



French Lick Fantasy

Of all the places that we figured we might finally catch a date with some of the world's top supercars, French Lick, Indiana wasn't exactly top of mind.

by Chris Paukert photos by Nate Luzzo



Other than vague knowledge of French Lick's status as the hometown of NBA great Larry Bird, about all we knew of the tiny Hoosier burg was its giggle-inducing name. But after having spent an autumn weekend there flogging millions of dollars of the world's top sporting machinery, suffice it to say that our impressions of the place are rather more vivid now.

We had rolled into town on the honeyed promise of driving some of the world's top supercars through Indiana's rolling woodlands and pastoral landscapes, and although the clouding skies overhead would come to make things a bit dicier than

we would've liked, it was going to be difficult to come away disappointed. Our invitation had come from World Class Driving, a traveling road show of sorts that preaches the gospel of supercar-dom, and we were only too happy to accept.



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Each year since 2006, Delaware-based World Class Driving has brought a handful of supercars to different cities—forty of them in 2007 alone—offering enthusiasts the chance to pay to ⁺drive some of the world's most sought-after automobiles. That successful venture spawned the idea for this, the inaugural World Class Driving Festival, an homage to all things exotic that included the opportunity to drive a truly massive fleet of supercars (some \$12 million dollars worth). We are happy to report that whether your dream car brandishes a prancing horse, a raging bull, a triton, or even a flying propeller (be it a BMW or Spyker),





WCD had you covered. Bugatti? Well, there was a Veyron Pur Sang in attendance, but sadly it wasn't part of the general driving program. Maybe next year.

Billionaire Bug or no, we were able to get some seat time in a whole fleet of automotive gorgeousness, including a Audi R8, Bentley Continental GT Speed, Callaway C16 Coupe, a pair of Ferraris (430 Scuderia and 599 GTB Fiorano), a couple of Lamborghinis (Gallardo Superleggera and Murcielago), as well as a few stolen moments in a Mercedes-



Plenty of past, present, and future automotive royalty was on hand, including Spykers, Ferraris, and even Alex Roy's record-breaking BMW.



Benz McLaren SLR. There was a second tier of less-exclusive but no less desirable automobiles to sample (Nissan GT-R, BMW M5, etc.), but we ended up having so much fun with the high-wattage starlets that we ran out of time before getting to them.

In all, we were accompanied by 162 other participants who had traveled from all over the U.S. to partake in the festivities, some driving in, some taking commercial airliners, and a couple even flying in with their own planes. The price of admission varied greatly depending on how much seat time and accommodations were called for, but participants paid anywhere between \$895 and \$2795 for the





privilege, and throughout the weekend, a further 2500 souls paid \$10 for walking passes to check out the cars displayed on the grounds.

Beyond writing out variously sized checks, participants had to meet some other basic

criteria: Drivers had to be between the ages of 25 to 70 (with those over 70 able to participate provided certain insurance hurdles were met); possess a valid U.S., Canadian, or International license; hold insurance from a “recognized company,” and drive

without the aid of special equipment. Lucky for us, we qualified on all accounts.

Those descending on French Lick came for different reasons. We spoke with participants whose spouses had splurged for an anniversary or birthday gift, and at least a couple of attendees regaled us with riffs on the “I just had to drive a Ferra-

ri before I die” theme. Still others came because of the unique opportunity to cross-shop their next exotic purchase with its close competitors.

We arrived in French Lick a bit early, just in time to sit in on one of several scheduled drivers’ meetings, this one attended largely by the neighboring constabulary. In a brilliant move to smooth

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over whatever rough edges may have been produced by zooming around the local precincts in throaty supercars, the organizers invited area police officers to sample the event for themselves. Thus, the bluecoats received the same safety and behavior briefing that other participants received, and they even logged some time in the cars. While we wouldn't go so far as to say that there was any sort of "professional courtesy" reciprocated, we only heard of a single speeding ticket being issued the entire weekend—and that was to an event staffer in a Dodge Charger scouting out the roads.

The driver's meeting, it's worth pointing out, was proc-



tored by Jean Paul Libert, the charismatic founder of World Class Driving, himself a 24 Hours of Le Mans veteran. The brief session not only summarized who would be in what vehicles and in

what groupings, but outlined the amount of drive time and behavior expectations (no burnouts, no reckless driving, etc.). Libert also emphasized the importance of respecting the cars and fellow

Rain couldn't dampen our editor's enthusiasm for the stunningly planted Ferrari 599 GTB.

motorists ("Our handshake with you is worth \$12 million dollars"), without losing sight of the goal of having a good time.

Each "tour" involved a handful of cars (typically around four), with participants getting about 25 to 30 minutes behind the wheel of each vehicle before pulling over and swapping. Individual tutoring was always made available to help drivers get accustomed to the various cars' driving peculiarities (manual transmission operation, seat adjustment, etc.). Beyond getting physically comfortable, the

instructors were also on hand to give actual driving advice to whoever was interested. Thankfully, WCD's team was well equipped to field such questions, as their staffers have logged hundreds of hours of behind the wheel in professional motorsports, including lead driving director, Didier Theys, an accomplished Belgian best known in CART and endurance racing circles.

A note on gearboxes: In almost every case, World Class Driving has specified self-shifting "e-gear" transmission in order to ensure that everyone can drive just about everything. There were a couple of exceptions (e.g., Ford never built a GT with anything other than a six-speed manual), but most everything is of the automated manual variety. For life-long DIY types, this may come

as disheartening news, but it was also a good opportunity to compare the current, variegated crop of these sorts of transmissions.

Unlike some other exotic driving programs (Supercar Life, etc.), World Class events like the Driving Festival take place entirely on public roads. Doing so allows one



to get a sense for how these exotics function in real life, away from a sterile, proscribed track environment, where everyday realities like



Our handshake with you is worth \$12 million dollars.



bumpy surfaces and traffic can unravel supercar dreams. Not driving on a closed circuit meant that speeds had to be kept within reason, but that's not to say that limits were so low as to curtail the joy of the experience, particularly for those who hadn't previously had a chance to drive these

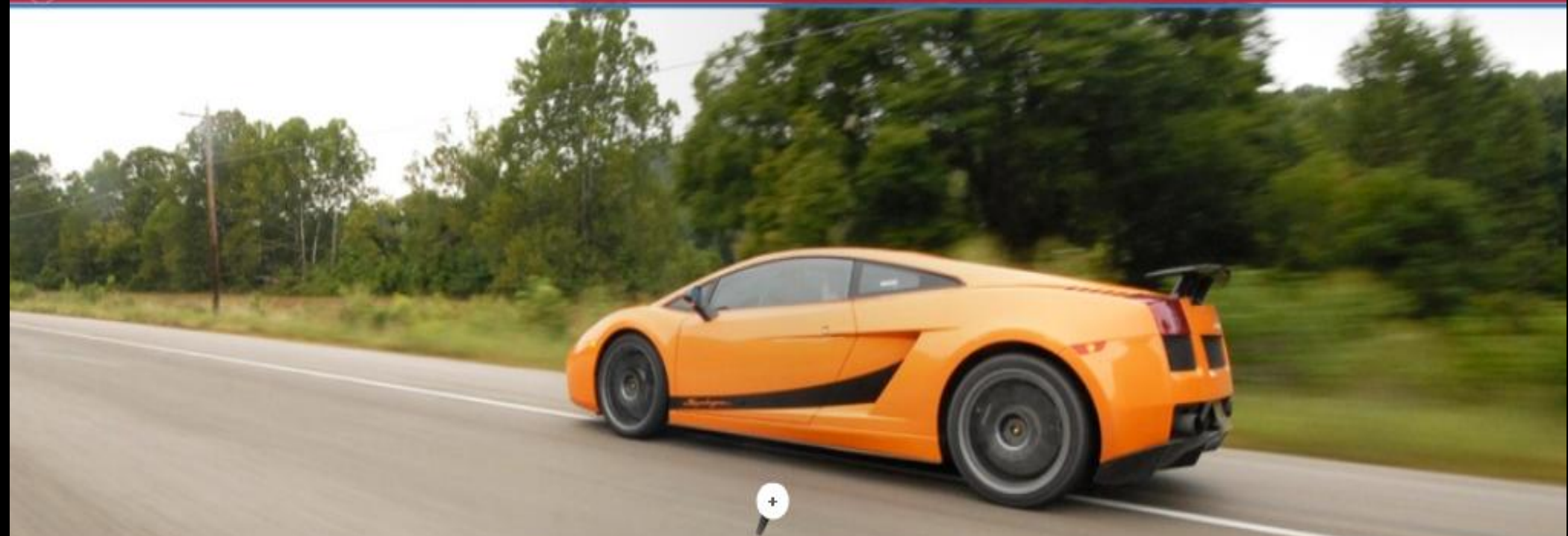
sorts of automobiles. Thankfully, French Lick and its surrounding areas aren't swamped by commuters, and surprisingly, the region is blessed with the best sort of winding tarmac through thick forests and rolling farm land. As such, whenever conditions allowed, we poured on the revs and

rifled through the gears.

It's important to note that during each drive, staff-driven pace cars led each group, preventing new drivers from getting in over their heads, or from getting lost. And even though we never managed to open any of the cars' taps up all the way, we

still enjoyed ourselves immensely and noted a great many joyful expressions on the faces of the participants at day's end.

Our finest moment? Aside from meeting some wonderful people, we'll remember the singular sounds of the Ferrari 430 Scuderia for a long, long time—



and not just the flat-crank V-8's wail and exhaust's mellifluous tone. The glorious white noise made by the Indiana rain spitting up in the lightweight's wheel wells and sound-deadener-free undercarriage is something everyone should get the chance to experience firsthand.

If driving high-powered exotics on public roads strikes you as an exercise in frustration, WCD is set to launch its Xtreme experience, a series of one-day programs that will take place on private airstrips across the country, with the first event to take place in Miami this winter. Instructors

like Theys will help participants get comfortable with driving at high speeds, both as a passenger and a driver. Those revealed to be the most proficient behind the wheel at a set of handling, performance, and speed challenges will then get the chance to crack 200 miles per hour in one of the

company's specially-prepared exotics. And while it may not have the same ring as "French Lick," being a member of the 200 MPH Club doesn't sound too shabby, either. —WR