

## BENTLEY DRIVING DYNAMICS DAYS

### TRAINING DAYS

*It's not every day that you get to drive a Bentley to the limit and beyond but Bentley owners now get the chance to do just that. Andy Enright tried out one of the marque's unique Driving Dynamics Days*



*There's a moment of great clarity that occurs just before you crash a car. After you've wrestled with the controls and done all that is humanly possible to keep your machine on the straight and narrow, a resignation washes over you when you realise you're a mere passenger travelling directly to the scene of the accident. When it's a £115,000 Bentley Continental GT that you've just relinquished control of, that resignation is all the more intense. Having just experienced this, my instructor then requested me to drive back and do it again. And then once more.*

Instead of being located in a hedgerow somewhere off the B2130, we were instead at Dunsfold Aerodrome in Surrey, better known to most as the Top Gear test track, in order to sample a half day Bentley Driving Dynamics course. This event is aimed at Bentley owners, granting them some insight into exactly what their car is capable of and, pointedly, what they are capable of. Make no mistake, this course isn't for the faint-hearted. It would be virtually impossible to hit anything other than a lightweight plastic cone on the vast expanses of Dunsfold's tarmac but it still requires some steely fortitude to throw two and a half tonnes of Crewe's finest around in quite such a demented manner.

I've been on a few of these manufacturer driving experiences before and most are rather ho-hum, employing freelance instructors who know precious little about the car they're driving and who don't trust the general public not to send them straight to A&E. This was different. At some points the instructors will urge you to drive the car in the most clumsy, lead-booted, ham-fisted way possible in order to try to provoke it into a spin, highlighting the genius in the programming of the car's Electronic Stability Control programming. One even offered £100 to anybody who could defeat the car's ESP safety net.

Quite how safe his money remained was graphically demonstrated with a test that simulated an emergency lane change manoeuvre. The exercise was conducted first with the ESP system switched on. The task seemed straightforward. Accelerate the Conti GT up to 80mph and then attempt to jink through a staggered gate of cones and then carry on in the direction you were initially travelling. Swerve right, swerve back left and continue, as if avoiding the carcasse of a lorry tyre in a motorway carriageway. It was only when attempting to flip the car back left that you could feel the forces load up, the car's weight come into play and the ESP system working hard, first quelling understeer, any car's natural inclination to plough straight ahead when the steering wheel is turned sharply. In an understeer situation, the front end of the car tends to wash out. ESP automatically applies the inside rear brake to create a rotational axis to help achieve the desired turn. If necessary, it will also reduce the engine's power.

The rapid transfer of weight from one side to the other in this test, along with the deceleration then combine to create oversteer, the classically lurid tail slide. ESP acts immediately, automatically applying the outside, front brake to prevent the back end overtaking you. So far, so technical. Let's try it with ESP switched off.



The Bentley manages the right jink but when flicked back left there's just too much physics to contend with and even with very fast hands applying corrective lock, it's virtually impossible to catch the slide. Just when you thought you might crack it, you found yourself forty yards off line, wreathed in blue smoke and facing the wrong way. I managed a 'save' once in five attempts and the instructor reckoned I was lucky to do this. On the road, I don't think I'd fancy those odds which is why I'd leave the ESP firmly switched on in everyday driving conditions.

The anti-lock braking exercise gave a graphic demonstration of how modern cars can be steered and braked at the same time to avoid an obstacle. It used to be one or the other but the capabilities of the Continental GT, a car equipped with the largest brake disc area of any production model, are well worth experiencing. I entered the braking task (an exercise with a target speed of 95mph) at well over 110mph, expecting to create a rather pretty display of flying cones but, infuriatingly, the Bentley managed the braking and swerving very tidily. Even with ESP switched off, an emergency application of the brake pedal will activate the ESP, electronic brakeforce distribution and emergency brake assist, bolstering middle pedal pressure to the max. Rather astonishingly, the electronic handbrake, operable by an insignificant looking finger switch on the centre console, could generate up to 70 per cent of total braking effort – handy in the event that your driver nods off at the wheel. Getting comfortable in the soft leather, I could see how that could happen.

Graphically demonstrating how these complex systems work is a real eye opener and many customers are not always aware of quite how capable these safety functions are. Once experienced in a safe setting with some skilled guidance, you certainly wouldn't want to be without them on the road. Bentleys are designed to be *driven* but driven responsibly and safely. Knowing where your limits and your cars limits reside is an integral aspect of this process. After a Bentley Driving Dynamics day, I have to admit that Bentley's software is a little sharper than mine.

Bentley Driving Days are an exclusive benefit of Bentley ownership. That said, if you're wavering about a Bentley purchase, a dealer might well invite you in the very real expectation that attending will have your cheque book out quicker than any test drive down the high street. They are great fun and take place at various venues around the country. Your nearest Bentley dealer can tell you more. You'll find him on [www.bentleymotors.com](http://www.bentleymotors.com).