



TG MAN ACTUALLY  
DRIVING AN F1 CAR



# HYPER DRIVE

Take one F1  
car. Insert man  
with zero race  
experience.  
Stand back  
and pray...

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**T**he astronaut Alan Bean spent precisely 31 and a half hours on the moon. In the grand scheme of life, it was just the briefest of pitstops. Which may explain why he spent the rest of his years painting pictures of the lunar landscape, even sprinkling specks of moon dust into his oils in an attempt to relive those magic few hours again and again. He might never have reached the same high back on earth, but at least it made the comedown a little more bearable.

Why am I telling you this? Clearly, I'm not about to land on another planet. But I have just done three laps in a 2012 Lotus F1 car, and I'm feeling as high as old Bean when he stepped out of his Lunar Module and onto the space dust all those years ago. For an average earthling with zero racing stripes, it may never get better than this. Which is why I should wet my brushes and erect an easel. Maybe paint some blurry grand prix cars or an abstract selfie. You never know, it might just stretch the last six minutes of my existence over a whole lifetime.

Let's rewind a few hours. If you like cars, and I suspect you do, you'll understand that fantasies don't come much dreamier than this. Because, although mortal amateurs have driven F1 cars before, driving a very recent – and successful – one is almost unheard of. But because the screaming V8s have been replaced and the tech game has changed so drastically, it's now OK to drive a year-old car without breaking any of the FIA's in-season testing rules or giving away too many secrets. Which is why I find myself with the keys to the black-and-gold Lotus E20 in which Kimi Räikkönen won the Abu Dhabi GP in 2012...

You know the one. "Leave me alone, I know what I'm doing," said Kimi that day. "Yes, yes, yes." It even has his name swirled in black marker pen under the seat mould, which – luckily – seems to accommodate me rather well. In fact, I'd guess that Kimi and I share a similar diet, which is why I was placed farthest away from the wine at dinner last night.

I won't pretend I'm confident. Any clumsiness may result in the takeover of my personal bank account for

## "ANY CLUMSINESS MAY RESULT IN THE TAKEOVER OF MY BANK ACCOUNT"



the next hundred years. You should've seen the forms I signed. Don't worry, there's nothing to hit at Paul Ricard circuit, they say. And, sure enough, the barriers are many yards away from the edge of the track. But instead of filling this no man's land with gravel, it's coated with special abrasive paint. Who knew a lick of Dulux could stop an out-of-shape racing car? Apparently, you have to lose control in the proper manner in order for it to actually stop you. Locked up or sideways should do the trick.

To make sure I do this in the best possible style, I'll be shown the ropes by current Lotus driver and everyone's favourite crash artist Pastor Maldonado. He arrives straight from Monaco after a tricky race weekend – the latest in a line of hiccups that's earned him some pretty bad press recently. And from our nice comfy armchairs, it's easy to shout rude things and question his talent. Many people have. He's just a pay driver, they say. More money than skill. But he's a good sport, Pastor, and he's willing to call our bluff on this one. Think this stuff is easy? "There's the car," he says with a slap on the back. "Off you go."

And while there are some – alright, many – F1 drivers whose egos require a separate truck, Pastor packs light. Behind mirrored orange shades, he talks me through the basics as if he's handing over a hire car. "Remember," he says with a little smile, "it won't work if you're not fast. Full throttle. Maximum braking. Have fun." "What about the aero?" I ask, "How will I know when it's working?" "The first time," he says, "you have to feel the limit to know where it is..."

Righto. To get a feel for the track, I'm given an hour in a Formula Renault, before I'm let loose in the E20, Kimi's E20, which has just been warmed up by Nico Prost, son of Alain (weird day, I know). His brief was to make it as friendly and un-prangible as possible, so the mechanics have applied some traction control and disarmed the KERS, meaning it now makes only 750bhp. I'll manage. Otherwise, the original hardware is the same, which means there's a 2.4-litre V8 good for 18,000rpm and a seven-speed 'box with customary paddle-shifters. Total weight is 640kg, or a bit more if you include me.

And so here I am, stepping into the cockpit, first standing on the seat before slithering down into it. It's snug and low in here, and you lie like you're reading a book in bed. Except instead of holding a paperback, I'm gripping 20 grand's worth of steering wheel. Thick belt straps are lashed over my shoulders and two more emerge from my crotch. The whole assembly is buckled in my lap while two men pull hard on the loose ends, squeezing me into the seat. If racing drivers really do have big balls, I've no idea where they store them.

If I weren't so locked down, I could reach out and touch the tops of the front tyres. They frame the road on each side and look wider and more rubbery than they do on telly. There's a sliver of plastic windscreen, but you can't see the nose or suspension because they're way down low. The sides are high, but you



### MR MOTIVATOR

You didn't think they'd let him loose in a proper F1 car without a spot of downward dogging, did you?



**1** It all starts in the classroom. No talking at the back **2** "And this one does the wipers..." **3** Pastor Maldonado, minus the shades. Proof that F1 drivers do have eyes **4** Somebody talk to this man. He has no idea what he's doing **5** Give it a turn of wing, chaps. He'll need it...



could still see someone standing level with your temples. Each mirror is about the size of a luggage tag and gives a more generous rearward view than expected, though the rear wing seems a long way back – at more than five metres long, the E20 is lengthier than an Audi A6 estate.

Inside my helmet, my earplugs crackle, and team manager Barry comes over the radio. Thumbs up. The starter motor is inserted into the rear end, and I tingle as it spins. The engine is lit. Through my earplugs and balaclava and helmet, it's muffled yet terrifying... like I'm about to be fed backwards into a sawmill. I haven't even revved it, yet the vibrations are going up my arms and massaging my brain. The jacks are removed, and I'm dropped to the floor with a bony thunk. You feel it up your spine. I'm pushed out to the pitlane and lined up straight.

Pull in the hand-operated clutch paddle with the first two fingers on my left hand and hold it there. Into first by pulling a flappy paddle with two fingers on my right hand. It clunks into gear and the revs jump up... pulsing like automatic gunfire. Pap pap pap. Ease out the clutch on Barry's command, without touching the accelerator. It slowly edges away, a little jumpy at first. Clutch fully out now. Even jumpier. Try some throttle... feel the car surge forwards, pull paddle again for second gear. I've seen more stylish getaways, but at least we're off.

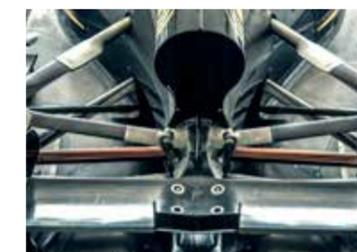
Now I know this sounds terribly sensible, but once you're up and running, it's actually quite easy to drive. It has power steering, so you can guide it around with a light grip, possibly lifting a little finger like you might when raising a glass of champagne. Lovely. The throttle is progressive, and you operate the paddle-shifters as if you were flipping through

## “ONCE YOU'RE UP AND RUNNING, IT'S ACTUALLY QUITE EASY TO DRIVE”

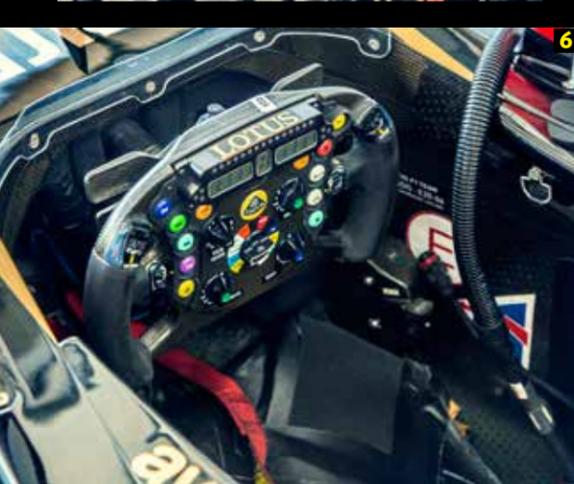
the pages of a book. The first few corners are more easy-going than they were in the Formula Renault. For some reason, through a right-hander – which crosses over another portion of track – I even check for traffic. There is none.

Of course, you'll want to know what happens next. I'm curious, too. And so, after a cautious first lap, when the final corner straightens onto the long and manly straight, I squeeze the throttle. And here it comes... the road is a treadmill, and the edges are smudged. I am a laser beam. The world is weightless. Somewhere behind me is the wail of Formula One car. My car. Up the straight like a barb from a taser. Heaven only knows what it feels like when the KERS is hooked up and deployed. I wouldn't even find the button. And it turns out I only just reached full throttle. This isn't even flat out...

Along the top of the steering wheel is a row of red and blue LEDs that light up in cahoots with the revs. They blaze like a police car's roofbar, and as soon as



1 There's a racing line there somewhere. Probably to the left a bit 2 If this magazine played sound, you would now be deaf 3 Remember when F1 noses were pretty? 4 Writer Read does his best not to look petrified. Fails 5 Move over, Pastor, there's a new bloke on the grid these days... 6 Many buttons in here, most of which are best left alone. The stretchy hose blows cool air to reduce nervy sweating before setting off





**1** A slap on the back for not crashing  
**2** It felt quick. The telemetry proved otherwise  
**3** Brakes are cooled with actual petrol-powered leaf blowers from a DIY store  
**4** This is what your face will look like after driving an F1 car. Unless you happen to be a model



“MY FACE PEELS LIKE THE TOP LAYER OF A RICE PUDDING”



WATCH OUT, TAKI'S ABOUT. SEE IPAD VIDEO FOR A CHEEKY SURPRISE



you've grabbed one gear, it's time for another. Yet despite all this, and once you have the first burst out of your system, it's actually quite peaceful inside... like it might be in the eye of a tornado as it rips up the world around you. I can hear my breath, scuba-style. After a while, I realise there's a faint beep in my ear, like the pips on Radio 4, reminding me to change up on time.

Under the bridge, looking for the orange cone that marks the braking point. Some fool has placed it about 50 yards from the corner, at which point I'm still doing 170mph. I push the stiff pedal with my left foot, mustering all the power I can from my thigh. Later, I'll be shown telemetry of my laps, and Pastor will point at a molehill on the brake graph, where really there should be a stalagmite. Still, the skin peels from my face like the top layer of a rice pudding. Down a few gears. Look up. Nowhere near the cone. Accelerate towards the corner again...

It's not unknown for these forces to coax tears from their ducts. Though I'm not sure mine needed much persuasion, as – forgive me a slightly mushy moment here – they were topped up and ready to

spill. I thought all this speed would make me swear in my helmet like Kimi. But no. I was actually welling up in there. Just don't tell anyone, eh?

I'd like to tell you that I threw it through the next few corners like Kimi once did. I'd like to pretend that I felt a phantom force as the aerodynamics took over and pushed the car into the road. Truthfully, though, I didn't. Of course, the wings did their job, and I still changed direction like a flying saucer. The muscles in my neck tugged at their moorings. Yet I was barely above the minimum operating speed. What it's like beyond here is still privileged knowledge, reserved for the 22 blokes who line up on that grid each week. And they have traffic to worry about.

If you don't believe me, come and have a go. Really. If you pay Lotus enough money – around €6,000 – it will give you three laps in this very car. It will provide physios and helmets and fireproof socks. If you're feeling particularly flush, you could even buy extra laps, for around €1,000 a pop. But you know what? I'd stick with three. Bank the memory.

Start painting. **TG**