

Supercar Tour will let you take exotics for a spin

by Joe Michaud

What's it worth to an enthusiast to get behind the wheel of an exotic car for a few hours?

Apparently, plenty.

Luxury car rental agency San Diego Prestige is charging \$999 per driver, plus a \$10,000 security deposit, for half-day tours that feature 30 minutes of driving time in six fast cars. The tour has proven so successful that the company has added a second shift to the monthly events.

SUPER TOUR - The Supercar Tour makes its way up a street in San Diego. The tour allows participants to drive six exotic cars on a round trip. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin.
The list of cars is intoxicating - a Ferrari F430 coupe, Ferrari 360 Modena Spider, Lamborghini Gallardo, Porsche 911 Turbo, Aston Martin Vantage V-8 and Lotus Elise.

To experience them, you'll need to reveal your driver's license number and insurance agent, pay the upfront fee and post the security deposit for "loss of use" coverage. Your passenger rides free.

The route is a blend of freeway and twisties chosen to showcase the muscle-bound nature of these supercars. While covering 120 miles - give or take a few - six drivers will swap cars at six locations.

When I was offered this opportunity, I was excited, but as time drew near, I became more nervous. After all, this was a tad more than a million bucks' worth of cars.

My fears calmed when I learned Mehdi Benabdeljalil, Prestige's operations director, would be my navigator. How crazy could it get with a protective employee in the car?

Hmmm.

Participants arrived early to sign the requisite insurance, rental and personal injury waivers. My credit card was authorized for the large security deposit. Somewhere, my insurance agent was having an unsettling lunch.

We picked numbers for the rotation of cars. Benabdeljalil knew the route so our car would lead all six legs. Radios would enable the cars to keep each other in sight as well as provide us with traffic reports.

Route maps were distributed that showed freeway for the first and last legs. In between lay 90 miles of twisties. I've covered these roads for years on motorcycles and I knew them well.

I drew the Lotus first and drove an uneventful freeway leg. The Elise is a spartan little car. Its seats are thin, and contorting myself into the cockpit proved difficult. It's a go-kart with a license plate and not really up to its rowdier stablemates.

We swapped for the Ferrari F430 coupe. This car attracts more attention than Sharon Stone. Cell cameras appeared at every stop. Men asked questions and women stared with interest. My house costs less than this car, but then my house isn't painted Arrest-Me red with a rampant stallion logo.

By vehicle rotation, my half-hour in the F430 included 20 minutes of first gear plodding on Wildcat Canyon

Road in nearby Lakeside, a delicious twisting road sadly clogged this day with casino traffic. The expensive stallion had few chances to run. But at least my deposit was safe.

The Aston Martin Vantage V8 is sporty enough but the luxurious interior isolates the driver from most mechanical experiences. It was quite different from the interior of the F430, where the engine howls inches behind your head and the smell of the leather can render a driver weak.

The philosophical difference between Ferrari and Lamborghini is hinted in their logos. Ferrari favors the stallion - powerful yet lithe and sinewy. The Lamborghini is an unapologetic wild bull.

I drove the Kool-Aid orange Gallardo on a road as technical as any in the county. Punching the Lamborghini hard out of an apex is addictive. The Bull is about big power, all-wheel drive, fat tires and no rear view at all.

Benabdeljalil and I didn't speak much on the Gallardo leg or, if we did, I either didn't hear him or can't remember it. Disembarking, I was sweaty and my knees were weak. I hated to hand it over.

The 360 Modena Spider is open and noisy. Conversation is reduced to shouting over the howling engine and wind noise. This is lovely stuff, but compared to its big brother, the Spider lacked the rich smoothness of the F430.

Porsches all look alike to nongearheads and hence don't draw attention as do the flashy Italian marques. On the freeway and under a light foot, the 911 is tame and predictable - a usable daily driver. But spool up the twin turbochargers and hang on. The car hunkers down and becomes one wicked-fast road car.

So, who pays to drive these cars? Actually, most drivers received their Supercar Tours as gifts. Mike and Jere

Coykendall used a retirement gift that Mike received. Frank Escobedo used a gift from his sister. Monah Hanson gave the drive as a gift to her husband, Jim.

Fundamentally, most admitted to taking the tour simply because of the opportunity. Where else can someone drive six cars like these on any one day - for any price?

Jim Hanson, who drove with his wife, Monah, and their dog, Jack, says: "Monah gave me a four-hour rental but I upgraded to this. With these six cars and all, who could resist?"

Afterward, the drivers shared notes.

Escobedo, with co-driver Eric Thode, says: "The F430 was the most enjoyable. The 360 seemed a bit flexible in comparison."

Richi Wang and wife Carrie drove the F430 on the last leg. "I liked the Lotus because of the road we were on, and the 911 was fast and easy to drive," he says. He favored the Ferrari 360 because of the open cockpit and the aftermarket exhaust.

At the end of the day, the shark-nosed F430 Ferrari stayed in view of my right side mirror much of the way back. The Lambo was close behind and the others were visible trailing the Bull.

Most people will never experience anything like this. All six cars in one day? It's worth it. Joe Michaud is a San Diego motorhead, motorcycle collector, restorer and writer. Copley News Service If You Go The next San Diego Supercar Tour will be April 1. Presented by San Diego Prestige, the half-day tours begin at 7:45 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. Each tour allows up to 30 minutes of drive time in each car for 120 miles on a variety of

roads. Technical presentation and handling instruction are provided. Participants are limited to 12 seats for each event.

Cost: \$999 per person, which includes one passenger, fuel, mileage, instruction and road book. (Not included is a \$10,000 security deposit required from the insurance company.)

Cars: Ferrari F430 coupe and 360 Modena Spider, Lamborghini Gallardo, Porsche 911 (997) Turbo, Aston Martin V8 Vantage and Lotus Elise.

Information: www.time2rally.com or (858) 551-6001.

Other tours: Similar tours are being run in other cities, including Las Vegas (www.supercartour.com) and in London (www.supercarsontour.co.uk).

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