

ROAD-SKILL

Continental shift.

Nick Scott journeys 10,000km to tear up the bitumen of southern Spain in Bentley's most muscular model to date — the Continental GT Speed.



The Continental GT Speed: stately, sedate and sophisticated. Then you push the 'go' pedal.

IN THE SUN-KISSED COURTYARD OF A HOTEL — the former home of a Moorish prince — I gaze out at the choice of vehicles on offer. Drawing invisible circles in the air with my index finger, I let out a luxuriant hum of indecision. “The silver one.” Like a spoilt child picking a dodgem. Except the multi-coloured fun-buggies glinting before me in the Andalusian rays are not fairground bumpers, but spanking new Bentleys.

GQ has been invited to Jerez de la Frontera to check out the Continental GT Speed, the latest iteration of the car that has put the once near-decrepit marque back on the map. The sepia patchwork of arid plains surrounding the southern Spanish city is no dart-in-the-map choice of destination for Bentley to showcase its flagship model. Rest assured, they won't shoot the TV ad here, but the region — home to one of the country's major motor racing circuits — is striped with winding, gently contoured ribbons of scarcely used yet excellently maintained road, snaking through a sparse landscape with only occasional olive plantations and tiny, whitewashed hamlets to take your mind off the motoring.

But before setting off into the post-dawn glow, there's time for myself and my co-pilot, former GQ deputy editor Jonno Lobban, to finish up our coffees while putting the most meticulously crafted piece of metal I've ever been allowed within slobbering distance of through a cursory inspection. Otherwise known as a wide-eyed, guppy-mouthed perv, given unconvincing semblance of informed curiosity by the odd nonchalant tyre-kick.

UNDERPINNED BY 20-INCH alloy wheels with bespoke rubber, the Continental GT Speed is seductive, Junoesque, even, and yet muscular looking. From its regal front grille (an integral strand of Bentley's DNA) to the curvaceous rear haunches, it exudes pedigree and poised-to-pounce sportiness. Inside, diamond-quilted hide upholstery and deep-pile mats ensure that passengers leave the car shrouded in a redolent haze. The finer detail — the circular-patterned aluminium fittings, purposeful-looking dials that look like precision instruments, the three-spoke steering wheel, embroidered Bentley emblems, alloy gearstick and pedals — all smacks of scrupulous attention to detail. And that's before you check out what's under the bonnet.

In order to justify the “Speed” part of the name, the boffins at Bentley's plant in Crewe, England, have put the donor model's 411kW Volkswagen W12 engine on a serious course of steroids. Lighter connecting-rods and pistons, improved cooling and juice-flow for less internal friction has added 38kW of power, a whopping 100Nm of torque, shaving three tenths of a second off the 0-100kph dash. The result is a glass-shattering three-octave beast that goes from an impatient baritone burble at 80kph to a visceral, orotund bark at 140-plus. Floor it from stationary and the rise from funereal to bug-splattering to magistrate-bribing speeds takes place in a few exhilarating seconds — 4.5 to crack the first 100kph, to >

be precise. And it goes on to hit 326kph. Apparently. Your honour.

Given this two-and-a-half-tonne bruiser's bullish approach to the road, it's appropriate that Jerez tops the Ruta del Toro, where animals are reared for fighting. And, it soon becomes apparent that the region's open cambers and curves are perfect for demonstrating how the fastest, most powerful production car in the company's history harnesses — and at times defies — the laws of physics. Jonno is not exactly light of right foot, and but for the stunning grip and responsiveness, and the stopping ability provided by the carbon ceramic brakes (an optional extra), the gees would be giving me a severe case of the jeebies.

THERE'S MORE TO THIS EMPHASIS on performance than adrenaline. The Speed sits at the vanguard of Bentley's funkier new mojo. Silver-haired aristos need not apply; footballers and rappers, welcome to Crewe. OK, it still elicits in this driver pangs of faux-baronial

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snobbery; when we return to the car following a visit to Jerez's sherry factory to find a band of local scallywags poring over it with sticky-pawed admiration, I yearn for a gold-tipped cane with which to disperse them. But in blurring the lines between luxury roadliner and hardcore sport coupé, Bentley has done the youthful über-rich a huge service.

So is it worth the 400,000-plus dollars? The abuse from buccaneering Boxster-boys? The sweaty panic-attacks when bare-chested bogans try and de-bug the windscreen at traffic lights with an egg-stained cloth? Yes. With its sybaritic comfort, fingertip sensitive handling and bitumen-shredding whoopee factor, the Speed offers a higher level of driving experience than anything I've been allowed behind the wheel of ever before.

For sheer style and poise, this Bentley is in a world of its own. For pure grunt and go, you'll need to look far afield to find anything that even comes close. Can I personally afford one? Sometimes it's best to just ease back and enjoy the ride...

Acceptan company Visa card, señor? **GQ**

YOU NEED TO KNOW

Engine 6.0 litre twin-turbo W12

Power 449kW@6,000rpm/
750Nm@1,750rpm

Speed 326kph

Acceleration 0-100kph in 4.5 seconds

Economy 9.8 litres per 100km

Price \$407,500

Enquiries www.bentleymotors.com