

ASCARI RACE RESORT

THE RACER'S RESORT

The Ascari Race Resort has what for many is the world's finest racing track – and you can visit, maybe even try it. Jonathan Crouch does just that



What would you say was the most demanding racetrack in the world? The Nurburgring? Monaco? Bathurst? Spa? No less a judge than World Champion F1 driver Fernando Alonso reckons that it's none of those. For him, that accolade belongs to a circuit you've probably never heard of. It lies in the heart of Andalusia in Southern Spain and it's called Ascari.

Or, to be more accurate, the Ascari Race Resort. Designed as one-of-a-kind, it's a combination of luxurious day-retreat and adrenalin-packed racing circuit. And it's home to the Ascari Club, a private members club for owners of very fast cars. Nearly every curve is inspired by elements of the world's finest racing circuits, including Spa, Brands Hatch, Bathurst, the Nurburgring Nordschleife and Silverstone.

Make no mistake, this is a unique place, the full lap five and a half kilometres long, with over 3kms of that straightaways. That might suggest a layout that's flat and dull but in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Rather superstitiously, there are thirteen lefthand corners and thirteen rights, some of which have banking at a steep 17.6%.

“One of the most challenging racetracks in the world ...”

Perhaps the most striking thing though amongst Spanish circuits that are frequently very flat is the frequent change of gradient of up to 11.5%. The final 'Track 3' section, which plunges you through a dip styled on Spa's famous Eau Rouge before rushing uphill with heavily banked turns left and right, is indeed one of the most challenging sections of racetrack in the world.

Until recently, Ascari, hidden away in the hills near Ronda, less than an hour's drive from Malaga in Southern Spain, has been a well-kept secret, closed to all but the most privileged supercar owners. But now, it's slowly opening up. For some time in fact, Club Memberships have been available to those fortunate enough to be able to visit frequently.

At the time of my visit, costs (all excluding Spanish VAT) ranged from 15,000 euros for access to the track with your car for fifteen days a year, plus use of Ascari's extensive facilities which, depending on your membership, include a off road buggy track and a luxurious Clubhouse with everything from internet access to a swimming pool. If you can stretch to a little more, 60,000 euros (or 20,000 a year) will qualify you as a 'Superior Individual Member' with 50 days on track. There's also a 25 year 'Premium' Individual Membership where the price per year drops to 10,000 euros.

If you can afford a supercar though, you can probably easily afford a 200,000 euro Family membership that for 20,000 euros a year, gives you 75 track days over 25 years. And before committing your exotic set of wheels to the track, you'd do well to invest in one of Ascari's Racer Packages where qualified instructors will train you up. Check the www.ascari.net website for latest offers and costs.

So, is it worth it? To find out for myself, I arranged to a visit. As a member bringing your own car there for, say a weekend, the favoured route would be to save the drudgery of the long journey through France and instead get a ferry to Spain. Plan carefully and you can get sailing mid-week that will give you enough time to reach the track for Saturday and Sunday driving before catching the same boat back the following Monday.



We travelled with Brittany Ferries (www.brittanyferries.com) whose costs for our three cars worked out a little cheaper than pounding down through France. In any case, it made the whole trip much more relaxing. The boat takes you to the Northern Spanish port of Santander where there's then a drive of just over 500 miles down to Ronda in the South: a hard one-day's journey but an easy hop in two.

Once at the circuit, you'll need to enrol in the Ascari Racing Academy for your first day – a sensible precaution anyway since this is a highly technical track and you'll learn it much quicker with a qualified, experienced instructor beside you. What you can't do is just turn up at the track and drive your own car on a one-off basis. The resort is open to club members only – which is something you'll be thankful for if you take out a membership. The remoteness, exclusivity and cost of the place put it out of reach of boy racers in bespoilered GTIs. You don't have to fight for track space with some guy in a beaten-up Caterham. And you don't risk some idiot spinning in front of you and spoiling your day.

Yes of course a minimum of 15,000 euros (around £12,533 + Spanish VAT) is a great deal of money, but it does buy you an awful lot. Perfection isn't cheap. But don't take my word for it. Check out the ascari.net website, then take a cheap flight to Malaga and go and look for yourself. Make arrangements in advance and the circuit will welcome you in for a tour of the facilities that'll cost you just 65 euros. You can even enjoy a leisurely meal in their beautiful restaurant overlooking the pit straight afterwards.

If you've petrol flowing through your veins, visiting this place is certainly one of those things to put on the list to do before you die. And if you take the plunge into membership, you've at least fifteen days a year where it'll be just you, your car and arguably the greatest racetrack in the world. A hard proposition to resist? I thought so. Forget UK track days. Spend a little more, do the job properly and come here. Fernando Alonso was right. There's nowhere in the world quite like it.

Ascari Race Resort Need to know

Where?: Carreta de Campillos, KM 30.5, 29400 Ronda, Spain

To get in contact?: 0034-952-18 71 71 – www.ascari.net

Costs?: Club Membership required – minimum membership is the 'Annual Track Pass' inc. 15 track days & other benefits for 15,000 euros + Spanish VAT