt rental cars on track? We understand that there are ‘car spotters’ on tracks at track days and they report back to the rental car companies, so the suggestion is, to not do it! .





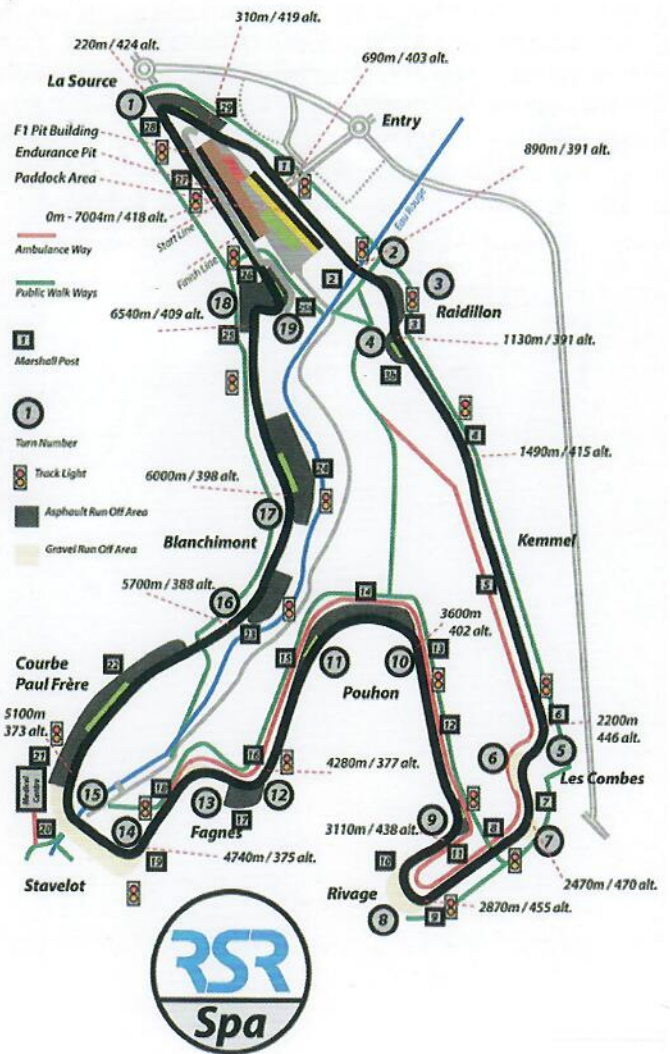
As you would expect there was a comprehensive driver's briefing with around 90 drivers all up, some in RSR's cars, and the balance, in personal or team cars.

As many will know, Spa is currently the longest racetrack on the Formula 1 Grand Prix calendar, it is a flowing high speed track, a very long straight (if you include Eau Rouge/Raidillon and Kemmel Straights and if you have the car with sufficient aero aids and kilowatts to do Eau Rouge flat).

RSR's tuition was helpful and gave us confidence to enjoy the track day experience ensuring we took fast lines and that we went as fast as we were comfortable with, and within the capability of the cars (not to mention the tutor's nerves).

After a few laps we were able to get into the "groove". Overtaking was permitted so long as it was on the left (remember these were left hand drive cars too). At the end of Kemmel Straight In the RSR M2, we were managing 235km/hr, the M4, 240km/hr and admittedly did not have the skill, nerve, tyres or vehicle to do Eau Rouge flat out.

From the hairpin at La Source, the Eau Rouge straight comes up very quickly in the M cars, the downhill run aiding the acceleration to around 210km/hr before a settling dab on the brakes prior to the left kink, cross the grating on the



apex and heading right for the old building through Raidillon, and hope to be on the right side of the ripple strip. It is a mix of courage and intrepidity – no room for the meek with this series of turns. And as we know, sadly, Antoine Herbert recently lost his life in an F2 on the exit to Raidillon.

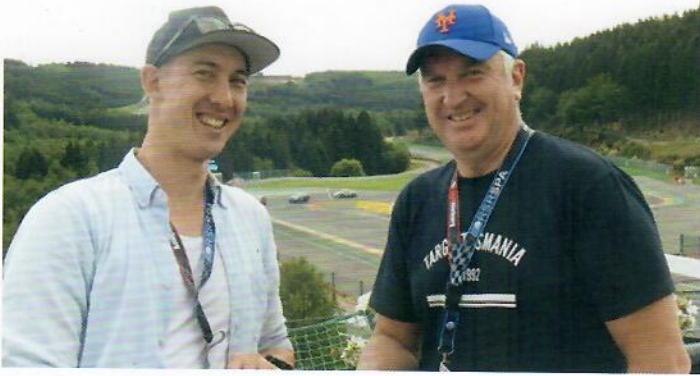
Blanchimont is another "straight" except it has two left hand kinks in it and when you approach these at circa 220km/hr it is hard not to dab the brakes on the second left a little harder than necessary even though there is a significant amount of run off. And just when you think you are punting fast, you find yourself overtaken by an almost unrecognisable GT3RS, followed by several other high performance Porsches.

Of course, F1 cars are flat though both EauRouge and Blanchimont straights, showing off their superior aerodynamics and the resulting speed they can achieve, it does put perspective on just how much those drivers 'earn their keep', and for some, 'keep their earners'.

There is plenty of run off although some over exuberance can leave you with damaged ego, if you are lucky an intact car and if not, because of the speeds involved, a battered credit card at the end of the day.

The Premium Track day was inclusive of a great lunch at Spa's Pit Brasserie, an ideal spot to observe a good percentage of the track and certainly get a real perspective of the elevation changes around the track.

This is a track that demands robot like precision and repetition to get the best from it, even though I had done around 50 laps on a previous visit, it took some time to get into the groove – being a bit older than my last visit I took it a bit easier, plus I was probably also a little more aware of the €50,000 liability clause.



As part of organising a trip such as this, there is the accommodation and some of the tourist spots around the region to consider. Brussels is just 150km away to the West, well



worth a visit if not to sample Belgian chocolate and bier. Spa is nestled between the very cute village of Malmédy to the east and Stavelot to the north with varied historical sites to visit, bars and restaurants to enjoy. In Stavelot you must visit the Spa-Francorchamps Racetrack Museum situated in the underground tunnels of an 11th-century archaeologically significant church which displays, a massive collection of



Formula 1 cars, motorbikes and classic cars such as this beautifully restored BMW M1.

The most convenient location to stay would be the Hotel De La Source, just a few hundred metres away from the La Source corner but outside of the confines of the track itself. Otherwise there is accommodation at Stavelot and Malmédy. English is not their first language in these small towns, French, German or Dutch will suffice if not sign language, but you can always get a bier.

... To Be Continued in Ed1 2020.



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