

by JAMES GENT
PHOTOGRAPHY by TIM BROWN

ON THE ROAD TO LE MANS

On a 1600km road trip to Le Mans in the new Audi RS Q3, our man encounters stunning landscape, interest from the military, and one of the best driving roads in the world



'THE SMELL OF FRIED EGG SANDWICHES AND 'HERBAL CIGARETTES' IS IN THE AIR'



IT'S 5.30AM, AND WHETHER I've pitched my tent on a tree root or a discarded bottle, I'm not too sure. Either way it's left me with a knot in my left shoulder blade. It's a moot point though since I'm more concerned with my rapidly descending body temperature, the hastily acquired sleeping bag I've brought with me having proven not quite as robust as I first thought. In the background, the sound of hybrid V6s and lightweight V8s whip past on the Mulsanne Straight at more than 300kph, all while the smell of fried egg sandwiches and 'herbal cigarettes' starts wafting through from an adjacent tent.

It's awesome. It's why I'm here.

Indeed, the road trip to the Le Mans 24 Hours has been on my personal bucket list since I was 17, the idea of joining thousands of motor racing fans to the oldest endurance race on the planet always striking a nerve. And unlike the last 14 times when I thought to myself "next year definitely", I was adamant. This was the year.

Unlike my fellow Le Mans road trippers though, my journey starts at Munich Airport, wherein I meet both my companion for this 1600km journey – photographer Tim Brown – and the vehicle we will be using, the '15 Audi RS Q3.

"What, no classic TVR, Jag or Lotus, James?", I hear you ask, and I'll admit, on first impressions, a compact performance SUV may seem an odd choice. One not without reason though. The Q3 is the first SUV to wear Audi's hallowed 'RennSport' badge, and is due to arrive in the Middle East market early next year. For another, measuring 14ft long and over five feet tall, and boasting both a 64-litre fuel tank

and bags of boot space, the RS Q3 should easily hold not only Tim and I but also five days-worth of spare socks and a glut of camera lenses. Plus, as an optional extra, the RS Q3 also comes with its own bespoke tent. That might prove handy.

A couple of delayed flights though mean our road trip gets underway slightly later than either of us had anticipated, and with our first 'beauty' stop 185km away in Bregenz, Austria, we hit the de-restricted autobahn hard.

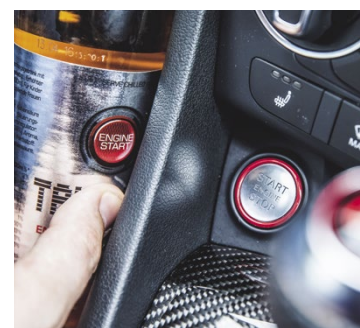
After the first hour on the road is in the bag, I'm feeling a little disappointed with the RS Q3. In the cabin, the lumbar-supportive sports seats are certainly very comfortable (if mounted perhaps a touch high), and even with RS Sports Suspension as standard, the ride comfort is also surprisingly good. The design is typically Audi modern, with lots of head and legroom, fantastic build quality and enough practicality – that means 'cupholders' and 'armrests' – to make our journey a comfortable one. It's the amount of road roar though emanating over my left shoulder that comes as a surprise: it may be one of 30 songs on the MultiMediaInterface 'Jukebox' Audi has uploaded for our journey, but Peter Garbiel's *Sledgehammer* is still struggling. Granted this may seem a trite comment given the would-be-horribly-illegal-anywhere-else speeds we're hitting on the autobahn, but for a premium SUV pushing \$70K, it's a little irritating.

Still the RS Q3 does not seem unsettled by these high speeds, our good progress brought to a grinding halt only when we hit heavy traffic just outside Mindelheim, around the halfway point. Since neither Tim nor I are keen to stare at the arse end of an 18-wheeler for a further 90km, we abandon the autobahn for the slightly more

picturesque back roads. It's on said backwater route that an enormous solar park rears out of the mid-distance, a stark reminder of Munich's goal to achieve a 100 percent renewable energy supply by 2025. A Misano Red Rennsport SUV pushing 335bhp and 332lb ft of torque from a 2.5-litre turbocharged five-cylinder may not be the most appropriate car for such climes, but given that said unit returns 8.4L/100km of fuel consumption, our consciences are clear. The remainder of our 90km drive through Austria includes typically beautiful European greenery, this only changing when we hit the slightly antiquated town of Bregenz, and Lake Constance. Even with the gradually dropping temperatures and the choppy waters, it's a truly majestic sight, and though we have to leap some tram tracks to do so, we figure a few beauty shots are in order.

Bizarrely though, most of the holiday-makers who pass by seem more interested in the Audi. And not just because Oasis' *Don't Look Back in Anger* can be heard blaring through the windows. Boasting new, more aggressively chiseled headlights and a more pronounced front grille (in suitably evil black), plus some superb looking double spoke 18in alloys, the RS Q3 is an admittedly handsome brute. The sheer amount of attention it receives though on our journey – via iPhone shots or thumbs ups – I find difficult to comprehend. Three days later, upon rolling into Le Mans' famous Houx campsite, a gentleman in a meticulous Jaguar E-Type asks if he can take a picture alongside it. Plaudits rarely get bigger than that...

Back on the road, and after a very brief sojourn through Lichtenstein (did you know its biggest city has a population of only 5500?),



Clockwise, from top: Our man James gets emotional in Reims...; regardless of backdrop, the RS Q3 draws attention; a day spent hustling the Audi in San Bernardino; home away from home; "How much is petrol in Switzerland?"; both are required across 1600km of Europe



evening is beginning to roll in on our 190km drive to Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. And if anything, the scenery is getting even more stunning: one particular hamlet we stumble across in Heididorf, with a church high up on the mountainside and clouds swirling about snow-capped peaks, looks like it's been created with a paintbrush. It's all the more random when, having taken what we think is a potentially awesome stretch of winding mountain road, we pull straight into a military barracks, unhindered by any gates, fences or signs in anyway whatsoever. It's one of the few times when the striking look of our RS Q3 works against us, and it's not long before a gentleman in fatigues holding an assault rifle asks us – in impeccable Swiss-English – to kindly move on.

With light continuing to fade, and nearly 400km and more than seven hours in the bag already, we call time on the day just outside San Bernardino (“any idea why that name sounds familiar Tim...?”) to pitch camp. This proves slightly more cumbersome than I thought with the RS Q3 bespoke tent.

For starters, there are no tent poles supporting the hexagonal canvas. Instead, the whole structure is hung from a mass of interconnected inflatable tubes. Once up it's a charmingly modern design (very Frank Gehry-ish). To do so though requires an air pump, a flat surface, some comprehension as to which side is the door, quite a lot of elbow grease, a little bit of swearing and breathlessness, and some barely controlled laughter from your travelling companion. Once up, the tent can actually be connected to the RS Q3 itself, effectively giving you – with the tailgate up – a walk-in wardrobe. A word of caution though: once connected, you will forget about the large piece of metal at forehead level, it will hurt, you will kick something, and across the weekend, several people will ask if you've been in a fight recently.

Even despite being completely knackered from our previous day's journey, both Tim and I are up at a suitably revolting 6am and are met

with a beautifully crisp summer's morning. And, on our doorstep, one of the stunning stretches of driving road in the world.

All through the night, and even despite a tailgate-related headache, San Bernardino had been rolling through my mind: where do I know that name? The answer comes, as we're filling up just outside town in the morning, via a surprisingly small signpost saying simply, 'Passo San Bernardino'. Running parallel to the region's main highway, the pass stretches for 15km from San Bernardino towards...well, pretty much nowhere, winding its way Monte Carlo Rally-style around the neighbouring mountains. The drops are insane. The views are spectacular. And the corners, as the Satnav demonstrates, are out of this world.

I'll admit that, until now, I've been struggling to love the Audi. It's certainly striking, both comfortable and practical, and of a quality any self-respecting premium German SUV should aspire to. But so far it's offered neither that RS spark nor the sense of drama I've come to expect from those two letters. With the help of The Arctic Monkeys and *When the Sun Goes Down*, all that's about to change.

Ratios for the seven-speed S Tronic gearbox have been closely spaced in the RS in the name of stronger acceleration, and out of the tighter corners as the Pass begins to wind snake-like against the rockface, this sense of urgency begins to shine through. Even in full-spec Sport mode (let's not mess around), the suspension feels tighter, the steering more responsive and the throttle more alert than during our highway cruise yesterday. A little more precision and feel for the front wheels wouldn't go amiss – that old Audi tendency rearing its ugly noggin once again – but the balance of the Q3 through the turns is mightily impressive. At the base is the same platform one finds on a Volkswagen Golf, the solid frame making the SUV much tauter and less flobbery through the turns than I'd expected, the RS sports suspension – complete with adaptive dampers – once again proving its

effectiveness as the whole car hunkers down into and through the turns.

So keen am I to crack on with the climb though that I'm mashing the right pedal too hard out of the corners, the sudden impetus of momentum causing the front wheels to break traction and skitter a little on the gradient. The Quattro all-wheel drive system is keeping the rear wheels nicely in-check, but the process is not as composed as the road or indeed the car deserves. Far better to lean on the brakes a little heavier and earlier then feed in the power more gently: there's plenty of feel through the brake pedal and massive stopping power in those discs to bring this 1655kg mass to a halt without issue. The gradient is increasing. Time to put my new style to the test...hang on, how long has *Sultans of Swing* been playing...?

Better. Much, much better. With 340bhp of power being fed more delicately through the pedal, the front-end feels much more composed, and I can concentrate on nailing the apexes (which is just as well, since we're some 1500m above sea level now and, if anything, the road is getting tighter). Acceleration from that five-cylinder is strong, there's no doubt, each swift change through the seven-speed box ushering a more furious burst of thrust, and a pleasingly energetic baritone call from the exhaust system. If there's one thing starting to grate though, it's the lag in the lower gears below 2000rpm, comparative to the rejuvenated fury as the turbo begins to spool up in the mid-range. It makes the sensation of speed that much more dramatic, but in a few of the slower corners, I am looking for delivery that's a little more predictable.

Soon we crest the mountain, whipping at dizzying pace past Lake Laghetto Moesola and yet more snow-capped peaks. Even despite the much lower temperatures, the road is packed with bikers, Porsche 911s, Golf GTIs, and the occasional bus. A morning playground for us, to others the Pass is just the morning commute, and we can't help but feel a bit jealous.



'WE PULL STRAIGHT INTO A MILITARY BARRACKS. A GENTLEMAN WITH AN ASSAULT RIFLE ASKS US TO MOVE ON'

Particularly since, having ignited some of the tempered fury within the RS Q3, I'm finally starting to click with it.

Though on this road it doesn't have the panache or the insanity of an RS7 or similarly badged Avant, it's proving equally as adept as any hot hatch (albeit on stilts), the sense of composure through the turns - despite the odd hiccup - still impressive. Having throughout our journey offered more of the 'Audi' premium qualities of comfort and practicality, on this road, the RennSport nature is beginning to shine through. Even if the steep descent on the other side works those massive brakes a lot harder than I expected.

Some three hours and several hundred motion shots later, we start winding our way back to the highway, destination Reims, a solid 800km and seven hours away. Plus a quick stop at Lake Lucerne for a gander at Chapel Bridge and a chat with a French officer who pulls us over at the Franco-Swiss border control ("must be a fast Audi thing", Tim proffers).

If stunning scenery and an epic stretch

of driving road are my main memories of Switzerland, traffic –and git-loads of it – will stay with me from France. As a result, a seven-hour journey from San Bernardino turns into a nine and a half hour teeth-gnasher (the less said about the Sat Nav's 'shortcut' through Strasbourg, the better). Once again, even amongst the human misery that is rush hour, the Audi receives an inordinate amount of attention from our fellow motorists. In many ways, the RS Q3 has proven a revelation.

It's perhaps not the most dynamic of vehicles (I do catch myself wondering how an R8 would have handled that dizzying San Bernardino Pass) and lacks a little aural refinery at highway cruising speeds, but my enthusiasm for the RS Q3 has grown considerably across a three-day, 1600km drive from Munich. As a cruiser, there's more than sufficient room to counter fatigue: at no point have I worried about twinges in my back or cramp in my legs, or felt the RS-derived sport seats were not offering enough support. Nor for that matter has the sport-tuned suspension adversely affected the ride comfort,

impressive in itself given the effective manner in which it handles load into even the tightest corners. It's a similar situation with the chassis, stiff enough to reduce body roll to a minimum on the winding asphalt but supple enough not to affect cabin comfort.

Where perhaps the RS Q3 is let down is with the five-cylinder engine, which although certainly powerful enough does lack oomph in the lower revs. Fortunately a gutsy turbo and that superb seven-speed gearbox keep the Q3 aggressive, but it is perhaps this lack of precision low down that makes me question whether ultimately an RS Q3 would be my choice over, say, a similarly priced and equally practical RS4 Avant, a car we're big fans of at **evo**. That it's been a stellar chariot for our road trip however is without question.

Before we hit our final destination - Le Mans - there is one last stop we need to make.

It's the morning of the third day, and the sun has just poked its way above the horizon. Beside me, the Audi – now coated in two days-worth of bug roadkill – ticks itself cool. To my left, the

pit boxes once used by Mercedes, Bugatti and Alfa Romeo among others to usher the likes of Tazio Nuvolari, Sir Stirling Moss and Juan-Manual Fangio to Grand Prix glory. To my right, and across a brand new strip of tarmac, the main grandstand, now badly weathered. These two structures are all that remain of the Reims-Geux Circuit, home to the French Grand Prix intermittently across the 1950s. It's eerily quiet, only the sound of Tim's shutter working furiously breaking the silence. It's also surprisingly emotional: once or twice as the sun shines across national flags at full mast, I have to catch a lump in my throat. Where once Grand Prix machines sluiced by at over 200kph, trucks and hatchbacks now barrel through on the daily run to work. And were it not for a passionate group of motor racing fans, these edifices would have been long gone too.

Amidst the excitement of the driving roads, the stunning backdrops and the benevolence of the Audi RS Q3, on occasion it's been easy to forget why we set out from Munich in the first place. But at Reims, the sense of history,

and the passion involved therein reminds both Tim and I of the race we're about to attend, the heritage it's built up, and the ultimate goal of our journey.

It's much the same feeling we get when, after another three hours on the road and with wildly unkempt beards, we arrive at La Sarthe, ZZ Top's *Smart Dressed Man* now playing with ever-increasing irony. There are hundreds, simply HUNDREDS, of cars that have just completed their own road trip. To our left, as the traffic slows on the approach to the circuit's main gates, there's a TVR Tuscan. In our rearview mirror, a BMW i8. Being pushed along the hard shoulder with steam billowing from under the bonnet is a classic MG. We've stop counting the sheer number of Porsche 911s.

I'm reminded yet further of the weekend's jocularly when, on the approach to our campsite, we come across a crowd lining the main road, beverages in-hand, offering thumbs up to passing motorists. Once again, the RS Q3 draws a lot of attention.

As do I, a cry of "WIINDDOWWWW"

from the pavement as I drive by followed swiftly by a jet of water being sprayed right into my face through the open driver's side window. Were he not laughing uncontrollably, I'd like to think Tim would be sympathetic. But given the roar of approval from the crowd, and confident that I can't be the first one today who's received this initiation, it's difficult not to see the funny side.

Indeed, as I'm pitching the tent just 20 minutes later (my right temple throbbing where the bootlid makes contact for a second time), the enthusiasm of our fellow road-trippers is striking: some of the more fanatical fans, as I later find out round the campsite burger van, have already been on-site for three days, and the race is not due to start for another 36 hours. For them, the race is why they're here, but it's the journey that's made the experience.

For many the road to Le Mans is a long hard schlep. For me, it's been one of the best experiences of my life. ☒

AUDI RS Q3

Engine In-line 5-cyl, turbocharged, 2480cc

Power 335bhp @ 5300-6700rpm

Torque 332lb ft @ 1600-5300rpm

Transmission Seven-speed S tronic

Front suspension RS sports suspension

Rear suspension RS sports suspension

Brakes 'RS' high-performance

Wheels 20" x 8.5J front and rear

Tyres 255/35 R20 front and rear

Weight 1655kg

Power-to-weight 202bhp/ton

0-100kph 4.8sec

Top speed 250kph

Basic price TBC

evo rating: ★★★★★