

SPA FRANCORCHAMPS

The Magic of Spa



SPA FRANCORCHAMPS IS A VERY SPECIAL PLACE, AS #TRACKADDICT'S **JASON HARDY** DISCOVERED.



Jason's car for the day at Spa was a standard BMW M235i

Spa Francorchamps is one the greatest, maybe even the greatest race circuit on earth. If you ask RSRSpa owner Ron Simons he'll tell you that it's his favourite track to drive on, bar none. When the opportunity presented itself for me to fly out and take in this amazing place, I wasn't exactly going to say no. It's one of the bucket list tracks for any track day or motorsport enthusiasts.

My Spa experience started at 5:30am at the Nürburgring, meeting at the RSRNurburg offices and workshop ready to make the short 60 or so mile trip to Spa. I was hoping to be a passenger and catch some extra sleep on the drive but instead I was handed the keys to the modified M235i that RSRNurburg operates on its track days. It was booked for the day and someone needed to get it there. I was part of a three-car convoy, my 235i, a Porsche GT3 and RSRSpa's latest acquisition, a brand new MY17 Nissan GTR. All the cars we're branded in either the RSRNurburg red or the RSRSpa blue so it was pretty obvious to onlookers where we were heading and what we were going to be doing.

This was unlike any track day I've ever experienced in the UK, the RSRSpa guys don't mess around when it comes to hosting track days. They had a 10-strong team of mechanics and staff on hand to make sure the day ran smoothly. A fleet of cars and a whole load of spare parts had been brought along for those who had paid to hire one of the cars out.



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There was everything from a Megane RS250 right through to the Porsche GT3, and even an ex Clio Cup car. My car for the day would be a standard BMW M235i, no slouch with 320 bhp and 0-60 in 4.8 seconds, but looking around the pit garages it looked like I would be spending a lot of time looking in my rear-view mirror.

I took a stroll down the pitlane and it was awash with Cayman GT4s, 991 GT3 cup cars, GT4 racers and even a Ginetta LMP3 car. I had a knife at a gun fight. Luckily to help me through the day I had my driving yoda, Luis Ramirez. He would be my tutor for the day, helping me get the most from the car and myself. This is the guy who tutored me at the fearsome Nürburgring so I knew he was up to the job.

The day started with something I've never seen at any UK track day before. Rather than going out for a couple of sighting laps behind a pace car, we went out for a track walk. All the cars followed a pace car but we parked at various points around the circuit where Ron Simons would walk and talk us through certain corners. Eau Rouge, Pouhon and the Fagnes chicane, three corners you need to get right for a good lap.

Standing at the top of Eau Rouge and looking down at the pitlane was something else. I've driven this corner hundreds of times from the comfort of my sofa. I've watched every F1 race since 1998 and nothing prepared me for just how steep it is. It's not just the climb up but also the downhill approach from La Source. We walked to the bottom and Ron explained the line and turn-in points and what to do if we got it a bit wrong.

MANAGEABLE SECTIONS

Once we'd returned to pits, the green lights came on and the track was open. I wasn't going to waste any time sat around in the pitlane so I headed out with Yoda Luis, in the passenger seat for my first experience of Spa. That first lap was quite an experience, heading up the Kemmel straight I allowed a De Tomaso Pantera race car to pass me, as the driver hit the brakes for Les Combes it pirouetted three times right in front of us. Somehow the car avoided the barriers and ended up pointing the right way on the racing line and even made the apex!

I did two laps and Luis ordered me back to the pits. He wasn't impressed with my driving style. I was trying to show this guy how good I am and failed miserably, I probably went a bit too hard too quick and just over-drove every corner. My lap times were around 3m:23s.

We went back to the garage and Luis sat me down for a chat and broke the track down into manageable sections before going back out. La Source to Malmedy would be the first part of the track I had to master.





Luis talked me through the lines and the braking points, one of my issues being that I was braking like I was driving on the road. Trying to be smooth on the brakes is wrong, I needed to stamp on them as hard as possible at the last possible moment. Luis was adamant the car could take everything and more we could throw at it and told me to brake as hard as I could for the least amount of time possible.

I headed back out with Luis' pep talk fresh in the memory and as we came round to La Source to start another lap, he gave me the signal of when to brake and I hammered the pedal harder than I ever have before. The car shed its speed, I turned in and got back on the power and drove down towards Eau Rouge. The line here is to use the marshal's post at the end of the pit wall as the turn-in point and brake hard onto the curb. You can use all of the entry curb and even more if you wish, the further over to the left you can get leads to a better entry into the right hander. You need to carry speed through the uphill section and get back on the power as early as possible to maximise the speed up the Kemmel straight. It's a terrifying sequence and not something you can learn in a day. The walls are littered with scuffs, there is debris from previous crashes and I didn't want to add any parts of a BMW to it.

Coming up the hill and over the crest the Kemmel straight is in front of you. Les Combes looks a long way away but in no time you're hitting the brakes and turning into the right, left chicane. You need to sacrifice the left part to make sure you have the right line for Malmedy. It's a fairly simple section of track, but it's nice when you get it right. We did this for three or four laps, just cruising round for the rest of the lap then headed back to the pits to discuss how



→ much quicker it felt each time. We then moved onto the next section which was Rivage round to the Fagnes chicane. This section had the mental Pouhon corner which is a very unique challenge in itself.

We headed back out and went as quickly as possible from the outset. Having already learned the first section we could go quick through there and then learn the next. Coming out of Malmedy it's a downhill run to Rivage. I braked hard on the left and turned in. It's a late apex and you need to be very patient before getting on the power. From there is a short blast on the power before braking for the corner with no name, a quick third gear left-hander. You need to be quick through here as the next straight leads into Pouhon, a big double apex downhill left-hander where you brake far later than you think you should as it's possible to carry good speed through here. Braking starts at the curb on the entrance on the right of the track and once I'd scrubbed enough speed off I could turn the car in, pointing it at the curb and then allowing it to run out before taking the next apex and getting back flat out on the power to drive the car out of the corner and down the hill to the Fagnes chicane. This is another tricky section, another late entry corner as you need to keep the car over to the right to have a better line through the left-hander, which leads onto a short straight and into Stavelot. I kept turning into too early for Fagnes and I could feel the car was not happy with the line I was taking. I was asking too much of it in the left-hander and I was getting a bit of understeer, but once I did get the correct line, it was a night and day difference. I was able to carry more speed and the car felt much more compliant and settled.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

We went through the same process of doing three or four laps before heading back to the pits and discussing the section, where the car felt stable and where we had understeer/oversteer because of something I had done and how to dial that out for the next laps. The next and last section of track to learn was Stavelot to the end of the lap, including the famous Blanchimont, a mega fast almost flat out left-hander.

We headed back out with me now having a good idea of how to drive two thirds of the track and only three corners left to learn. I came around the track and exited the Fagnes chicane nicely and got a great run into Stavelot. This a corner where you need to carry as much speed as possible as you are flat out up to Blanchimont. On the exit I was allowing the car to take the line it wanted so I wasn't scrubbing any speed off and getting as much acceleration as possible. For Blanchimont you bring the car over to the right and use the gantry over the track as the turning point, a quick lift, flick it in and get straight back on the power to stabilise the car, let the car drift to the right of the track and get hard on the brakes for the next part of the corner, a slightly tighter left hander, there is plenty of run off here so you can hammer the throttle and just allow the car to take the line it wants



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to. From one of the quickest points on the track you brake incredibly hard for one of the slowest at the bus stop chicane. It's another very late entry and apex, sacrificing the first part gives you the right line for the second part and a better run onto the start/finish straight. I was getting a bit eager on the throttle here and causing the rear to step out of line, and while it's fun going sideways it's not fast and Luis ordered me to relax and be a bit more patient.

We did this three or four times before heading back to the pits to discuss the laps and lines. Luis also revealed that on our last flying lap my lap time was down to a 3m:14s, nearly 10 seconds faster than I managed on my first flying lap. Real progress!

Luis sent me out on my own and set me a target of knocking another couple of seconds off my lap time. I knew if I pushed I might be able to get down to a 3m:10s, but even I was surprised at the time I managed to achieve. I went out for my first ever solo laps of Spa aware I was in a borrowed BMW, but that didn't worry me. I just wanted to prove to Luis that I was capable of putting in good lap times.

I pushed harder than I had all day and strung the corners together better than ever. I'm not claiming to

Luis Ramirez points out where Jason can improve his cornering

be a Spa master, but this felt fast. I got held up allowing a Caterham past just before Pouhon, having to lift on the straight, which compromised my speed, but I came round to complete the lap in 3m:04.9s!

Another five seconds off my best lap time. I did one cool down lap and headed back to the pits to share the good news with Luis. He looked at the data from the onboard Race Navigator camera and datalogger so we could measure just where I was faster from that first lap compared to now. It was a massive improvement everywhere, more than Luis imagined I would achieve.

After that we just went out for some more laps to work on being consistent and I was able to lap within a second of my times over a five-lap run. I did my last lap and just enjoyed the atmosphere and soaked up the beautiful location that Spa is set in. As a surprise and well done present, Luis arranged for me to have three laps with Ron Simons in the GTR. He would show me how you really drive this place.

I expected him to be quick, but not grit your teeth and hold on for dear life quick! Sideways through Eau Rouge on cold tyres was an eye opener. He wasn't worried as he'd done this hundreds of times before.

He managed to put that car into situations where I was sure we would be in the wall, but the GTR bowed down to him and obeyed his every command. Those three laps will stay with me forever and it was amazing to be beside the man who has such a passion for what he does and how he goes about doing it. This is not a guy who sits back and watches, he gets involved and loves it as much today as he did when he first started the RSRNurburg and Spa businesses.

I can't express how much you need to get to Spa and take this amazing place in. The circuit is beautiful, the corners are out of this world, but it's the feel and atmosphere of the place. You just know you're somewhere special. I sat on the pit wall and looked at the grid hatchings and thought about all those famous names that have lined up on that grid and charged off down to La Source. It was a nice feeling knowing the greats like Senna, Prost, Schumacher, Hill and Hamilton have driven this ribbon of asphalt. I'll never experience a Formula 1 car but I'd now experienced Spa just as they all have. This is one of those places that if you are a motorsport or track day enthusiast you have to visit at least once in your life. ■