

FEATURE: GREEN HELL, SILVER DREAM MACHINE



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I have very little experience with track days. I have owned in the last 5 years: a Mini Cooper S, Porsche 997C2S and now the awesome Nissan R35 GTR, but I would not have a clue what "lift off oversteer" means let alone be brave enough to try it.

David Yu, whom I met at the excellent Nissan Race Academy last year at the Nurburgring - where I drove the GTR on the Nurburgring GP track for the first time - asked if I could write an article about the car and the Nordschleife following my second trip there on the weekend 8th and 9th August 2009. I have attempted to do so and focus on the practical aspects of getting there and the "Ring Experience" from the point of view of a novice.



Pre-travel

My number one tip here is to get as much virtual practice in before you get there. After two laps (approximately 13 miles a lap) in my Porsche last year and no clue about the track I was dripping in sweat, felt car sick and needed a rest. The Ring is a frightening place if you have no clue about the track. You don't have line of sight into many corners particular the fast ones. I recall Jackie Stewart saying something along the lines of if you're not scared at the Ring you're not driving hard enough!

Youtube and GT4 on my PS2 were my two main training tools for this trip. PS2 gives you no idea of how up and down the real track is (over a 1000ft of elevation changes) but it does give you some confidence and familiarity of the parts of the track and where you can expect to go fast and where the twisty bits are. Unless you have a lot of time on your hands you will not remember all of the 73 (official - I swear there are many more) bends when you get there. Youtube is much better to give you a feel of the up and down nature. There a raft of videos so I will avoid posting links.

If it is your first time also spend a little time on the internet to understand that this is a toll road (and the road rules that apply), your insurance position (many policies now exclude the Nurburgring Nordschleife by name and even if they don't I am sure you will not want to test it) and some other practical information including the best route to get there (although with everyone having sat nav it is difficult to get lost). Ben Lovejoy's website is a good single source of all information Ring related. [www.nurburgring.org.uk]

I can't speak for the hotels as on both trips I have stayed at the Hotel Am Tiergarten owned by Sabine Schmitz's parents (she of the attempt to get a Transit to lap in under 10 minutes around the Ring on Top Gear). It is a nice hotel (better than its 3 star rating - and I do stay at a lot of 5 star hotels for work) and quite affordable with the well known Pistekenlause restaurant attached which is full of racing memorabilia. The Dorint is bigger and flashier and I think more expensive.

Lastly, and stating the obvious, do check (and check again a few days before - the calendar can change) that the track is open to the public and at what time. The times are listed on nuerburgring.de under "Touristen Fahrten". It is often open for just two hours in the evening so don't be fooled into thinking it is open all day. You want to find a day when it is open from the morning (around 10.00 or 11.00) until closing (generally 16.30 - 19.30 depending on time of the year and daylight).

In terms of the GT-R itself, not a lot of preparation is required. I did take it to my HPC to have it set up for "track". Seems be £200 odd for a change of camber!! All the other race settings (suspension, transmission and traction control) are done via the switches in the car. I think I will just leave it with this set up. Some adverse tyre wear but I think cheaper in the long term than paying to switch between set ups.



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Travel

Door to door for me (South London and via the Chunnel) is around 7 hours which makes a weekend trip possible. We left early (3.00am) Sat morning and got home around 10.00pm Sunday night and got nearly two full days of driving in.

My main tip on the actual trip is this: Fill up your tank..... particularly if you are driving on a Sunday. Lots of petrol stations, even on the main motorways, close on Sundays on the continent. David can attest to the pleasures of running out of fuel when his thirsty Corvette ran out last year on his way down for the Nissan Race Academy. I am not sure if it is just my cars, but both the Porsche and the GTR tend to tempt you into believing you could make it with a single full tank. I have not tempted fate and tested the accuracy of the trip computer.

Apart from that, the drive is quite easy. Around 4.5 hours from Calais with a stop for petrol and you are generally heading east towards Brussels and then Leuven where you have the choice to keep heading east towards Aachen (where you enter Germany) before heading south on the A61 autobahn or, alternatively, from Leuven you head south east toward Liege and then onto B roads in Germany (heading north east) to the Ring. I have tried both ways and am undecided. The autobahns (A4 and A61) on the way home on Sunday were terrible - lots of traffic and roadworks whereas the B roads through Germany get a little frustrating when you can't pass slower traffic. RHD cars don't let you get a good view around vehicles in front of you on the continent, so overtaking - if you are by yourself - (I had my father in law calling out passing opportunities) can be a little hairy.

I got one little stretch on the autobahn on Sunday to nail the GTR and got it to 158 mph (252 km/h) but it lasted less than a minute. I was hoping to test 188 mph (300 km/h) on a suitable stretch but it was not to be.

The Belgian roads are wonderful (a little noisy as there are lots of concrete stretches) but I kept my right foot under control as I am told that the Belgian police are not fans of fast cars....

Once you're there

If you leave early and get there around 11.00am like we did - stuff the hotel - go straight to the circuit and try to park in the main carpark. Both times when I have got there for just after the supposed opening time the track was not open. Last time it was due to fog and last year it was due to a diesel race car spilling 70 litres of diesel on the track the day before.

The car park is a wonderful place to check out the cars. Everything from stripped down old Golfs (who will usually kick your a**e on the circuit through corners) to full race set up Porsche GT3s are there. Last weekend I saw one other R35 GTR (in DMG) with German plates. The GTR got a lot of attention with lots of photos and people poring over it. The usual comments are about how big the car is and how good / muscular / aggressive it looks.

Ok. I have to admit to something here. I get car sick when I drive around a circuit (yes even when I am driving - as I found out last year at the Ring). I therefore have to drug up when I get there and let the drugs take effect (around 45 minutes). I tried this for the first time on this trip and it worked a treat. Most motion sickness drugs actually make you drowsy so you need a legal "upper" to offset the effect. I got some guidelines on this from the US Coastguard instructions for pilots which I found on the internet. I figure if it's OK for them it must be OK for a mere driver doing a few laps of the Ring. Anyway, it did mean that regardless of whether the track was open when I got there, I had to wait a bit.

Once you are ready to go for a lap or two all you need to do is buy a ticket at the ticket office right by the car park and entrance. The ticket is actually a plastic proximity card which is a nice souvenir to keep. Even though it gets cheaper the more laps you buy (eg: EUR 22 for one lap but EUR 145 for 8 laps, ie: EUR 18.12 per lap), do think about how many laps you are really going to manage and the fact that the laps expire on 31 December each year. On a busy day, like on the Sunday we were there, we only managed 5 laps in around 4 hours with the queuing, needing to let the GTR cool down (see below), getting petrol and the accidents which closed the circuit at least once. You cannot get a refund on the unused laps.

It is hard to not let the adrenalin get to you when you are waiting to get onto the track. I don't really have any tips here but all I can say is think of how it's going to feel (and what it is going to cost) if you put it into the Armco. At least take it easy to start. The initial section of the track (you do not start at the same spot where the lap record setting and the GT4 videogame start) is actually very fast as you come on towards the end of the mega long straight which usually is the end of a timed lap. It does however turn into a few tight turns quite quickly where the track meets the GP circuit. You will build up speed even on the first lap. I think the best advice is to think of it as a fast road rather than a racetrack and soak up the experience. You will (unless you have done 100s of laps) get passed by "locals" who know every corner. I got used to that quite quickly!



What about the GTR man!!

I only really have the Porsche to compare it to. First of all, I can't understand why people compare the GTR to the Porsche, notwithstanding Nissan's firm focus on the 997 Turbo. At least in relation to the 997 C2S the cars are so different. The Porsche is a much smaller and lighter car with much more civilised and slower acceleration and actually a lot more feedback before you have an "oh s**t" moment.

The GTR is pure brute force. In RRR mode and with my basic driving skills I learnt that you can floor the accelerator quite early out of a corner and the electronics will ensure you don't lose it. Braking however is a little more hairy. This is a heavy car and can get out of shape under heavy braking. Also, I found the rev limiter a little gentle. You can bump up against it without really knowing - the Porsche really let you know when you hit the rev limit. I learnt that you don't have to change down as much. With all that torque 2nd is really only needed for a few corners. Without always being in the 6,000 - 7,000rpm the rev limiter issue kind of disappeared.

The GTR's gearbox (as I already knew from road driving) is just unbelievable and makes most of the difference in this car compared to rivals I believe. The gear changes are imperceptible and lightning quick. It is also idiot proof in manual (good for me) and you can't change down if your speed is too high.

The only annoying thing I found with the GTR is that you need to watch the transmission temperature (together with oil and coolant temperature as well as transmission and engine oil pressure it is available on one of the many screens you can call up). Above 110 C deg (used to be 120 deg) the Nissan servicing schedule requires the transmission, diff and engine oil to be changed within 1,800 miles. Above 140 deg this has to happen immediately to keep your warranty. My HPC quoted me around £1,000 for a "juice change". Middlehurst Motorsport in St Helens has this down to around £604 so I know where I will be going if this is required. For my driving, it pretty much got to 110 deg on a single lap (a little over to be honest). Best way to get this back to mid to high 90s is to take it out on the road in 6th doing around 40 mph. A bit of a pain really and affected the number of laps we got in.

With both the Porsche and GTR you really need to keep an eye on the petrol gauge. I estimated the GTR would do 4 -5 laps with a full tank and it is easy to forget the petrol situation when you are having so much fun. There is a petrol station on the A258 about 5 minutes away that sells 98 RON petrol and is open on Sunday. We actually had it showing 0 miles at one point because we just did not look. [100RON available in Adenau - highly recommended for GT-Rs and other turbos! - ed]

I don't really have much else to say about the car itself other than the GTR was a beast on the track and then was a faultless cruiser as we immediately headed off about 3.00pm on Sunday to make our 8.20pm Chunnel crossing. Maybe it's too early to call it but it does seem as well built and "bullet proof" as the Porsche which was ever dependable but a little boring.



Post return

The car is still on the track alignment set up and I have not yet had the post trackday inspection done as I am doing a driver's course with 6 other GTR drivers in September. The GTRs have a "black box" and the data is downloaded when you go to the HPC to see if anything needs changing (like the expensive juices).

The other thing to try and get a hold of is some photos. I had some photos taken by my father in law at Brunchen corner. I dropped him off after he did a couple of laps. There is however a simpler solution; there are always professional

photographers taking photos. The trick is to get a hold of them. Generally they use one or more websites - a Google search of "nurburgring photographers" or similar will yield some results. The photos of my GTR included with this article were taken by my father in law and the close up taken by Mark Nauta (thanks to him for letting me use it here) and I think was the best photo. I found it via a Dutch forum: <http://www.nurburgring.nl/forum/> under the "Fotos and Videos" which directed me to his website: www.marknauta.nl

Also, wait a week or two, as some photographers take a while to load up photos. You can generally buy the high res JPEG file for a reasonable amount and print them up yourself as many times as you like..... anyone thinking Christmas cards here?

Apart from that the only other thing to do post your return is plan the next trip. I can't recommend the Nurburgring in the R35 highly enough. In fact anyone in any car should make the trip at some point. You can even rent cars which are allowed to be used on the Nurburgring (about EUR 500 per day for something decent like a BMW 335i).

I can't help but think that this spectacle will close to the public in my lifetime. Where else can you legally go flat out in any car with no safety inspection, have bikes zipping around at the same time (there are always bikes!), have no real rules (other than pass on the left) and no need to even wear a helmet. All this where you could easily come off at very high speed (as evidenced by the numerous accidents that happen every day and an ambulance standing by at all times) and where there is generally very little room for error?

I am already scheming for my next leave pass to get back before winter this year.