

The Fast and the Fabulous

OUR WRITER NAILS TURN #2, THEN GETS A FOOT RUB

SUITED UP IN A SLEEK BLACK JUMPSUIT, LOGOS OF TIRE companies running along my racing stripes, I stretch my legs under the long hood and flip down the visor of my helmet. The reality of being behind the wheel of a Formula 1 racer—the fastest course car on the planet—ignites as I flip two switches and press a button. After a quick sputter, the engine hums a throaty, bone-rattling baritone as I floor it.

Welcome to Day One of a three-day “Speed & Spa” vacation. Combining car racing with the luxuries of a California wine country resort, Speed & Spa is a joint venture between the Jim Russell Racing School, which supplies the speed at Infineon Raceway, and The Lodge at Sonoma, which provides the spa, along with dining at Carneros Bistro & Wine Bar and wine tasting at nearby Viansa Winery.

The establishments were surprised to learn that speed is not simply for men, and the spas are not only for women. In fact, women now make up 40 percent of the racing school’s participants, though in my class there were 11 would-be Mario Andrettis, including a contingent of tire salesmen from Indiana, all with some racing credentials. Taeko Okano of Tokyo was the only would-be Danica Patrick aside from myself, and we were also the only novices. By the end of three days, however, we were driving at upwards of 100 miles per hour in a vehicle that lacks both a windshield and bumpers and barely sits a foot or two off the ground.

You first learn to drive as fast as you can and then jam on the breaks, or “blip” the gas pedal as you downshift, while keeping your foot steadily on the brake – maneuvers not exactly encouraged by the DMV. Once such rudiments are mastered, you drive the entire two-mile track—used by Nascar, drag, and Indy racers—by the end of the first day. On Day Two, participants learn strategies for passing other cars. By Day Three, they are trying to shave seconds off their track times.

The course can be relentless. There’s the #2 turn that climbs 150 feet, the serpentine S’s of #8, and the hair-raising hairpin at 11. “There’s not a lot of time to rest,” instructor Mark Wolocatiuk warns during a classroom segment.

“I was really nervous because I didn’t know what to expect,” says Okano. “But I felt better as we went on.” At the end of the day, we both contemplate a Swedish massage that’s included in the package. My right foot, in particular, is killing me.

More: 707.935.6600; www.thelodgeatsonoma.com

Available Sunday-Thursday, \$4,795, includes classes, dinner for two, two 50-minute massages, and a wine tasting.

