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Chasing speed

The eternal pursuit of more speed and power

On February 14, 2013, the Hennessey Performance Engineering built Venom GT (pictured above) set a top speed of 270.49 MPH on the 3.22 mile shuttle landing strip of the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida. Based on a Lotus Exige, and registered as a modified Exige, the Venom GT does not hold the Guinness record of fastest production vehicle because with only 11 of them made and technically not a new car from the ground up, it doesn't qualify as a production car.

Since the conception of four wheels and powered transport, there has been a relentless race to build the fastest, the most powerful, and the most desirable car in the world. What Karl Benz started in 1896 with the first petrol engine car, has been carried on decade after decade, with the best engineers, designers and marketers from all over the world working day and night to gain that one extra mile per hour, all for a title and an entry into the history books.

Ettore Bugatti, other than being a businessman selling his products to the elites of society, was regarded as one of the brightest engineers/designers in the early 20th century. Proof of his expertise at building magnificent, ultra desirable cars is the Bugatti Type 35 and the 57SC Atlantic, both of which were the fastest cars of their time.

Bugatti took a several decades long hiatus after the death of Jean Bugatti, Ettore's son, who died testing a prototype car in 1939. Bugatti challenged the top speed record again in the early 90's with the phenomenal EB110 GT, the company then under an independent Italian investor. The 209 mph record it set in 1991 was enough for VW to sit up, take notice, and acquire the company in 1998. They gave the green signal to a car that would change the face of ultra-rare hypercars forever: the Veyron 16.4. In Veyron SuperSports form, the

numbers read: 16 cylinders, 4 turbos, 1,200 horsepower, 1,100 lb ft torque, and a 267.856 mph top speed. It's still the fastest, since the Venom GT isn't a production car.

The race for the title of fastest production car has heated up in recent times, but back in the 90's, the competition was even more intense. The ones that made the breakthroughs, did so in spectacular fashion.

The Jaguar XJ220 was a class apart as a hypercar, combining grace and power in a way that is yet to be replicated (except, perhaps, in the Pagani Huayra). At the time, the XJ220 was the fastest car in the world, topping out at 213.1 mph. Another British great is the eternally cool, gracefully monstrous McLaren F1. 3 seats, a gold plated Mercedes AMG engine, liberal use of carbon fiber, and the magic touch of genius engineer Gordon Murray, propelled the F1 into the history books in 1995 with an eye-watering 231 mph, a record that would stand till the Veyron broke it in 2005. The F1 is still the fastest naturally aspirated production car in the world.

In the late 80's, Ferrari and Porsche battled for the title with the F40 (1987, 202.687 mph) and



the 959 (1986, 195 mph), respectively. In America, Callaway Cars Inc., a company much like Hennessey, came up with the fire breathing Callaway Twin Turbo Corvette, the most powerful version called the "Sledgehammer", which at the time held the record of the fastest street legal car in the world, at 254.76 mph. Take into account the record was set in 1988 and was held until 1999, and it's an astounding achievement.

As far as the classics go, besides the Bugattis, the Mercedes 300 SL Gullwing must be mentioned. Back in 1955, the voluptuous, curvy shape of the 300SL had a huge aerodynamic advantage over the rest of the field, reaching a top speed of 140 mph. The gullwing doors were an engineering necessity because of the low-slung body and the frame, but that was a first, too. Nowadays a well-kept Gullwing will put you back over USD \$500,000.

All of this chasing after a top speed, and the rate at which a higher record is attained slowing down year after year, begs one question to be asked. Where does it stop? 270 mph has been reached, but is it possible to go beyond 280-290 mph in the next three-four years? Without massive leaps in tire and transmission technology and aerodynamics know-how, probably not. As for an engineering cap on the top speed at any given time, it's not feasible to think that *this* is it, and thus it's not possible for us to put an upper limit to our hunger for more speed. After all, who would want to give up and not push for that extra 1 mph?

THE GREEN STIG

Low down in Bali A small dose of Indonesia's car culture

On a recent work trip to Bali, Indonesia, my cohorts and I were in a cab that came to a stop at an intersection. It was night and the interior of our cab was bathed in a red glow from the traffic light outside. Motorbikes came to a putting stop beside us. The cars from the opposite direction were moving in a steady, straight flow. My Bangladeshi companion's reflex reaction kicked in as he asked our driver why we weren't moving. I pointed out the red light and it took a few seconds for him to register that people here were obeying traffic rules. Red meant stop the car; it wasn't a decorative ornament.

This was a pleasant change from the usual race grid of Dhaka streets. It wasn't a kill or be killed routine. People were on scooters all over the place. Women in short skirts, men in short tops and a couple of children possibly on a joy ride. The difference was all the two-wheelers were moving fast as they can, but in a straight line. Not cutting across the car's front bumper. I'm assuming the people in Indonesia don't watch the Fast and Furious franchise, because in Bangladesh everyone wants to be like Paul Walker's character in the horsepower fuelled movies. Except Paul Walker died in real life in a car accident. Real life is a bit of an ass that way; it doesn't follow movie rules.

The adherence to traffic rules was a strange phenomenon after spending years in a country where such rules are like the warning labels on cigarette packets: necessary yet overlooked. And the result showed in the way their cars looked. I was amazed to spot quite a few gems all over the place. There were mostly two categories of cars. Old, customized machines and new, compact



rides. In the former category pretty much everything was available. I saw a KE70 Corolla hardtop with over fenders and a mirror straight body. It was rolling on lowered shocks and some kind of dished rims that made it look like a poster out of a stance magazine. Too bad my phone wasn't fast enough to snap a few shots.

Old EP82 Starlets, AE111 Corollas, every possible variety of pre-2000 Lancers, everything was straight, shiny and lowered. I drooled over a 95 Honda Accord in the opposite lane with dark blue paint, original lip bodykit and a wheel arch to tire gap ratio of about less than a finger. The car collection there is a lot like what we have in

Bangladesh, except in pristine condition. Old cars that look like they just came out of the showroom.

And then there were newer rides. Suzuki Swift, Toyota Yaris, Honda Jazz. Tiny, compact, popular like biriyani in Dhaka's Old Town. I spotted quite a few of these all over the place, sporting 16-plus inch wheels

and lowered suspension. You're right if you guess they have great roads. Speed breakers do just that, they break the speed, not your spine. Compact hatchbacks feature prominently on the landscape. Denny Watarang is the owner of one such ride, working as a restaurateur. He currently drives a 2013 Honda Jazz which was decked out with really sharp looking 17 inch alloys. Why, I asked. He says, 'why not?'

He doesn't 'race', but he likes to have his car look just right. We got to talking and he invited me to have a go in his little Jazz. Now I drove this tiny car in Dhaka, but not one with such a cool stance. It was surprisingly easy rolling, a little tire rumble from the heavy rubber and I couldn't turn the front wheels completely lock to lock cause the tires

smooth. The looks are a good payoff he thinks, against the slight loss in practicality.

Anisa Made (pronounced Ma-day) loves her 125cc Honda scooter. It's the ultimate freedom. Sharply styled, sips fuel, zippy enough and comfortably carries two, usually her boyfriend. Where we have our rickshaws, they have their scooters. I couldn't help think in Bangladesh, we'd be cutting corners and racing with these as well. Anisa mentioned that there are the occasional 'wannabe's who want to be fast but the majority prefer to go quick in a straight line. "We grow up and around two-wheelers so we know how easy it is to fall and how easy it is to get hurt badly," she said. What? You mean Bangladeshi's don't learn after falling once or twice that it will hurt if they do it again? So difference



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Note: Next week, watch out for a piece on lowering... in Bangladesh.

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