



2009 Lamborghini Gallardo LP560-4

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By Gary Gastelu

"Excuse me, are you famous?"

Not the kind of thing I'm usually asked by women in passing SUVs with preschoolers in the backseat. Certainly not when I'm parked on the side of an empty country road in the middle of Nowheresville, N.Y. Then again, I'm not normally standing next to a bright orange Lamborghini.

I should have expected it.

When the 2009 Gallardo LP560-4 was dropped off at my office, which is located smack in the middle of Times Square and Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan, it was the biggest thing that happened on the street since the last time Miley Cyrus was in the neighborhood.

As it was being unloaded from the flatbed truck that brought it (you didn't expect them to drive it there and get the tires dirty, did you?) dozens of people converged, cameras in hand, boxing me out from what was rightly mine, at least for the next few days.

Then, just when I realized that I was probably better off on the sidelines secluded from the madness, people started to figure out that the car sort of belonged to me and the barrage began.

"Is that yours?"

"How much does it cost?"

"What is it?"

What is it?! You're this excited and you don't even know what you're looking at? I know the lettering on the back of the car is a little harder to read than what's found on a Chevy, but we all learned cursive in grade school ... oh, wait, you are in grade school. Sorry.

A trio of teenage boys even came over and timidly asked me for directions to some bogus destination, just so they could tell their friends that they met the guy with the Lamborghini. Such is the good life.

The attention you get just being associated with the Gallardo is exhausting, but it taught me an important lesson. When you buy a Lamborghini, even the cheap one (base price

is a mere \$198,000), you don't simply own an exotic car. Instead you become the shepherd of a public treasure, one that you are responsible for sharing with the world for the benefit of the greater good.

It's not so much like collecting Picassos or Faberge eggs, but more like being one of Pamela Anderson's husbands. Five years from now no one will care who you are, but as long as you're with her, you had better show her off every chance you get, because she makes us smile, and we're all really jealous of you.

And we should be, because the newest Gallardo is much more than just a looker. The mid-mounted V-10 engine has been tuned to produce 552 horsepower at an ear-shattering 8,000 rpm. Even at around-town speeds, you can hear what sounds like the 5.2-liter monster snorting massive amounts of air, just waiting for you to press harder on the accelerator so it can mix in more gasoline and leave the flow of traffic behind like a junkyard of broken down cars.

It will, too. The Gallardo can cover a quarter mile from stop in less than 12 seconds at a speed of around 125 mph, and will keep on going until it breaks 200. Astonishingly, it gets 20 mpg highway, though not at those speeds. That may not impress the EPA, but it is an achievement for a car with this much go. You can thank the person who invented efficient direct fuel injection, which is also responsible for the 32 horsepower bump over last year's model.

All of that power is laid down through a permanent all-wheel-drive system that usually sends most of it to the rear wheels for a well-balanced feel, but it can also dish it out around the horn as necessary. Coupled with steering that feels just about perfect at any speed, the Gallardo is almost too easy to live with from the driver seat, but it has its issues.

Like any supercar worth its salt, the Gallardo makes tall drivers chose between legroom and headroom. It took me the better part of the day to find a position where I fit reasonably well, and it reminded me a lot of how my wife looked when she prepared to give birth. I'll never understand how NBA players can drive around in these things, but even with the contortions the seats themselves are actually pretty comfortable on long drives, and visibility all around is remarkable for a car with mailslots for windows.

A 6-speed manual transmission is standard, but mine was outfitted like 90 percent of the Gallardos that come to America with the \$10,000 E-Gear that adds an automatic clutch and paddles behind the steering wheel to shift with. They are a little stubby, and don't move with the wheel, but have a light and responsive feel.

E-Gear has a fully automatic mode, but it's not a lot of fun. The clutch slips, it drags first gear longer than you would if you were in control, then does it again in second gear, giving the impression that the car's inner extrovert just wants the engine to make as much noise as possible all the time.

Seeing as how you can just as easily slap the paddles around yourself while sitting in traffic, you're much better off leaving it in manual, which has three modes: normal, sport and corsa. The last one is for racetracks, which is a good thing, because that's where I took the car.

Other than pulling up in front of a nightclub, there's really no way to get your money's worth out of a ride like this on American roads without losing the license that makes it all possible to drive in the first place. Thankfully, another kind of club exists where you can

enjoy the Gallardo's more dynamic abilities far from the prying eyes of the paparazzi and slack-jawed out-of-towners.

The Monticello Motor Club, fittingly located in Monticello, N.Y., is one of the newest in a flock of private driving tracks popping up across the country. Run by Bill McMichael and Ari Strauss, a couple of car guys who used fortunes made in the software business to buy out the original developers of the property, the nearly four-mile-long course is a heaven sent strip of asphalt for exotic car owners looking for a place to enjoy their rides and commiserate with well-heeled colleagues without having to put on golf shoes.

For a \$125,000 buy in, and annual dues of \$7,500, members get unlimited track time and access to the club's other amenities, which include a fleet of club rental cars, a lounge with pool and poker tables and a full service spa.

An old hangar, left over from the airport that the track replaced, currently serves as storage for member's vehicles and is located next to a helipad for quick 20 minute trips back to Wall Street if the 90-minute drive upstate is too much for you. Construction is underway on a state of the art clubhouse overlooking pit lane, and plans are in the works for on-site condominiums with private garages.

There is even a staff of professional driving instructors on hand to help you get the most out of your machinery. Racing director, and current Grand Am series driver, Nick Longhi rode shotgun for a few laps to show me the ins and outs of the track.

It's a marvelous road course with sweeping turns, lots of elevation changes and one of the longest straightaways in the United States, where the Gallardo was able to hit more than 150 mph, as it should be.

Sadly, there are only 500 memberships available and I have a strong feeling they'll all be gone before I can afford one of them.

As expected, the Gallardo was enormous fun on the track, though maybe not quite at home. This isn't a stripped down 24 Hours of Le Mans wannabe. The interior is covered in gorgeous leather and a quilted fabric headliner, and there isn't a lot of boy racer gear inside to egg you on to quicker lap times.

The layout of the instruments is actually very simple, with nothing more than you'd find in your run-of-the-mill sports car, and very few performance goodies for you to adjust like you find in a Ferrari F430, or even a BMW M5. Just pick your transmission setting, which also incrementally firms up the suspension, resist the urge to turn off the electronic-stability program, and you're off.

If you choose corsa mode, and you will at least once, you might wonder why the guy behind you keeps running into the Gallardo every time you change gears. He isn't; the transmission just shifts that violently. It is the polar opposite of normal mode, and while I'm sure that somewhere back in Italy there are streams of computer data showing how it shifts several thousandths of a second quicker than sport, it really doesn't seem worth the beating. I mean, just take a look around, you're sitting in the automotive equivalent of Giorgio Armani's living room, dial it back a couple of notches and enjoy it the way it was meant to be.

You see, the Gallardo wasn't really made for this place, it longs to be back home in Italy on the Autostrade, stretching its legs on the long, empty superhighways where polizia are few and far between.

Sure, it'll do just fine here, better than most, but why get all worked up and sweaty when you eventually need to drive home for a night out at that other club. You know, the one where you pull up in front and everyone in line starts tripping over themselves to get a good look at you.

Well, maybe not you.