

Circuits such as Brands Hatch can offer high-speed thrills



Track winners

A perfect present? We hit the UK's top race and rally schools for the best day out

Simon McBride

S LOT racing, radio-controlled cars and console games all have their place, but there's nothing like getting behind the wheel yourself for the ultimate driving thrill. And you don't have to win the lottery to see if you've got what it takes – you can guide a single-seater around one of Britain's top race circuits, or kick up the mud tackling a rally stage, for less than £200.

There are plenty of schools to suit all tastes. As a rough rule of thumb, race circuits usually provide more exciting cars, but higher speeds mean drivers are kept on a tight leash. Visit a rally specialist and you will learn more about car control, but the machinery is less exotic.

So, which driving days deliver the best value for money? We put 10 starter courses to the test to find which offer the most racing and rallying thrills.

The test



TOP of our list was drive time. There's no point in paying a couple of hundred pounds if you spend most of the session watching other people. We also wanted a fun day out – it doesn't matter how long you get at the wheel if your driving is severely restricted. Other considerations were value for money, cars and venue.

Thruxton Race School

Thruxton, Hampshire
Price: £155 (half day)
Drive time: 40 minutes
Rating: ★★★★★

IT'S the fastest race track in the UK, and boy did we have a blast! The atmosphere was relaxed but professional, while the circuit is great fun. Mazda's RX-8 (right) was used for the six instruction laps, three with you driving, and it's important to watch, listen and learn, as Thruxton's racing lines are tricky to pick up. There are many passing opportunities and you will hit the rev limiter on the straights when you're driving the Formula Vauxhall Lotus single-seater. The day finishes with the instructor taking you on a high-speed lap in the RX-8. Our racing Best Buy.



Castle Combe Driving Experience

Castle Combe, Wiltshire

Price: £165 (half day)

Drive time: 40 minutes

Rating: ★★★★★

ALTHOUGH it poured with rain all day, this failed to dampen our enthusiasm for the Castle Combe driving experience. There's no speed limiter on the cars and you really get the feel of being at a race meeting. The day starts with a safety briefing and passenger laps in a Ford Focus to learn the track. The venue lost points here, as there were three passengers crammed into one car, and you couldn't see much from the rear seats. Thankfully, it was just us and the instructor for our three laps behind the wheel. The Formula Ford single-seater (below) was a handful in the tricky conditions, but the relaxed atmosphere helped make the day enjoyable. Recommended.



Silverstone Single-Seater Experience

Silverstone, Northamptonshire

Price: £155 (half day)

Drive time: 40 minutes

Rating: ★★★★★

UNIQUE in our test, this half day sees you spend the entire session in a single-seater. There are no passenger laps or saloon driving – which is great, but not all good news. Half your time is spent following a pace car in an effort to show you the racing line around the track. While this is a good idea in theory, it's not much help if you are stuck near the back of the queue. For the final 20 minutes you are let off the leash and can overtake, but the circuit is tight and you'll get a ticking off if you 'race' too hard. Is Silverstone tight? Sadly, you don't use the hallowed GP track, but only the small, triangular Stowe Circuit, which is laid out on the runway near the corner of the same name.



Everyman Mallory Park

Mallory Park, Leicestershire

Price: £150 (half day)

Drive time: 40 minutes

Rating: ★★★★★

FIRST impressions were not great here, as the poor staff assistance when getting suited up meant it lacked the family feel of Thruxton and Castle Combe. After the safety briefing, we jumped into a Subaru Impreza for the sighting laps as a passenger, but again we were not alone, and from the back seat couldn't see as much as we would like. The track is short and there are few corners, although getting a good lap proved difficult, thanks to the never-ending Gerrards right-hander. The Formula Vauxhall (below) was good fun, although as with most other schools, this single-seater was limited to 4,500rpm. A neat touch was the low-speed Autotest, designed to cool you down before you drive home on public roads.



MotorSportVision Racing

Brands Hatch, Kent

Price: £145 (half day)

Drive time: 40 minutes

Rating: ★★★★★

BRANDS Hatch is the jewel in the crown of MotorSportVision, which also runs similar courses at Oulton Park in Cheshire. Sadly, we didn't have the best of times at this fantastic circuit, with its dramatic dips and climbs. The main problem was that there were simply too many cars out at any one time. Combine this with over-zealous marshals, and the whole session felt far too heavily controlled. It followed the usual format of briefing and laps with the instructor, before we got to drive a Renaultsport Mégane 225. Finally, we were let loose in a power-restricted Formula Palmer Audi racer (below). Fewer cars and a more personal touch would greatly improve the experience and eliminate Brands' production-line feel.



Chris Birkbeck Rally School

Brotton, North Yorkshire

Price: £200 (full day)

Drive time: 49 minutes

Rating: ★★★★★



THERE'S a cracking mix of stages, split pretty much equally between gravel and tarmac, at Chris Birkbeck's operation on the Teesside coast. As with our winner, the atmosphere is personal and friendly, and unlike some other courses, you don't have to wait around too long before it's your turn at the wheel. Our only real niggle is the cars. A front-wheel-drive Ford Focus (below) may match today's rally machinery, but there's nothing like going sideways in an old Escort for driving thrills. However, the up-to-date models allow you to feel the changes in grip on different surfaces and are well suited to learning the art of the handbrake turn. More time behind the wheel would be welcome, but this remains a good day out. Recommended.



The verdict

WHETHER you are a budding race or rally driver, or simply want a fun day out, you're in for a fantastic time.

Aspiring Fernando Alonsos should visit Hampshire's Thruxton Race School, which offers friendly and professional tuition. The Phil Price Rally School in Wales is better suited to budding Sebastian Loeb's. This offers loads of drive time, plus a competition with rival drivers.

