



Power to the people

The Ariel Atom on the road

Some people in the North East are regularly scoring top marques when it comes to motoring pleasure. It doesn't come cheap, as **Peter Jackson** reports, but nor is it beyond the reach of the less-affluent

IT'S a nice problem to have on a glorious, sunny day. Which to take for a spin – the Aston Martin, the Ferrari Spyder or the Porsche 996 GT2? Ah, decision, decisions... In fact, it is a common dilemma facing the members of the Vitesse Supercar Club, based at Hamsterly Hall, County Durham.

The club owns £1 million worth of the world's top motoring marques, a fleet that also includes a Bentley, and the Ford GT – of which there are fewer than 100 in the UK. These are the kind of

cars to make the enthusiast salivate and, once bitten by the bug of driving them, the admirers tend to be hooked for life.

Vitesse director Karl Lowther explains the appeal: 'If you drive a supercar, it's then that you realise that everything – the power, the acceleration, the handling – are all so different to an ordinary road car. It's a thoroughly exciting, thrilling experience.'

The age of the members ranges from early 30s to mid 60s. The majority are entrepreneurs – both male and female – with their own businesses, although the club also lists people who work in the

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3 Ford GT

public sector among its numbers.

Commonly, the cars are booked out for weekends or for trips to events, as with the member who took the Porsche Cayenne for a camping break at the Goodwood Festival of Speed. Another member booked the Bentley Continental GT to take his parents for a surprise day out on their Golden Wedding Anniversary. Unsurprisingly, people predominantly take the cars out around the spectacular countryside of the North East, the Lakes and the Scottish Borders.

Tris Simpson, 38, of Darras Hall, is the director of an IT consultancy. He owns a number of classic Ferraris and membership of Vitesse allows him to drive some more contemporary machines.

'It's great to drive the latest models,' he says. 'I've taken out the Spyder, which is a fantastic car, and I really like the Ford GT. I take the cars out for the weekend and I tend to take them into the countryside to see how they compare to cars I know. My eight-year-old son likes to come with me and he's pestering me to take the Porsche GT2. I must admit, I would like to see how it handles.'



'There are those who, if they are going to drive these cars, want to be noticed'

Porsche GT2

The club has got its name down for a Ferrari California, which has received rave reviews and I can't wait to have a go in that.'

Tris was one of the members who went on a club trip to the Monaco Grand Prix last year, where they were allocated a prime spot overlooking the finishing line and were later introduced to some of the Formula 1 drivers. He adds: 'I wouldn't mind going to Le Mans next year with Vitesse. I've made good friends at the club, which happens when you have a common interest. That's the key to Vitesse; the people behind it did it because they wanted to join a club but there wasn't one, so they had to set up their own.'

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You would not expect this to come cheap; and you would be right. Membership costs a one-off joining fee of £2,500 and then an annual subscription of £12,000 which gives you points to exchange

for driving time.

All this might seem contrary to the spirit of our belt-tightening, credit crunch times, but Karl Lowther believes this makes the club even more attractive to the cost-conscious supercar enthusiast.

He explains: 'The fact that you don't own the cars means you're not involved with the extremely high costs of servicing, insurance and especially the extremely high rates of depreciation.'

'Without a shadow of a doubt, people will be more careful as to how they spend their money in a credit crunch, but financially it makes so much more sense to join a supercar club than to go out and buy the cars because of the drop in second hand values. Who wants to go out and buy a top end value car and then take such a depreciation hit? It just doesn't make sense in this climate.'

Karl admits that straightened economic times also operate in a subtler way to make club membership more attractive than ownership. Put bluntly, owning a car costing £150,000 and having it



Above: Bentley Continental GT
Left: Distinctively Bentley
Right: Ferrari and Porsche
Below: Audi R8



sitting on the drive might be seen as an insensitive flaunting of wealth at a time when austerity should be the watchword.

'We have members who might, for example, have always wanted a Ferrari and could well afford to own a Ferrari, but they don't particularly want to be seen to be doing so well at the moment and they particularly don't want to be seen turning up at their businesses in a Ferrari or a Bentley,' says Karl.

Having said that, there are other members who revel in the attention that driving these cars brings. Significantly, when the club had the chance to buy a black Lamborghini, the members were consulted and a clear majority expressed a preference for buying the more head-turning yellow.

'There are those who, if they are going to drive these cars, want to be noticed,' says Karl.

Well, they might be able to fulfil that ambition, but they still have that tough choice to make on a sunny day. ☺

Vitesse membership

The Vitesse membership terms are a one-off joining fee of £2,500 and then an annual subscription of £12,000. That gets you 1,200 points or 5,000 miles which you can use across the fleet, with some days and some cars costing more points than others.

There are also the more limited options of paying an annual subscription of just £3,000 for a quarter of the points and a quarter of the mileage or £6,000 for half the entitlement. The subscription also entitles a life partner to share the points.

For insurance reasons, members must be at least 25 years old, have held their licence for at least five years, with no more than two disqualifications within that period. They must also provide a history of their driving experience, including cars they have owned, but, if that does not include supercar experience, the club can arrange for them to attend a day-long driving course to give them the necessary skills and experience.