

The Business luxury goods column on the finest things that money can buy

# One of my other cars is an Aston Martin ...

## Introducing Damon Hill's P1, a car club unlike any other

THE Aston Martin Vanquish S is an agreeable dark green outside and a deep cream inside. It's slick, comfy and on the subtle side of flash. We have to negotiate a speed hump and a mundane security barrier, along with a crowded one-way system, before hitting the wide-open dual carriageways of Surrey. Because I spend most of my driving life negotiating narrow London rat runs, I fear for this elegant piece of machinery's paintwork, but I shouldn't. It isn't mine.

One immediate difference to my run-around is that there is no gear stick or pedals. Instead, the Vanquish has paddle gearshifts on the steering wheel racing-car style and a digital display to show which gear you're in. But the most noticeable thing is the G-force like thrust. It's hard not to reach for the Jeremy Clarkson book of grumpy adjectives, but let's just say it feels good. My companion Nick Gartrell's party piece is to open the windows as we gather speed to experience the mighty roar. Sound is important for car fanatics. I could yet become one.

Now all this is great, but it comes at a price. Cars like the Aston Martin are expensive and a nightmare to maintain. You need a garage and the depreciation is horrendous. Fortunately, there's another way. If you want to drive fast cars but don't have the time, inclination or silly money to own them, the P1 club could do it for you – for around £14,000 a year. Based in Surrey, the club has almost

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50 fab motors waiting for members to summon. P1 can deliver to your door a Ferrari 575M, an Aston Martin DB9 Volante or Range Rover Sport. The sort of machines that car blokes and blokettes drool over.

The beauty of P1 is that the only responsibility you have is driving – no stroppy mechanics to deal with, no making with the chamois and wax. Then there are the perks of being a club member. P1's co-founder is Mr Fast Car himself, Damon Hill, and it is his passion manifested in metal. Hill might give you a few tips on handling a Formula 1 car at one of the club's fixtures.

Undoubtedly, your driving has to be up to scratch for handling a £179,000 car. I found the size and power quite overwhelming, probably because I'm quite small. There was a time when I couldn't understand the attraction of powerful cars, but after going for a spin in an Aston Martin, I begin to change my mind. For one thing there's the challenge of being able to master a monster machine, rather like taming a steel wildebeest – a chance for man to assert himself as king of the mechanical jungle. Or queen (the club has three female members).

Another great feature of these cars is the racing seats: I felt sleepiness creeping over me



In the driving seat: £14,000 a year buys you access to a collection of the most desirable luxury sports cars

as the seat wrapped snugly round me. Why can't all car seats be like these? Osteopaths would be out of a job.

The most prized of P1's collection is probably the Ford GT, one of 28 in the UK. There are some advantages to being Damon Hill and one of them is getting your hands on exclusive cars like this. While marketing manager Nick Gartrell showed me round, a P1 member arrived with his sons to pick it up. They tried to look nonchalant, but were just a little too taken with the car to stay cool.

The GT is modelled on a 1960s racing car with a face like a friendly shark, but a shark who does the jokes. It has a vast bonnet that a giraffe would have trouble seeing over and two wide white lines running over its dark blue body, giving the impression that the road stripe painter had failed to notice it while going about his work. You don't so much get in as clamber in (not easy to maintain your dignity in a summer dress, ladies). When you do manage it you'll be greeted by a black interior and retro dashboard

replete with old-fashioned toggle switches. Think Steve McQueen in Bullitt and you get the idea.

P1 members pay one of two tariffs, the Monaco at £13,750 or the Silverstone at £11,750. For that they get a mileage, 6,000 and 5,000 respectively, and points, 1,000 and 750. This entitles them to use different cars as they please – using the Lamborghini Murcielago, for instance, will cost 60 points Friday to Monday in the summer. A Porsche

Cayenne S would be a mere two points in a cold winter week. There's also the Bentley Arnage T for a special occasion, the Range Rover Sport for a family trip or a Lotus Exige S2 for a Highland fling.

Most of the 250 members have flash cars of their own, but love to compare rival models. Membership also circumvents car showroom waiting lists – up to five years – for some models – and depreciation of perhaps

£45,000 on a £180,000 to £190,000 car. P1's cars are changed every year and more than one model kept of the most popular.

My temptation is to head off for the coast, given that it's a gloriously sunny day. I spent my childhood in Surrey, the car-owning capital of Britain, and it's what you do there. My mum carried my father's spare car parts in her handbag and my next-door neighbour's cat

was called Shell (not because it was tortoiseshell or even because its full name was Michelle, but because its owners ran the local filling station). Unfortunately we have to turn back; a club member wants to collect the Aston Martin. Lucky devil. It would look a little out of place at West Wittering anyway.

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