

» The Enthusiast



NICK MASON

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Nick Mason

I know I've been doing this column too long when I realise I'm launching (or in this case lunching) into a repeat of where I was this time last year. Back to Bahrain – no support race this year, and my God, what a difference. Instead of endless attempts to learn the line around a challenging circuit (that's 'challenging' in the Government-speak meaning of 'not a hope'), it was unrelenting fun.

Aided and abetted by Rory Bremner, a man who can do an impression of Sir Jackie Stewart that's better than the real thing, we loitered around the paddock being such a nuisance that eventually both Sir Jackie and Ron Dennis (now perceived as the Fagin of Formula One, as his child exploitation racket reaches new heights of success with Lewis Hamilton) were forced to take us around the Williams and McLaren pits for a tour.

I should confess that initially I'd loved watching Hamilton drive brilliantly last year, but had remarked that half of the rest of the F1 drivers would be equally capable of finishing on the podium this year driving the McLaren. I now feel that I'll tuck in to a nice slice of humble pie with lashings of custard served from the McLaren hospitality unit. To be chased by a clone of Bender, the mad robot from

Futurama, in a Ferrari for lap after lap and still not make a mistake is proper driving, and we can only hope that Lewis isn't so good that everyone else gets demoralised, gives up and goes historic racing.

Our pit tour was a reminder of just how complicated motor racing now is. It's not just the banks of computers, exotic metal mechanical thingamajigs and yards of well-pressed slacks and emblazoned polo shirts; it's the lack of Radweld and Isopton, and the sheer cleanliness. I know I'd rather have an operation in an F1 garage than in an NHS hospital.

Having been given some idea of the information used to define race strategy, our next successful hustle was to get hold of a couple of Kangaroos. These are the latest wheeze, a mini portable TV that gives a race spectator the regular commentary feed, a choice of in-car cameras (select your favourite driver), race positions, lap times and all the information needed to become the most

irritatingly knowledgeable anorak in the grandstand. More disturbing is that it also takes all attention away from watching the real thing as, head buried in the figures on screen, you miss some massive spin under your nose.

The race itself was once again terrific. Formula One moves on so quickly that Schumacher and Montoya appear forgotten as Massa, Raikkonen, Alonso and Hamilton punch it out at the front of the grid...

And for me the icing on my cake was a trip around the circuit the day after in a GT3 Porsche with David Coulthard at the wheel – there really didn't seem much advice I could give him – followed by a brief road trip in the Bugatti Veyron. I think I'll try for a drive before saying much other than that, if that was the trailer, it's a 'must see' film.

On our return to the UK, the temperature seemed fairly

similar so, retaining our pith helmets and anti-snake serum, Mrs M and I headed off to a disused airfield somewhere north of London to polish our skills as anti-hijack drivers. Not a constant threat to us, I have to admit, but it's best to be prepared.

SpeedSkills is a family business, but a lot more congenial than the one that is the Schumacher brothers. These three guys are not only

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driving instructors, but they can teach on motorcycles, cars, HGVs, armoured vehicles, armoured JCBs, and probably unicycles and the military version of the Sinclair C5 too. Oh, and when they've got time off they like to relax by winning the odd trials bike event.

As an experience day it really does transcend standing about in a pit garage waiting for a few laps in a clapped-out Formula Ford. You know you're getting value when they change the tyres yet again because they are worn down to the metal. The mysteries of the J and Y turns – possibly the best show-off driving manoeuvres ever – were revealed; best of all though is instructor Mick Croome's ability to hum the theme tune from The Professionals as the car slides sideways toward a fairly solid bank at the edge of the concrete.

I'll give a shameless plug for this operation (see www.speedskills.co.uk) on the basis that they might let me come again, and work on fast reversing and the Y turn...