

Going Three Hundred

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Somebody on a whole other continent asked me recently about the speed limit on motorways in Europe. Given that I travel around a bit, and like to think I know approx. everything about everything, I was happy to give him a concise and immediate answer.

“The *autoroute* limit in France is 130 km/h, but everybody does 170. Whereas, in Italy, the limit is also 130km/h, which they’re about to raise to 150, but only in some places, although it doesn’t really matter where, because everyone does 200. And in Germany, on about half the *autobahns* you can still go flat as a maggot, fast as you want. Most people go about 170.”

Shackled, like Britons, to an eagerly policed speed limit on his country’s motorways, my friend couldn’t believe his ears. And the hardest for him to hear was the bit about Germany.

He’d been so comprehensively brow-beaten by his government’s anti-speed message, he was convinced that taking away the speed limit could only result in every vehicle rasping on its rev-limiter in top (*cue sfx: Stuka dive-bomber*) until it either ran out of fuel, disintegrated, or until everyone inside just sort-of spontaneously, umm, died for no evident reason.

“Well, uhh, no,” I said. “People just seem to drive at whatever speed they feel safe, comfortable and in control.”

It was spooky to realise that his government’s ‘road safety’ electrode/testicle-interfacing had even managed to over-write humanity’s strongest instinct: survival. He seemed to be convinced that, although he is a father of two, he could no longer be trusted as an arbiter of his own, or anyone else’s safety.

“Phew, thanks for pulling me over, officer. I hadn’t realised that I was in the grip of blood-curdling terror.”

I was thinking about this earlier this year, when ... You know what? I wasn’t thinking about this *at all* earlier this year, when I raised my personal, top-speed record to 190mph (305km/h).

My previous best had been 177mph in a Porsche 928 GTS automatic, recorded during a motoring magazine’s fast-fest almost 11 years earlier. I know that my 928 record would have been accurate enough to stand up in court because it was verified by radar – for once, actually being used in an educational capacity.

Can’t say the same for my new record of 190mph, which was set in a Ferrari 575M Maranello. I hadn’t set out to break any records, nor – need I convince you? – to try and kill my recently-married, adequately-paid and spiritually-whole self, or anyone else. It was just a matter of

everything coming into alignment for a few minutes. Y'know, no big deal to anyone except myself.

As I said, I wasn't thinking too much about arbitrary numbers on signposts or what some chauffeur-driven, shiny-bum transport minister might have decreed in the sole interest of getting his melon on the telly. I wasn't debating the difference between 130km/h and 150km/h while I was doing 300km/h.

I wasn't thinking about that, because I was thinking about driving the car. About the cool, lightly overcast skies above, the dry, wide and relatively smooth surface beneath me, the long and uninterrupted straight ahead, the wealth of information coming to me through sound and sensation, the lightness and delicacy of my inputs as kinetic energy and aerodynamics operated in another realm...

Basically, I was more focused than would be my friend, who must spend all his travelling time studying the speedometer and worrying about speed signs, fixed cameras, mobile cameras, marked patrol cars, unmarked patrol cars and whatever other intelligence-insulting terror tactics are being employed in his country.

So I've now got my personal, top-speed telltale set at 190mph, and I'm not going to say in which country I did it. And that's the point I'm making.

If I told you that this straight, dry, near-deserted stretch of road were a motorway in Britain, chances are that you'd be appalled and outraged. If these very same conditions were repeated on an Italian *autostrada*, you'd think me a bit irresponsible, but probably not exactly the spawn of Satan. And if it were on a German *autobahn*, you'd just go, "Yeah, so why didn't you get the 200, nancy-boy?"

Years ago I saw one of those pisspoor television programs, *The World's Worst Drivers*, or some such. It was about half an hour of car chases, people driving the wrong way around roundabouts, Jack Russell terriers tied to the rear bumper doing 70, that sort of thing.

Either way, it looked like a value-added proposition for the Police, who chased the motorists, fined them and then got to sell the footage to a TV production company.

Anyway, on this show, they had footage of some guy going for Vmax in a Corvette somewhere in America. He was going so fast, and was so far out in the desert, that they were filming him from a helicopter. The narrator said something like, "This driver, surely one of the world's worst, was chased by our chopper at 160mph!"

Just as he was saying that, I was thinking that to drive a piece of crap like a Corvette at 160mph, he must be pretty good.