

AUTOMOTIVE



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FANTASY CAMP

SATISFY YOUR INNER SPEED DEMON
AT THE PORSCHE HIGH
PERFORMANCE DRIVING SCHOOL
ON BARBER MOTORSPORTS
TRACK IN LEEDS.

TEXT BY JEFF BOOK





In the realm of American motorsports, George Barber's racetrack has few rivals. Located just outside Birmingham, in Leeds, the 2.38-mile circuit snakes around the North Alabama hills like a jackrabbit on steroids. Designed to maximize thrills for drivers and spectators alike, the track has challenged everything from Indy-class and GrandAm racecars to modern and vintage motorcycles (on display in Barber's splendid trackside museum, the world's largest collection of fire-breathing two-wheelers). Since 2003 it has also been home to the Porsche Sport Driving School, a kind of automotive fantasy camp for adults.

There's no better place to satisfy your inner speed

demon, as I discovered when I took the school's two-day High Performance Driving Course. The instructors all possess racing experience and that essential alloy of humor and patience. Limited to 30, the class ranged from drivers with some track experience to novices like me, from avowed "Porschaholics" to the man who confessed, "I drive a hybrid, so this is therapy for me."

Both days began with classroom sessions covering technical matters such as vehicle dynamics and the proper driving line on the track (the fastest distance between two points is often not a straight line). Driving and cornering at high speeds is a kind of applied physics—for example, using



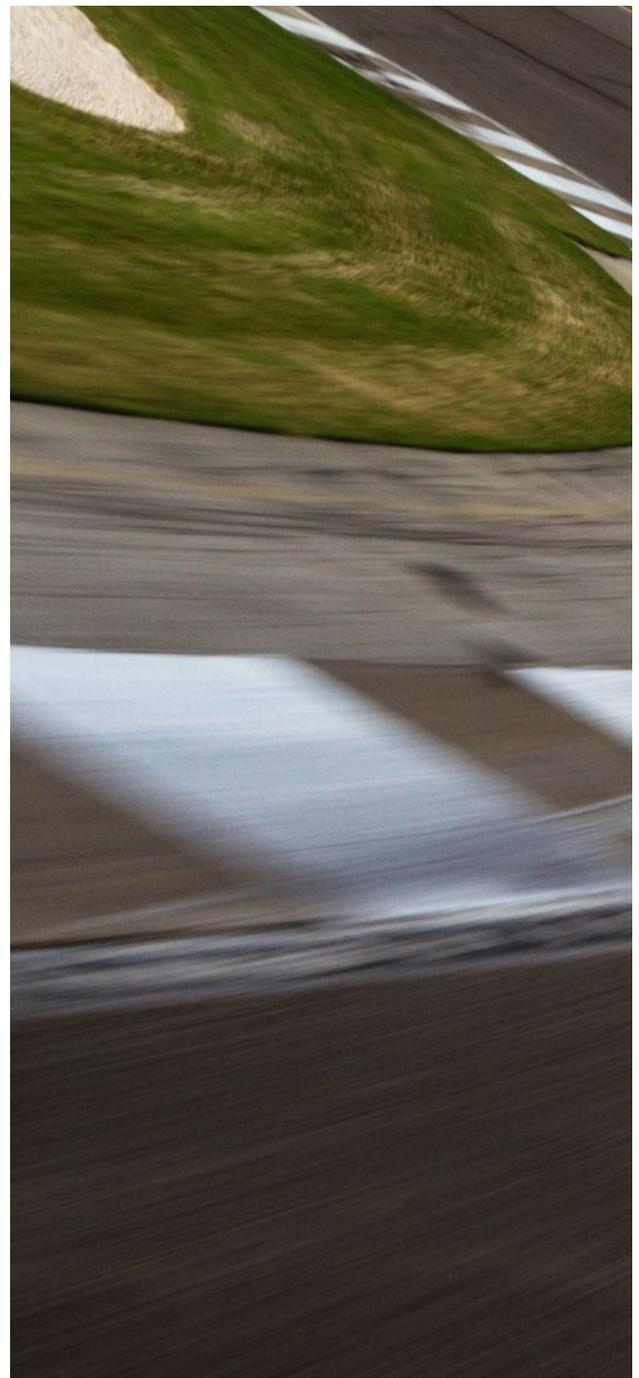
WE GOT TO PILOT THE S[SPORT]-CLASS BOXSTER, CAYMAN, AND CARRERA AND THE PANAMERA GTS, ALL OF WHICH CAN HURTLE FROM 0 TO 60 MPH IN UNDER FIVE SECONDS.

the brakes and throttle to shift the car's weight forward or backward for optimum steering and acceleration. Braking with maximum efficiency (hitting them hard before turns, then backing off and throttling up) allows for maximum speed the rest of the time. Gradual braking and acceleration are fine on the street but lame on the track. Still, one vintage driver's-ed rule applies in spades at high speed: "Look where you want to go," said instructor Brian Cunningham. "Your eyes have to lead your hands and feet."

Unlike the "stock cars" at Talladega, the Porsches we drove were factory-issue down to their tires and fluids. The fruit of decades of track-tested engineering and design,

these automotive thoroughbreds are elegant, beautiful, and blazingly fast. We got to pilot the S[Sport]-Class Boxster, Cayman, and Carrera and the Panamera GTS, all of which can hurtle from 0 to 60 mph in under five seconds. Splitting into small groups, we tackled performance exercises that would sharpen our skills. Doing figure-eights on the water-slicked skidpad taught us about losing and regaining control at the outer edge of traction. Avoiding the plastic cones edging the autocross course, a single-lane circuit twisting around a parking lot, meant ignoring them and doing what a racetrack requires: looking ahead, throttling and braking aggressively but precisely, pushing our limits if not the car's.

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Between exercises we strapped on helmets and racked up track time. “This is Darwin’s playground,” instructor Peter Litzenberger told us. “And this is one time when it pays to be Type A—to do well here you have to pursue perfection.” More plastic cones reminded us of the optimum driving line, the one racers follow. We did laps in small groups, the instructor in the lead car giving us tips and comments by radio. “They say there’s no crying in baseball,” said one of many mentors. “Well, there’s no coasting in racing. When you’re not braking, you’re accelerating.” The Barber course has 16 turns and more than 80 feet of elevation change.

Each turn is different, and before the end of the course we’d memorized all of them.

On the second day we did time trials on the skidpad and the autocross. We catapulted a 911 Turbo from a rip-snorting, high-rev standing start, with an assist from the kind of onboard electronics that make Porsche’s dual-clutch Tiptronic automatic shift faster than even a pro driver can manage manually. We went off-road in Porsche’s SUV, the Cayenne S, crawling around crazy-steep dirt mounds and through water that lapped at the doors. (“Don’t worry,” quipped our instructor, “I put extra air in the tires.”) And we



did more track laps, including some with an instructor riding shotgun, giving a running critique.

By the end many of us were topping 100 mph on the straightaways. On my final laps I had a glimpse of the eye of the storm, the tunnel vision that comes from focusing entirely on the track, oblivious to all else. In two days we'd made a lot of progress—but much more remained, as we realized when the instructors took each of us around the track at racing speed on a "hot lap," showing how much more these high-performance cars can do. The school also offers more advanced courses, and even one exclusively for

women. I'll admit that my regular ride is not nearly as racy as a Porsche. But after finishing this course, I'll drive it more consciously, more safely, and with more unfettered, road-hugging pleasure.

**PORSCHE
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