

MOTORS ICE DRIVING

DANCING ON ICE

DUNCAN MADDEN heads for the snowbound Swedish hinterland and discovers frozen lakes, fast cars and an addiction to drifting



DAMN, IT'S COLD. This isn't a brisk chill that I can ward off with an extra pullover or by burying my hands deep in the pockets of my threadbare jeans. This is a dry, gnawing freeze that engulfs and overwhelms everything around me. I feel it in the marrow of my bones, freezing the wind-induced tears to my eyeballs, sucking the air from my lungs.

I'm standing on a lake in the Swedish wilderness near the ski resort of Åre, not quite in the Arctic Circle but close enough to feel its bitter grip, creeping inexorably in the fast-fading shimmer of the early afternoon sun. The thermometer reads minus 17 centigrade, and it's the warmest part of the day.

The entire lake is frozen – “at least 40cm thick” my guide Richard sagely reassures me with a solid stamp of his snow boot – and for a while I feel lost, other-worldly. The wind whistles around us over the ice white landscape, frozen still but for the snow flurries whipped up into spindrifts that glisten like icy fireworks as they catch the sun's last rays.

The hypnotic silence doesn't last, though – soon, it's punctuated by a distant, inorganic throb, a deep and ominous rumble that fast transforms into the throaty roar of a classic Porsche 911 whizzing past me, impossibly controlled on its racetrack of ice and snow. And for the first time today I feel some warmth creeping into my bones – the warmth of adrenaline. It's my turn next.

The rally spec, air-cooled 911 that's just flown past in a 300-horsepower blur is one of a fleet of eight carving a path into the ice of this unnamed lake, 63 degrees north. They belong to Tuthill Porsche, a company renowned for its 911 expertise and rally pedigree.

My guide is Richard Tuthill, ex-rally champion and boss of this eponymous outfit. Here, a few hours drive from Trondheim across the Nordic border, he's focused his speed obsession and invested his rally pedigree in the business of inviting any old Joe Schmo to drive fast cars on frozen lakes. Aptly, he has called it Below Zero Ice Driving.

Our day started early to make the most of the limited hours of light. Heading out from the warm embrace of the Kall Auto Lodge (strapline: In the Middle of Nowhere), we piled into a minibus and plunged deep into a blanketed white wonderland – impossibly scenic roads rolling through dense forests, past ancient log cabins and into the huge expanse of frozen everything.

Richard's driving offers a taste of things to come. With the scenery a fast-passing blur, he spins tales of recent rallies, of near and not-so-near misses, of motorsport successes, triumphs and calamities. He's refreshingly

bullshit free – the kind of old-school adventurer who's confounded by rules and out-and-out offended by the dogma of health and safety. I mention health and safety to him, and he fixes me with what seems a half-ironic, half-serious stare. “I'm a rally driver,” he says. Good point, well made.

The safety briefing, sputtered out in the warmth of an idyllic wooden hut lit by an open fire and decorated with the trophies of an environment in which hunting is both business and sport, continues the theme.

“This isn't your typical driving experience,” Richard enthuses, between poking jibes at his rally elite colleagues and our instructors for the day. There are no bollockings for messing around or driving too fast. The idea is to get you behind the wheel for as long as possible, doing whatever it is you want to do. You're driving on a frozen lake with snow banks for cushions and it's almost impossible to crash, so just go for it.” Amen to that.

I begin with the basics. A simple-looking slalom course is laid out and I meet my first instructor, Ryan, who spends the next hour patiently navigating me from one largely out-of-control spin to the next as we practice the art of steering using the throttle.

Small progress made, I move on to some grippier short-stud tyres, move on to the other six kilometres of ice track and am left to my own devices to practise my new drifting skills. Handily – and, no doubt, from bitter experience – the Below Zero team are strategically placed in vans to rescue those of us regularly found floundering in the deeper snow. It's an impressively slick outfit, and I'm never left for more than a few minutes before the yank of the bungee towrope has me back on thin ice – metaphorically, of course.

Several laps and many rescues later, I pull into our makeshift base and decamp to the teepee to warm up by the wood burner and enquire about my progress with Martin Rowe, 2003 Production World Rally Champion. “These are classic 911s – tail happy and physical,” he says. “You have to drive it rather than be driven. Know what you want to do and tell that to the car – don't ask.” ➤

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COOL CUSTOMER: Duncan Madden navigates his way across the ice of a frozen lake almost inside the Arctic Circle. "It feels like dancing – it's hypnotic, swinging to the rhythm of that high-revving flat six engine. The more my confidence grows, the faster I find myself flying into corners."

It's about finding where your and the car's limits meet (or collide) and pushing that boundary

► I come away with an understanding that the Below Zero experience isn't just about going nuts in an iconic car on a frozen lake so that you can boast about it to your mates over post-work beers. It's about finding where your and the car's limits meet (or more often collide) and then pushing that boundary, because that's where the most fun and the most satisfaction is to be found. Listen to the advice offered, ask for more if you want, but just get behind the wheel and try it out. And drive on your own, too – because when you know that nobody is watching you'll not only push harder but also care less about how you look.

Back on the ice, I practice the mantra of precise timing. Brake hard, sharp turn in, feel the back begin to slide, concentrate on the steering and point the nose in the direction you want to go with a strong step back on the

accelerator on the exit to bring things back into line. And, before you can blink, you're in the next corner. Repeat. And repeat again.

Every now and again, the magic happens. I string together one, two and then three corners, all the while in control and drifting. It feels like dancing – it's hypnotic, swinging to the rhythm of that high-revving flat six engine. The more my confidence grows, the faster I find myself flying into corners, by now screaming at myself: "Control! Turn! Acceleraaaaate!" And as I'm rescued from yet another snow bank, shunted back to reality once more, I wonder what the hell went wrong – but find myself frothing to have another go.

With the day nearing its end, Richard saunters over and asks whether I'd like to try out a real rally stage – but as the passenger rather than driver (because these are his Porsches, after all). The roads around our lake are driving nirvana, and are used by rally stalwarts Citroën, Ford and VW for their WRC Sweden rally warm-ups.

Minutes later, I have said yes and find myself strapped in next to Martin, chatting to him over the Stilo intercom like a bona fide co-pilot. Over the next six minutes, he performs several driving miracles, hurling our 1978 911 SC down narrow, winding, bumpy, cambered,

ice-covered tracks at insane speeds. Once or twice, I catch him steering while we are in mid air – and I swear that the car responds.

I emerged both wide-eyed and humbled. I definitely need more practice. Oh well, I'll just have to come back... ■

Based on two drivers sharing one car, drive day prices cost from £1,750 per person per day and include pretty much everything you'll need for an unforgettable experience. Flights and accommodation are extra. Find out more at BELOWZEROICEDRIVING.COM. Duncan stayed at the Kall Auto Lodge and would highly recommend it (especially the outdoor hot tub) KALLAUTOLODGE.COM.

DRIVE ANOTHER DAY: If you want to diversify from the Porsche portfolio, bolt on a trip with Lapland Ice Driving. Here, they'll let you loose on the ice in anything from a Mitsubishi to a Corvette. There's even a Lamborghini, if you're brave enough. Lapland-ice-driving.com

