

Damon's dream garage

FEW items mark out the successful entrepreneur more assuredly than his choice of car. Anyone can turn up in a fancy suit, only the most precocious brag about the summer hideaway in the Italian Lakes, and who these days keeps up with which London neighbourhoods are in or out?

Strut your stuff in a Lamborghini Gallardo or Ferrari Spider, though, and it shrieks your Alpha-male (or female) credentials to the rooftops. At least until now.

I joined London's most exclusive motoring club to discover how to enjoy the multi-millionaire lifestyle on salary income and — for 48 hours — sampled some of the finest fruits the motoring world has to offer.

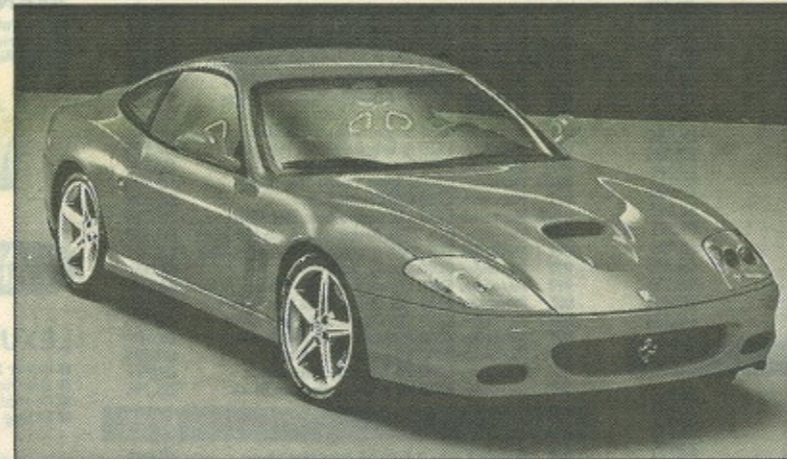
P1 — the Prestige and Performance Car Club — is the brainchild of Damon Hill, who, having conquered the world of Formula One, apparently found he couldn't entirely relinquish his links with fast cars and the enormous fun that goes with them. So he set about assembling the ultimate dream garage.

Having sorted the appropriate premises in Leatherhead he began filling it with the kind of cars would-be Lotto winners fantasise about.

Hidden behind the sturdy doors lurks the rare Ford GT (£120,000, only 28 in the country, top speed around 200mph), a Ferrari 575M, two Gallardos, a Lamborghini Murciélago, at least one Aston Martin Vanquish, a Bentley Arnage T, Ferrari 360 Challenge Stradale... The list goes on.

Sadly, however, for those seeking to amaze and impress their friends at the office party or society wedding, this isn't Hertz. Anyone wanting to get their hands on Damon's exclusive garage of 50 supercars has to become a member and it's a process that would impress the most stuffy London clubs.

First the aspiring applicant must declare their past motoring history. The driving licence must also be submitted for close perusal. One or two brushes with a speed camera are OK. Drink-driving convictions



The stuff of dreams: the Ferrari 575M and Lamborghini Gallardo are just two of the mouth-watering supercars on offer to members of Damon Hill's P1 club — at a price

are not. Then follows a fireside chat with one of the directors. Get this far and you're virtually in the door, although P1 may well invite you to brush up your skills with a day's intensive driver-training on and off the road.

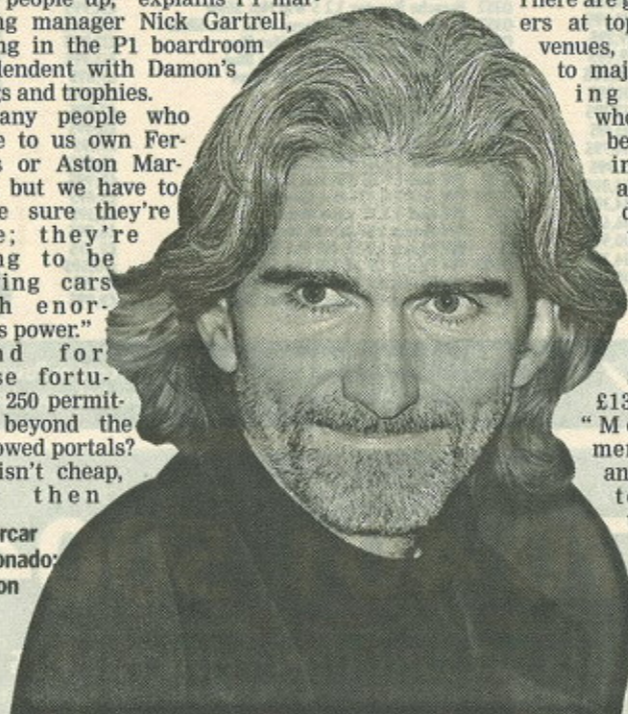
"It would be irresponsible just to sign people up," explains P1 marketing manager Nick Gartrell, sitting in the P1 boardroom resplendent with Damon's gongs and trophies.

"Many people who come to us own Ferraris or Aston Martins, but we have to make sure they're safe; they're going to be driving cars with enormous power."

And for those fortunate 250 permitted beyond the hallowed portals?

It isn't cheap, but then

Supercar aficionado: Damon Hill



flashy cars never were; maintaining even one supercar would cost you the earth. Membership starts at £11,750 a year, plus a one-off £2,500 joining fee.

Cough up and you get around 70 driving days a year as well as a busy social life, if that's your desire.

There are get-togethers at top London venues, drive-outs to major motoring events where members wallow in luxury, and track days where the cars can be driven to the limit.

Stump up £13,750 for "Monaco" membership and you get to share the company jet, membership of the Bluebird Club and

one or two other treats. My brief flirtation with the high life began when I picked up the phone to order something tasty for my trip to Leatherhead.

Hours later the stunning £117,000 450bhp Gallardo burbled into the ES garage (delivery charge £2 a mile) — a mean yellow apparition out of sorts next to the usual company-car fodder.

The performance was shattering, the attention from passers-by more so. My kids — and the neighbours' — all wanted rides around the block. Schoolboys yelled and clicked their camera phones, children waved, cyclists radiated scorn and envy. At P1's headquarters the following morning it was tough. Should I try the Ferrari, the AC Cobra or the Aston?

I PLUMPED for the open-top 420bhp Porsche 996 Turbo and headed for the proving ground with high-performance-driving trainer extraordinaire, Bernard Aubrey, with whom I had driven many miles, many years ago. On the road he observed and offered common-sense, practical advice, bringing my observational skills back up to scratch.

On a closed circuit I explored the handling limits of the car, easing close to 150mph, all under perfect control. Exhilarating, educational;

only money can usually buy this kind of fun...

But the dream had to end somewhere. To enjoy P1 comfortably you're probably a director or self-made businessman earning £250,000 or so a year. Let's just say I didn't measure up.

I hung up the keys, picked the flies from my teeth and trundled home on the 3.34pm to Victoria.

● For more information log onto www.p1international.com. 01372 374400.

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