

All the way up here, is all sixth gear, flat..." The voice is that of 1993 BTCC champion Jo Winkelhock, but this time he's in a roadgoing BMW M5 Touring, with this writer, equally brave freelance John Elwin and photographer Mark Bothwell aboard. What will turn out to be a memorable ride is the result of yours truly realising, while planning a trip to the STW-Cup meeting at the Nurburgring in Germany, that we would be perfectly placed to investigate the real Nurburgring - the Nordschleife, 14 miles long and with 'at least 150' corners. One of the last true road circuits left in the world, it sees little competitive use these days. The Grand Prix circus left in the mid seventies for the artificial Hockenheim, followed a couple of years ago by the mighty Class One DTM machines who

declared the place just too dangerous. Now the circuit's income comes from the public. For 15 Deutschmarks a lap you can drive or ride your own vehicle around the Nordschleife, unhindered by road rules or speed limits. And every day hundreds of drivers and bikers do just that. But for our first visit, we didn't want to just drive it. We needed someone to show us around properly, a Nordschleife expert...

"In this section you need very good rhythm. Second gear, it's quite quick because of the very long gear ratio..."

Jo knows the Nordschleife intimately. He used to race it regularly when it was a stop on the DTM calendar. And only two weeks before our trip, he had raced it in his Super Touring BMW, in the one major event the circuit still hosts, the 24 hours. This race attracts 160 cars varying from Super Touring machines to Mini Coopers and Fiat Cinquecentoes, and

teams, which vary from complete professionals to total enthusiasts. Sadly Jo did not see the flag this year, totalling his BMW against the barriers while overtaking a slower car. Our man Chris Goodwin was also unlucky, team-mate Ian Flux crashing their Group N 5mb with an hour to go. The Nordschleife demands respect, and is ready to bite the unwary.

"Third gear, fourth gear, fifth gear flat, this is Flugplatz, where Manfred had his accident. It's fifth gear flat and the car is completely in the air..."

Flugplatz means flying place, and is well named. It was the scene of one of the Ring's most famous accidents, when the March F2 car of Jo's brother Manfred, its nose damaged in an earlier collision, suddenly took off over a crest. It flipped backwards then rolled into the barriers, Manfred amazingly stepping out unhurt and in true Winkelhock tradition asking





der nürBURG-ring

nürBURGring
 schönste Rennstrecke der Welt

ERBAUT: 1925 - 1927
Länge: 21,819 km
HÖCHSTE GEBIRGE: 210 m
REKORDE: 1928 - 1929
 1930 - 1931
 1932 - 1933
 1934 - 1935
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 2020 - 2021
 2022 - 2023
 2024 - 2025

Berühmte Rennfahrer:
 1927-1929: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1930-1931: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1932-1933: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1934-1935: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1936-1937: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1938-1939: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1940-1941: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1942-1943: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 1944-1945: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
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 2018-2019: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
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 2022-2023: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel
 2024-2025: Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Opel



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK BOTHWELL

a spectator for a cigarette. The mention of Manfred is a surprise - he was lost in a sports car crash in Canada, and even 10 years later it is clear that Jo still greatly misses his brother.

"This is Schwedenkreuz, one of the quickest parts, and already here the car is in the air, with a little wheelspin..."

A group of bikes accelerate past our BMW, their riders hunched low, leaning far into each corner. The Nordschleife attracts hordes of bikers, yet for them it holds the greatest dangers. As we'd boarded the car Jo had said we would have to take it easy, there had been a bad accident to a biker that morning, the medical helicopter called. Jo shrugged off our concern, saying "On the Nordschleife, it is normal." Later we would learn the biker had been killed...

But this is indeed normal for the Nordschleife. The circuit claims approximately one person a week, the great majority bikers. Last year, apparently was particularly bad, with 72 deaths. But the circuit is so deeply wrapped in tradition that no safety-conscious do-gooder even thinks of raising objections to the carnage. They would not get far...

"Brake, turn-in, flat, fifth gear - there's a lot of fifth gear." Jo is now chasing the bikes, his earlier aim of taking it easy forgotten, with perhaps his right foot stirred by the mention of his brother... now he's beginning to enjoy himself.

"Back to second, this is Aremberg, out, all downhill, flat to Fuchsröhre (the foxhole).. this is really good, wow! It's possible even in the rain to go flat."

Between corners I ask him how long the place takes to learn. "About two to three 24-hour races," is the matter-of-fact answer. "When I first came here, I did 40 laps in my mother's Renault 5. Fifth gear flat, back to second. In this hole the compression is so heavy you cannot lift your foot from the accelerator,"

In truth, he adds, it's never really possible to learn the Nordschleife. Each time the circuit is a little bit different. "In the DTM I used to do just one lap of practice then come in and think about it. There are just too many impressions.

"This is a big part, fourth gear, double right hander, a little lift, then flat..."

The M5 is really motoring now, Jo just feet behind the pushing-on bikers, letting the tail slide out in every corner. We simply hang on but our host is relaxed, steering with his left hand while the other searches for his cigarettes in the centre console. The spectators are getting good value too - spectators? Yes,

you can tell the most dangerous corners on the Nordschleife, as each is thronged with people. Local people, soaking up the sun in deckchairs, eating picnics and waiting for the accidents.

"Breidscheid is the deepest part of the Nordschleife. Up to Bergwerk, where there was the accident to Niki Lauda..."

Another grim Nurburging memory, a picture of a burning F1 Ferrari, hit by two other cars, an accident that turned Niki Lauda the great racer into Niki Lauda the scarred hero, and took Formula One away from the Ring.

"Fifth gear, sixth gear, all flat, here you have wheelspin..." Now we are heading towards Karussell, an amazing corner, more than a hairpin. Its inside half is paved with car-sized concrete slabs, each at a slightly different angle to the next so that as you turn into it you are taken on a rollercoaster ride, around a seemingly endless circle, then spat out of the exit at very high speed, and onto the next test.

"Pflanzgarten, fifth gear flat, a big jump..."

The place where all the

photographers go. Cars fly at Pflanzgarten, but being on a curve they fly at an angle, landing crab-like and only the grip of their tyres preventing a disastrous high speed spin. For while it is full of corners, the Nordschleife is anything but slow, Jo's most used phrase seeming to be "flat."

"This is Schwalbenschwanz, which means..." Jo makes the sign of a hanged man, a sign we all understand. And then on to the long straight, a couple of miles parallel to the public road, where Jo reckons Group A Sierra Cosworths used to touch 300kph. If we stopped here, we'd see the memorials in the trees, to mostly unknowns, all claimed by the circuit throughout the years.

We brake for the last bends, then slow before the barrier, where the track

A rollercoaster ride round a seemingly endless circle before being spat out at very high speed...





Back in the great days. The last time the DTM visited the Nordschleife, with one of the Alfas pictured taking off at Pflanzgarten



The only way to travel.. 'Smokin' Jo in content frame of mind, driving his BMW around the Nordschleife, with the view over the Eiffel mountains

PHOTOS BY MARK BOTHWELL

used to carry on to what is now the Grand Prix circuit, and Jo brings the BMW to a halt in the car park. "Would you like to go again?" he says, and I am keen, but spotting the queasy look on the face of my photographer I demur.

Next day, after the races have finished and before departing the Nurburgring, I can't

resist having a go myself in my BMW 316i company car. I pay my marks at the gate and hit the famed tarmac, enjoying myself more with every one of the oh- so many corners – until I exit a left-hand bend over a crest to find it turns dramatically into a right-hand bend, and only just manage to avoid testing the strength of the no-doubt

unyielding barrier followed by making a very embarrassed call to my publisher.

The problem, is the place is like that, sucking you in to the point where you can so easily think your abilities are greater than they actually are. It gets under your skin – magical Ring...

Due to an unfortunate design error (not by me!), the original of this feature was published with the final three paragraphs cut off. So I reproduce them here. AC