

WHEEL DEAL



A Thrilling Ride

Actor Gul Panag pens her experience of driving an Audi R8 on the tracks in Berlin.

When I was invited by Audi India to be part of the R8 Experience in Berlin, my excitement levels were moderate. I had of course been on an A6 Driving Experience to Abu Dhabi on the Yas Marina track (and one in Gurgaon later). I had also already driven the R8 a few times. What new could I possibly experience? (Little did I know then that I was going to stand corrected.) New

or not, when it comes to super sports cars I am always game. And so I set out for Berlin.

For me, precision and functionality are at par with luxury. Indeed, living in India, they ARE a luxury. So my luxury experience began from the time I landed in Germany - the land of precision. Fortunately, I had a day to myself in Berlin before the R8 Drive and used it to sight see. And there can be no better way to see the

sights than sitting in the driver's seat of an R8 Spyder with its top down. Audi India had very kindly given me one for the day. The roads of Berlin were lovely and I had the opportunity to experience the thrust of the Spyder's 10 cylinders - in a way that I hadn't before in India. After all, given an empty stretch in one's lane back home, one still can't take the chance of flooring it lest someone veer from their lane. However in

Germany, you know that's not going to happen.

After spending the day in Berlin, Michael Perschke, Head, Audi India and I headed out towards Groß Dölln, 80 km outside of Berlin in what was former East Germany. The R8 drive was to be at a track there. As I was driving on the AutoBahn at a comfortable 240km/hour, I began to soak in the luxurious experience. To be able to drive a car like this on the kind of roads it is meant for, is an incredible high for an automobile enthusiast like myself. And to find all cars around me doing the same, if not more speed was strangely comforting. Like I wasn't an odd speed starved person from India. Soon we got off the AutoBahn, and were on a beautiful wooded road leading - surprise surprise - into the woods. The Spyder handled beautifully on the gentle curves. And once again I thought to myself, now I really had seen all the R8 could do. I had driven it in the city, on the no speed limit AutoBahn and on a country road. What more would I get to experience in the R8 drive the next day?

With these thoughts in my head I drove into the Hotel Doellnsee-Schorfheide. Probably best described as a country inn (it WAS in the middle of nowhere), and was surrounded by woods on all sides and even had a lake nearby. It also appeared to cater almost solely to the Groß Dölln Driving Centre. After tucking in to a barbecue

dinner on the lake, I called it a day. I had difficulty sleeping in anticipation of the Drive.

Next morning it was raining as I was introduced to the driving instructors - Josef Haider, Oliver Rudolph and Marco Werner. With a twinkle in his eye, Oliver said the wet track would now be more fun. I wondered. The track itself was a mere 200 metres away. However 'track' was an understatement. Groß Dölln Driving Centre was an old Soviet era airfield!! And at 5000 meters (or 15000 feet approximately) it was also the longest in Europe. We assembled in what was the edge of the mammoth former aircraft parking space, dotted by giant concealed and camouflaged hangars. And if one peered carefully into the woods one could also spot cleverly concealed 'bunkers'. I wondered what this place was like 30 years ago. Probably filled with Ilyushins, Antonovs and MIGs and teeming with Soviet troops. And yes very secretive.

I dragged myself back to the present as I was gently ushered into a briefing room (an erstwhile aircraft hangar of course) to be addressed by the instructors. I learnt that apart from the 5000 meter runway, the parking bays, there was also a specially constructed track (used for racing events). The instructors briefing done, I set out for part 1 of the R8 Drive - the track experience. This was my opportunity to take corners at higher than normal speeds, see

how the car handled with steering - under and over. As I followed the instructor's car, and his driving pattern, I began following what those in motor sport call the 'line'. I marvelled at the dexterity of the instructor, never wavering from the line. There were times when I braked too hard to late, and any other car would have spun. But not the R8. The low suspension, coupled with its kerb width kept it stable. After the first two laps I felt I knew the track better and pushed the car a bit more. But there is a fine line between confidence and over confidence. I took a corner at much higher speed than I should have and almost began to go off the track, the ESP kicked in and I found that with minimum steering I was able to regain control. The R8 not only looked good and moved fast, but also handled very well in slippery conditions. Oh, did I mention it was raining?

Trying to push myself and the car, I found myself leaning, almost standing on my left foot (the R8 was Left Hand Drive) - for balance. Just as I thought my left foot would detach itself, the instructor led me off the track.

We were now, without preamble, going into Part 2. I finally got a glimpse of the runway. It was LONG. And a portion of it was cordoned off to experience the braking of the R8. Basically the instructor wanted me to floor it from point A to point B, then hit the brakes HARD at point B (stand on the brake





he said), and reach point C as the car slowed all this while avoiding the obstacle placed on the way. Easy! Not. The R8 gathered so much speed in the short distance of 100 meters between point A and Point B that surely it couldn't stop by point C AND avoid the obstacle! In the first run, I was rather inhibited and did not give full acceleration. I was seriously worried about not being able to stop. I was duly admonished by the instructor. He asked me to be fearless. In the second run, I let go and stood on the gas pedal. Then switched my foot to the left and stood on the brake. I was still very fast, hurtling down a narrow corridor of orange cones, steering gently to avoid the obstacle cones. Voila! I had come to a dead stop! With a thumbs up from the instructor. I should have put more faith in the brakes (and ABS). I went on to do more runs- getting more

and more daring with each one. And each time the car amazed me.

Now half way through the experience, we took a short break for tea. The day had a frightfully early start and the croissants and tea were most welcome. I had barely finished my tea when the instructor was back to take me to Part 3. This is my favourite part. And from earlier drives with Audi, I know this requires skill and technique. The Slalom (zig zag driving while avoiding obstacles or repetitive S curve.) The Slalom track has been carved out of another portion of the runway. There was a water tanker constantly wetting the track. The idea was to navigate it with minimum steering. And this is also where you see what happens when the weight of the car shifts from one side to the other. I have to say, in my book, how a car behaves in the Slalom is the

ultimate test as it's the closest depiction of street driving under duress. The R8 handled remarkably. And I do have a frame of reference when I say that because I HAVE done this a few times on different cars. After my last (of many many runs), I walked away very, very impressed. Very.

The grand finale of course was getting a taxi ride in the R8 LMS (the racing sister of the R8) with Marco Werner - three times winner of 24 hours of Le Mans - on the wheel. What a thrill! And what control. I was suited up like Marcus in a fire retardant suit and helmet, but that's where the similarity ended. I would give my right arm to be able to drive the way he did. In hindsight I now also know why, this was saved for the last. Had I witnessed this first, I may have killed myself trying to emulate his moves! ■

