

# **Mont-Tremblant – Where the Deer and the Interlope Play:**

## A Newbie's Account of and Ten Lessons Learned from NER's opening DE event

by Laurie Jitts

May 28<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> in Mont-Tremblant was my first DE outing with NER. My prior experiences in DEing have all occurred this year with other chapters of the PCA, so I really am a newbie to the sport. As such, I am honored to be allowed to share my experience with you. Let me state from the outset that I have never had so much fun in a car as I did with NER in Mont-Tremblant — well, that's not entirely true, but I was a lot younger and much more limber then. The event was extraordinarily well organized and the operations staff flexible and congenial. Eurotech Advanced Automotive in Framingham, MA, who helped a number of people during the weekend, generously sponsored the event. Further, my fellow DEers were instantly and infectiously welcoming, and the track itself could not have been more magnificent.

As a newcomer it is impossible not to be a little nervous as you first approach the track. You've read all the documentation about what to do and how to prepare and what to expect, but you're still checking to make sure that your helmet is still in the car where you carefully pre-packed it a week ago. I was no different from anyone else. These feelings were exacerbated by waking up (2 hours earlier than required) in the delightful little village near the track, drawing back the shades, and discovering it was pouring rain. Instantly, I was reminded of some advice given to me by a good friend with many years of driving experience, "At Mont-Tremblant, be really careful of the first corner at the end of the pit straight; it can be one of the scariest corners I've ever met."

"Great!" think I, as I sit outside the gate waiting to enter. I, who knows nothing, am taking a car I can barely drive onto a "scary" track in the rain with a bunch of no-doubt-far-more-competent-and-experienced drivers. Maybe my mother-in-law was right when she described my plan to take Percy (my beloved 996 C4) to the track as "the dumbest thing" she had ever heard of.

The next thing that occurs to me is that it is approaching 7:00 a.m., and I am the only person sitting waiting at the gate. Could it be the event has been cancelled due to rain? Have I just driven 7 hours from Boston for nothing? Did I check my E-mail before I left? Finally, the mystery is solved when an unknown driver in a WRX stops and asks if I am here for the NER event, and if so, why am I waiting at the main entrance and not at the paddock entrance?

Lesson 1: Print your directions from the NER site (i.e. the Event Packet they told us about in the Track Rats Messages), not the track's site. One will get you to the right place; one will not.

Eventually I find the right place, find a place to park, and start imitating the behavior of everybody else by removing everything that isn't bolted down from the car.

Lesson 2: Bring some means of keeping everything dry while it is not in your car (check out the useful hints on the NER site, "Here's What to Bring!") It isn't always going to be perfect sunshine, and the thought of putting soggy floor mats back later is not overwhelmingly appealing.

Next it is off to Tech line. Cheery faces with plastic raincoat frames take my pre-inspection paper work and do a quick check of the vehicle.

"You know these brake pads will not last past today, don't you?" comes the warning from low in the front left corner.

"What!!! I just replaced them ... well that was a while ago ... and I have done a few track days in between ... Let me have a look. Hmmm. They do seem a little thin. Oh, shit! How on earth am I going to get a set of brake pads before tomorrow?"

"Don't worry just ask around; someone will have some they'll lend you," suggests the tech inspector. Now remembering I'm the newbie and given that the last thing I want is to be known as is the guy who drives 500 miles to take his car out on the track with no brakes, I come up with a much better solution – call my wife.

"Honey, sweetie, darling, would you mind finding a Porsche dealer someone near where I am and seeing if they can deliver some pads up to me TODAY?" As it turns out, my long-suffering and incredibly patient wife is able to locate someone who can put them in a taxi from Montréal. You do not want to know how expensive that turned out to be.

Lesson 3: Bring spare brake pads (remember that "Here's What to Bring!") — you never know when you may need them.

Lesson 4: Don't be shy about asking around if you need help. As it turns out, I find at least two people who could have helped me out with spares if only I had asked, and it seems that the level of camaraderie amongst NER members is such that if somebody can help, they will.

As fortune has it, the rain gives way to a light mist, and it looks like we might have a dry track after all. Next it is off to the Drivers' Meeting. The reality is that when your time comes you will remember the critical things (and if you don't, your instructor will quickly remind you), but while sitting in the meeting my thoughts immediately go to such things as: *"Oh my god, I will never remember where I can pass and where I can't. I'll bet I signal the wrong direction when I want someone to pass. What **did** the Black Flag mean?"*

Lesson 5: Worry not. Take in what you can, and the rest will become second nature in time.

While at the Drivers' Meeting, I make the spur-of-the-moment decision to introduce myself to the powers that be and offer my services for anything they might need. As it turns out, they are short a "Pod Captain," and I am asked if I would like to take on that responsibility.

"Absolutely" I hear my mouth saying, as my mind slowly grapples with the fact that I have no idea what a "Pod Captain" is. Good fortune smiles again when it turns out that this is actually a pretty straightforward role. At every event, it seems all drivers are required to fulfill work assignments. At Mont-Tremblant, this typically means helping with Staging and or Pit Out for a couple of sessions each day. My job is simply to ensure that people turned up on time for their assignments.

There is a lot to be said for holding such a role. Firstly, you get to meet everybody at the event and introduce yourself; and secondly, you get to have a radio for the day, so you are privy the "behind the scenes" communications, some of which can be pretty amusing.

Lesson 6: Newbie or old hand, I thoroughly recommend volunteering for whatever is available; it is almost certainly going to enhance your on-track experience.

By the time the Drivers' Meeting is over, the rain has stopped. The Red and Black run groups start Friday's proceedings, and by the time my Green group goes out, the track is virtually dry. My instructor for the weekend, Dick Fell from the New Jersey chapter of the PCA, introduces himself to me prior to my run. Instantly likeable and obviously knowledgeable, I know we were going to get on famously.

After the initial run-through of seating position, mirrors, and belt adjustment procedures, Dick takes us out on the track for the first couple of laps. No description I can offer will do justice to the magnificence that is le Circuit Mont-Tremblant. The setting is scenic and beautiful, and the track itself is a complicated combination of fast, sweeping corners, even-faster straights, and very tight and deceptive left- and right-hand combinations.

For myself, whose prior track experience has been restricted to Lime Rock and NHIS, being chauffeured around this track is a revelation. Le Circuit is twice the length of either of those other tracks, and by comparison, the track surface itself is billiard-table smooth. At the end of two laps, Dick pulls in to Pit Lane and suggests it is my time to drive.

Instantly, I have forgotten everything I have just taken in and enter the track as if I have never seen it before. Dick's comment as we exited Pit Lane is that he won't say much unless I need correcting. Needless-to-say, he spends the entire session (and most of the rest of the day) "correcting."

I know from my prior experience not to try and go fast. Everything that is spoken about learning "the line" and the track is doubly true for Mont-Tremblant. It is a long circuit, a lot happens, and there are a lot of subtleties to learn. By the end of day, I/we are feeling reasonably comfortable with my progress and speed seems to come magically without trying.

My friend's advice, however, remains a fair reflection of the reality. There is something intrinsically terrifying and simultaneously exhilarating about dabbing the brakes at the end of the entrance before allowing the car out on the left-hand side of the track and then blindly powering uphill towards an unseen apex before blasting past it, feeling the car lighten over the crest of the hill, settling on the down hill, and the squirming under braking as you set yourself up for the upcoming right-hander. This is one hell of a ride, and this is just one small section of a 2.5-mile circuit.

In all on Friday, I have four 20+-minute runs without incident, and I go back to my room in the village absolutely exhausted. I would like to say I sleep well, but the reality is that I am so excited that I cannot drift off. Instead, I lie there thinking my way around the track, contemplating how courteous and friendly all my fellow newbies have been and how much I loved this sport.

Saturday dawns a perfect, sunny day, and this time, I have a reason to be up 2 hours early — I now have to go and install my newly-acquired brake pads before the 7:00 a.m. tech.

Lesson 7: Read the Event Packet and Track Rats Messages *before* the event so you know when the track opens!

Having no idea how to install them I think I will head out to the track and find some help. Of course, the track isn't even open at 5.45 a.m., so plan B is put into action: find a nice, flat surface by the road, pull the car apart, and hope some kind Samaritan will stop and offer advice. I carefully select my spot near the local breakfast stop and have soon gathered a good number of advisors. The pads are changed in a matter of minutes.

Lesson 8: Practice a hopelessly confused look before endeavoring any car repairs.

Saturday's tech inspection and Drivers' Meeting follow the pattern of Friday, except at this meeting, we have the added bonus of some very nice door prizes donated by Carol Matte, owner of the Petro Canada station just outside the track (two certificates for \$50 worth of petrol) and by Bill Chadwick of Leaf (three pairs of very nice driving gloves).

The driving starts as planned. The track is dry and clear, and the first few runs go smoothly. Then some exciting differences start to occur. The first comes in the guise of some deer that have decided to wander onto the racetrack. I am very fortunate to experience first-hand an uncommon signal from one of the pro corner workers that consists of a waving yellow flag in one hand and the other hand arranged with thumb pointed to ear and four fingers flapping and pointing skywards. This is the pre-arranged indication for deer on the track. In this case, I presume it was a four-pointer by the number of extended fingers.

Sure enough, around the next corner I find Bambi and mother stopping to graze. These Canadian deer are pretty keen auto-sport spectators, because they do not seem at all phased by our

presence. They are also pretty smart; somehow, they know not to get too close. Throughout the day they reappear often but fortunately manage to coexist without incident.

Not so smart are the mountain bikers who decide that they will relax *inside* the Armco fence on the previously described downhill braking zone. George Bixby and his trusted bicycle are quickly dispatched to the outside, off-road track to disperse them, and driving recommences.

Next comes what could have been a complete disaster. Unbeknownst to the driver, one of our member's vehicles (not a Porsche I'm pleased to say) manages to loosen its screw-on oil filter and deposit its entire sump around the whole circuit. In many circles, this might be a long-term issue, but with what seems like typical efficiency for NER organizers, a bevy of volunteers is soon spreading Oil-Dri, sweeping the track, and for some lucky spectators the pleasure of driving street vehicles around the circuit (at a considerably-less-than-race pace) to spread the dust around. Less than an hour later, it is business as usual, and with some minor shortening of breaks and the combination of a couple of runs, we are back on schedule.

Lesson 9: Keep aware of what's going on behind you in case your car is smoking or leaving a wet trail, so you can get offline ASAP.

Then comes the Interloper. It seems that one of the conditions of renting Mont-Tremblant is that we must accept that the "international consortium of investors" may decide that *he* wants to take his *must-have-a-special-noise-level-dispensation* yellow Ferrari out for a little spin at any time he deems appropriate. In our case, this comes on Saturday afternoon just before the Yellow/Blue group is about to go out. Some quick reshuffling of schedule sees the Red and then Black groups sharing the track with someone who will not give pass signals but must be given pass signals and whom, if not given a pass signal, will pass anyway. As it turns out, most of the drivers in these run groups thought it was pretty cool to be out there with the Yellow racer.

For many of us — including one or two of the track staff who presumably are his direct employees — one of the highlights of the weekend is watching Bill Chadwick drive his new 935-K3 race car, built by our sponsor, Eurotech, slowly reeling in and then passing the Interloper's machine not once, but twice. Who said this is an unjust world?

Saturday night, Margo has arranged for a dinner at the local "Les Artiste," where we all head after cleaning up. Spirits are high, and a great time is definitely had by all. For me, exhaustion sets in early from another fantastic day of driving and Pod Captaining without incidents.

Sunday is another perfect, sunny day and follows the same ritual of tech inspection, meetings, and door prizes, including a free entry to a future 2004 event. By now Dick has signed me off for soloing. It is amazing how much harder a track can be when you are not getting reassuring screams of panic from the passenger seat. Still, I manage to survive the morning without getting it too wrong, and once again revel in just how fantastically capable Percy really is and how much I have to learn to ever be able to match the 996's standard. Once again, I contemplate how considerate and friendly my fellow DEers are and what a wonderful event this is.

Alas, other commitments require that I am not able to witness the DE Enduro event that by all accounts goes off spectacularly well. Oh well — gives me something to look forward to in July when I will be returning to Mont-Tremblant for the 2<sup>nd</sup> event. Hopefully, I'll see most of you there.

As I drive home from Mont-Tremblant, it occurs to me that when my dog is found chasing his tail in ever-faster circles, I immediately accuse him of insanity and insist he must stop because it cannot be good for his well-being. On the other hand, those of us who choose to spend three days doing what amounts to the same thing in a Porsche will happily validate our pursuit by proclaiming (to anyone who is willing to listen) that this a healthy and educational pastime. This is what our cars are built to do, and we owe it to the machines to regularly let them be free of the normal constraints of urban congestion. We will attach an almost pious significance to the Machine's needs

and try to pretend this is an entirely logical and useful way to spend our time. Insanity or useful pursuit? Who cares – it sure is fun!

Many thanks to Arnie, Margo, Bruce, Matthew, the two Marks, and everyone else involved in what really was a wonderfully run, enjoyable, and safe event.

Lesson 10: It really is not just the cars; it's the people, too!