

Sunday drives: Kathy Mead on Pikes Peak

01/07/2026 For Kathy Mead, Pikes Peak is not simply a road. A retired astrophysicist who took up racing later in life, Mead has become a familiar figure at the world-famous annual hill climb. This year marked her seventh appearance at the mountain, where she was competing in a Porsche 911 GT2 RS Clubsport.

Ask Kathy Mead where Pikes Peak begins as a drive and the answer is not as simple as the start line. “It’s honestly really all of it,” she says. “I think of it all at once.”

For Mead, the mountain is travel, preparation, technical inspection, practice days, early mornings, weather, altitude and anticipation. “Most people think of race day,” she says. “But we can be on the mountain as many as 10 days.”

The race to the clouds

Mead describes the route as “three different courses in one”, each with its own demands. The lower

section, used for qualifying, sits below the tree line. It is the easiest section to read visually, with trees and landscape providing reference points, but there is still little that feels conventional about it.

“There are a lot of turns and they go by really fast,” she says. “There are a lot of off-camber entries, big corners and exits, so a lot of it feels really uncomfortable. But visually, it's not weird.”

The middle section sees the road rise above the tree line, visual references fall away and the switchbacks begin. The braking zones are hard, and the consequences of getting them wrong are immediate.

“The way to gain time is to brake deep into corners,” continues Mead. “But of course there's no margin for error, so if you overshoot, you hit the guardrail and your day is over. Maybe your whole month.”

The upper section is where Pikes Peak becomes something else again. “Nothing can prepare you for that,” she smiles. Above the tree line, the road is fast, exposed and visually intense. The car runs close to the edge of the mountain, with sheer drops that feel immense.

“You see the finish line and you want to just floor it, but it's way too bumpy. You would just bounce off the mountain.” That is part of what makes Pikes Peak such a singular challenge. “At Pikes Peak, I can't find the limit by going past it,” Mead says. “I have to nibble up a little bit at a time.”

Why the 911 GT2 RS Clubsport works

Mead's Porsche is the 911 GT2 RS Clubsport, and her reasons for choosing it are both emotional and deeply practical. “The short answer is it's the right car because it's a turbo,” she says.

At altitude, forced induction matters. As the air thins, a turbocharged engine helps mitigate the loss of power that affects naturally aspirated cars. But for Mead, the 911 GT2 RS Clubsport also brings something just as important: trust. Pikes Peak offers very little opportunity for conventional testing. Drivers practice one section at a time, wait, then run again. Major set-up changes are difficult on the mountain, and every run matters. “The first thing you want in a car is for it to be reliable,” she says.

The lower section might reward one set-up, the upper another. The car, like the driver, has to compromise. “Nothing at Pikes Peak is ever perfect,” she says. “You just have to compromise.”

A view like nowhere else

The run itself takes around 10 and a half minutes. That's Pikes Peak – a year of thought, a month living and breathing the mountain, then a handful of frenzied minutes in the car. When the double chequered flag appears, the first sensation is one of release. “It's suddenly over,” she says.

There are still formalities to complete, interviews to give and signatures to add. Then, as the adrenaline starts to fade, the magnitude of the climb starts to land. She then walks to the summit building, watch other cars arrive and breathe it all in. “Only then can I take in what I just did – I drove my car.”

On a clear day, the view from the summit is almost overwhelming. The sky is vast and the landscape's open in every direction. “I feel like I can see all the way to Canada and Mexico,” she says. “It's a view like nowhere else – you feel like you can see forever.”

A road anyone can drive

For all its racing mythology, Pikes Peak is still a public road. Away from the event, it is open to visitors, and Kathy is keen to point out that anyone can experience it. She advises taking the elevation seriously, and suggests choosing a quieter time outside of tourist periods. “Who doesn't want to drive their Porsche up a twisty mountain road?”

For most visitors it is a spectacular mountain drive. For Mead, on race day, it's a mountain, a Porsche and a challenge that's never perfect, never easy and never the same twice.

That's why she keeps returning. Not for speed or competition, but for the chance to apply everything she has learned to something deeply beautiful. “The hardest things are the most rewarding,” she says. “I'm just so grateful every day that I get to do it.”

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