

# Ford Mustang

## Bite the Bullitt, buy the fantasy

By Jeremy Clarkson

*Club members with access to BBC World may be acquainted with Jeremy Clarkson as presenter of the BBC TV program Top Gear. If so they will know he is a Euro-snob but nonetheless funny writer. His look at the Ford Mustang, first published in the London Sunday Times, makes amusing and interesting reading. R.A.*

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The new Pontiac Solstice is America's first attempt at making a sports car in more than 50 years. And not since David Beckham's wayward penalty kick against Portugal have we seen anything go so wide of the mark. It is comically awful.

And that sets a question. How come America's massive car industry can't make what is basically beans on toast? A light, zesty, pine-fresh car with an engine at the front, a simple foldaway roof in the middle and rear-wheel drive at the back? Lotus can make a sports car using nothing but a melted-down bathtub and the engine from a Rover. Alfa Romeo can make a sports car using steel so thin you can read through it, and an engine that won't start. Then there was Triumph, which made a sports car even though its entire workforce was outside the factory warming its hands around a brazier and chanting.

So what's America's problem? Well, here in Europe early cars were expensive coach-built luxury goods for the tweedy and well-off. It wasn't until the 1940s that cars for the common man came to France, Germany and Britain, and it wasn't until the 1950s that they came to Italy. They haven't arrived in Spain even today.

As a result we still have an innate sense that a car is something you save up for, something a bit decadent and exciting. Whereas in America the everyman Model T Ford came quickly after the introduction of internal combustion so there was never a chance for cars to earn that upmarket cachet. As a result, they've always seen the car as a tool: nothing more than an alternative to the horse.

In Europe we talk about style and how fast a car accelerates. In America they talk about how many horse boxes their trucks can pull and how much torque the engine produces.

If you do encounter someone over there who's fond of performance cars they're only really interested in how much g can be generated in the bends, whereas here those of a petrolhead disposition don't care at all about grip, only what happens when it's lost and the car is sliding. Then you are into the world of handling. A world where nothing but skill keeps you out of the hedge.

There's more, too. From day one American motor sport was all about sponsorship, which is why the oval raceway was developed. It meant the whole crowd could see all the sponsors' names all the time. The cars never zoomed off into a wood.

Here, they did. Motor racing was a rich man's game, held far from hoi polloi on airfield perimeter roads. And on twisty tracks like this, grip was nowhere near as important as decent handling.

Add all this together and you start to understand why we have Lotus, Ferrari, Maserati and Aston Martin. And they have the Ford F-150 Lightning pick-up truck: 0-60mph in a millionth of a second. Enough space in the back for a dead bear. And on a challenging road about as much fun as a wasabi enema.

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They also have the Ford Mustang and last week that's what I was using to cruise up the 101 from Monterey to San Francisco. The sun was shining, 104.3 the Hippo was massaging my ear bones with soothing West Coast sounds and, like everyone else, I was doing a steady 65mph, my heart beating in slow monotonous harmony with the big V8.

This new version has been styled to resemble the original from 1965, and that's a good thing. Less satisfactory is the news that it's also been engineered to resemble the original with all sorts of technology that in Europe would have been considered old fashioned by Edward Longshanks. *[English king born in 1272]*

There's no complex double-stage turbocharging here; no elegantly machined swirl chamber to extract the best possible power and economy from the smallest possible engine. It's a 4.6 litre V8 with just one camshaft, three valves per cylinder and the sort of power output the average European would expect from a juicer.

The platform for the new Mustang comes from a Jaguar S-type. But then the Americans take it back in time by fitting a solid rear axle such as you'd find on a Silver Cross pram, and a Panhard rod, dismissed by Newcomen *[The Newcomen Society the world's oldest learned society devoted to the study of the history of*



*engineering and technology*] as being “a bit too last year”.

So what's it like to drive? Well, the previous day I'd taken it on a hard lap of the extraordinarily beautiful Laguna Seca raceway, which, because it's the curliest track in North America, is regarded by racing drivers all over the world as one of the greats. Mansell. Villeneuve. Even Top Gear's Stig go all misty eyed at the mention of it.

And frankly it was more than a match for Ford's big daft horse. Its brakes were cooked by turn six; the final slow corner completely overwhelmed the live rear axle; and through the fearsome Corkscrew, which twists down a gradient so steep you can't even walk up it, I'm afraid Mr Ed was about as pin sharp as a punt gun. I damn nearly soiled myself.

Is it fast? Well, you get 300bhp, which is about 200bhp less than BMW gets from a similarly sized engine. But nevertheless it will get from 0-60mph in 5sec and reach a top speed of 150. That's not bad for an ox cart.

But by European standards this car is rubbish. Its engine has wasteful, unused capacity that turns fuel into nothing, it couldn't get from one end of a country lane to the other without running out of brakes and it handles like a newborn donkey.

There's more, too. It's got a gruff engine note, its interior has the panache of an Afghan's cave and . . . and . . . and I can't go on. You see, I'm running through all this car's bad points but I'm afraid my mind is consumed by the bit where I was doing 65mph on the 101, listening to some Eagles on 104.3.

And then by the subsequent memory of grumbling along the waterfront in San Francisco itself, the city setting for Bullitt, the film that etched the Mustang for all time on the petrolhead's radar.

You see, I kept thinking I'm in a Mustang in San Francisco on a glorious September afternoon. And I liked that a lot. I liked it so much that I became consumed with the notion of maybe taking a small part of the experience home with me.

The numbers look good. Because the Mustang is made from pig iron and lava it is extraordinarily cheap: \$25,000. And £13,800 for 300bhp is tempting. Even if you factor in the cost of shipping, changing the lights and paying Mr. Blair some tax, it'll still only be £22,000.

For that you could have a Golf GTI, which, alongside Ford's canoe looks like the Starship Enterprise. It's more practical, easier to run, and around Laguna Seca undoubtedly it'd be a whole lot more competent. Whenever I drive a GTI I'm always full of admiration for its abilities, but when I was driving that Mustang I liked it. And that's sort of more important.

Of course, the American way means they'll never be able to build a sports car. It explains why the Pontiac Solstice is so dire. But the simplistic, covered wagon approach doesn't really matter on a car like the Mustang, not when you're doing 65mph in the sunshine and the Doobies are serenading you with Long Train Running. Not when it means you get a car this handsome for 13 grand.

The only worry is that if I did buy a Mustang, I'd get the car over here and on a wet November night realise that, actually, what I wanted to bring home was San Francisco.

The Mustang, then, is a great car in America. But here you're better off with a olf.