TV SERIES

The Grand Tour enters a promising new era

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The Grand Tour is back with a new season, but it is no longer hosted by its original legendary trio of hosts Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond, and James May.

As someone who grew up watching the trio of Clarkson, Hammond, and May for years on BBC's *Top Gear*, and later followed them to *The Grand Tour*, I was not convinced that the formula could work without them. So, when Thomas Holland, James Engelsman, and Francis Bourgeois were announced as the new hosts, my expectations were fairly modest. I expected a competent car show; I did not expect to enjoy it nearly as much as I did.

What gave me relief was that the new hosts brought their own personalities to the format without spending all their time and energy pretending to be the original trio.

Thomas and James already have a natural chemistry from their work on their YouTube channel Throttle House, which I highly recommend everyone check out, where they make some of the most entertaining car reviews on the platform. They bounce off each other comfortably, and their enthusiasm for cars feels genuine rather than manufactured.

On the other hand, Francis, who became a TikTok sensation owing to his trainspotting obsession, is the wildcard inclusion. There is a slightly awkward, almost innocent quality to his enthusiasm that makes him surprisingly funny. His excitement can be wonderfully infectious. His quirkiness, with all his train trivia sprinkled in the episodes, also reflected the authenticity of his character without taking away anything from his petrolhead side. And, most importantly, he gels with the duo of Thomas and James brilliantly.

The show also handles its transition from the old trio better than I expected. The cameos of Clarkson, Hammond, and May act as an obvious nod to the past, but it does not feel like the entire season is built around nostalgia.

The format of the show ditches the audience segments of the early seasons of *The Grand Tour* and runs continuously as a series of documentaries akin to the latter seasons and the specials. Fast cars, slow cars, cheap and expensive cars all feature in magnificent shooting locations in each episode that represent unique car cultures across the world. There are also solo car reviews, road trips, comparisons, and the kind of unnecessarily elaborate challenges that have always been part of the show's DNA.

The production still looks as polished as ever. The show's runtime is also well managed, packed full of content in only six episodes with negligible filler. But the direction feels noticeably less chaotic than the old one.

This tonal shift is probably the biggest difference between the old and the new. Clarkson, Hammond, and May had spent decades developing their particular rhythm. Their arguments, insults, and ridiculous decisions felt completely natural. Thomas, James, and Francis may still need some time to carve out their particular rhythm as a trio. Some jokes feel slightly forced, which had me searching for the punchline. Some sequences lack the wonderfully unpredictable feeling that the original trio could create without even trying. Nevertheless, the show never kept me yearning for more humour or pandemonium with its balancing act of the spectacle and the personalities.

However, those shortcomings became less of an issue when I decided to stop comparing the new hosts with the old ones and started watching them on their own terms. The new *Grand Tour* does not have the same magic as the Clarkson, Hammond, and May era with its safer setting and toned-down humour and chaos, but there are still moments when you can feel the shadow of the old *Grand Tour*. Most importantly, it introduces the new trio splendidly and establishes a great starting point for what could be a new winning formula for the years to come.

After watching the disastrous attempts to simply replace the original *Top Gear* trio, I think Amazon has taken the more sensible approach here: give the format to people who genuinely love cars, let them be themselves, and see what happens. Perhaps the new hosts were due some credence from the fans as well, since they had been handpicked by Clarkson, Hammond, and May as their successors. And it has clearly worked. They are genuinely hilarious, energetic, and essentially sincere in their act, and together, they are surprisingly entertaining.

I would be lying if I said that I did not miss Clarkson's shouting, Hammond's spectacular mishaps, and May's increasingly exasperated explanations. But after completing the new season, my mind did not jump to the thought of wanting to see the original trio make a comeback. Rather, I was watching and wondering what Thomas, James, and Francis might do next.



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