

# ICAE Driving

BMW Driver Training, Sölden, Austria

REMEMBER: Keep off the brakes. Be gentle with the throttle. Don't get in a car with anyone from Fall Line

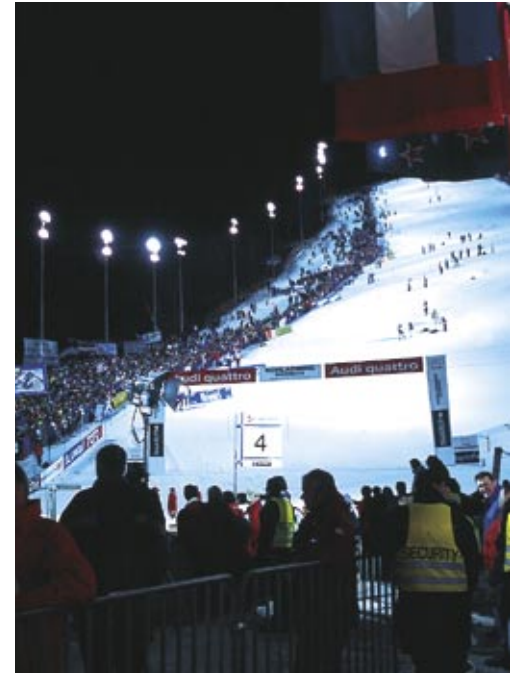
If you're driving to the Alps, it's just like the pony express – you've gotta get through. Here's a course that'll show how to thread your sled out of the tightest spots, sling it sideways and make the big entrance. Who said getting there was the boring bit?





Like all serial killers, Sullivan has a weakness. His is getting photographed with his next victim

**'This felt like champion-level downhill on sheet boilerplate. And then some'**



**MY** mind was thinking back to the hundreds of slithering, white-knuckle journeys made to the Alps in a rusting Astra, smoking Sierras and a variety of vans. This time the 1000-mile blast was going to be far sweeter – big Beemer 4x4, the right sounds and a killer destination where I could watch someone else scream down a hill.

As ever, when you've got access to the right kit the weather plays it straight and we cruise the journey. The major obstacle comes at the end – 60,000 spectators who fill the streets of Schladming to watch the night race at the Alpine World Cup slalom. I arrive just in time to see Alain Baxter put down a great time on this difficult hill, only to just miss qualifying for the second run by a fraction of a second. We watch the top 30 together and he's nabbed for autographs (see, Brit skiers ARE famous).

Sitting in the soundproof oasis of the X5 is the perfect way to watch the schnapps-fuelled spectators staggering by as the snow begins to fall. Alain's staying way up the mountain which is fine by me. After 15 hours of motorway driving, we can find out what else this car can do. This means I drive and he presses buttons. He makes the car make noises, and so do I – scraping, slithering ones. Best get onto that snow-driving course, quickly.

So far we'd been up some pretty slippery roads. Crucially we'd also got back down them and the car was, to Alain's surprise, still intact. Yet the course is three days long. That's a lot of time winding on opposite lock and creeping down hills in first gear. What's so special, I asked myself, that it takes three days to learn? What else could they possibly teach me? Fool that I am...

The first two days are spent out on a huge skid pan further down the valley, practising all the techniques that you need for the third. So that's driving in a straight line,

turning a corner and stopping. Not too taxing, unless you're on a surface with a grip like bananas on greased teflon. Or skis on ice, if that makes it easier to imagine. That's when the flash kit comes in. We're paired off (I get Schuli for the next three days; a very adept, brisk and happily tolerant German) into BMW 330ls – as good as you'd ever need for, well, almost anything if you're driving on normal roads. Loads of power, great response, liveable interior. All worthless, particularly the power, unless you apply it just so. And have snow tyres – though the skid pan allows us to practice what it's like without.

First off – drive normally. Switch off all the traction aids, aim down the skidpan, pull away and, for the hell of it, bury the throttle. Ah, there's the start line, 20 metres away and spinning gently out of view...

Now try it again with the electronic trickery engaged. Plant the gas and the car takes over, aware that it's in



Alain Baxter trying not to look bothered: he'd much rather be night racing in front of 60,000 people than getting in a car with Adam

the hand of a buffoon. And off we trot, calm as you like, across the glacier. In a less-equipped car you'd have to manage the judicious throttle-juggling yourself, which takes a lot longer to learn than pressing a button. But, as ever, that's only the half of it. Turning on ice is always hard, whether the car's doing its part or not.

Once you've set a thing in motion, without any forces to oppose said thing, it'll carry on going. In this case we're talking about the back of the car. Gentle turn-in with the steering wheel and tiny dabs of throttle are the essence. Guiding you through the process is the instructor's calm voice via walkie-talkie: 'perhaps a little too much lock that time. Now ease onto the brakes. Not in the corner, or – yes – that will happen'.

The next two days were filled with time trials and weaving through cones over large courses, controlled skids and high-speed braking. All the while you're encouraged to experiment with the car's different traction functions. The car would control its braking and acceleration amazingly well on unstable snow conditions. In the vast expanse of the skidpan you could turn it off if you preferred, which we obviously did to experience a howling slide every once in a while.

On the last day, you try to get up to the top of the Sölden glacier. 3000m up, real, narrow, ungritted roads. Mountain one side, valley the other. Between a rock and nothing at all. The instructors show us how it's done. In classic German measured fashion, everything inside the car remains calm – at least in the driver's seat. Rapid arm movements correct insane levels of oversteer as snow banks loom large through the side window. Swift, controlled, exactly the right amount. Balanced with exactly the right gear and exactly the right amount of throttle. Schuli and I watch wide-eyed out of one window or another. Rarely the windscreen, never the rear and,



You can only go so fast on snow. Or so you thought...

Photos: Eric Kendall



In another couple of minutes it'll be covered. We'll come back and get it in the spring



## 'Shuli screamed, then we ploughed into a snow bank'

could have fallen off the mountain... The wall of snow was powder and absorbed our impact. An hours digging and towing released the slightly battered Beemer. But everything works, the car is still straight and, knackered from digging, we get back in. No time to complete the route – everyone's been up and down as we've been messing around. Time to let the car do the work. Engage Hill Descent Control, stay off the brakes and shakily leave the perfect winter playground.

though it seemed very possible, not the sunroof, either. Fast? As any copper will tell you, speed is all relative to the conditions. This felt like champion-level downhill on sheet boilerplate. And then some.

Just to rub it in, the cool bastard holds a conversation with you while being sideways at 80kph, the nose of the car centimetres away from concrete bridges. A perfect antidote to any cockiness out of any pretend rally drivers in the group.

You get to pilot different vehicles over the different stages of the day: the X5, 7, 5, and 3 series petrol and

diesel. From coupe to limo, via chunky 4x4. In just over three days, the group made amazing progression, as my drive buddy Shuli handled the glacier road at some speed with excellent control and really showed the boys how to do it. His technique was unrecognisable from the first day.

I was right up for a fast, flowing run in the X5. To prove how far I'd got, off came the traction control and down went the throttle pedal. It couldn't last. After a few fast and rather too hairy corners, the back came round, Schumi screamed and we steamed into a snow bank, backwards, at 40kph. It could have been worse. We

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