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IN TO THE VALLEY

A wine tour along the Mosel valley, bookmarked by two of the world's greatest racetracks? We made the pilgrimage, courtesy of track-driving instruction experts, RSRNürburg



Left: Winding through the stunning Mosel valley. Vineyards line the lower slopes. Above: Travelling in style. The RSR fleet is an enthusiast's dream. We drew the Cayman GT3, while RSR chief, Ron Simons, led the way in a 991 GT3

It could only be La Source at Spa, the hairpin before the downhill plunge to Eau Rouge

A wine tour, you say? Well, Antony bought a breathalyser at the Chunnel terminal and, in the event, we didn't use it. But we might have, had we taken full advantage of the copious bacchanalian opportunities on offer.

Drive the Mosel valley, and you cannot help be immersed in vineyards. They line the flanks of every hillside, horizontal terraces clawed out of the rock face, and long, staked lines of vertical planting, sometimes tumbling right down to the roadside. Every charming riverside town and village is replete with hostelrys and wineries offering tastings and wines for sale. So, Tipler by name, tippler by nature, how could I refuse an invitation from RSR principal Ron Simons to join him on a mosey along the Mosel, halting at some of the spectacular viewpoints and vineyards en route? The deal was sealed by the promise of a few laps in one of his track cars around the hallowed asphalt of the Nürburgring Nordschleife and Spa-Francorchamps circuits.

That turned out to be a scarlet Cayman GT3, and for a few days my constant

companion was this roustabout road-hog. I travelled to our 'Ring-side rendezvous with shutter-boy Fraser, and found ourselves billeted virtually trackside at Breidscheid in apartments belonging to Hotel Landhaus Sonnenhof. It is the place to be if you want to watch the action as well as savour trackside vibes. Sure, there other spots such as Brunnchen where you get an overspill of both, but at Breidscheid you have the eateries of timber-framed Adenau nearby, too.

Ron Simons' RS Nürburgring HQ is 300 yards from the Nordschleife access and the same distance from Nürburg village Schloss in the other, and the maintenance facility and offices are surrounded by parked Porsches and Mégane hot-hatches – at least a dozen of each. He even still holds on to a similar number of Alfa 75s, his start-up track-driving tuition cars from when I first met him a dozen or more years ago. We toggled up, me in trusty Peltor and Sparco gloves, and eased down to the Nordschleife assembly area. It was a public day, so heaving with hotheads and wanabee whizzer-wazzers in a plethora of Porkers, Beemers and hatchbacks. I've

done the 'Ring a few times, also courtesy of Ron, as well as stood behind the Armco snapping away at the N-24 and Old Timer. But unless you do it every weekend you forget the running order of the turns, and you find yourself unexpectedly in corners that are actually familiar, once you're in them. So, I was glad of Ron's inimitable exhortations to brake – or not – turn in, power on, and not surprised when the 'hand of god' eased the wheel in the appropriate direction on my behalf from time to time.

First thing Ron observes is that I am too close to the steering wheel when I need to opposite lock. 'That's a personal thing,' he says, 'but I think give yourself a little bit more space by moving the seat back a notch and then the wheel's also clearing your knees when you need to operate the pedals.' Our car is well known to the officials of course, so we breeze through the gate and I flash my RSR card at the barrier, and we are swiftly out on track. The road ducks right onto the Nordschleife, ignoring the modern F1 circuit. I need to play myself in, so to start with I let everything else go past. 'Keep it over to the





right,' shouts Ron; 'there's more traffic coming, indicate right, and then people know that you've seen them.' And that's how it goes: there's such a disparity between speeds, with no shortage of GT3s versus doddering sightseers as counterpoint, so I'm having to gauge who to pass where and who to keep out of the way of.

I act on what Ron tells me, and this is a typical directive for most corners: '...little bit of brakes, and turn in, try to keep your hands on the wheel, use all the track on the right here, keep on going, speed is fine, no brakes, and you're fully on the left here at the turn in, and...wait, and we turn in, keep your speed, don't brake, go to the left, still on the throttle, fully right, a little bit of brakes and turn in, and keep your line...' We begin the plunge down

to Breidscheid: '...wait, and now you go – Antony must be taking pictures here – turn in, on the brakes, wait, and on the throttle, and use the road on the right...this is the Lauda corner...' Which is kind of poignant now.

But, imagine that, for a full lap and then another one, with this focused, non-stop torrent of instruction coming at you! I loved it, and it was literally laugh-out-loud thrilling. Ron had my voice recorder on, so I could quote you his whole commentary – but you'd need to be in the driving seat. It's easy to be intimidated by the Nordschleife: the never-ending succession of tricky corners, all subtly different, some radically different, and it would be well worth paying for a tutored session on the uncluttered circuit. And that Cayman GTS with PDK is nothing short of phenomenal. No

turbo lag, just instant power allied to the PDK, masses of grip and taut handling, a beautifully balanced chassis, and steering nicely weighted. It feels like a glove, and what seemed at first like an unknown car is now a close friend.

'Ring done, we head out onto the region's fast A- and B-roads, and Ron leads in his GT3 RS. To start with we're on the 257, winding its way via some quite demanding bends through a few villages towards Bonn. The traffic is predominantly 'Ring-bound, and every other vehicle is some sort of sports car or racing motorbike. Soon enough, we're revelling in rolling Eifel mountain scenery, cloaked in different patches of green, deciduous versus pine, and all now lusciously blooming, as the hillsides fold into one another. Beautiful high

What a way to start a road trip, with a few laps of the legendary Nürburgring

RSR's Ron Simons holds court at Spa, with the mighty Eau Rouge in the back ground



Ruined medieval castle looks down over town of Altenahr. Middle and right: Cayman basks outside Le Val d'Ambleve, where everyone enjoyed a particularly fine meal and sampled the new "Rare" champagne from Piper Heidsieck. To which the Editor says: "Alright for some!"

country with craggy spurs, and in the villages the trompe l'oeil stonework around the windows, a lot of timber frame buildings, Gothic script identifying shops, hotels and wineries. One such town is Altenahr, where there's a ruined medieval castle atop the wooded hill, all craggy turrets and ancient walls, with the river flowing through the middle of it. This is the most northerly on our trip.

Under acceleration, I don't think we'll be staying with Ron very long, but on the open downhill sweepers the Cayman holds onto him; I'm under no illusions that he's hanging back for us, of course, but it is thrilling nonetheless. The PDK thinks for you and does all the work if left to its own devices, and it's quite uncanny how it's always in the right gear, blipping the throttle to get the revs right for the downshift – and all the time I'm accompanied by the guttural stuttering of the flat-four sound track.

Before long, I'm seeing grape vines, a mixture of terraces and vertical planting with the vines extending up the rocky hillsides, as the Mosel tumbles over a rocky bed to my right. All wine-growing regions are punctuated by chateaux, and the Mosel domains are

similarly headquartered with equally substantial edifices. One such is Marienthal, a former nunnery where wine has been made sporadically since the 12th century, and we pause for lunch in the congenial courtyard of Weingut Kloster Marienthal. The bottled wares of the chateau shop – the Brogsitter Riesling in particular – prove irresistible to my companions.

The Mosel is Germany's third most prolific

higher elevations. Back on the regular road system, our route takes us into the hills, high arable, yellow rape fields, looking down at forest across lots of other hills, and as the surfaces are remarkably smooth, the Cayman's now in Sport mode, and if you're an inveterate boy racer there are few things more amusing. More to the point, these back roads winding over the hillsides are almost as thrilling as being on the Nürburgring itself, and

“ The Brogsitter Riesling proves irresistible to my companions ”

wine producing region, and borders the river from Koblenz upstream to Trier. Ron wants to show us some more spectacular views looking out over the Mosel valley, so we drive the cars up hill roads and metalled tracks, scarcely a car's width, to the disgruntlement of a few walkers, but we enjoy some astonishing views from the vineyard terraces at these

in Sport it really romps away. We dine that evening at Koblenz-Gondorf, in the Alte Muhle, a truly amazing restaurant run by the ebullient Thomas Höreth and his wife. It's housed in a former chapel and water mill, festooned with trinkets, objets trouvés discovered on site over the establishment's 1000-year history. Thomas makes his own wine – and fabulous





it is – and we dine in the shadow of enormous wooden grape presses. Certainly one for the record books.

A second comfy night at Hotel Landhaus Sonnenhof's Breidscheid annexe, and we rendezvous with Ron and his photographer Kostas again, ultimate destination Spa-Francorchamps, taking in another swathe of Mosel scenery and highpoints along the way. To begin with, we drive around the part of the Sudschleife, which gives an idea of what the original Nürburgring circuit would have been like, without any barriers – Jackie Stewart's 'Green Hell' seems pretty apt on this narrow road, with ditch and trees on either side. Then it opens out. If this Cayman GTS belonged to me I would be running it all the time in Sport mode: it's so much tauter, the steering seems more acute and turn-in sharper. The quality of these German roads is phenomenal, bend after long, arching bend, winding up and down

hill, a joy to be driving on in a car like this.

We're following the Mosel, though at this point I couldn't say whether it's upstream or downstream, but we're in the broad valley, high above Cochem castle with its quayside town where the river cruisers are moored up. The river must be 100 metres wide, flanked by a tow path and chestnuts in bloom. Very steep terracing either side, with the vines extending two thirds of the way up the hillside, covered in scrub and woodland on the top. We're on the A49 going towards Trier, enjoying some thrilling sweeps and swoops. Every few kilometres we pass through a riverside village composed of picturesque, timber-framed buildings with window boxes and wall painting decorations. It's kind of Riviera, with plenty of hotels and a few camp sites. Wine is definitely the theme, and in each village there are several establishments – bars, restaurants and wineries – advertising

wine tasting. The vines were introduced by the Romans, and the wine trade has perpetuated ever since. Which reminds me: Bottle Shock! Now there's a movie: it may be Californian – and the '70s sound track couldn't be from anywhere else – but it gives a reasonable insight into the actual wine making process.

Still tracking the Mosel, the terraces on my right-hand side are coming right down to the road, with the cheeky vines actually tumbling over the stonework onto the kerb. Looking across the river, there's another village, predominately white buildings with grey or terracotta roofs, a church spire, with immaculately terraced vineyards going up behind. We pass a big lock just as one of the commercial mega-barges that ply these waterways filters into the chamber. In some places, the terracing is like a patchwork quilt, and the producers' names are writ large on

One of life's great track driving experiences: Eau Rouge at Spa

Left: The Hotel Landhaus Sonnenhof provided comfy accommodation. We stayed in the annexe overlooking the 'Ring at Breidscheid. Below: Impressive RSRNürburg facilities, with wide range of cars





the hillsides. The grapevines are predominantly arranged in vertical planting, lines of vines and stakes running down to the roadside, with people between the vines tending them. Elsewhere, the terracing is carved out of the rock face, and some of the cliff is actually netted, and then surmounted by vineyard, which would be quite daunting to work on if you were a picker.

We pause at Bremm, and Ron leads us up to an amazing vantage point accessed on a farm track and through woodland, where an escarpment overlooks an astonishing meander in the river – a hairpin bend, if you'll accept the motoring simile – hundreds of feet below. Apparently, people do hang-glide from here, and it's popular with hikers. Far below, a train makes its way across a bridge on one side of the land, passes through a tunnel and emerges like a worm on the other. You do get a sense of the expanse of the country from up here, with all the different valleys and mountains folding in on each other, forested on the tops and vineyards on the flanks. The local winery is Bremmer-Calmont. Ron says

it's called 'The Hot Mountain', because it gets the sun all day, and at 65-degrees, it's the steepest vineyard gradient in the Mosel. The roofs of the houses way down below are a bizarre agglomeration of triangular pitches, something which wouldn't be evident unless you were in a plane. And you can also trace the roads snaking their way up the hillside, and the farm tracks that bisect the vineyards. 'There's so much else to see,' says Ron, 'like the military bunker for the government, left over from the Cold War, where they were going to run the country from if the bomb went off. We're relatively near Bonn, which was the capital, that's why. Really, you need a week to see everything properly.' Indeed, quite possibly. We make a detour to Bad Eiltz, another jaw-droppingly picturesque Schloss, all turrets and pinnacles, and perched on an impregnable bluff. Unsurprisingly, it's a honeypot for sight-seers.

For an amusing diversion we make a river crossing aboard a little ferry: the kind that's harnessed to a cable so the current can't sweep it downstream – though it seems to

have a plenty powerful engine. We carefully ease both Porsches on board – there's a bit of a lip to the drawbridges at either end – and enjoy the prospect of yet another achingly picturesque riverside haunt, a row of enticing hostleries overlooked by the looming carcass of a medieval castle. The ferry times its runs so as not to impede the commercial barges and river cruisers – the only mystery is why they need to be so large!

The furthest south we get – in the direction of Trier and Luxembourg – is Bernkastel-Kues, where one of the vintners, J.J.Prüm, will sell you an exquisite bottle of Riesling for... €1500. This is also the location of Zylinderhaus, a small motor museum housed in a newly-constructed 1930s-style municipal building. It harbours an eclectic selection of BMWs and Mercedes-Benz automobiles, mostly from the 1950s, and there's a single Porsche 356C cabriolet. They're especially big on Borgwards, but my favourite is the brown-and-cream Steyr 220 from 1937, a 2.3-litre straight six with its Streamline Moderne bodywork. We pause beside the river for a

Bumpy ride... It could only be the Karussell at the Nürburgring

Left: Alto Muhle restaurant in Koblenz-Gondorf is situated in former chapel and water mill. Owner Thomas Horeth presses his own wine. Below: Ferry across the River Mosel



Middle: Brauhaus Kloster Machern, founded by Cisterian nuns in 1084, where they've been making wine, and latterly beer, since 1238. Right: Zylinderhaus museum, well worth dropping in on



quick photo-opp, the GT3 and GTS set against a backdrop of grand, late 19th century Jugendstil buildings.

A late lunch at another former monastery, Brauhaus Kloster Machern, a wonderful ecclesiastical establishment, a stone's throw from what's reputedly the tallest river viaduct in the world. The institution was founded by Cistercian nuns in 1084, and they started making wine in 1238. In 1969 they switched over to brewing beer and, for once, the beverage on offer is weisbier rather than wine.

We're done here, and it's time to turn tail and head north-west for Stavelot, where we have a dinner reservation at the Val D'Ambleve. Another fabulous gourmet treat, and it transpires that Ron is also a connoisseur par excellence of fine wines and champagnes. He's brought a number of bottles from his cellar for us to sample, and frankly, I have never counted so many wine glasses on a restaurant table. Star attraction is the new "Rare" champagne from Piper-Heidsieck; what can I say? Salut!

Our road trip culminates with two hours lapping Spa-Francorchamps. Ron's brand-new RSR Spa facilities are located just inside the gate into the track at Blanchimont. His techies take the Cayman for a check-over and inflate the tyres. I attend the driver briefing,

and it seems that only three out of ten of us have driven at Spa before – I last attended an RSR session here in 2012. But still, there'll only be a couple of Caymans and a pair of shared Elises, so no pressure like there was back at the 'Ring. I'm allocated Freddy Mayeur as my instructor and, suitably helmeted, we take to the track. We do a couple of laps and come in. 'You're gripping the wheel too tight, and being too aggressive turning in to the corners,' he advises me. We

right, as was the Bus Stop chicane for some reason, slow as it is. 'You just free your mind and imagine you are on a Sunday drive. Your car is the cello and the track is your musical score. When you are relaxed behind the steering wheel, your driving will be much more serene. So, you don't have to think, "maybe I should be faster," you don't have to fight with your steering wheel, just relax, breathe sometimes, stop racing in the corners. Of course, you have to deal with

“ At least twice I got Eau Rouge and Raidillon absolutely right ”

switch over, and he demonstrates what he means by holding the wheel between two fingers on each hand. 'It's like playing the piano,' he says, '...and braking and going back on the gas, it's the same; you must be smoother.' On several corners I've evidently been turning in far too soon, and at the entry to Fagnes we wait unfeasibly long before turning. The double-left sweeps of Blanchimont were difficult to get consistently

traffic, but before running you have to walk, to do lap after lap and then it will come by itself. Even on your last lap you beat your speed of the one before, and it was easier.' Sure, and at least twice I got Eau Rouge and Raidillon absolutely right, mostly by backing off earlier than anticipated on the downhill run on the old pits straight, and few things are more satisfying than that. Apart from...a glass or two of Rare champagne, perhaps? **PW**

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