

# The acid test

As Steve Hall discovers, if you want to assess a modified M235i, it's best to put it head-to-head with a standard model, around the track at Spa

**B**lanchimont, Les Combes, Pouhon and, of course, Eau Rouge; the most iconic corner of arguably the most iconic Formula 1 race track of them all. With its combination of speed, elevation change and length, a lap of Spa Francorchamps is an incredible test of driver and machine.

Winding its way through the tree-lined countryside of the Francorchamps district near the town of Spa, this circuit is picturesque in a manner that's alien to the new breed of modern, purpose-built race tracks. It's also a palatable three-and-a-half hours' drive from Calais, making it accessible for UK enthusiasts wishing to visit for a track day, or to attend one of many events run there during the season.

## TESTING VENUE

All-in-all, then, it's difficult to think of a more testing venue to experience RSR Spa's Standard vs Modified programme. You've probably heard of RSR, given that they're one of the longest established and best-known track day organisers in Europe.

The brainchild of Ron Simons, RSR takes its name from original company Ron Simons Racing; established in 1995, the company grew from a background of racing and tuning track and sportscars. With a solid background in racing and instructing himself, Ron spotted an opportunity to take things on to the next level in 2002, and RSRNurburg was born.

With an impressive array of machinery on offer, operations at the Nürburgring, Spa and Iberia (Portimao and Ascari), plus a solid background in event organisation and management, it's easy to see why RSR has become one of the go-to outfits in the world of high-end track experiences.

Conceived by Simons as the ultimate way to demonstrate the difference wrought by track-focused upgrades, the Standard vs Modified philosophy is simple; take an already capable track car, sprinkle it with a selection of dynamic improvements, then sample them, back-to-back, with expert tutelage alongside. With 11 different cars on the books from Megane and M4 to Cayman and GTR, it's a comprehensive list which demonstrates

the depth of the RSR garages.

But you're reading a BMW magazine, which is why I'm here to sample a car that's been somewhat overshadowed by its M2 big brother, the M235i. I'll be experiencing both road and track programmes to ensure I develop a meaningful depth of feeling for the dynamic changes RSR's modifications bring, and the schedule begins with six laps of Spa in each car.

Now, if half-a-dozen laps doesn't sound like very many, consider for a moment that Spa is the longest track on the Formula 1 calendar; its 4.352-mile lap makes it twice as long as most UK track day venues. With so much to learn about car and circuit, take it from me, six laps is plenty!

## RELAXED START

The day started in relaxed fashion, as we gathered around steaming hot tea and coffee dispensers, and washed down the abundant snacks on offer. Briefing completed (a sensible, grown-up affair which allows passing either side with a liberal dose of common sense expected),



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# TRACK TEST

we headed out first in the standard car – a 2015 M235i auto.

Technically, we're not quite in a standard car, as the brake pads have been upgraded to WinMax Endurance pads, with compound W1 up front, and W5 taking care of things at the rear. This change was implemented as much to improve durability as performance – an entirely understandable concession for a 320hp coupé weighing the best part of 1,700kg with passengers and fuel.

It's actually been a while since I last drove an M235i but, after a lap to bring everything up to temperature, I'm reminded about just what a superb package the M-performance 2 Series really is. Although I'd prefer a manual on track, the eight-speed auto absolutely makes sense for a car in the track rental market. It removes any possibility of missed shifts, and allows drivers to focus completely on perfecting lines and getting a feel for the car.

Once the preserve of big barge limos, the quick response, instant lock-up and perfectly rev-matched downshifts, adeptly demonstrate just how good automatic gearboxes can be – I think it's excellent!

As you'd expect, we're running the cars

with all stability systems on, and while you can feel a few tenths slipping away exiting some of the slower corners (where a little slip angle would be faster), the systems do a sterling job of keeping things neat and tidy through the faster sections.

## SMOOTH AND PRECISE

Given the 'arrive and drive' nature of this programme, it's a sensible measure that doesn't detract from the fun. With plenty of encouragement from the instructor, you find yourself driving as smoothly and precisely as possible, trying to extract as much speed as you can without triggering the systems. In fact, I can't recall being encouraged to push harder on a track event for a long time – the instructors seemingly just as keen as I was to get the most out of my laps!

The M235i proved to be an excellent foil for Spa; plenty of grunt down the straights, a lovely benign chassis balance (even when I overcook the entry to Bruxelles), and enough communication through the steering and seat to prove an immersive and enjoyable ally at all other times. Being a road car, it naturally felt a little soft on the track, with

gentle understeer the early sign of an approaching breach of grip.

It demanded smooth inputs to allow the car to settle, particularly through the left-right transitions encountered midway through a lap of Spa. It's a great introduction, though, and you can see why the M235i makes a terrific daily, with the ability to play occasional track day tool, straight out of the box.

But for the lack of rear seats – and the Wiechers half-cage that takes their place – the modified car would make an excellent daily, too. But on track, the performance orientated upgrades really came to the fore. Being turbocharged, the N55 straight-six lends itself well to performance enhancement, the DTE Systems Powercontrol tuning box delivering a welcome 370hp and 401lb ft – increases of 48 and 69 respectively.

## SUPERB PACKAGE!

Chassis-wise, the standard springs and dampers make way for a KW Coilover Clubsport two-way adjustable suspension kit, with adjustable top mounts, BBS CH-R 18in wheels and Michelin Pilot Super Sport tyres. Everything works beautifully

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in unison, to give the chassis a level of precision and response well beyond the standard car. RSR hasn't gone all-out in terms of choosing the most aggressive set-up, so it's still usable on the road (important, given the road element of the Standard vs Modified programme), while retaining the pleasingly benign characteristics of the standard car.

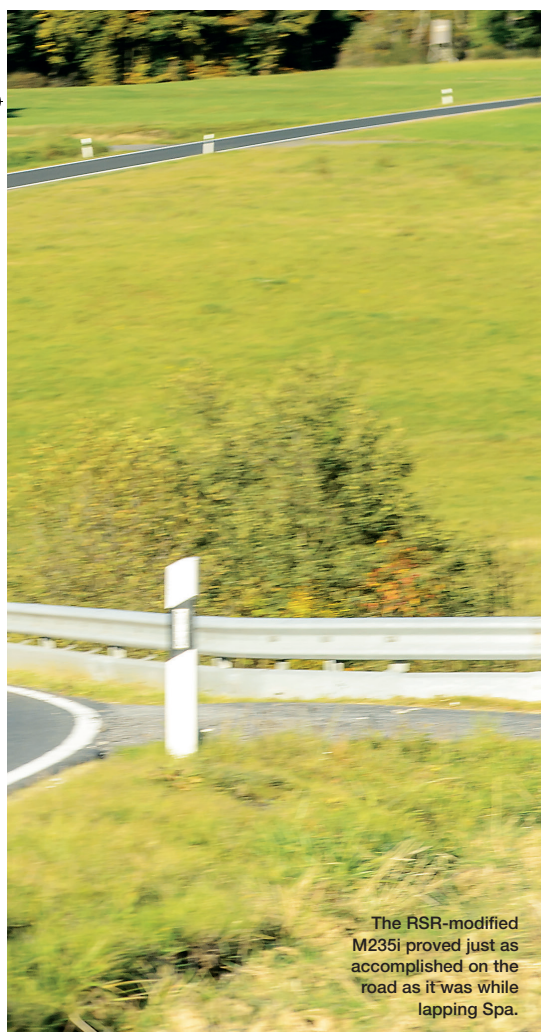
The modified car carries broadly the same kerb weight as the standard model – the stripped-out rear and lightweight wheels being countered by the addition of a roll cage, so any weight loss is marginal. Of course, the wheels lose weight in a critical area; the loss of unsprung mass helping the KW suspension work even more efficiently.

Combined with the new suspension and tyres, the substantial power upgrade of the modified car delivers a stark improvement on track – Spa lap times typically see an improvement in the region of 5-6 seconds. But the real story lies in just how much more enjoyable the modified car is to drive. Where some of the transient corner combinations required a delicate approach in the standard car, I can really attack the direction changes here, knowing

The DTE Systems Powercontrol tuning box fitted to the RSR-modified M235i, delivers 370hp and 401lb ft of torque; enough to keep it ahead of the standard car on both track and road.



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The RSR-modified M235i proved just as accomplished on the road as it was while lapping Spa.

that the modified car will keep up.

Braking into slower corners feels much more precise, stable on turn-in with less lateral yaw, and a faithful response from the front tyres. Through the high-speed stuff – particularly the intimidating Pouhon left-hander – that stability inspires the confidence needed to push harder.

## NO COMPROMISE

With an emptying track, I'm really starting to find a rhythm, revelling in the modified car's ability to be driven hard without compromise. It's impossible to pick out how much each component is contributing individually but, as a demonstration of the benefit of a well-thought-out package of complementary upgrades, it's incredibly instructive.

Six laps of Spa at this speed is plenty and, thanks to the excellent Race Navigator system fitted to each car, you can relive your laps from the day via USB videos, together with full telemetry.

Having decamped to Nürburg for the next day's road driving, I woke up to bright sunshine and T-shirt temperatures. With

Spa rightly known as the race track that winds its way through the Eifel region, there are also some spectacular driving roads to enjoy in the area as well. We head out nice and early to get some action photographs in the bag, before sampling each car, back-to-back on the superb roads south of Nürburg. These are all beautifully surfaced and sprinkled with every corner radius you could want. They truly make for an excellent testing ground.

Inevitably the modified car has less opportunity to enforce its dynamic advantage on the public roads, as we're less concerned about ultimate pace. But the same traits that made it so encouraging on track, still make themselves felt during this session. As fun as the standard M235i is, even at a brisk, B-road pace, the sharper responses and extra power make the tuned car a really enjoyable coupé to punt.

Impressively, the suspension set-up retains enough compliance to soak up whatever the admittedly well-surfaced German roads throw at us. If anything, the sharper damping keeps the car



# TRACK TEST



The modified car's rear seats have been replaced with a Wiechers half-cage.



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more composed, so you just get on with attacking bends, then powering out of them without a hint of traction loss.

## BRILLIANT TIME!

And then, all too soon, it's time for me to give the keys back, which makes me very sad indeed. It's been a fantastic couple of days with RSR, and a particularly instructive one at Spa, where the advantages provided by the modified car were abundantly clear.

So, if you're considering updating your own car there's no better way to sample the benefits for yourself. Which is probably

exactly what Ron Simons had in mind when he conceived the programme. Looking at parts in isolation tells you very little, but being able to sample them back-to-back against a standard car, offers a perfect demonstration of what is possible.

The €1,499 fee gives participants access to one of the most enjoyable driving experiences you can have on a track, which truly deserves its legendary status. It's also important to appreciate that the package includes not just time in the car, but excellent instruction, helmet hire and a USB video of your laps from the onboard Race Navigator system. The latter

ensures hours of fun as you play at being a data engineer, and compare your lap times and apex speeds!

So I have no hesitation in wholeheartedly recommending the RSRNurburg Standard vs Modified experience, and can't wait to try the exciting new BMW programmes coming for the 2019 season. ●

## FIND OUT MORE

There's lots more information and event details on the RSRNurburg website, which you can find at: [rsrnurburg.com](http://rsrnurburg.com)