

I had this month's story all lined up for you. I'd even cobbled together the bones of a first draft. It was all about spring time, the return of motorsport and classic cars to the roads and about Audi's appearance at Techno Classica, Germany's mammoth classic car fest. I had a whole bunch of stuff lined up about NSU – all very interesting, I assure you. I was even going to throw some stuff in from the New York Auto Show. You'd have loved it...

Then something happened. Don't ask me how, but I was suddenly whisked away to Portugal and forced to drive ... the new Bugatti Chiron. What????!!!! And, honestly, after that, everything else just looks like a bunch of old tat. I'm ruined forever, I tell you.

I realise that a Bugatti doesn't have four rings on the front, but, if we're being pedantic, neither does an NSU, so I thought I'd tell you about it anyway...

So, picture the scene. I'm being driven through the Portuguese countryside by British racing hero and Le Mans winner Andy Wallace, who is now a test driver and instructor with Bugatti. He's talking me through everything that this most superlative of automobiles can do. The phenomenal 8.0-litre W16 is growling away behind us, but I can hear every word he says. It may have 1500 horses at its disposal and a mouth and eye-watering 1600 Nm of torque, but when you're only using a fraction of that, the Chiron is tame and peaceful – like a lion snoozing in the sunshine.

As he talks, I find myself instinctively stroking the leather interior. This is not a stripped-down wannabe racer – this is elegant, sumptuous, cossetting. Yet it isn't showy or opulent. I'm perfectly well aware that this machine has a 2.4-million-euro price tag (before options!), but it's not screaming money at me. I don't feel overdressed. I don't feel like I've come to a barbecue in an evening gown.

Andy's talking about handling and performance now. If you don't already know the figures, the Chiron does 0-62 mph in less than 2.5 seconds. Do you know what that feels like? It's like a brute force has pinned you to your seat and



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your breath is being pushed back into your lungs. I've already felt this. We've already been on the motorway. With a clear straight stretch laid out oh-so-temptingly before us, Andy had pushed down on the throttle and – wham! Warp drive was engaged and the countryside streaked towards me. You know, 2.5 seconds are over pretty damn quickly. With most cars, things start to ease off after the initial thrust. But this most definitely is not most cars. The almighty force of the Chiron continues to intensify. The acceleration is unrelenting as the needle climbs, but, despite the fact that the dial is a thumping great thing positioned squarely in the centre of the binnacle, I'm not looking at the needle. I'm not sure I'm looking at anything, to be honest. I'm just feeling.

But then it occurs to me that the end of what had seemed like an infinitely long straight is almost upon us. Andy hits the brakes. The Chiron has gargantuan ceramic brake discs measuring 420 mm in diameter at the front and 400 mm at the rear and gripped by 8- and 6-pot callipers respectively, carefully designed to ensure even pressure upon the brake pads. Plus, it has a magnificent airbrake. The imposing rear wing deploys at motorway speed for added stability, then flips up at an angle of 55 degrees under heavy braking. If we were (theoretically) driving at 380 kph (236 mph), the air brake would deliver an additional 600 kilograms of downforce to the 300 kilograms of aerodynamic force already acting on the rear axle. Inside the cabin, the effect is phenomenal. My rib cage is pressed against the seat belt and my long hair shoots forward at an angle it

usually reserves for fairground rides. Wow! Talk about shock and awe!!

But now we're winding through the back roads on a route picked out specifically to demonstrate the Chiron's everyday driving qualities because, let's face it, its straight-line speed was never really in question. Andy pulls over into a layby and turns towards me: 'Now it's your turn'...

Oh, boy! I've never felt so intimidated in my life. Not only am I about to take control of the world's fastest (not to mention most expensive) production car, I'm also potentially about to make a complete fool of myself in front of a consummate racing driver. No pressure.

I take a moment to settle into the Chiron's cockpit, to get my seating position right. It's not a tight space, far from it. I suppose the best word to describe it is 'cocooned'. The centre tunnel can't really be described as such. The carbon-fibre monocoque is formed more like two separate occupant cells linked to one another by an aperture that echoes the C-shape of the Bugatti line that is such a distinctive feature of the car's glorious exterior. The Chiron's interior proportions, laterally at least, are generous, and Andy seems awfully far away – somehow, further away than when he was in the driving seat. Oh dear, I'm not sure what that says.

In front of me, between 4 and 5 o'clock on the steering wheel, is a large blue button with the single word – 'engine'. Yup, that'll do it. Like Alice in Wonderland's bottle commanding her to 'drink me', this may as well have read 'push me'. Here goes...

The W16 wakes up again, rumbling away behind me, sounding every-so-

slightly more threatening this time. I take a deep breath and ease out onto the road. Andy has advised me to use the steering wheel paddles in manual mode. 'The Americans never use the paddles,' he laments. You can leave it in drive, obviously, but if you want to have fun, 'drive' will kick down the gears every time you open up the throttle. As Andy points out, most of the gears in the Chiron are for show anyway. It can do its thing in just about any gear you choose – so choose.

I do as he says and start flipping up and down through the gears, feeling my way along the winding roads and picking up speed. The steering is an absolute dream, like a knife through butter. While the Veyron has an electro-hydraulic system, the Chiron is equipped with a highly sophisticated electro-mechanical design. It has a direct mechanical linkage to the wheels, which delivers fine, linear feedback, while the multiple layers of algorithms in its software maintain that linearity with increasing speed. The bottom line is that the Chiron goes exactly where you point it and does precisely what it is told.

Just around the next bend is a nice long straight with not a soul to be seen. 'Go on, open it up,' urges Andy. And there it is again, that lung-crushing feeling as the W16 lets out a roar of joy. Straight as a die and utterly solid, the Chiron surges forwards. I was already in fifth, so two quick tips of the right paddle take

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it smoothly into seventh and I feel an exuberant rush as the car starts to unfurl its wings and fly. Yet I sense it's teasing me; a bit like Usain Bolt, its long stride tells me that, while I might be pushing myself to the limits, the Chiron is merely out for a jog. Bearing in mind that this car can reach upwards of 430 kph and I've barely topped 200, my senses are not deceiving me. But that doesn't lessen the exhilaration as I thunder on, coaxing my foot to unleash the beast even further.

I don't want this to stop – please don't make me stop. But the Chiron is eating up the straight and Andy gives me the palm-down hand signal that it's time to slow down. Anchors on, and the Chiron obliges. Again, straight as a die and unwavering. We ease back into the gentle twists and turns. The beast that I glimpsed oh-so-briefly has slunk back into its cage. I desperately want to coax it back out again, but it's time to head back to base. As I pull into the parking area I become aware that my face is hurting slightly. It takes a moment to dawn on me what's going on. I've spent the last half hour with a Garfield grin on my face. Honestly, it's as if someone jammed a six-inch ruler into my mouth, sideways!

It really was one of those experiences that is difficult to do justice to with words – which is unfortunate, as that's kind of my job. The exquisite feeling of driving the Chiron is not merely a matter of its unfathomable performance. For me, it's a three-dimensional sense of what this represents. This is a pinnacle of human achievement. The modern-day Bugatti was the vision and brainchild of Ferdinand Piëch to take engineering to its zenith – not to create a magical one-off that would break some kind of speed record on a salt flat in America or win trophies on a race track. But to create a car that can give a numpty like me the feeling of having driven – really driven – something extraordinary. Okay, numpties like me don't happen to have a spare 2.4 million lying around, but the guys who are in the lucky position to be able to add the Chiron to their stable of exotic driving machines are not that much different from me behind the wheel. They're not Andy Wallace; they're not racing drivers. They are regular men (and women) who love cars and love driving. They just happen to be able to afford the very best. And let there be no mistake about it – this is the very best. 🇧🇪

