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How to Drive More than 100 mph and Not Get Busted

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ForbesAutos.com

CHICAGO — Do you have a fast car but nowhere to take it out and see what it will do? A driving country club may be coming to a metropolitan area near you.

Think golf-country-club amenities but with a racetrack instead of links. It's a place close to home where members can go to exercise their cars and driving abilities in a safe environment without worrying about speed traps. Most importantly, this is not professional racing, but somewhere to drive as fast as you'd like, as often as you'd like.

The idea has evolved over the last few years, with four clubs already open and more on the way. Established clubs are attracting everyone from professional drivers and race-car builders to car enthusiasts. The only qualifications members need are a fast car, driving certification to be determined by the facility and, of course, you have to pay to play.

The key here is the club component, setting these businesses apart from the traditional racetrack venue by offering regular on-track driving opportunities without having to join a sanctioning body or wait for special events. This most often takes the form of a country-club model, where members pay an initiation fee and annual dues for track access as well as use of a clubhouse and related facilities.

A prime example is the Autobahn Country Club (ACC), which opened in spring 2005 in Joliet, Ill., and is a one-hour drive from downtown Chicago. "It's the first purpose-built club of its kind," said founder and president Mark Basso. "We're getting a lot of interest from around the country."

The carefully landscaped 3.57-mile road course winds around 320 acres. Construction on a larger clubhouse with a car museum starts in April to supplement the Autobahn's current building. Members can also lease trackside lots to build their own garages and spectator buildings. This feature is in its third phase, with some 36 already leased in the first two. Each one is fancier than the last, with "pool tables, custom kitchens, even art collections," according to Basso.

And men aren't the only ones having all the fun at these clubs. Three primary members are women. Steve Wagner, one of the four founders of the ACC, says there are several members' wives, almost a dozen by his estimate, who come out and drive on a regular basis.

Developer Matt Page, who is breaking ground in July on a 1,600-acre site near Dallas, says his Racers Ranch country club will feature a combination of Old English architecture and “the look of a Kentucky horse farm.” Even garage facilities will resemble stables. There will be an actual equestrian center and 40 five-acre home sites for a true country-ranch-living experience. Page wants the club to feel more like an exclusive and relaxing retreat than a racetrack. Truck access to the paddock will be through a separate entrance to keep the operations behind the scenes. A high level of service, including a concierge, will be this club’s hallmark.

A quite different club idea is the Miller Motorsports Park, which opened this spring near Salt Lake City. Alan Wilson, who designed Autobahn and many other tracks worldwide, said this setup is based on drivers’ clubs at the Goodwood and Silverstone tracks in England and the Sports Car Club of South Africa — which he says are “great social places where at any time you could bump into Formula One drivers.”

Clubs in Operation:

Autobahn Country Club Joliet, Ill.

Annual Fee: \$3,000
Contact: 815/722-2223
autobahnmb@comcast.net

Miller Motorsports Park Tooele, Utah

Annual Fee: \$1,600 to \$3,500,
depending on level of membership
Contact: 801/563-4175
bmiller
@millermotorsportspark.com

Motorsport Ranch Cresson, Texas

Annual Fee: \$1,158
Contact: 817/512-3162
info@motorsportranch.com

VIRginia International Raceway **Motorsport Country Club** Alton, Va.

Annual Fee: \$2,100 for
Virginia/North Carolina residents;
\$1,200 all other state residents
Contact: 434/822-7700

hitting anything as well as limiting speeds by keeping the length of the straightaways relatively short. Matt Page, who has also brought Alan Wilson on board, says he wants to have a longer straightaway on one of the courses for only the most competent drivers, as this will be useful for manufacturers that might rent the track for testing. “Everything will be built to Sports Car Club of America standards,” Page said. “Safety is first.”

The Miller Motorsports Park track holds sanctioned races — several organizations have already signed on — and also has a private club with a core membership. It will also be open to credentialed members of the visiting race. Home club members not only have ample track use but also free spectator access during races, where they are able to meet and socialize with the incoming group. “The idea is to mix and match elements of motorsports,” explained Wilson.

Autobahn management feels that opening the private club to car shows is important for business, and hence plans to allow public access to its car museum. “It adds to the excitement of the racetrack atmosphere, but the members will always have a private area to retreat to,” Basso said.

The annual fees differ between each club. Racers can expect to spend \$3,000 annually at the Autobahn Country Club; \$100 to \$175 per month at the VIRginia International Raceway (VIR); and \$50 to \$75 per month at Motorsport Ranch. Also, the VIR and Motorsport Ranch have additional charges for usage by day or half hour, respectively, while the ACC does not. Most of the clubs in development have pricing posted to pre-sell memberships.

“Members are on their own as far as insurance coverage if they wreck their cars, but they are covered as participants under the club’s liability insurance,” Basso said.

The main attraction at all these clubs is a road-racing course, though some of the clubs will offer other driving venues such as kart tracks, skid pads and, less commonly, drag strips and off-road trails. Autobahn is putting the finishing touches on its Wilson-designed half-mile kart track this spring; it’s 30 feet wide, so it’s also suitable for autocross events.

Though driver certification is required by all, typically these tracks are designed with safety in mind, because a wide variety of skill levels will be accommodated. This means ample room to run off the track without

Another feature nearly all of these clubs possess is a track with multiple configurations, allowing club members to drive simultaneously and independently while another group can rent another part of the track. You'll see anything from street cars to vintage race cars to motorcycles. Page said he wants to "celebrate all kinds of motorized vehicles," and he wants to make room for "gearheads with muscle cars, even Model Ts."

All of these racing clubs run in much the same way, by grouping similar vehicles and drivers together to go out on the track for a predetermined length of time, then the next group goes out. Occasionally, there might be timed racing. Rental customers include car clubs looking for track time; sanctioned organizations holding races; manufacturers for testing, consumer events or training employees; and corporate clients looking for an activity. "We sold out every weekend and 60 percent of the weekdays," Basso said of the first season. "It takes the burden off the members to have to cover all the operating costs."

Location is an important consideration. Back in 2000, the scenic 3.27-mile road course of the Virginia International Raceway was resurrected after a long hiatus and reopened as America's first driving country club. However, it is billed as a resort destination catering to both in-state and out-of-state members. The advantage of a club like the Autobahn is its proximity to a major city — the club is 49 miles from Chicago. "You can leave the office at noon, get an afternoon of driving in and still be home for dinner," Basso said.

The future Alpine Motorsports Club may have one of the best locations, situated 75 miles from both New York City and Philadelphia. The 360-acre site in the Pocono Mountains will feature a four-mile course with 220 feet of elevation changes. Alan Wilson designed the circuit with nine different configurations. All the ingredients for a perfect driving country club are there; one novel idea is encouraging members to form "driving groups" who can rent a section of the track to race amongst themselves. Already years into the planning, Alpine will break ground early next year.

Bruno Silikowski found a different approach to the proximity problem. His Autobahn Motorplex, located 15 minutes from downtown Minneapolis, is a 37-acre site that will not have a track, but will have a clubhouse as well as secure, heated storage condos that members can purchase — and depreciate — to garage their racing and other special cars. Silikowski is scouting some potential track locations further out of town, but in the meantime members will have use of on-site facilities for car maintenance, with techs both on-staff and visiting, as well as a concierge to help make arrangements. They will host events like car shows and SCCA meetings, and they will offer a place for like-minded enthusiasts to mingle and watch televised races. "It will be the mecca of motorsports in Minneapolis," said Silikowski.

Alan Wilson thinks noise is the biggest problem with getting a new club built in a populated area these days. "The noise issue doesn't have to be a necessity," he said, pointing out that most recreational drivers won't see any difference driving a car on the track with a muffed exhaust. "These clubs will evolve, and without the noise will no longer be a negative to the surrounding area. Then they will be more socially acceptable."

The demand is there. Autobahn has sold out individual memberships and has started a waiting list. Only six corporate memberships remain available. "We're growing like crazy," said Basso.

Clubs to Watch:

Alpine Motorsports Club
Saylorsburg, Pa.
Contact: 800/795-2638
dsmith@lusa.com
Look for it: Construction begins in 2007.

Autobahn Motorplex
Metro Minneapolis
Contact: Bruno Silikowski
bsilikowski
@autobahnmotorplex.com
Look for it: Construction date TBA

Club Motorsports
Tamworth, N.H.
Contact: 603/437-3278
Look for it: Construction date TBA

New Jersey Motorsports Park
Millville, N.J.
Look for it: Spring 2007

Racers Ranch
Dallas area
Contact: 214/718-1247
straight8llc@hotmail.com
Look for it: Construction began July 11, 2006.