
Fellowship of the Ring: Learning the Nordschleife with Jaguar

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In a sight reminiscent of 'bend ze knees' 1970s skiing lessons, three high-performance Jaguars, novices at the wheel, painstakingly followed the racing line set by an acknowledged 'Ringmeister'.

And your Editor was behind the wheel of one of them, achieving a lifelong aim to drive at the famous 'Ring.

The occasion? One of the British company's by-invitation-only days at the famous 'Green Hell': the daunting Nordschleife circuit at the Nürburgring.

Jaguar has had a base in the Eifel Mountains for many years, using the circuit for performance and endurance testing (with de-restricted Autobahn only a short drive away). It describes lapping the 13-mile circuit, built in the 1920s to draw business to the area, as the "enthusiastic driver robustness

test”.



So, can driving instruction from a team of aces under the leadership of driving academy head Tom Schwister give raw recruits some idea of how to drive at the Nordschleife?

The way it works is that an expert (in our case, the marvellous Axel Hoffmann) drives the lead XKR-S with a two-way radio permanently on in his cabin. The three learners (driving a LWB XJ Supersports, an XFR and an XKR-S, in rotation, so everyone gets a go in a different car) then follow in his wheeltracks, with Hoffman's wise words broadcast in our cars via receiving walkie-talkies.

It's a closed instruction day today. So no coaches, bikes or souped-up Golfs to get in the way. Starting from standstill on the long home straight, Hoffmann ups the pace and we are soon travelling at a brisk speed.



It's much narrower than I had imagined. It's also featureless in parts, with many (it has 76, depending on how you count them) corners looking very similar to each other. A mistake? Well, let's not even think of it – as Hoffmann says, “when you are out in the green stuff, you are really on your own”, helpfully pointing out where Niki Lauda nearly lost his life in 1976.

Bit by bit, corner by corner, it begins to make sense. Many sections are really one long corner – often blind – with dips and crests, yet can be taken with the smallest steering input. ‘Can be’ being the operative phrase. It's all too easy to come bowling into a corner, trying your best to clip entry, apex

and exit markers, yet over-braking and steering too violently to make up time lost by sloppy driving. So many times the electronic safety systems of the Jaguars come to our aid. A little too often, in the case of the XFR that, out of all three cars, is the one with traction control most likely to intervene. While one would expect the XKR-S to provide the fastest ride, the supercharged LWB XJ proved a surprise hit with everyone: forget about the length of car behind you, just look at the road ahead and enjoy the car's 510bhp.

Flugplatz, Schwalbenschwanz, the Karussell and Pflanzgarten: famous names evoking multi-coloured memories of Hans Stuck jumping the BMW 'Batmobile', superlative drives by Jackie Stewart, Jim Clark and Stirling Moss, and Derek Bell setting astonishing times with a camera on board his Rothmans Porsche 962.

It's soon over. The Nordschleife bug has well and truly bitten. Time, though, for one last treat: a flying passenger lap in an XKR-S with Klaus Panchyrz, one of the three instructors on hand that day.



Sitting low in the car, the man who ran wheel-to-wheel with Michael Schumacher in F3 takes the car by the scruff of its elegant neck and makes it do things we novices could only dream about. He hardly touches the brakes. His steering input is minimal. What he does do is get every single corner so perfectly right that they merge into one, flowing sweep. Flugplatz is jumped with a reassuring crunch of spoiler on Tarmac, the Karussell judged to perfection.

It is extraordinarily fast driving. With an "everything OK? I can slow down if you like..." he tears into the circuit. It was an experience I shall never forget.

And hats off to the XKR-S. This is one heck of a car: powerful, with beautiful handling yet very smooth and quiet – even at the 160-180km/h Panchyrz was taking many corners.

Oh, and by the way, please note he did the whole lap in Sport automatic gearshift mode, something which shamed us novices who had been frantically using the paddles to keep up with the pro ahead.

Oh well. I need a bit more practice – roll on my next trip to the 'Ring. We hope the video brings you a taste of what was an unforgettable day.

Photos / Video: Jaguar

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