Experiences with the new Rolls-Royce Phantom

Even we German Rolls-Royce enthusiasts have problems with the fact that Rolls-Royce is no longer as British as it used to be. And so I got the idea of writing a photographic report about the new Rolls-Royce Phantom that would show the new car together with all its predecessors, integrating the car into the ancestral line of the 'big' Rolls-Royce cars, and demonstrating that the new Phantom is not only a true Rolls-Royce but also a true Rolls-Royce Phantom.

From the 22nd to the 25th August 2003 I had the great privilege of experiencing this car because Mr. Ulrich Knieps, Sales Director of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars in Germany, allowed me to take a pre-production car home to take pictures for this report. Mr. Knieps was extremely kind, helpful and flexible – and within a short time we found a date, although it was extremely difficult to get a car at that time.

All completed cars had been delivered immediately to their customers (mainly in the USA) and so, unfortunately, Rolls-Royce could hardly build up its own stock of cars. Therefore they had to use pre-production cars for such purposes as Club events, photo-shoots, test driving or presentations. But these few cars were spread all over Europe. The car shown here had come back from Monaco the night before I picked it up!

The driving experience cannot be imagined

I was allowed to pick the car up during my company's lunch time. I was warmly welcomed by Mr. Martijn Oremus of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars who tried to explain to me everything within 45 minutes. After closing the doors I entered another world. The key pushed into the lock, the starter pressed, a quiet noise as if an engine was running, and then there was silence everywhere again.

Having selected "D", released the brakes, you embark on a driving experience that has never been felt before: the Phantom seems to float away without an engine! You find yourself in an oasis of absolute silence. Stress is kept outside. Even strong acceleration only lets you hear the merest whisper.

The gigantic bonnet shrinks and the Phantom becomes a small car. The driver's position is very high (last seen on the Phantom VI) giving a fantastic view ahead. As soon as you reach the next traffic lights and stop, the car becomes a giant again and you look down on all the other drivers in their small cars (even those who do not seem to be small) or you can stare straight into the faces of the pedestrians.

First of all I had to go back to my office where a colleague guided me into the parking space of our underground car park. This was a quite difficult task and I really saw how big this car actually is. Despite being constructed for big cars such as the Mercedes S-Type, the Phantom seemed to be out of place in this garage and I was happy having parked the car without any damage. But I must admit that the handling of the steering is excellent in every way, and you get further help by the acoustic parking signals.

The main reason why I was driving this car was, as mentioned before, a very special photo-shoot at the collection of one of our Club members. This must be one of the largest collections of Rolls-Royces and Bentleys ever seen. The cars may not be concours but all are kept in running condition and there are just two models missing: a Phantom IV and a Ghost.

The drive to the collection was a typical test drive mixture of Autobahn, country roads, narrow roads between fields, and lovely small villages. The weather was excellent and the landscape most picturesque. The direct and easy going steering, the high driving position and the fantastic view over the bonnet, crowned by the Spirit of Ecstasy made this drive a very special experience.

The balance this car offers is phenomenal. Although the character does not encourage you to drive it sportily, the knowledge that you have more power than you really ever need encourages you to try at least one kick-down when joining the autobahn.

One cannot describe the way it accelerates without having experienced it first-hand. Just 5.9 seconds from 0 to 100 km/h at a weight of 2.6 tons with hardly any noise is unbelievable. This is even more fascinating when thinking of the fact that many supercars are not much better.

The maximum speed I reached was about 170 km/h; which in the Phantom seems like 100 km/h in normal cars. Because of the fact that there is no wind noise at all, it is very important to look at the speedometer from time to time in case you are not used to this extraordinary state of calm.

The hitherto unknown levels of comfort (and handling) of the suspension - that make every surface seem to be flat - can no longer be compared with the sort of gliding which we know from former Rolls-Royce cars, although their comfort has always been fabulous indeed! But there is no description for the feeling you have when riding in the new Phantom. Maybe a summary could be like this:

Driving in the Phantom is not simply driving in a car; it is even not driving in a Rolls-Royce. It is an experience of the third kind, an unknown dimension of being transported in an automobile.

The Rolls-Royce Phantom as concert hall

My colleague loves Opera - especially those of Richard Wagner. Before we went our separate ways for the weekend we tried out the sound system with his music. I tell you, it sounds so realistic that it is breathtaking, and I cannot imagine where this music can sound better than in the Phantom. Even in Bayreuth it can hardly be a better experience.

Reactions on the new Rolls-Royce Phantom

Of course I had many talks and discussions about this car, and it was a relief to notice that for most people the Phantom is not a “Mega-BMW” but a Rolls-Royce!

I must admit here that I do not yet own a Rolls-Royce, and so these cars are extremely rare in the street where I live. Although our neighbour’s wife has never seen the Phantom before, she soon called her husband, shouting out. “Mr. Ehrhardt has just arrived in a Rolls-Royce!!” This should be proof enough that the Phantom is easily recognised as a Rolls. Another neighbour could not believe that this was the newest Rolls-Royce because the design seemed too classic to him.

Reactions of people ranged from wonderment to enthusiasm. When passing by I only saw happy faces of people who were pleased to see the Phantom. Many people waved and smiled, other car-drivers passed by respectfully, or gave way as a young woman did when I drove out of the car park of a supermarket. She applauded, put both thumbs up and enjoyed the car from every angle. But the nicest experience was when I was standing at the first traffic lights that Saturday. There an excited young man hurried to the car and asked me to run the windows down. Then he spoke in perfect English: “Do you know where I’m goin’

tomorrow? I´m goin´ to Goodwood, building Rolls-Royces!”

The new Rolls-Royce Phantom really is a Rolls-Royce Phantom

Its presence on the road really is striking. It was lunchtime in spring 2003 when I saw the Phantom on the road for the very first time. There was a long row of cars passing by. Suddenly I spotted a gigantic car; the roof was higher and wider than of any other car. I was sure this must be a Rolls-Royce. Finally it stopped at the front of some traffic lights with other cars beside it. I was more than impressed. When seeing this car in the streets of a city, there is no doubt that this is not only a Rolls-Royce. This is a true Phantom.

The Saturday I took the pictures shown here, I had the great chance of not only viewing many different types of Rolls-Royce motorcars; but driving most of them too. Now the Silver Shadow or the Silver Seraph cannot be called small cars. Measuring more than 5m they are some of the biggest made. But when swapping from the new Phantom to one of the others, they really seem to be tiny and sweet little cars indeed. It’s there that you see and feel that the Phantom is a car positioned one class above all Shadows, Spirits and Seraphs. It clearly belongs to the 'big' Rolls-Royce cars. When entering it you get the experience of the Phantom VI: you seem to go up rather than down!

The new Rolls-Royce Phantom may just be a saloon with only four or five seats, whereas the Phantoms V and VI were usually delivered as limousines and seven seaters. There are numerous examples of four and five seaters among all Phantoms found in Rolls-Royce history. But since these were mainly built on Phantom III

chassis, the new car's character is more similar to that of a Phantom III or Silver Wraith Saloon - particularly when you consider the Phantom III, like the modern Phantom, is a V12. The Silver Wraith would be the best post-war car to match the new Phantom's character because, after the war, this was actually the first 'big' Rolls-Royce available to everybody - until the Phantom V was introduced. The Phantom IV should be considered separately as it could only be ordered by heads of state. So it made sense to use a Silver Wraith for the photograph above.

Looking at the row of cars the character of the new car is as it should be for a Rolls-Royce called Phantom; mighty, elegant, aristocratic and majestic.

U121610 is – as mentioned above – a pre-production car with special “Theatre” equipment, showing two single seats in the rear. The car is painted in Anthrazite/silver sand with Oatmeal leather and Mahogany.

Summing up this weekend is very hard for me because there are no words that could in any way describe the experience of driving the new Rolls-Royce Phantom. Maybe I will try it like this:

Sir Henry would have been proud of this masterpiece.

Until the Phantom II was introduced the Phantom I was called "New Phantom". So these pictures show two new Phantoms but the difference in age is 75 years!

At the end I must express my warmest thanks to the following, who helped realised this photographic project and who put so much trust in me:

Mr. Karl-Heinz Kalbfell (Vice President BMW Group Marketing), whose contacts were vital for realising my idea, Mr. Ulrich Knieps (Sales Director Rolls-Royce Motor Cars) for quickest and most flexible help in finding a delivery date, Mr. Martijn Oremus (sales department Rolls-Royce Motor Cars) for his kind way of explaining the car and being available 24 hours per day, Mr. Fred Fruth (General Manager Public Affairs Rolls-Royce Motor Cars) for kindly answering questions and our Club member who offered his collection to be photographed.

Michael Ehrhardt is an enthusiastic member of the German Rolls-Royce Enthusiasts' Club. Visit (www.rrec.de) and you will see more examples of his excellent photography.

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Gallery

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