



Adrenaline Rush

GET YOUR FIX WITH HOT LAPS AT THE NÜRBURGRING NORDSCHLEIFE
AND SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS. STORY BY **ROB SASS** PHOTOS BY **KOSTAS SIDIRAS & RSRNÜRBURG**



Long before it became a marketing tool for supercar manufacturers and an essential part of any racing game worth its code, the Nürburgring's Nordschleife circuit was just a racetrack. Back in the day, it was a long, dangerous, and demanding roller coaster of blind corners and extreme elevation changes that Sir Jackie Stewart famously dubbed “the Green Hell.” Niki Lauda was scarred for life at the left-hand kink now rather morbidly referred to as Lauda-Links. A generation earlier, in 1958, another Ferrari GP ace, Peter Collins, lost his life when he went into a turn near Pflanzgarten too hot, running wide in a section of the circuit that—like 99.9% of the Nordschleife—has zero run-off room. Danger unquestionably lurks here: in the tarmac, the trees, the curbs, and even in the distracting and occasionally ominous graffiti.



HUMAN BEINGS ARE inexorably drawn to a challenge—your average type-A Porsche person probably more so than most. We lionize the widowmaker cars like the original 930 Turbo, the Carrera GT, and the 996 GT2. We brag to each other about taming them. And while you might fool yourself into thinking that you’ve gotten the better of one of Porsche’s more challenging cars, you’ll likely never say that truthfully about the Nordschleife, no matter how many virtual laps you’ve done on Forza or Gran Turismo. The ’Ring simply must be experienced in person at least once. Period.

Aerial view of the legendary Karussell (left) in all of its graffiti-ed glory.

THE WHY

What makes the Nürburgring such an essential experience? The unmatched adrenaline rush? Checking something off a bucket list? Bragging rights at the next PCA track day? Maybe I’m being a bit too reverent, but I think motivations like these tend to reduce the stature of the ’Ring to roughly that of a theme park. I’d suggest giving it some more thought—driving the Nordschleife is the only way to fully appreciate the titanic accomplishment that is a sub-seven-minute lap time or to understand the achievements of masters like Stefan Bellof and Timo

Nürburgring Track Notes

by Ron Simons / RSRNürburg

EX-MÜHLE:

Mind the big concrete wall on the outside of this double-apex, single-radius, roller-coaster turn. Marks the lowest point on track. Halfway exit on right. This is the only place where you see houses alongside the track, meaning you are halfway.

WEHRSEIFEN:

The slowest corner on the Nordschleife has all the ingredients for losing it. Blind, the crest lightens the car; camber change limits the amount you can brake. The braking zone is in a turn itself.

KALLENHARD:

Downhill and closing on the exit, in combination with the guard-rail even closer than elsewhere. The key here is an extremely late entry.

ADENAUER-FORST:

The recreational accident zone of the 'Ring. Local families camp here every Sunday watching you make a fool of yourself. Mostly it's minor damage, but sometimes cars still end up on their roofs. It is very slow and almost a switchback. You know this corner is coming after you feel the heavy compression in the previous section (Fuchsröhre).

AREMBERG:

A slower corner after a long stretch of being almost flat out. It's only when you walk the track here that you will see how steep it is, and therefore how much earlier you need to brake.

BERGWERK:

Second key corner. Very, very late entry. Watch the rumble strip on the left, and where this ends, you turn. Most beginners are off by a mile and end up killing all the speed for going up the valley.

CARACCIOLA-KARUSSELL:

Blind entry and difficult exit. Key is to ease into the bowl a little later rather than earlier, joining as smoothly as possible. You want to be in the middle of the concrete plates where banking is at its steepest. Try not to "steer" out, but allow a little acceleration to slingshot you over the corner of the final concrete plate.

HOHE ACHT:

Typical top-of-the-hill late-entry turn.

WIPPERMANN & ESCHBACH:

Between Wippermann and Eschbach there's a nasty crest, mid-corner. You're blind until you pass this, at which point you will scare yourself and lift off, which makes the car turn around blindingly quickly.

BRÜNNCHEN:

The crowd is here because of the accidents. The accidents happen because of the crowd. Don't show off, as there are very firm limits on both bends.

PFLANZGARTEN:

Watch for the jump here and plan to do a little bit of braking before and after the crest—never in mid-air! Take a straight line in, staying parallel with the left side of the track.

KLEINES KARUSSELL:

Turn in early here; take advantage of the easy transition from flat to banked ground. Although the track is wide on the exit, stay smooth with inputs to the car as you're leaving the banking to avoid loss of control when the car is spat out.

GALGENKOPF:

Important for good speed onto the main straight (in a race situation). Attempt to make this corner one long, constant-radius, double-apex curve. Run wide in the middle, but not all the way to the outside of the track.

HATZENBACH:

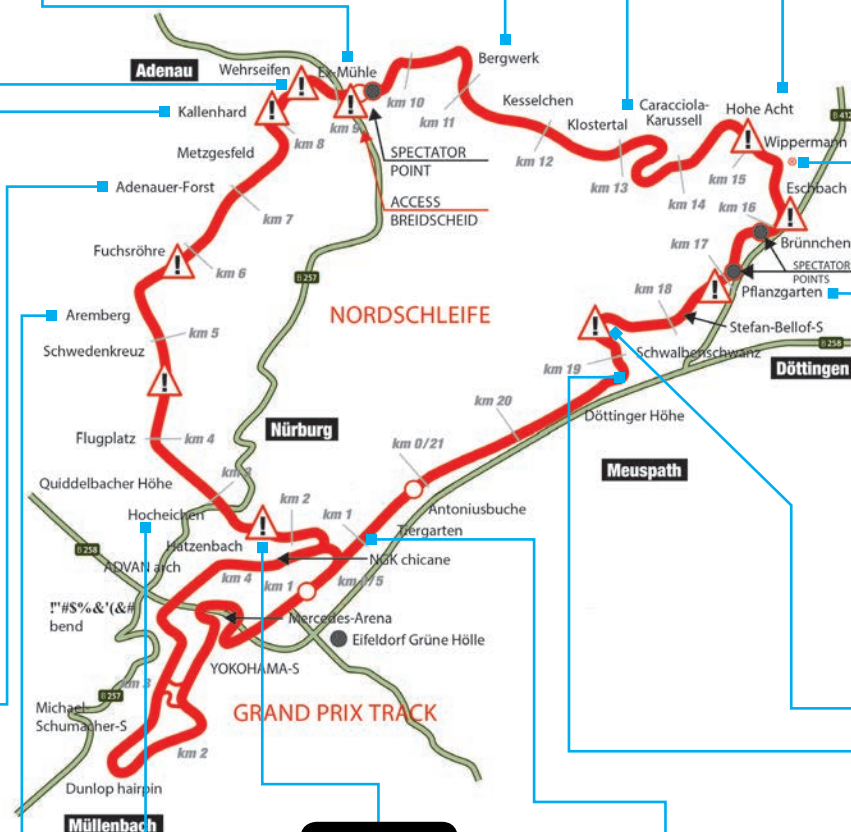
The first slow section of corners after a very quick downhill stretch. All third gear and constant radius. Smooth is fast here, and using every inch of track means you exit on the throttle, instead of having to brake for the final left-hand turn.

HOHENRAIN:

After the speed gained from the downhill run through Tiergarten, a big slowdown is necessary in readiness for the tight Hohenrain complex. Brake firmly in a straight line, across the track and toward the turn.

HOHEICHEN:

First key corner and also the first real booby trap. Very late entry, the track falls off violently and is therefore blind. Turning in too early means you leave the track on the left. When you then scare yourself and lift off, the car turns around and hits the barrier before you know what has happened.



Bernhard as well as the sacrifices of Lauda and Collins. You need to go there to fully comprehend what Sir Jackie was talking about when he coined the circuit's famous nickname, and what his motivation was for founding the modern F1 safety movement. Then again, maybe, as usual, I'm over-thinking it. Put the philosophical musings aside and just get there. It's one seriously good time, almost certainly the best you'll ever have in a car.

HOW TO DO IT

Somewhat counterintuitively, the Nürburgring isn't located anywhere near the northern Bavarian city of Nuremberg (Nürnberg in German). More than one confused American has called from Nuremberg asking where the hell the track is, only to be told that it's about a four-and-a-half-hour drive away. The 'Ring is in the Eifel Mountain region of west-central Germany, not terribly far from the Belgian border. Frankfurt and Brussels are the most convenient airport entry points from North America. During shoulder season, round-trip flights can range from as low as \$600 to \$900 to either city from North America. From there, it's best to rent a car to get the rest of the way.

An outfit called RSRNürburg offers an exceedingly complete and professional gateway to the Nürburgring (www.rsmurburg.com). Started in 2002 by Ron Simons, a Dutch racer, suspension designer, and author of *Petrol-*



RSRNürburg will outfit you with anything from a hot hatch like a VW Golf GTI or Renault Mégane to a 911 GT3 RS. Going out with an instructor as editor Sass did is highly recommended.





Where to Stay

THERE'S NO shortage of hotels around the Nürburgring, and everyone seems to have their preference. The Hotel am Tiergarten (www.am-tiergarten.de) is probably the closest, and is located right next to Pistenklause. Trip Advisor can help you sort out the rest. Spa is an attractive town that is considerably larger than you might expect. Like most European towns that were heavily damaged during the war, Spa was expertly restored and there are plenty of hotel choices there.

But if you want an experience that's well beyond the ordinary, stay at Château Charles (www.chateaucharles.be). Built near the end of the château era in 1843 for a Belgian railroad magnate, it's been sympathetically updated as a B&B—the Belle Epoque-era wood floors, high ceilings, skeleton keys, chandeliers, and fireplaces are intact, but the bathrooms look like something out of the latest issue of *Architectural Digest*. The grounds and the view are magnificent, too. A double room starts at a reasonable 160 euros (\$180) per night. —RS



head Planet's *Guide to the Nürburgring*, RSR does everything from 'Ring taxi laps (essentially hot laps with an expert driver) to road tours of the Eifel Mountain area and, of course, Touristenfahrten (public driving) rentals, which run every day from March through November. The latter—which if you're reading *Panorama* is what you want to do—can be accomplished with or without an instructor, in cars ranging from a Ford Fiesta ST at €89 (\$100) per lap to a Porsche 991.2 GT3 RS at €539 (\$610)



per lap. The Porsche fleet at RSR numbers 15 cars of differing model and spec. I spent my time with an instructor in a Cayman GTS (which goes for €259, or about \$295, per lap). The Boxster/Cayman platform is usually my default choice on a track—it's the car that I feel the most comfortable and safe in. Safe is the watchword at the 'Ring, where there are of course countless ways to screw up. Okay, maybe not countless, but by my tally, there are currently almost 200 different videos on YouTube that are mostly crash porn of Touristenfahrten shunts on the Nordschleife. Most look like something out of *Jackass*, or maybe *Germany's Funniest Home Videos*. But as RSR chief Simons is fond of saying, "There are no dangerous racetracks, just dangerous drivers."

AUF DER NORDSCHLEIFE

If you've never been to the Nordschleife, I can't over-emphasize the benefit of having an instructor in the car, as I did. South African Allen Irwin is a calm, smooth, and very skilled former movie stunt driver with thousands of 'Ring laps to his credit. He put up with my early turn-ins, missed apexes, and tentative throttle lifts while approaching the crests of blind hills. It must be akin to asking a violin virtuoso to listen to a day's worth of first-graders taking their first Suzuki class. The laps with him behind the wheel were a master class. I never cease to be amazed at how really good instructors like Allen can carry on a perfectly nonchalant narration while



driving at a good clip on a wet track through some challenging parts of the circuit: "A little bit of brake to settle the car; then back on the gas . . . it's starting to dry out, nice that the weather cleared up today . . . Lauda-Links, I'm not going to go flat-out here because I don't trust the grip yet . . . Bergwerks, very high entry, third gear."

Being with someone who is able to drive like a boss at eight-tenths or so also lets you really feel the elevation changes and the g-forces—positive g's push you into the seat as the suspension compresses, and negative g's have the opposite effect, getting a few millimeters of air between your bum and the seat bottom as you crest a hill and become momentarily airborne—the

Few things in life can match the feeling of getting all four tires onto the concrete of the Nordschleife's famous Karussell.



What to See

THE EIFEL Mountain/Moselle/Saar region of Germany is underrated as a tourist destination. The wine and castle tours and the roads themselves are magnificent. A guided tour of the mind-blowing Burg Eltz castle (left) built between the 12th and 15th centuries is a must. An interesting short side trip is a visit to the remains of the disused circuit at the Nürburgring—the Sudschleife (below). Out of service since the 1960s, parts of it are still accessible if you know where to look, and Ron Simon, the founder of RSRNürburg, does. It's eerie and evocative and worth seeing.

Spa's immediate surroundings are full of history of the more recent variety. The Battle of the Bulge Museum in Bastogne is worth seeing, as is the Mardasson Memorial, a moving monument to the American soldiers who died there. —RS



Out of use since the 1960s, parts of the Sudschleife are still accessible—in spite of nature's efforts to reclaim it.

quintessential Nordschleife experience.

Happily, by the time I got behind the wheel, the track had dried out, giving way to what passes for a fairly chill day on the circuit. “Be safe, actually pass some slower traffic, and don’t negatively impact the insurer’s loss ratio,” was the mental checklist I threw together while waiting my turn. Then it was round the corner at the Devil’s Diner restaurant, off past the checkpoint, and onto the circuit. The combination of awe and nerves on entering the Nordschleife for the first time is hard to express. In any event, I didn’t have long to think about it—some dude in a GT2 RS with Swiss plates and an open exhaust blasted by, yanking me out of my contemplative stupor before I’d even hit Flugplatz. With the vast majority of the circuit still in front of me, I was pretty certain I’d see and hear his tailpipes again.

Early on, you understand why the Nordschleife is one of the greatest momentum tracks on the planet—with 170-plus corners, a minor mistake here or there sets into motion a domino effect that keeps compounding over the course of a lap. But while I wasn’t even mid-pack in terms of ability that day, there’s a certain amount of satisfaction about doing the Karussell properly, with all four tires on the concrete, feeling the extreme positive camber, and getting some of the sensation of not necessarily steering out of it but letting the car catapult itself off the concrete banking and into a short bit of straight-ish track leading up to Hohe Acht, the highest point on the circuit. Incredible fun.

One of the benefits of the Nordschleife’s 12.9-mile length is the fact that it allows traffic to spread out somewhat, even with a fair number of cars doing tourist laps.

There wasn’t a ton of overtaking, no accidents or caution flags, no fluids on the track, etc. What there also wasn’t, though, are obvious assists, such as cones marking the braking zone, turn-in point, or apex. Again, an experienced instructor is key here, someone with thousands of laps for whom signage, graffiti, and other obscure landmarks are as effective a marker as a cone. And except for two locations (that you’re certainly not going to memorize), the high curbs are no-drive zones unless you want to launch yourself like an F-18 off a carrier deck and unwittingly star in the next viral YouTube video.

“A MAN’S GOT to know his limitations.” That is my favorite Dirty Harry catch phrase from the Clint Eastwood film *Magnum Force*. Given the fact that a fair number of the tourist drivers on the Nordschleife seem to have not seen *Magnum Force*, keeping a constant eye in your mirrors is always a good idea. Using your indicator and giving way to faster traffic is imperative. And while my

driving skills didn’t impress Allen, I like to think that my situational awareness skills made up for it. On second thought, maybe not. Sadly, races aren’t won by yielding. As with any track situation, you’re liable for damage to your car and any part of the track, including the barriers. And, since it’s considered racing, something the law views (no shock here) as inherently dangerous, you assume the risk of injury.

Everyone pays their own damages. Even if someone clips you, you’re responsible for any damage to your car, which makes track insurance more than just a pretty good idea. RSR uses OpenTrack, whose standard track policy costs about \$800 for the day and caps your liability for damage to the car at the first \$9,000. That is not an inconsequential deductible, but with even a mere carbon-fiber fender-shredder costing upwards of \$10,000 in a new GT3 RS, it’s a good thing to have.

It was an interesting and diverse group of people on my day with RSR at the Nordschleife—a bald Russian guy

Almost unbelievable elevation changes and ubiquitous graffiti are the Nordschleife’s unmistakable calling cards.

Where to Eat

THE NÜRBURG/ADENAU area isn’t particularly populous. Restaurants are few and far between. Given its near-monopoly status so close to the circuit, the food at Restaurant Pistenklause is probably several times better than it actually needs to be. The menu is a pastiche of German and Italian, but steak cooked at the table on a hot stone is what everyone seems to order.

In truth, the food, while quite good, is actually not the best reason to go. The place reminds me of what I’ve read about The Happy Bottom Riding Club, the beloved watering hole run by aviatrix Pancho Barnes in the 1950s on the grounds of Edwards Air Force Base. Tom Wolfe made it the stuff of legends in his book *The Right Stuff*. Test pilots were its primary clientele, and their pictures covered the walls. Cocky pilot/would-be astronaut Gordon Cooper made the mistake of asking what you had to do to get your picture on the wall. “You have to die, sweetie,” Barnes sanguinely answered.

At Pistenklause, there are photos of drivers and every manner of motor racing memorabilia. And sections of Armco. At the Nürburgring, if you bend it you buy it, and it’s not cheap. A fair amount of the twisted stuff seems to wind up on the walls of Pistenklause. —RS



The 'Ring's location in the Eifel Mountains is what makes the Nordschleife utterly unique in the motorsports world.

straight out of Central Casting wearing a track suit and a gold and diamond watch, a friendly, middle-aged Dutch man and his very polite son who I ate lunch with were clearly true believers/motorsports junkies, and an American couple in matching Harley-Davidson T-shirts who, as nearly as I could tell, were just garden-variety adrenaline mainliners (they could have just as easily been skydiving

into the Grand Canyon). About half were doing just the Nordschleife, and half were doing the Nordschleife and pairing it with RSR's program at Spa-Francorchamps. I was lucky enough to be in the latter group.

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS

To a WWII history nerd, the one-hour drive from the Nürburgring to Belgium's Spa-Francorchamps circuit was like traveling through a map of the winter of 1944-45 on the Western Front. The track itself is adjacent to places with names like Bastogne, Stavelot, and St. Vith, and while those three Belgian hamlets were flattened during the Battle of the Bulge, somehow, the circuit itself managed to escape serious damage.

Today, Spa is clearly the most loved of the pre-war European circuits. While serious drivers speak in hushed tones about the Nordschleife and opinions differ on the Nürburgring's modern F1 circuit, they're unanimous in their adoration of Spa. What's not to like? It has all the amenities and safety features of a modern F1 circuit but retains some of the attraction of the old circuit from the golden age of Grand Prix racing, and it's located in the beautiful, hilly Ardennes Forest. And then



RSR NÜRBURG 2019 TRACK DAYS

| SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS | NÜRBURGRING |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ■ May 6 -7 (Monday-Tuesday) | ■ April 23 (Tuesday) |
| ■ June 6 (Thursday) | ■ May 20-24 (Monday-Friday) |
| ■ June 24 (Monday) | ■ June 25 (Tuesday) |
| ■ July 17 (Wednesday) | ■ July 22-23 (Monday-Tuesday) |
| ■ August 6 (Tuesday) | ■ August 26 (Monday) |
| ■ September 9 (Monday) | ■ September 30 (Monday) |
| ■ October 18-19 (Friday-Saturday) | ■ October 14 (Monday) |
| ■ November 7 (Thursday) | |



there's Eau Rouge, maybe the most storied corner in all of motorsports. Walking the track during the morning fog and looking down the hill from Radaillon onto Eau Rouge was a near religious experience.

If it's possible, a track day at Spa is even more hard-core than one at the Nürburgring. While the 'Ring sees a lot of Golf GTIs, AMG wagons, and E46 BMW M3s, the cars at

Spa were heavily weighted toward the weapons-grade end of the scale—Koenigseggs and McLarens were as common at Spa as hot hatches are at the 'Ring. My time was limited to the morning session at Spa, and I got in one lap before a track-wide yellow caution slowed things down for the rest of my time there. I'm not telling whether or not I lifted for Eau Rouge. It was sublime. I want to go back. 🌀

Looking downhill from Radaillon at Eau Rouge. Pity you'll never get this view from the left seat.



At Spa, unlike at the Nordschleife, there is generous run-off room in most places.