

Confessions of a road test driver



It's a demanding job but motoring journalist Tim Barnes-Clay gets to drive the latest cars and visit exotic parts of the world

I'm a full time, freelance motoring journalist. But I didn't just end up being 'lucky' as many people assume. It actually took a lot of hard work.

Taking a post graduate course in broadcast journalism, back in 1993, was the first step in my career. A succession of reporting roles in radio, starting off in Norfolk, followed by a couple of years working in cable TV, led me into motoring journalism. My first role was presenting and producing a car programme on Live TV, the station owned by the Mirror Group. That led onto another position - presenting and producing factual programmes at ITV. Eventually, after a dabble here and there in the relatively better paid world of PR, I went freelance so I could concentrate fully

on the motoring side of journalism, and have more control over my work/life balance.

So, these days, when people ask what I do for a living, I find the conversation goes like this: "You review cars?" "Yes." "A new model each week?" "Yes." "And the car manufacturers send cars to you at home?" "Yes." "And then you drive the motor around for a while?" "Yes, for about a week." "And then it gets collected?" "Yes." "And then another new car gets delivered?" "Pretty much." "Wow, you're so jammy." At this moment, I half nod and try to shrug it off. What can I possibly say? They're right: motoring journalism's great – and, let's face it, somebody's got to do it. As well as driving cars in the UK, I'm out, sometimes week after week, testing



Different ends of the motoring spectrum, left, a Renault Captur and above a Bentley Continental GT V8 S Convertible



Behind the wheel of a Cherokee Jeep in Morocco

vehicles at industry launch events abroad. On occasion, I'm given just a couple of days' notice that I'm on an all-expenses paid excursion to some European country to drive a car around a city or through the countryside. From time to time I get to go further afield to North Africa and the USA. And those trips do allow me to see some particularly awesome action. For instance, I flew to Marrakesh in Morocco earlier this year so I could try out a few Jeeps. But this was no run of the mill automotive media event – it was several days of tough driving, away from the imperial city, across the Agafay Desert and High Atlas Mountains. On reflection, it was one of the most colourful experiences of my career.

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Located just an hour from the lively souks and dizzying maze-like market streets of Marrakesh, the Agafay offers quite a contrast from the hustle and bustle of the city. The landscape slowly changes from urban to rural farm land until you reach the desert, which is literally untouched by development. But this is not a Saharan-style sandy wilderness; it is more of a barren, abandoned plateau. Stretching for miles, this semi-lunar terrain is unforgiving in the summer months, but in the cooler seasons it provides a breath-taking environment; one that is often overlooked by those wanting to shuttle between the Atlas Mountains and Marrakesh.

Indeed, local villages have been driven out by the lack of water, so, apart from some local shepherds on their donkeys and the odd 4x4, the area is free for adventure. And, believe me; the Jeeps made ideal travelling companions in this kind of environment.

Later in the year I visited Moab in Utah, USA, to do some more off-roading. Getting the chance to drive the area's 'Hell's Revenge' trail route up, down and around long stretches of red slick-rock was enough to keep me on my toes for a few days.

Testing a Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk with a formidable 3.2-litre V6 268bhp petrol lump, mated to a nine-speed automatic gearbox, made it the textbook vehicle for a journey into cowboy and Indian territory. Moab is where many of John Wayne's Westerns were filmed, after all. See, even we self-effacing motoring journalists understand what it is to stretch the all-too-human limits of our endurance. We know what it's like to

face up to a seemingly unsurmountable mountain or desert in unsympathetic territory. Well, you try flying to all these places. Hell, there are some days when I swear the smell of an aeroplane is never out of my nostrils - that compelling but also slightly sickly aroma of aviation fuel mixed with the scent of airline food. Indeed, as much as I'd like to be unassuming about it, I can't pretend the role doesn't involve some disadvantages. For instance, rather than becoming the kind of person who drives a Ford Mondeo for a few years, I open myself up to being mistaken for the owner of pretty much every car on the road. Sometimes, I relax into the idea of the confusion: if people assume I

actually own that Bentley I drove to the airport last week, then I guess I'm just about prepared to live with it. When, however, people raise their eyebrows as I step from a bright purple Peugeot 208, or climb out of a boy-racer focused Vauxhall Corsa VXR, I feel an instant “the car's not

mine” conversation coming on. What's more, it's puzzling for some of my neighbours, who see my financial fortune, as reflected in my choice of car, alter on a weekly basis. There's the tendency for them to imagine that I'm either someone who's 'made it' or I'm a dodgy dealer of some description. So why do I do it? Why would I put myself through this kind of motoring madness when other, less demanding jobs in journalism - such as, for example, political correspondent - might have beckoned? I don't know, really. It's difficult to explain, beyond that nod and shrug. I get to drive a lot of tasty motors, though. And I derive an awful lot of pleasure from that.

Favourite car tested:
New Audi R8 V10 Plus

Unexpected pleasure:
**Peugeot 308 SW
BlueHDi 180 GT**

Worst car tested:
Chrysler Ypsilon