

Perfecting sporty driving on the track – the Porsche way

23/12/2016 Russell Ong, freestyle swimmer from Singapore, had a great time with the Porsche Media Driving Academy at the Sepang International Circuit. The experience on track has just brought his fascination to Porsche to another level. An experience report.

Unsure of what to expect at my first-ever driving on track experience, I had difficulty believing Porsche Asia Pacific when they told me the gamut of Porsche's offerings would be made available to drive for attendes of the brand's unique Media Driving Academy. Coming from Singapore where entry level Porsches run north of US$210,000 even when sparsely optioned, it seemed improbable that they would let me in the cockpit of a 911, and more so on a racetrack. I resisted querying the Porsche team for fear of jinxing any chances I had to join the program built primarily for the journalists in the region, and furnished them with my details including exciting stuff such as racing helmet and glove sizes (I had absolutely no idea but stuck with the safe M option). There was nothing left to do but wait.

After what seemed like an eternity, I arrived in Kuala Lumpur and in true Porsche fashion. I mean, you know you're going to have a great time when they invite you to the F1 track, the Sepang International

Circuit. As we neared the racetrack I quickly realised that my initial fears were unfounded, for crouched on the tarmac were a bevy of beauties – a host of 911, 718, Cayenne and Macan in all their glory.

First station: The Slalom course

We were quickly thrust into action after a quick briefing and lecture on racing physics. My first station was a Slalom course, which was a timed component involving nimbly weaving a 718 Boxster S or Macan in-between cones. It required razor like focus, and coupled with the added pressure of trying to outdo the other drivers, this station was a great start to the morning. The Porsche instructor emphasized a lot in elements of sporty driving and precision. I could not help but to make that connection between my first time experience in motorsport, and swimming professionally through my seven year stint representing Singapore internationally. The adrenaline rush, reflexes and judgement required in controlling the car were all so familiar and thrilling at once, bringing back memories from the SEA Games.

Next up was the braking station. While initially perceived as boring purely from assumptions drawn from its namesake, this turned out to be my favourite station. It required launching the 911 at top speed into a corner and slamming on the brakes at the very last moment, in order to leverage on the resulting body roll to tackle the turn. What seemed like a simple turn was actually extremely counter-intuitive to regular driving and the skills I picked up were the most applicable during my laps around the circuit later in the day.

The next two stations were the lane change and safety line exercises, with the objective to show how the vehicles handle unexpected swerves and stops. It was extremely unnerving having to swerve the 2-ton Cayenne at full speed, which on more than one occasion almost caused my lunch to resurface. Thankfully, I walked away from the exercises with my lunch intact, although the same cannot be said for the multiple squashed cones I left in my wake, may they rest in peace.

Eight laps around the famed Sepang track

Rounding the day off was a grand total of approximately 8 laps around the famed Sepang track, which really allowed us to put the days training to use. What really surprised me was that amidst the throng of 911 and 718, the Macan (yes, with the lack of a suffix), held its own and managed to keep up with the pack. The courses really showed what the Macan can do beyond my daily drive in Singapore with its restrictive speed limit.

By end of the day, having spent the whole day at the track under scorching hot weather, I was completely drained and at the same time had a great fulfilling day. The experience was more than I expected especially understanding the foundations of sporty driving, that it's not only driving but putting together all the elements together, the car, the technologies, your stamina, your precision.

It was also really obvious that Porsche developed its different technologies all with one thing in mind – to assist in sporty driving and to enhance the experience for the driver. It was clear that Porsche applied what they experimented and perfected on the track through endurance racing and especially at Le Mans into their road cars.

One of the top 3 fastest drivers on the Slalom course

To wrap up the day perfectly, it was really tremendous when Porsche announced that I was one of the top 3 fastest drivers on the Slalom course and donned me with a garland and allowed me to pop a champagne bottle on the winners' podium like a bona fide racing driver – I was truly humbled!

My first acquaintance with Porsche was when I was a teen, and I've made up my mind to own a Boxster one day. The experience on track has just brought my fascination with Porsche to another level, especially with the brand's motorsport association and the fact that every Porsche is a sports car, whether it's a two door coupe or an SUV. Having cleared the first stage of the driving academy, I am thankfully eligible for the next two levels, which are reserved for more experienced drivers. Needless to say, my helmet and pair of gloves will be stored somewhere easily accessible in anticipation for my next phone call from Porsche.

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