



Joining a Motorsports Country Club

These members-only clubs offer you a chance to drive as fast as you want on a racetrack

By Sue Elliott

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No speed limit. No stoplights. No pedestrians. No cross traffic. Just you and the road, flat out -- or as fast as you're able to go.

"Where?" you ask. On your own private racetrack, of course.

Well, technically, it's not yours and yours alone. But in most cases, it is indeed private. And membership is indeed limited.

This is the whole idea behind a motorsports country club, which is essentially like a golf country club, but with a racetrack in place of the 18 holes.

Most motorsports country clubs are private, purpose-built facilities with their own dedicated road race course. Often, the racetrack can be used in several configurations. The full circuit may be 3 miles, 4 miles or even a whopping 6 miles in length. And it typically can be broken down into at least two shorter circuits that can be run simultaneously, so multiple groups of members can run at one time -- or so the country club can rent its facilities to driving schools, car clubs or even automakers while still accommodating club members on a second circuit. (This helps to keep membership costs down and attract new members at the same time.)

On any given day, at motorsports country clubs around the country, you can find members driving Ferraris and Bentleys, Miatas and Minis, IRL cars, Toyota Atlantics and Porsche Cup cars. "We've got people who run late-model stock cars or old NASCAR racers in the high-speed group. And we've got people who show up in the grocery getter just to tour around the track in touring lights," says John Davison of [VIR Motorsport Country Club](#) at Virginia International Raceway in Alton, Virginia (near the North Carolina state line).

The variety is certainly part of the fun -- though most country clubs separate open-wheel cars from sedans on the track, and they often divide vehicles into run groups based on the cars' speed and, in some cases, drivers' skill levels.

Drivers also are encouraged to brush up on their skills at these facilities. In fact, many country clubs include at least some high-performance driving instruction as a benefit of membership.

Timing Is Everything

The major difference between joining a motorsports country club and actually going racing is flexibility. If you participate in a race series, you have to show up at specific tracks at specific times, with your car prepped and ready to run.

"The biggest benefit to our members is you come when you want to," says Mike Keck of [Autobahn Country Club](#) in Joliet, Illinois (about an hour's drive from Chicago). "It's not like you have to be here at 7 in the morning and be in a driver's meeting. So our members can show up at 2:30 on a Tuesday afternoon and the track is open to them and there's instruction available to them.

"For a lot of our members, their most valuable asset is their time. They want to do things when they want to do them."

The other obvious difference between going racing and joining a motorsports country club is you don't actually have to *compete* at a country club. You can go and make hot laps to your heart's content. You can pass if you want to -- typically in designated passing zones only -- or you can relax and enjoy your car and, often, enjoy quite beautiful scenery as well.

On the other hand, if you want to put your ego on the line, some motorsports country clubs have created their own race series. One big benefit: You get to run at your home track every time.

The Convenience Factor

Another huge benefit of joining a motorsports country club is convenience. Most clubs have garage facilities for rent, so you can store your car and your tools on-site, rather than having to trailer stuff back and forth to the track every time you want to race.

Some country clubs even have lodging available on-site -- ranging from hotel rooms and campgrounds to condominiums and custom-built villas -- so you don't even have to haul yourself home at night.

Virginia International Raceway bills itself as "America's Motorsports Resort." The facility has a campground. Plus, as Davison says, "We've got the Lodge, the 27-unit hotel. We have 18 unit rooms above the pit row garages that are lodging. And we're in the process of building the villas on the uphill esses that are about 1,300-square-foot, two-story townhomes, which are available for sale.... At first there will be 60 villa units, 10 buildings with six units per. Of course they're not all under construction at one time. It's going to be a continuing work in progress."

Brian Whitehead of [MotorSport Ranch](#) in Cresson, Texas -- the first of these country clubs to open, back in 1996 -- notes, "We have the Villas at Motorsport Ranch, which are condos that are privately owned. They're on the eastern side of the track and they're built the right way. The living space matches the garage space. These are two-bedroom, two-bath, eight-car garage variations. So far we have six [condos], and the majority of the trackside lots are already sold and just awaiting builders.... Some of the members will rent them out for track weekends.... And you literally can drive your car right from the condo to the paddock and then onto the track."

Track Time

The amount of time members get to spend on the track varies widely from country club to country club. At [Monticello Motor Club](#), which is due to open this summer in Monticello, New York (about 90 minutes from New York City), members will get up to 220 days of annual track use, including virtually unlimited use of the 4.1-mile road course on weekends and unlimited use of the dedicated Member's Circuit on four weekdays.

[MSR Houston](#) in Angleton, Texas, is literally open seven days a week, 364 days a year for its members.

[Pacific Northwest Motorsports Park](#), due to open in the summer of 2009 in Boardman, Oregon (about a 2.5-hour drive from Portland), says most members will get 22 or more days of track time each month, though the amount available does vary by membership level.

At [Club Spring Mountain](#) in Pahrump, Nevada (45 minutes from Las Vegas), all members get 16 days or more of track time per month, including at least two weekends.

Driving days are more limited at VIR, simply because the track is in such great demand for sanctioned races, as well as testing and driving schools. There, members average about 13 driving days each year, though membership costs also are dramatically lower than at some of the other country clubs -- plus they have set up a reciprocal arrangement with [New Jersey Motorsports Park](#) in Millville, which is scheduled to open this summer.

Quantity and Quality

Number of driving days is certainly a consideration when deciding whether or not to join a motorsports country club. And so is the *quality* of time you get to spend on track.

All schools limit the number of members allowed on the race course at one time. For instance, MotorSport Ranch limits run sessions to a maximum of 25 cars, which seems to be about standard.

"Typically, 20 cars per mile is the rule of thumb," explains Autobahn's Keck. "That's what car clubs aim for. So on the north track [at Autobahn], that would be about 30 cars. On the south track, maybe 40 or 50. On the full track, we could have 60 or 65. But it never goes that high.

"At Autobahn Country Club, on the busiest weekend -- when it's a full track, members only -- we may have maybe 100 cars total there in one day. So that's easy to accommodate in several run groups." Plus, he adds, "Some days there may only be three members out there, so it's just wide-open track."

Some country clubs do require members to make a reservation in advance to guarantee track time. Others are much more flexible and allow you to show up whenever you feel the need for speed.

Track Design

The design of the track itself is, of course, a huge draw for members, so motorsports country clubs have been investing in a top-quality -- or even a big-name -- racetrack designer.

For instance, [Alan Wilson](#) -- who has been involved in all aspects of racing, from driving and team ownership to event management and more recently the conception of world-class racetracks -- was tapped to design the two road courses at Autobahn Country Club. When combined, they create a single circuit that's 3.56 miles long with 22 turns. The 2.1-mile South Track alone has 15 turns and a 2,000-foot straightaway.

Wilson also designed a 3.3-mile course with 18 turns, known as the "ribbon through the woods," being built at [Valley Motorsports Park](#) in Tamworth, New Hampshire.

[Brian Redman](#), driving champion and winner of 77 races in 12 countries, and Bruce Hawkins, renowned architect of "next generation" racetracks, collaborated for the first time on the design of Monticello Motor Club's track. The 175-acre property features a 4.1-mile racetrack with 22 turns, or as MMC President Bill McMichael says, "enough comers, straights, elevation changes and turns to keep drivers challenged and excited." Especially since the circuit can be arranged into 12 distinct track configurations. Plus, there's a skid pad.

Club Spring Mountain, near Vegas, has a 3.5-mile road course with 20 turns that can be split into three configurations, including a 2.2-mile track with 10 turns, a 1.5-mile track with 10 turns and a 3.1-mile track with 17 turns. The idea here was to create separate circuits, each with a unique personality. For example, one corner of the 2.2-mile course is a duplicate of the hairpin known as Moss Corner at Mosport International Raceway in Ontario, Canada. Another corner resembles a configuration at the Long Beach Grand Prix Street Circuit. And the 1.5 mile-course includes two banked corners, one dramatic blind drop and one technical off-camber corner, as well as a straightaway.

The one track that does not emphasize a new, high-end design is VIR. Its track remains virtually identical to the racetrack's original days, from 1957 through 1974. When the current owners decided to reopen the track in 2000, both to hold sanctioned races and as a country club, they chose to restore the 3.27-mile Full Course -- with help from track designer Hawkins. "Other than the shortcuts to split it up into multiple tracks, the centerline of the track is essentially as it was in '57," says Davison. And that's a good thing. As actor/racer Paul Newman once said, "If there's a heaven on Earth, it's VIR."

Carroll Shelby, who won the very first race at VIR in 1957 behind the wheel of a Maserati 450S, has been quoted as saying, "One lap at VIR is like a hundred at Watkins Glen." It's certainly a challenging and beautiful venue. The Front Straightaway is 3,000 feet long, and the Back Straightaway is 4,000 feet with an elevation change of 130 feet.

Pay to Play

Naturally, launching and operating a racetrack is not a cheap venture, so motorsports country clubs charge for the privilege of membership. And just like their golf equivalents, some motorsports country clubs are more exclusive (read: pricy) than others. The current range starts with a one-time initiation fee of \$2,500 at VIR and heads steeply upward to \$100,000 for the top-tier individual memberships at the as-yet-to-be-opened Monticello Motor Club and Pacific Northwest Motorsports Park.

Besides the one-time initiation fee, all motorsports country clubs charge either annual or monthly dues. Your track time usually in those fees, but a few clubs do charge a per-track-use price on top of the other costs. Autobahn fits about right in the middle of the range, with an initial fee to become a Country Club Member of \$35,000 and annual dues of \$3,000.

You'll find that most clubs offer several different levels of membership. For instance, MotorSport Ranch offers Regular and Executive levels of individual membership. The Regular initiation fee is \$3,400, monthly dues are \$90, and a half-hour run session costs \$20. The Executive initiation fee is \$12,000, with monthly dues of \$75 and a fee of \$15 for a half-hour run session.

Since lower-level members pay less, they receive less -- less track time and fewer amenities, such as professional driving instruction and other on-site perks.

And those potential perks are many and varied. As noted, many facilities have on-site garages for storing your vehicle and tools. Some also have service professionals on the premises who can maintain, repair and even modify your car. MotorSport Ranch even has a Formula Mazda dealership and a Spec Miata dealership on-site.

At VIR, members also get free tickets to all the spectator races, including preferred parking in a members-only area.

Some country clubs also have exotic and other high-performance vehicles available, which members can rent for track use. For instance, Club Spring Mountain offers members discounts on renting Corvette Z06s, Ferrari Challenge cars, Radical Race cars and the Aerial Atom.

And should you tire of the country club life someday, the higher-priced memberships typically are transferable, too.

The Social Side

As with golf-centric country clubs, there's a real social aspect to motorsports country club membership. Most facilities have a clubhouse with a restaurant and lounge and often a swimming pool, and many clubs put on family-oriented events for members. In fact, most memberships include the entire family, whether that means a significant other or a spouse and children under the age of 21.

"We hold the Springtime Speed Fest, we hold the Festival of Speed in the summer and then Octoberfest, and they're all Friday, Saturday and Sunday," says Autobahn's Keck. "They're full track and it's for members only. And then in the months that we don't have one of those, we have a Full-Track Friday at least once a month, where the full track is open for members only. Within all of those Fridays, we'll have a social event, ... either a meal or hors d'oeuvres, with live entertainment. It's a time for members to get to know each other off the track...."

"But at Autobahn Country Club, the paddock is like a kitchen in a house. That's where members all want to hang out. They hang out in the paddock and talk about their cars. Half the fun is talking about it, because when you're doing it, you're by yourself. People spend hours just talking about a certain turn or how their car handles. It's pretty amazing."

Clearly, there is a lot to be said for joining a community of like-minded individuals. And commonalities often extend to interests beyond the racetrack. Leslie Mitchell of MSR Houston points out that a lot of club members are business owners or prominent in their field. For instance, one member owns a commercial garage door business, and he has connected with several commercial real estate developers at the club and now handles garage door installations for them. Likewise, a member who owns a bedliner business has made connections with local car dealers and now installs spray-on bedliners for their companies.

Most country clubs encourage business networking among members. In fact, they even go so far as to offer corporate memberships. These typically include membership privileges for four individuals within a company, who then can bring clients to the club to either drive or ride along as passengers, as well as enjoy the property's amenities. There are also opportunities to hold business meetings and even corporate team-building events at most clubs.

That sort of camaraderie certainly is one part of the allure of a motorsports country club. And then there are the educational benefits, the sheer fun factor and of course the safety of being able to drive fast in a closed, controlled environment. Add in the convenience of having a place to store your car where you can actually use it -- particularly important for full-on race cars that aren't streetable anyway -- and it's easy to see the value of what's often a relatively small investment.

About the Author

Sue Elliott has been an automotive journalist for 20 years now, covering everything from racing to road tests, and from hardcore tech to lifestyle events. She lives in the Napa Valley.