



The McLaren 650S

One rainy day in March 2007, Away Soni borrowed his brother's new £830,000 Bugatti Veyron and thrashed it at 100mph along a road in Surrey, UK, speed limit 40mph. With minimal delay and total predictability, Soni collided violently with a Vauxhall Astra before coming to a sudden, expensive halt against a high bank. Veyron and Astra were now worth roughly the same amount. Soni's brother had waited a year for his supercar and possessed it for a week.

There are some people who like stories like this – and some who really hate them. The car owner, obviously, is in the latter camp, but also the car-maker itself, and all those engineers, mechanics and designers who've lovingly tended the creation of this uber machine that now appears as a crumpled mess on page five of a tabloid newspaper. They take it rather personally that someone with not enough sense, training or respect has jumped in their baby – something faster than he can comprehend – and carelessly binned it.

For a marque such as McLaren, the strain of supplying movable, breakable luxury has been ever-present for years. Founder Bruce McLaren loved seeing his vehicles on the road – and did for the first time in 1969. But the stakes were raised to stratospheric levels in 1992, when McLaren created the F1 road car, a vehicle of such high concept and engineering that it made the papers – but for all the right reasons. A carbon-fibre car, with an exhaust compartment lined with gold! McLaren didn't just trickle its proprietary tech down from Formula One, as grab it wholesale and engineer it into designer Gordon Murray's streamlined envelope. Even the driver's seat was in the middle. To own one took money; to drive it took nerve and training. McLaren was naturally very keen to offer support. Now, years later, that customer experience has reached its logical high point.

Pay one of the privileged visits to the McLaren Technology Centre in Woking, UK, and the sense of heritage – plus a faint smell of motor oil – is overtaken by the ticking of technology behind every blank white wall and through every pane of glass. Along a curving boulevard behind a man-made lake is the past: highlights of McLaren's more than 50 years' racing success. But nearby, on a turntable, is the new 650S supercar created by the company's McLaren Automotive arm; while the lake itself powers a huge wind tunnel (145 metres long) that tests both F1 and road vehicles. Beyond the far end of the boulevard is the Formula One garage itself, where the cars of Jenson Button and Fernando Alonso are brought to be cleaned, piece by piece, and rebuilt after every race. And beyond even that is the Production Centre, where the real story lies.

Here, being assembled by hand, is the P1 GTR, the ultimate track car, with the ultimate driver support. In an environment cleaner than most hospitals, the only real sound is the squeak of slick rubber on hard floors as million-pound automobiles are eased from one testing pod (stormy

weather) to another (rough roads). The GTR is the brand new track-only version of the P1, McLaren's phenomenal 2013 road car that pushes today's technology as much as the F1 did 20 years ago. Available only to owners of the P1, the GTR puts out 986bhp for a top speed in excess of 200mph and is the most powerful car McLaren has ever built. And for £1.98 million, the purchase gives the owner not just the keys to the car, but to an entire fantasy F1 series.

With the P1, McLaren offers driver training with the McLaren P1 GTR Driver Programme, but buy a GTR and it's part of the experience. Owners are offered not just a fitness assessment and a personal training regime (these cars pull heavy G-force and drivers will also sweat, a lot) but the use of the same racing simulator employed by Button and Alonso. Practise driving a track on the sim, then McLaren will transport everyone's cars to the actual circuit to try for real, together with their own driving instructor, team of mechanics and technicians. For a whole

"race" weekend, such iconic tracks as Monza, Silverstone, Spa and Circuit de Catalunya are available to improve driving and push lap-times in a car dialled to full racing mode, with a seat moulded to the driver, cameras inside and out and painted in his own colours. All that's left for the driver to do is commit to six weekends in a season, get himself to the track and start having fun.

If this seems like a good idea but too much time, there are much more accessible options: McLaren Automotive is expanding its range of production cars at a rate of one per year – each capped at a specific number to maintain exclusivity. That 650S may sit just below the P1 in the "ultimate" list, but offers much of the same tech, a top speed of 207mph and 0-62mph in three seconds. Robert Melville, McLaren's chief designer, says the 650S "aims to offer the ultimate

everyday experience for the driver on both road and track. We designed it to be the best and most engaging driver's car in its class, without being a stripped-out road racer".

With all that Formula One heritage, plus the F1 and P1 as direct inspirations, the 650S features the signature carbon-fibre chassis and active aerodynamics, including an airbrake to optimise stopping power, braking and loads of downforce. It won't cost you a million pounds either: every car – Coupé or Spider – is made to order, priced from £195,250. And each one is constructed by hand, of course. "Everyone who works on the cars, from initial design idea to every car rolling off the production line, take pride in knowing they were part of a process," confirms Melville. "With just eight cars leaving the production line every day, it makes it a very personal commitment."

And, yes, a programme called Pure McLaren helps you understand the car's frightening performance levels, while its "performance academy" develops your skills until you're a proper supercar driver, on track or on road. It all helps make sure that you're (almost) guaranteed never to end up in the papers, and everyone getting upset again.

DREAM, DRIVE

The McLaren marque is steeped in F1 glamour and heritage. And that can be yours in a series of souped-up, limited-edition supercars as Ivan Smith discovers