

CLASSIC DRIVER

Due North - driving the latest cars at P1's second UK branch



Your author excepted, not everyone has the chance of getting behind the wheel of two of the most desirable cars out there in the same day. Perhaps that might be stretching things for prestige and performance car club P1's average members, but that was exactly what I did recently, delivering the latest edition to the P1 stable, Bentley's gorgeous drop-top Continental GTC to P1 North and returning a Ford GT to the southern branch near London.

And neither of these cars were ones I had driven before, which just about sums up the idea behind P1, as P1 North's general manager Nick Bailey explains, "There's no typical P1 member, but most of them already have at least one nice car in their garage and membership brings the opportunity to drive many more, perhaps ones they wouldn't really buy themselves, but cars that are exciting and interesting without any of the long-term issues of depreciation, insurance and maintenance.

"Not to mention the hassles of storing a very wide and low supercar, perhaps in a metropolitan environment where secure parking is at a premium. It's a chance to really enjoy yourself in one of the best cars in the world without the worries, and playing your 'points' carefully means on average, current P1 members are experiencing around 50 to 70 days driving per year. Probably more than many 'owners'.

"Many of them take advantage of vehicles like the Range Rover Sport to take children back to university, while saving the Bentley Continental GTC for a family occasion or wedding."

The 'points' Bailey refers to are of course the well-known way of apportioning your membership over the broad range of cars in the Club. Having paid a one-off joining fee (£2,500), members can opt for either 'Monaco' (£13,750) or 'Silverstone' (£11,750) membership that allots so many points - that are weighted seasonally - and so many miles per year.

So a Ferrari 430 Spider in July is going to cost more than it would in March, but would still provide a fantastic ride down to Monaco for a long weekend even at that time of year. The cars in the top bracket (5) include the Continental GTC and Ford GT, but a Group 1 Porsche Cayman S is still a very nice car for filling in the gaps in a motoring year.



This is the second P1 visit I have made, but the first to the latest branch situated just off the M6 motorway in Cheshire. Launched last year for a limited number of members in the North West, the unassuming offices reveal an immaculate selection of cars safely hidden away, and plenty of parking for your car to be left for however long you intend to be away (they can also deliver 'at cost' and meet members at the airport).

Each member and their 'life partners' are required to complete a performance car control day before commencing their membership at a cost of £790 per couple, so you get a pretty good idea that the other car users are likely to behave responsibly, and the Club operates an 'honesty box' system whereby small scratches and wheel kerbings are paid for - again at cost - by the membership.

It means that you will collect a superbly prepared and valeted car that is probably only a few months old anyway, and something you'd be proud to say was 'yours'. Although you'd have to own up to a long-lost school friend that the gleaming Ferrari 599GTB was only in your possession for the weekend wouldn't you?

Driving the cars

As previously mentioned, both the Bentley and the Ford GT were new to me, so under the not ideal conditions of heavy rain I can offer the following brief review.

First off was the Bentley, made at Crewe, just a few miles away from P1 North's offices. If the styling does not appeal to more restrained enthusiasts, a few miles behind the wheel will reveal a car that has clearly had an unlimited amount of money lavished on its development. The finish is so superb you'd have to step up to a Rolls-Royce Phantom to find the equivalent. Despite the inclement weather the fabric hood gave not a murmur or whistle and the glass rear screen remained completely clear despite the best the British climate could throw at it.

The performance channelled through the 4wd system has been well described elsewhere, the colossal amounts of torque available at low revs meaning the six-speed auto does not have to work very hard and the car has a mile-crushing ability that's probably unmatched for two adults and occasional rear seat passengers. You can see why the cars are so popular and given the choice of taking anything on a long trans-European journey you couldn't go wrong with the Continental in either open or closed versions.



Make sure you have your fuel stops planned in advance though - the consumption in traffic is frightening, and *you're* paying for that remember...

It was a journey back south for the Ford GT, another motorway trip but this time from a driving position some way lower, on the 'wrong' side of the cabin and in one of the *w i d e s t* cars out there. Having said that, I got used to it pretty quickly and after adjusting the passenger side mirror down, to see the road markings, I felt it was OK, although I wouldn't fancy a lot of fiddly town or country roads.

It's a well-built car, though obviously not in the same league as the Bentley, and the seating and driving position with the trademark central-located pedals is a comfortable one. Light clutch and fairly long-throw gearchange prove it's not a road racing car, however it needs respect as with no traction control and a 550 bhp engine it'll bite if you don't get it quite right.

A very smooth, quiet and powerful motor provides quite a relaxing ride for a long run with hints of monster performance to come. It feels heavy (1585 kg vs 1450 kg for an F430 Coupé) though, and lacks the finesse and rapier-like sharpness of an Italian mid-engined car but all-in-all, I liked it a lot. But perhaps not to own.

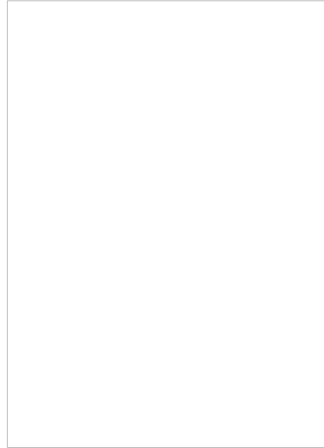
Which brings us back to where we came in, the P1 Club and the advantages of experiencing a variety of cars

for the sort of money that owning just one would cost (and more) a year.

It's worth thinking about.

For further information about P1 North membership visit www.p1international.com or telephone +44 (0) 1606 737954, email: north@p1international.com.

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