

ZAKSPEED ADVANCED DRIVER TRAINING

PUTTING THE ZAK INTO SPEED



Jonathan Crouch sorts out his driving skills once and for all with a visit to Germany's famous Zakspeed Racing School at the legendary Nurburgring

You're a keen driver – even quite good maybe – but you've always wanted to be just that little bit better. The speed is there but there's something missing. Let's call it the 'Zak Factor'.

The 'Zak Factor' is something most of us are aware of. The bit that's missing in our driving when we compare ourselves, not with Schumacher or Button, but merely to someone who's simply calmer, smoother and faster behind the wheel. Try as we might, we just can't find it.

A driving or racing course is the obvious answer – but which one? There is, after all, an enormous range, from something you can pick up in the supermarket to go in a gift card to a fully-fledged intensive course for someone about to go serious racing. Having tried a wide variety, I can confirm that there's little point in the former, unless all you want is a picture for the family album. But neither do you want something that's too much orientated towards producing the next Kimi Raikonen.

Experience around the UK suggests that nearly all the driving courses on offer fall into either one category or the other, so I looked further a field. Actually, the process of elimination wasn't too difficult. Almost everyone I talked to gave me one name. Great tracks produce great driving schools – and so it proved.

Eric Zakowski's Zakspeed school has been teaching people from all over Europe the mechanics of fast, smooth and controlled road and track driving for over 14 years. The school, based at the Nurburgring, just south of Koblenz in Northern Germany, is hugely successful but then, as even 'Zak' would readily admit, you can hardly fail when the world's greatest racetrack is on your doorstep.

Zakspeed is particularly fortunate since it has two world class circuits at its disposal – the ultra-modern Grand Prix track and the legendary 20km Nordschliefe which twists and turns its way through the Eifel mountains. The latter course is open for anyone to drive during its regular public opening times (which you can find on www.nurburgring.de). It's this that enables Zakspeed to offer an opportunity for meaningful progression of driving skills that other schools simply can't match.

“Listen, learn, then jump in for the lap of your life.....”

If you really want to improve your road driving – find that 'Zak Factor' – then any racing school tuition is only going to be as good as the extent to which it allows you to take what you've learnt and translate it to the public highway. Otherwise, as usually happens, it's a case of having a bit of fun, then jumping in your car, driving home and forgetting it all the next morning.

At the Nurburgring, it's different. You do a one or two day Zakspeed course in single seaters around the Grand Prix track, get the basics and iron out your bad habits. You listen (the instructors' English is excellent) and you learn. Then you jump in your own car (it doesn't matter what it is), pay your €14 at the toll gate and set off around the Nordschliefe circuit for the lap of your life. The first lap is all about just taking it in, then on laps two and three, you can start to push a little and experiment with what you've learned.

If your budget will allow, Zakspeed also do single seater training on the Nordschliefe a few times a year, though, at the best part of €4,000, it's hardly cheap. Better, if your trip coincides with one of the April or May months leading up to the famous 24 hour saloon car race in June, to enrol in one of the much cheaper Nordschliefe driver training sessions held in that period. Alternatively, on public days, there's often an opportunity to co-pilot in one of their fearsome race-prepared V10 Chrysler Vipers.

None of this however, will do you much good unless you do one of their one or two-day Grand Prix track courses first. These take place in the company's own specially prepared Formula Renault single seaters, developing 140bhp and capable of speeds up to 240kmh. Taking power to weight ratio into account, you'd need a 500bhp supercar to rival the speeds developed by these deceptively rapid

racers. The €1,850 two day course that I recently tried offered many more lasting benefits than the single day experience with an intensive afternoon of theory, car-acclimatisation and a written test preceding the track sessions. At only €200 more, it's also not much more expensive, given the inclusion of hotel, meals and the opportunity of racing licence application.

These take place on a short section of the Grand Prix track in the morning, when you get a chance to follow an instructor, then learn braking and gear changing techniques. In the afternoon, nearly the whole Formula One circuit is used and offers a chance to build your confidence as you stretch the legs of the little Formula Renault and learn overtaking techniques. At the end of this, I had all the basic tools I needed to start stringing fast, smooth and confident laps together on the Nordschliefe in my road car.

Plan your time carefully and you could do the whole thing in three or four days within a total starting point budget of not much more than £1,500. Sounds a lot? It would be just for a bit of fun on a circuit in a race car. But to discover your Zak factor and become the kind of driver you always wanted to be? Cheap at twice the price.

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THE FACTS

WHERE: Nurburgring, Nurburg, Germany (4-5 hours fast drive from the Channel ports)

WHO: Zakspeed Racing School – www.zakspeed.de

HOW MUCH: One Day Course - €1,650 / Two Day Intensive Course - €1,850

ACCOMMODATION SUGGESTION: Hotel Altes Forsthaus – Tel: 0049-2691-932390 / info@Hotel-Altes-Forsthaus.de