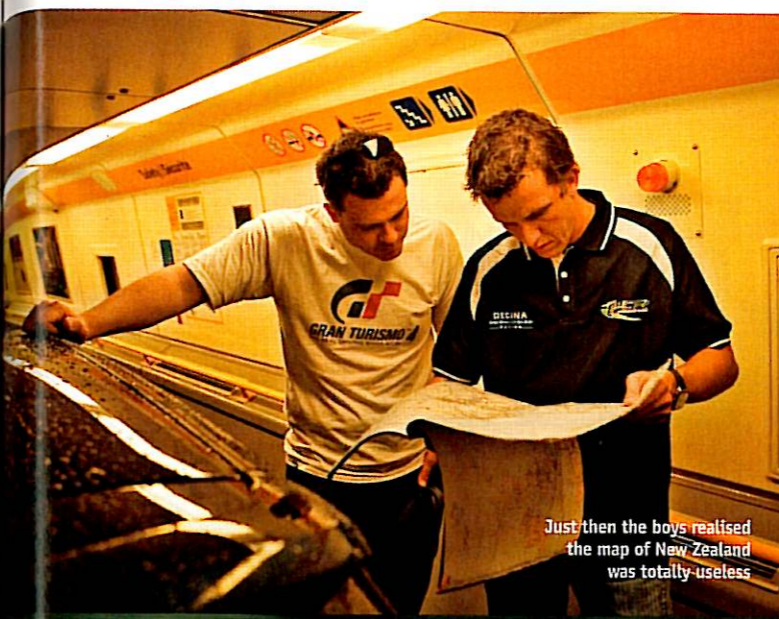




Someone's left a... and the keys... it. Let's go!

"All aboard" called the Fat Controller, and Thomas started his journey to France



Just then the boys realised the map of New Zealand was totally useless

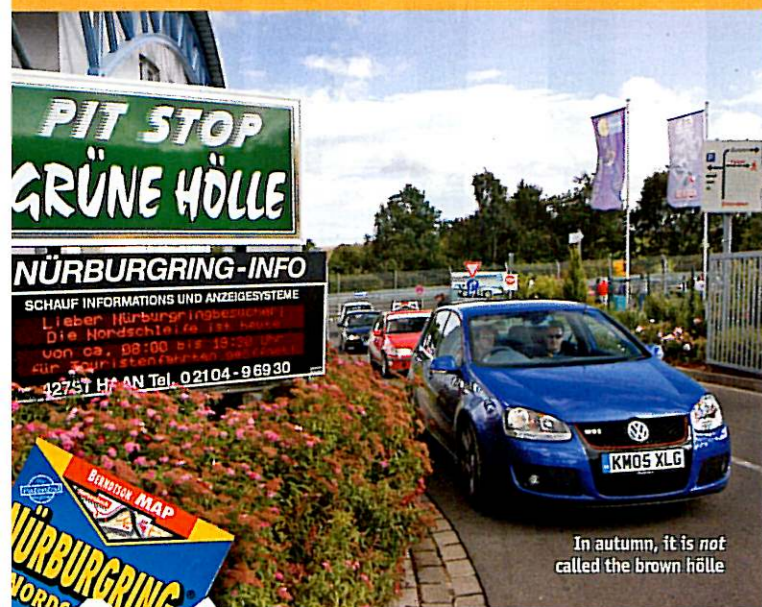
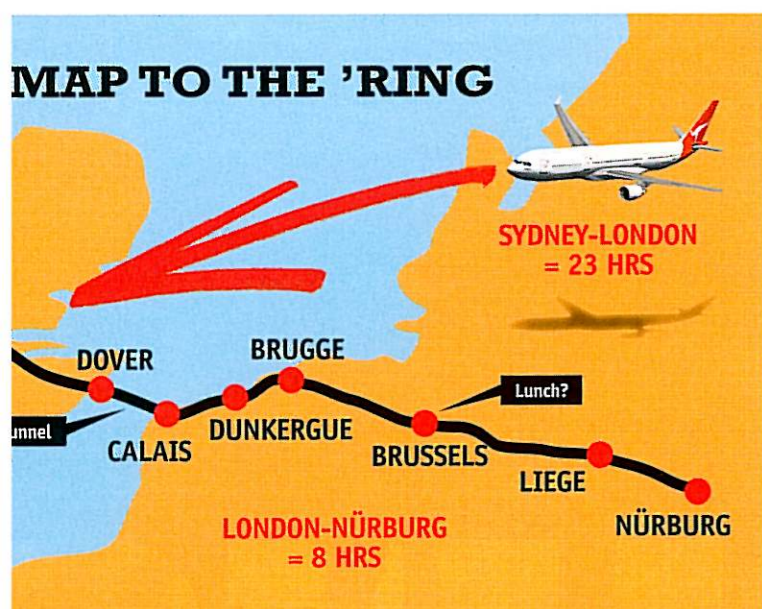


DIY GUIDE TO THE 'RING

STORY DEAN EVANS PHOTOS MARK BRAMLEY

MOTOR's guide to getting to and around the best track in the world, the awesome Nürburgring Nordeschleife





Nürburgring Nordescheife; that's its full name. Learn it, because the Nordeschleife (north loop) is the difference between referring to the glorious and historic 20.8km, and the 5km of modernised, sanitised F1 south circuit. Though not having held a Formula 1 GP since 1977, the 21st century has breathed new life into the Nordeschleife. It's a test track to many serious manufacturers, it's the halo track on Sony's *Gran Turismo 4*, and it still hosts a 24 hour production car race every June. It's an incredible place that any car enthusiast should visit. We know, because we've just returned with all the info a travelling Aussie needs to know to get themselves to what is the world's best road and track.

GETTING THERE Flights from Australia to Germany are available, but getting to the Nürburgring is just as much fun as being there, so we made it more of a driving holiday by using London as our base. Flight costs from Sydney to London vary with seasons and carriers, but ours was \$2200 return with Qantas; many other airlines were under \$2000. Accommodation in London is painfully expensive so shop around on websites like www.hotels.com, wotif.com.au or lastminute.com.au. A basic twin-share room costs around £100 per night in London, about \$230AUD. The chosen car isn't too important. Some rental companies specifically exclude coverage at Nürburgring, and some have mileage limits. If you're after something special, Avis in Germany, for example, rents a new Porsche 911 for 240 Euros (\$375) per day, including Nürburgring coverage. Being our first time to the 'Ring, we chose a Golf GTI with DSG and cruise control, but there are cars available like 350Z, RX-8 and Boxster. Just remember if it's booked in London, parking charges – and fines – are ludicrously high. The most important consideration is when to go. As the track all but closes during winter, the northern hemisphere summer is best around June-August – and the track is only open during daylight hours. Manufacturers, clubs and driving schools all book the track for exclusive private use too, so check the official website's public dates to avoid major disappointment. The trip across the English Channel also needs planning. There's a ferry, but the faster way is the Euro Tunnel. Around



It's a test home, halo track on *GT4* and still hosts a 24 hour race in June





Ever heard the expression 'shiny side up'? Not this guy!

\$400 return isn't cheap, but it's the fastest way to Western Europe by car. See www.eurotunnel.com.

We left London Friday morning, which would allow us a few hours of track time that evening. Our plan was a full weekend at the Nürburgring including the round of the German DTM race on the adjoining F1 track, and return Monday.

A map will guide you best, but the abridged instructions are: A40 arterial from London and southwest onto the M20 towards Dover's Euro Tunnel Port, an easy two hour trip. There it's through customs (remember your passport) and the loading queues. Refuel in France as petrol is cheaper.

The Euro Tunnel is an odd experience. Basically one long double-decker train, cars are guided onto the carriages and butted nose to tail. Get out, stretch and look at the views before it plunges under the sea and in just 35 minutes, you've arrived in Folkestone, France. There are a few significant changes: the time zone is one hour later, the speeds are back to km/h and most importantly, the traffic switches sides to left-hand drive (driving on the right). Refuel and it's straight onto the E40/A16 motorway towards Calais. Speed limit is 110km/h, but most cars sit on 135.

Through four countries in one day, the route cuts through France, Belgium and Germany. Head towards Brugge, onto

the A10, then towards the Brussels Ring Road. Parts of Belgium speak and spell in Flemish so the target of Liege is spelt Luik. Eastbound on the E40, head south towards Verviers and as it changes to the E42 and St Vith, it crosses into Germany towards Gerolstein and Prüm.

From there the signs towards Nürburgring will appear and by now you should have yourself sorted with a map and/or street directory. Don't rely on asking a local, because, well, they probably won't understand English.

About eight hours door to door, and no tolls, entering the town of Nürburg takes on a magical, distinct motorsport feel with signs and track maps, like Bathurst on race week.

ARRIVED Take time to fill up, and get used to paying around €60 (about \$100AUD) per 50-litre tankfull; you'll probably be doing a lot of it over the next few days.

There's plenty of accommodation in the nearby town of Adenau, but some places in Nürburg are as close as 200 metres to the track entrance. Visit www.nuerburgring.de for accommodation guides, but we spent a total of \$700AUD for three nights and three people, or \$80 each per night at Altes Forsthaus www.ringhaus.com.

Southbound, just past the famous Nürburg castle ruins,

an innocuous roundabout leads into the Nordeschleife public entry port. It's slightly odd to drive eight hours, simply insert a pass into a boom gate and drive straight onto the world's best track – but then, it's not a track. On public days, it's a speed-limit-free toll road. Helmets aren't required, carrying passengers is normal and car and driver is the only limit to speed. There are strict rules to be adhered to remember. 1) No on-track photography or filming is allowed unless you're media with a permit, though trackside photos are OK. 2) Overtaking is always done on the left and a slower car indicates to the side they wish to be overtaken on (ie: the left).

All these rules are on a board at the main office at the Nordeschleife boom gates, where there's also a restaurant/café, large car/bike park (an amazing place to see the world's best cars) and a few of the 'Ring regulars like the Zakspeed Viper www.viperjet.de. Basically a road car, for €260 a lap (\$400AUD) it's a tough sell against the official BMW Ring-Taxi. Up to three passengers can share the cost of €175 (\$275AUD) for a hot lap that takes, including introduction time, about 10 minutes. But book early on www.bmw-motorsport.com/ringtaxi, as it's sold out out months ahead and only runs from March-October.

THE RING TAXI-CAB

Want to feel the fast way around the Nordeschleife? Book a ride in the Ring-Taxi, a BMW-run program that uses the current V10 BMW M5, pro drivers and charges \$275 for up to three passengers to share. Learn the lines and track an experience the Nordeschleife the way it should be: at high speed!



It takes the Carrera GT 14km, half the track, to dispense with our \$40k Golf



"Oi, pressure bitch! 38psi rear, 40 front. Snap to it!"



Hit the kerbs the right way at Pfanzgarten and you'll see air. Here Luff simply expels it



Ze mighty Carrera GT makes light work of ze puny Volkswagen. Eventually...



Car versus bike? Not on my watch. Outta my way wheelies!

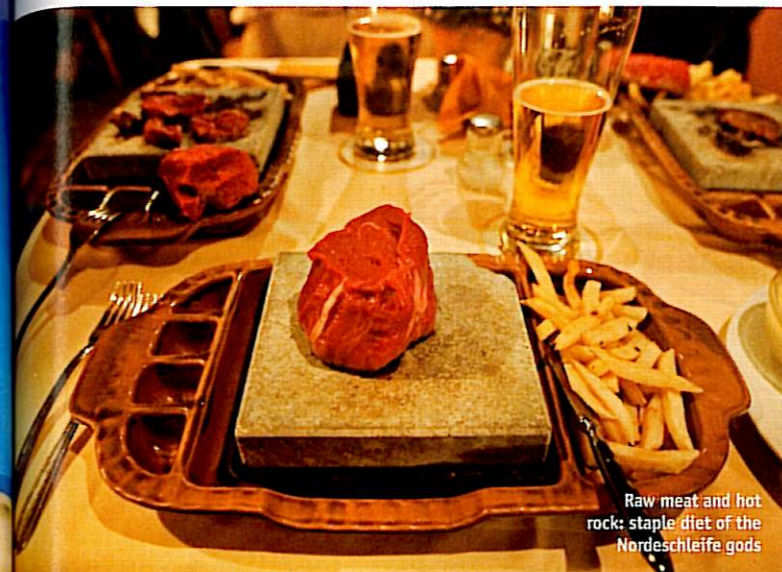
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Shell
Optimax Extreme



Raw meat and hot rock: staple diet of the Nordeschleife gods



Are you sure you didn't spike my drink? I want funny business you know

TICKETS If you intend to drive on the Nordeschleife, practice on *Gran Turismo 4*. It makes learning the track so much easier and faster and ultimately more enjoyable. And cheaper. The Nordeschleife is a toll road, taken one lap at a time. Sadly, it's not possible to blast down the main straight, as this is the track entry and exit point. After each lap, you're herded back into the pits.

At the main office, a ticket machine will sell one runde (lap) for €16 (\$25). Buy 25 runden for €300 (\$480) and it'll drop to \$19 per lap. There's also a 1.5 lap ticket, at the Breidscheid mid-entry/exit point, for €21 (\$33). Of course there's always an unlimited season pass, for €798 (\$1250). Credit cards are fine, and the staff is mostly bi-lingual if there are any questions. Another rule: no lap-timing allowed. Officially anyway. Though we won't tell.

There are three 'lap records' around Nürburgring: the full north and south circuit; the full Nordeschleife (during private track days), and the public 'bridge-to-gantry' lap. Just before the main straight's kink, an overhead bridge marks the 'start', while 200 metres after the final turn is a gantry, the finish. The 'missing straight' adds about 10-15 seconds, so consider that when hearing of 'Ring records.

TRACK TIME Absorb the track on your first lap and you'll be amazed at its gradients and length. In *GT4*, a lap takes forever, but in real life it feels half as long. The kerbs are higher, the trees line the edges and some sections really remind you that you're deep in a German forest.

After just seven laps our fuel light is already on. The nearest petrol station is the Tankstelle Döttinger Höhe, about 2km away, and also home to a model shop and all the Nürburgring merchandise you'll need, including the important track outline stickers. You'll get to know the German behind the counter too: over the weekend we filled up seven times, at an average of \$107 per tank.

Practice on *GT4* – it makes a big difference



All this way and not one 'Lord of the Ring' cliché. Oops, OK, just one

WEBSITE LINKS

Want to see some 'Ring action? Try these: www.nuerburgring.de (official homepage) www.bmwtransact.com/microsite/Nurburgring (Hans-Joachim Stuck BMW M3 GTR) www.24h-rennen.de/content/video.asp?sprache=ger&jahr=2005 (assorted 'Ring movies) http://home.btconnect.com/Elisesport/radical-sr8-6_55_lap.mpg (6.55 in a Radical)



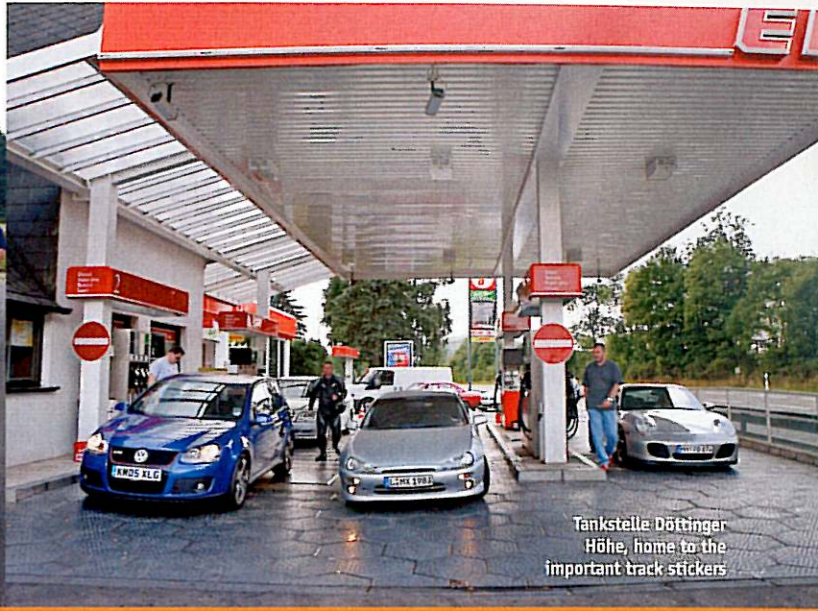
Season pass will set you back \$1250



Bus tours around the 'Ring, seen here through Wippermann, are €2 a lap



Semi-sticks, suspension tune, Brembos, almost 200kW - and still slower than our sticker!



Tankstelle Döttinger Höhe, home to the important track stickers

It's rare to do more than 2-3 laps without seeing a crashed car or bike - or worse

PRO DRIVE

With two 24 Hour races in a Peugeot 306, Warren Luff knows his way around the 'Ring

A fast lap of Nürburgring requires a fair amount of madness, bravery and skill. Divide the track into three sections. The first sector has some of the fastest sections of the track and knowing your car's limit and exactly where to position it through the high-speed Flugplatz, Schwedenkreuz and Adenauer Forst is critical. These are all 200km/h corners with a huge amount of time to be gained, but get it wrong and you will end up deep in the forest.

The most important corner in the 2nd sector is Bergwerk, the run out crucial as you wind-up flat out for 3km up to Klostertal. The Karussell is simple enough but during the 24 Hour race we took it

easy through there as it's bumpy and hard on the driveline. Many teams run around the smooth top part of the corner preferring to lose a second rather than risk potential failure.

For me the final sector contains some of the best parts. The run down through the fast Wippermann is crucial for placement. Some kerbs allow cuts, but where trees cover the road, they could be wet from overnight dew. It's important to settle the car before the crest at Pflanzgarten, and from here you start a high-speed run where you need to be very accurate. After the mini Karussell, the run onto the 3.5km back straight is determined by how you get through Gagenkopf, a fast double-apex right that you have to attack to carry as much speed as possible; a couple of km/h through here can equate to nearly a full second at the end of the straight. - WL

In 1996 and 1997, Luff raced a Peugeot 306 at the 'Ring



Back on track, motorbikes are everywhere; buses are relatively rare though they carry reasonable pace, but it's the sights and stories that make the place. You don't need a supercar to enjoy the Nordeschleife, and it's better to learn the track, not the barriers. Our VW Golf GTI DSG on Euro-spec 18-inch wheels passes 95 percent of traffic there.

Grab a map and learn the corners, because the stories will make more sense. We saw top speed into the rollercoaster that is Fuchsröhre, or 'Foxhole', a section that no video game can truly represent. It's a high-speed downhill tunnel of trees into a flat-out 210km/h stomach compressing dip and turn, before rising and braking while turning and skipping a kerb just before the braking zone into Adenauer-Forst.

There are constant reminders this track is dangerous: it's rare to do more than 2-3 laps without seeing a crashed car or a bike on its side and a dazed rider - or worse. On Saturday morning, we saw an orange Porsche GT3 slide backwards into the barrier and roll - thanks to the English chaps who caught all the action on camera. For that he earned the title 'drift tool'.

A helicopter flew in on day two, we presume, to rush an injured motorcyclist to hospital. The officials simply sweep up the mess, prepare an invoice for the track/Armco repair and the vehicle recovery and re-open the track. Marvellous!

RACE? But our best experience was when exiting the pits behind a black Porsche Carrera GT. As luck would have it, I'm riding shotgun with our enlisted pro, V8 Supercar's Warren Luff. As we start, the Porsche pulls aside and slows. Warren grabs the moment, squints his eyes and says: "let's see how long we can keep him behind!" It's on! We're flat out up the straight, under the bridge and with total commitment we pass the pits and (GT4) start line. Warren hits every braking point, traces the perfect line through every corner, and we're glancing in the mirror for the black nose of that V10 supercar. Nothing. Up Flugplatz, down into the thrilling and scary 205km/h Schwedenkreuz, as it starts to go downhill at Kallenhard there's still no sign after 8km.

Through the snaking section around Wehrseifen, rounding up bikers and slower cars, we're flat at the left kink before Bergwerk, where Nikki Lauda had his big one. It's an important corner leading into 2.5km of straight. And there it is, a black speck in the mirror. We're flat out at 160km/h but the GT passes us like we've hit the brakes, and he's gone. Until the tight right at Steilstrecke where he pops back into view, and we even pull him in at the famous Karussell. But it takes 14km, more than half the

NORDESCHLEIFE HOUSE RULES

- No cameras
- No overtaking on right
- No overtaking official cars when its lights are flashing
- Slow down for yellow flags
- No stopping on the track



Find your way to the spectator points and you'll be rewarded; this is Steilstrecke that runs up to the Karussell. [top of frame]



That's one way to strip off a panel.

The Golf earns its stripes. In the form of a sticker...

On the way back is the small town of Spa

track, for a \$1.2m Porsche Carrera GT to dispense with a well-driven \$40,000 VW Golf. And our times? Traffic effects times, but Warren's best is a bridge-to-gantry 8:46; after 20 laps I manage an 8:58. *Top Gear* UK's Jeremy Clarkson struggled to lap a Jaguar XJ in less than 10 minutes.

FINALLY When you've had your fill of driving, there's a museum, indoor kart track, Hall of Fame and Indoor Attraction Park, helicopter rides and even a 26km mountain bike path that winds in, around and under the track visiting the spectator points along the way.

There are plenty of restaurants, but it's essential to visit the Restaurant Pistenklause, about 1km from the track entrance, whose walls are filled with motorsport memorabilia and autographs. And it makes a mean steak on a hot rock.

After 40 laps of the 'Ring over the weekend, though our tyres were as good as gone, the brakes were cared for and only half worn. An important consideration if there's an eight-hour drive home.

Part way back, we find a surprise in Belgium: the small town of Spa, just 10 minutes off the freeway and home to the awesome Formula 1 circuit. There was an open track day on when we visited, with many of the cars we saw on the Nordeschleife the day before. Without the planning, nor tyres, we sadly couldn't experience Eau Rouge, but we will be back. There are better ways to spend \$5000, but for motoring thrills, few compare to a weekend at the Nürburgring Nordeschleife. **M**



Spa's Eau Rouge, the perfect stop-over on the way back from the 'Ring

FAST FACTS

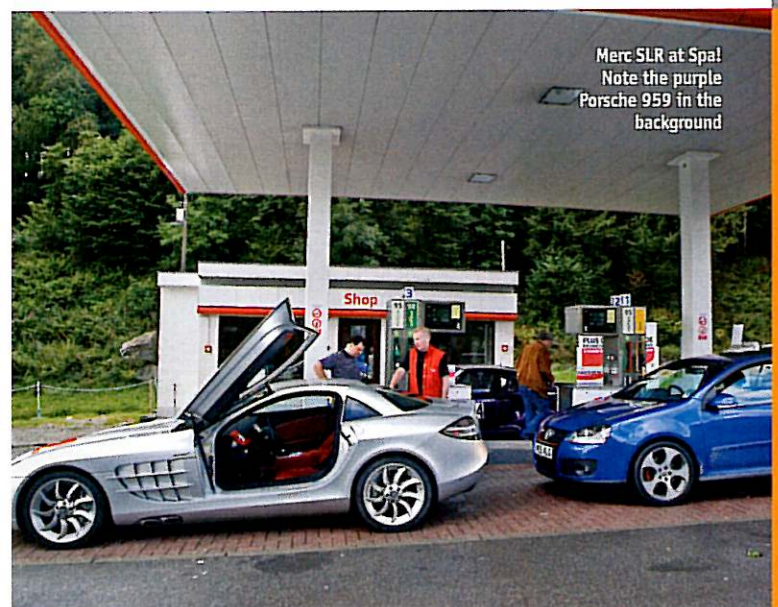


VW GOLF GTI

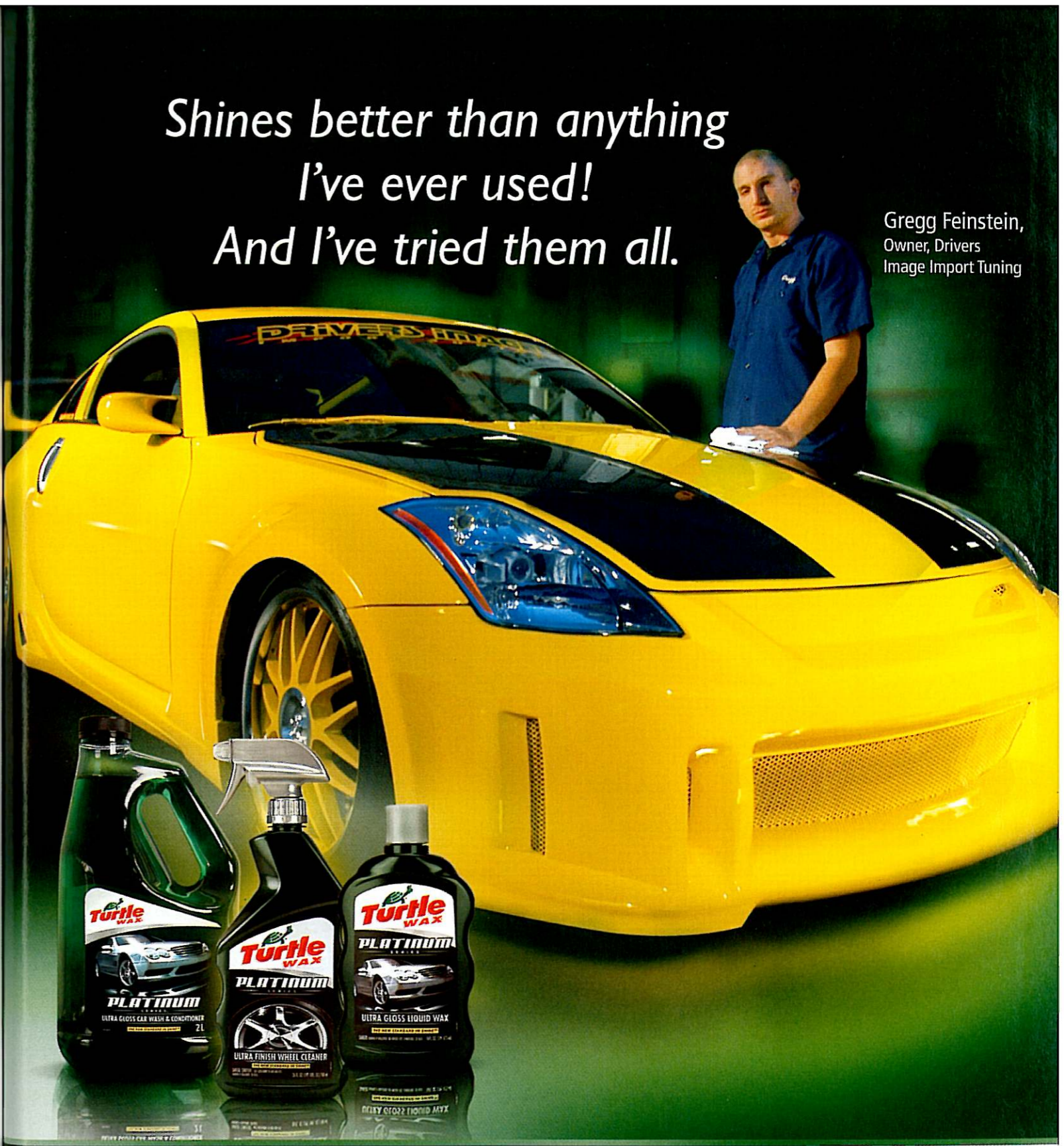
DRIVE: front-wheel
ENGINE: front-mounted 2.0-litre DOHC, 16-valve, intercooler & turbocharged four-cylinder
POWER: 147kW @ 5100rpm
TORQUE: 280Nm @ 1800rpm
TRANSMISSION: six-speed DSG
BRAKES: 312mm ventilated discs, single-piston floating calipers (f); 286mm solid discs, single-piston floating calipers (r), ABS
TYRES: (Euro spec) Continental Sport Contact 225/40 R18 (f & r)
FUEL: 55 litres, PULP
PRICE: \$42,290 (DSG)

SEE THE DTM

Time your trip to the Nürburgring in August and see the DTM series, spruced as the best touring car championship in the world with drivers like F1's Mika Hakkinen and Jean Alesi and massive crowds. Driving cars comparable (and faster!) to our own V8 Supercars, Audi driver Mattias Ekstrom won the weekend, and then took Audi top brass for a lap of the Nordeschleife in an Audi RS4.



Merc SLR at Spa! Note the purple Porsche 959 in the background



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 And I've tried them all.

Gregg Feinstein,
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