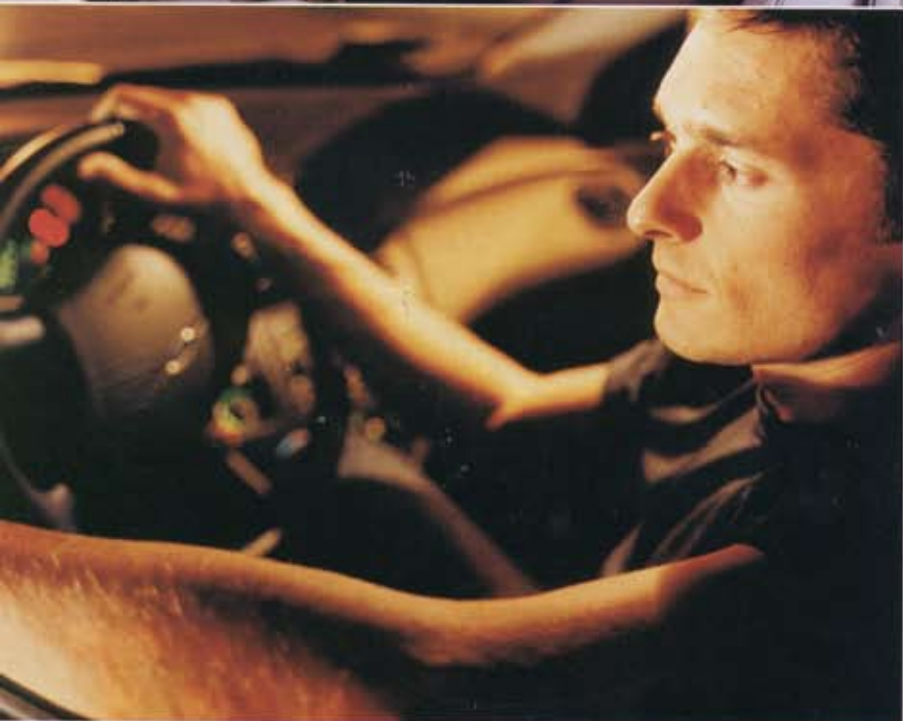




# SECRET CIRCUITS

Up Whitehall, round Trafalgar, down the Mall... We all know the London GP. But Madrid? Rome? Leeds? We asked Carlos Sainz, Giancarlo Fisichella and Guy Smith to show us the tracks of their years. **Story by Alistair Weaver**  
**Photography by Jason Furnari and Anton Watts**



W e're drinking

coffee in Madrid's Plaza Mayor when a couple of young girls approach Carlos Sainz. They beg him for an autograph and 'El Matador' signs a handful of napkins. There is a click of a camera and the girls scurry excitedly away. "It is nice if they have an interest in rallying," he says with an inscrutable smile.

Carlos Sainz is the coolest man in the world. Now 42, he remains impossibly handsome and his immaculate frame hides an extraordinary talent. This man was Spanish Squash Champion at 16, even though "my head was always in motorsport," and he quit a top law school to follow his dream. Twenty years later, Sainz is a double world champion who remains at the very top of his profession.

This fabulously wealthy *Madrileño* also owns homes in Monaco and Knightsbridge, but says: "I obviously view Madrid in a special way. It is a very open and cosmopolitan city." Sainz speaks in an emphatic way and he makes lots of eye contact. His schedule is tight but this is not a robotic interview with a bored megastar.

We finish the coffee and wander back to the Citroen C2. Sainz's secret circuit had started at the Plaza de España and, after tacking south-east through a tunnel, we emerged beside the spectacular Palacio Real (Royal Palace). Even in the bustle of a Spanish morning, it had been possible to carry speed through this section, before we turned sharp left around the Plaza San Francisco and into the twisting, photogenic back streets of old Madrid.

It's incredible to think this will be Sainz's 16th year in the World Rally Championship, and that he won his first world title back in 1990. "I bought the Toyota Celica I won my first championship in," he says. "I keep it at home in Madrid and sometimes drive it on the road. I also have a Porsche 911 Turbo and a tractor, but my favourite vehicle is a rally kart that has 170bhp and weighs just 220kg."

The Sainz memory bank is almost as full as his piggy bank, but he can still recall his first off-road excursions. "I used to race outside the town," he continues. "There were some gravel roads and we used to drive small old cars, Seats and VWs. I rolled a few times and we were often chased by the guards because we shouldn't have been there."

From the Plaza Mayor, we descend the Cava de San Miguel, which is bordered by simple, spherical boulders. Then we turn ninety degrees right, back towards the Palacio. Sainz's 'Circuito Palacio' is intriguing, not least because it's so tight and technical. Next to the Parque de Atenas, we ascend a cobbled twist of a road that, if it were taken at racing speed, would almost certainly require a tug of the handbrake. From there, we dip back into the old town before snaking right past the exquisite Teatro Real and returning to the Plaza De España. As we roll to a stop, I find myself asking the inevitable question: what happens next? Sainz smiles politely and answers: "I cannot drive

## 'I started driving karts when I was six. Dad wet the grass so I dealt with understeer and oversteer without realising it'

forever, but although I have business interests, my heart is still in motor racing. I need to find something that can absorb my power and my passion." El Matador is not about to hang up his cape just yet.

GUY SMITH'S LAST EXPERIENCE OF STREET racing was one of the motorsport stories of last year. After winning Le Mans, the Bentley team decamped to Paris and Derek Bell drove the winning car up the Champs Élysées. "Did you know that we cooked the engine?" asks Smith. "We were going so slowly that there was no air coming in – the engine reached 150 degrees and boiled. The Race One engine was destroyed."

Cooked engine or not, Smith's victory finally cemented his place among the motor racing elite. The 30-year-old Yorkshireman, who was a match for teammate Juan Pablo Montoya in Formula 3, is now a works Audi driver and rated as one of the world's quickest sports car racers.

Success on the track has had its rewards – Smith wrote a cheque for one of the UK's first Continental GTs – but he resists the temptation to leave his native Yorkshire. "Leeds isn't quite Madrid," he says, "but it has improved in recent years and is a good place to shop and go out."

Thanks largely to the exploits of Messieurs Bowyer and Woodgate, Leeds' nightlife has become notorious and Smith's secret circuit passes the infamous Majestic nightclub. "Most people who see me driving this probably think I'm a footballer," says Smith as he pilots the Bentley around the city's baffling one-way system.

Smith laughs as he describes his first car, a one-litre red Metro. "I used to do handbrake turns in the city centre, hopping it on one wheel." Did he ever race it? "My friends and I used to play this game. I had to drive the seven miles from Bridlington beach to my house at exactly 50mph and without touching the brakes. I ended up in a field a couple of times, but it was great fun."

The start of his circuit takes us past the railway station and the new hotels that hint at Leeds' urban renaissance. Smith then breaks hard for a 90-degree left that leads south on to Globe Road. The dirty, sometimes dilapidated buildings could have been plucked from a northern satire, and the potential for speed is compromised by the poor road surface. "Do you realise that this is the red light district?" says Smith with a grin. The naughty ladies are yet to clock on, but it's amusing to imagine their reaction to the passing of the Bentley. Moments later, we join Water Lane, which lies adjacent to a new development of upmarket, waterside apartments. In the space of half a mile, we've witnessed Leeds old and new.

Smith turns left, then right and right again onto the cobbles of Concordia Street. The damp, low-grip surface would challenge the inexperienced. "I started driving karts when I was six," he says, unprompted. "Dad used to wet



Guy's circuit could almost be Le Mans. If you squinted hard



Fisi's Roman route has a corner like Monaco's pool complex



Technical and gnarly – just like a rally stage for Carlos



## 'The Via del Fori Imperiali borders the ruins of ancient Rome. It leads down to a hairpin around the Colosseum'

the grass so I found myself dealing with understeer and oversteer without realising what it was. It was just a reaction thing." We turn left and then swing right onto Bishopgate Street to complete the lap. The 'Majestic Circuit' is an unlikely racetrack, just as Leeds is an unlikely home for a Bentley Boy. But both have an honest, gritty and undeniable charm.



GIANCARLO FISICHELLA WANDERS ACROSS THE Piazza San Agostino and proffers a hand. He is shorter than you imagine, but looks wealthy and his skin-tight T-shirt reveals a gym-carved physique. A couple of cafe dwellers clock him, but seem more interested in their *cappuccini*.

The locals' insouciant attitude is indicative of the Fisichella enigma. This will be the Roman's ninth season in Formula One, but he has always been in the wrong car at the wrong time. After spending 2003 in a lacklustre Jordan, 'Fisi' is moving to Sauber, which takes him one step closer to his beloved Ferrari. "It is frustrating," he says, "all the most important people in the paddock say I should be in a top team."

We hop into his Focus RS and drive south to the start of his secret circuit. It's early evening and the traffic is thick with eccentric drivers. Fisi seems unperturbed. "This is the characteristic of driving in Rome," he says in a melodious voice. "You must keep going – don't stop. The scooters are absolutely crazy."

We're at the Monumento a Vittorio Emanuele II, built to celebrate Italian unification and the focal point of Fisi's circuit, the street-racing scene of his youth. "When I was 18, the car to have was a VW Golf GTi, a 205 GTi or a Fiat Uno Turbo. I had a Golf GTi 16v that I turbo-charged. It had 225bhp and would do 255km/h. I also changed the wheels, the suspension and the brakes."

We set off south-east along the Via del Fori Imperiali, a wide boulevard bordering the ruins of ancient Rome and leading down to a sweeping hairpin around Rome's most famous landmark, the Colosseo, or Colosseum. The surface is terrific and we belt through this section.

The RS could be described as the Golf's successor, but Fisichella's garage now contains nothing more exciting than a Range Rover. "I used to have a Ferrari but I have a family – in one year I did just 2,000km, so I sold it."

Near the Colosseum is the Circo Massimo, where two-wheeled chariots once raced. It's strange to think that the immaculate Fisichella is the contemporary equivalent of a charioteer. He brakes hard to negotiate a sharp left-right through the one-way system that opens to reveal the route back to the Piazza Venezia. "It normally takes 15-20 laps to find the limit of a circuit," Fisi says, "and about the same to learn the limits of a new car."

There are no such heroics today, but it's amusing to imagine a Roman Grand Prix held on the Circo Colosseo.

