

SIMPLE PLEASURES: A glass of Krug, a Rolls-Royce and thou: all a man needs for a pleasant evening in the company of nature. Mosquitoes and elec



INTIMATE EXPOSURE

The union of opposites is a classic method of creating excitement: high and low, hot and cold, firm and soft. The new Rolls-Royce Phantom's natural environment is the superhighways and valet parking lots of the world. We took it to its least likely home, the wilds of East Germany, for a down-home old-fashioned camping trip.

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"The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous, and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again." – *Thomas Paine*

Few cars so perfectly combine the sublime and the ridiculous as the new Phantom. Few landscapes, on the other hand, conjure a less romantic image than the East German countryside, especially along the Polish border. A region notorious, whether deservedly or not, for car theft and less-than-progressive politics, East Germany's Brandenburg does not exactly inspire visions of idyllic vacations. Nonetheless, the area is rich in campsites and within easy driving distance of Berlin, so when Rolls-Royce foolishly accepted our proposal to borrow a new Phantom and take it camping, the Polish border is where I, your humble reporter, went with a photographer and an assistant. Why camp in a Rolls-Royce? Well, if you're going to park a car in the driveway that costs as much as a house, you

might as well put its homely qualities to the test. Jamiroquai's Jay Kay is rumoured to sleep in his Phantom at music festivals. So we decided to investigate how the Rolls performs off the road as an ersatz living space – how a € 330,000 car's seats and creature comforts hold up for a night off the autobahn.

For our journey, we packed the finest of Berlin's provisions from the KaDeWe department store: foie gras from Périgord, oysters fresh from the Île de Ré in France, tinned ravioli, baked beans, sausages and a magnum of Krug champagne. This is the story of what it's like to get to know a Rolls intimately, to use it as a support system that provides shelter, light and food – not to mention speed.

9.12 A.M. SCHÖNEBERG, BERLIN: DELIVERY

As the back of a UK-registered flatbed truck opens and the enormous black-red car, looking like a post-modern cartoon version of Ye Olde England, is slowly backed out, a thrill ripples through the pedestrians who have



SIMPLE PLEASURES PART 2 (ABOVE): The Phantom's grille, more menacing and imposing than ever, doubles as a stovetop and ventilation system for a country meal. HP sauce and Heinz Baked Beans pay tribute to Blighty, while yesterday's oysters from the Île de Ré, which came to us courtesy of Berlin's KaDeWe department store, give the meal an upwardly mobile slant.
PACK IT UP (BELOW): Yes, that IS the tallest boot you've ever seen. But the deep-pile carpet and leather accents beg for gentler treatment.



gathered on the sidewalk to gawk. The Phantom is a singular creation, a mammoth car with, as they say in the automotive press, "massive presence." Impressively proportioned, it looks as strong as a tank: a machine that positively oozes powerful arrogance.

I drive inside the office courtyard to investigate the car at leisure. The Phantom's height is astonishing. I am six feet tall, and the thing comes up to my chin. The rear passenger doors are hinged at the back, giving a grand double-door effect when both front and rear are open – what might be described as a "come into my parlour" ambience. With seemingly acres of soft leather, glossy wood, rich carpeting and throw rugs, it is a gentleman's club on wheels, with nary a whiff of that new-car smell. Well, perhaps there's just a whiff of the overcleaned press-car smell, but that can't be helped. And the rugs are plush, not the flat, dense carpets more typical in the German-dominated world of luxury cars.

Playing with the windows, I discover that they are double-glazed, two distinct layers of glass nestling against each other. The reassuringly well-padded *thunk* sound as I shut the doors suggests immense reserves of weight and hydraulics everywhere. So far, at rest, this is the dominant impression: immense reserves in every department.

There are a few plastic details in the fittings for window switches and, most gallingly, in the back passenger seat control setup. However, a chilled champagne cabinet is as between-the-wars cool as can be. The big question is, can it hold a magnum?

2.48 P.M. SCHÖNEBERG, BERLIN: DEPARTURE

As we drive through town, the sidewalks are packed with mid-afternoon pedestrians, schoolkids and tourists. The car does not go unnoticed. The middle-aged tend to pretend they're not looking, or affect looks of disgust, then do a double take after the car has passed. The Phantom's bonnet is as long as most entire cars, and swinging it around in traffic requires foresight and concentration. It's not unlike handling a heavy shotgun. Luckily the "Spirit of Ecstasy" tells me exactly where the bonnet ends – that and the constantly beeping parking sensor.

2.53 P.M. SCHÖNEBERG, BERLIN: TRAFFIC JAM

We are stuck in traffic. The fuel-consumption gauge is also stuck, at 35 litres/100 km. This translates to about 7 miles per gallon. Sitting still allows me a moment to admire the controls. The steering wheel is thin and elegant, just like that of a classic Rolls. Engaging the transmission pleasingly requires mere finger taps rather than an actual effort of the wrist.

3.50 P.M. PANKOW, BERLIN: AUTOBAHN

Out of gridlock, it's time to step on it. Pressure on the accelerator pedal is rewarded by instant and effortless propulsion. The traffic ahead looms at an alarming rate if the

foot is kept firmly on the pedal. And this raises a major issue, that of the car's sheer mass and momentum. On every turn, every stop, I feel systems activating to keep the car on the road and the ride smooth. Hitting the brakes at 200 km/h feels not unlike hitting the tarmac in a small jet, as the car is reined in by massive discs, pulsing and working hard. Most cars are flimsy bicycles in comparison.

4.08 P.M.

Fiddling with the radio is an exercise in frustration. The entertainment-centre interface – which also controls temperature, the GPS system and God knows what else – is unfortunately a very clear derivative of BMW's iDrive, a famously annoying system that relies almost exclusively on a single rotary knob to do the job of untold old-fashioned buttons and switches. The Rolls-Royce version is not at all intuitive and requires a dangerous amount of distraction from the road to perform a task as simple as, say, changing radio stations. The stereo, however, is sublime: as we drive along to the strains of American post-ironic country music, the sound is crisp and deep; the fact that the car is almost silent certainly helps with music appreciation.

4.38 P.M.

Stereo system off, we cruise back up to 200 km/h – a quiet rush. However, at this speed, the thing also starts to feel a bit like a rocket-propelled school bus, which calls for a bit of caution.

4.50 P.M. ANGERMÜNDE, GERMANY (NEAR POLISH BORDER): LEAVE AUTOBAHN

The champagne cooler is full of melting ice: the oysters started the journey in a bag that has now broken. It's a mystery how we will extract the ice without spoiling thousands of euros worth of Connolly leather. There are oysters floating in the same chilly sea. The warm bottle of Krug is the elephant in the living room: let future generations of Rolls-Royce drivers know that the cooler will NOT hold a magnum. Meanwhile, the country roads and scenery of haystacks and modern wind farms brings out more of the aforementioned rocket-bus behaviour. I note that our petrol gauge is edging towards the empty side, but the bustling town of Angermünde is a few kilometres from the campsite.

5.25 P.M. ANGERMÜNDE CAMPSITE: ARRIVAL

As we pull into the campsite, city mores no longer apply. Our fellow campers stare brazenly as we drive across the grass to our appointed swathe of land. We take photographs.

7.50 P.M.

The sun sets on the lake. Tiny eddies and swirling pools appear on the otherwise smooth water. ➤



BIG IN THE EAST: Men generally ask about the engine, while women notice the tendency of the stainless-steel door pillar to attract fingerprints (a Jeeves is definitely necessary for this car). The champagne fridge is a big hit all around.

8.08 P.M.

Waterbirds start squawking in stereo, the devil knows why. They are invisible.

An attempt to read a map in the fading light brings out one hitherto unnoticed quality to the car: the reading lights are an annoying blue-white fluorescent colour.

8.15 P.M.

The waterbirds have shut up.

9.45 P.M. SPRUCING UP FOR DINNER

To the essential activities of camping (setting up shelter, eating, sleeping), the Rolls adds a lavish home-entertainment option. You can watch DVDs or listen to music on the peerless sound system. You can also consider the money involved in the car, the mind-boggling man-hours spent chasing an old-fashioned idea of perfection. At rest, however, none of this is very important. A camping trip, the notion of spending the night here (and the slight dread thereof), is where the luxurious interior really comes into play. On the upside, there's all that wood, leather and high-class carpeting. Then there are the interior lights. They cast a cold light not unlike the campsite's bathroom.

10.15 P.M. DINNER BY THE LIGHT OF THE ROLLS

Eating tinned ravioli and drinking Krug by the dim glow of the foglamps – now this is living. Insects swarm in increasing quantities around the headlights and inside the car, where a reading light has been left on. Mmmm, sticky warm ravioli washed down by coolish priceless bubbly, the Rolls purring softly a few metres away. It is not very “green” to run the car while not actually driving it, but the headlights will not function otherwise. A 453-horsepower, 6.75-litre V-12 engine used as an electrical generator is perhaps a new level of decadence. The petrol gauge tells us that we are dangerously close to empty as the car sits and gets 0 miles per gallon.

1.15 A.M. FRONT SEAT: TOSS AND TURN

Good night, sweet lights, good night: the green-tinted overheads won't quit. These have become an obsession for me: one overhead for each passenger, more in the little mini-doorsills, in Art Deco-style scalloped sconces behind the rear passengers' heads ... but alas, their grim fluorescence just won't go away. At this point I am regretting the experiment: I would gladly settle for an old Chevy with a bench seat as I try to stretch out in some semblance of comfort. It is possible to wedge oneself on the front seat in a way that comes close to horizontal (clue: on one's side with serious contortions and flexing).

8.49 A.M. FRONT SEAT: WAKE UP

Waking up is an exercise in repetition and soreness from twisting about all night, even in this huge car. The view that greets the awakening guest is an odd combination of

hotel and automobile. The car's enormous width allows a great flat dashboard where toiletries, glasses and books fit with ease.

Breakfast is, if possible, even more sublime and ridiculous than dinner. It consists of the refrigerated oysters, eggs, beans, toast and foie gras. Unfortunately oyster shucking is a skill I have yet to learn. I bludgeon myself with a bread knife and succeed in opening one oyster. For my breakfast I shall have this week's eggs from Germany, yesterday's oyster from France and beans of an indeterminate age from England.

10.00 A.M. ANGERMÜNDE: GAS HUNT

It is decided that I shall get the petrol for the return journey since I am the smallest and weakest of our group. As I pull out of the campsite, I watch in dismay as the kilometres-till-empty gauge goes precipitously from 2 to 0 without passing 1. I try not to think of burning cars, farmers on cell phones calling in my position, the possibility of stumbling over the border ... my mobile phone rings. A text message has just welcomed me to Poland. Even pressing the pedal as lightly as possible to coast over hills, I still sense the relentless consumption.

10.12 A.M. OUTSIDE ANGERMÜNDE: GAS FOUND

After numerous mirages (read: closed East German petrol stations), and well into the negative zone of the tank's range, I find the bliss of an open petrol station. One thing the English do provide is a little bit of leeway; in a typical German car, when the gauge says empty, thunk, you're done. This idiot-proof margin is much appreciated.

11.37 A.M. CAMPSITE: DECAMP AND HEAD FOR HOME

Open up the London taxi-style doors and stuff the car full of the gear for three people. The trunk feels like coachwork, with thick-pile carpet and leather edges. It's extremely deep, tall and wide, and feels positively antediluvian. We hit the road and begin our glide back to Berlin. The car whirs and whooshes along, feeling more than ever like a collection of devices, closer to a yacht or jet than a car.

1.29 P.M. SCHÖNEBERG, BERLIN: ARRIVAL

The car has tremendous virtues and the pettiest of faults. Camping in it brings out these little contradictions, but it is with great regret that I leave behind the world of finger-tap gear changes and massive, silent acceleration. Ultimately the Phantom is a creature of motion, not rest – one that shines best not sitting and idling but swooshing down a high-speed road, with its several hundred horsepower pumping the whole thing along in something close to silence. Opening the door of my shabby, slow VW Golf, I miss those hydraulics already. The world has just become a little – make that a lot – more ordinary. []



GOLDEN HOURS (ABOVE): The sun on the lake, the weekday blues cast off for a few precious hours of communion with the silence that is nature – that and a creeping sense of worry about the wisdom of leaving a new Rolls-Royce in a trailer park.
GOODNIGHT, SWEET PRINCE (BELOW): This apparently peaceful photo fails to convey the actual discomfort of sleeping sitting up. It may be a first-class compartment, but a man needs a bed to sleep properly on his journey.

