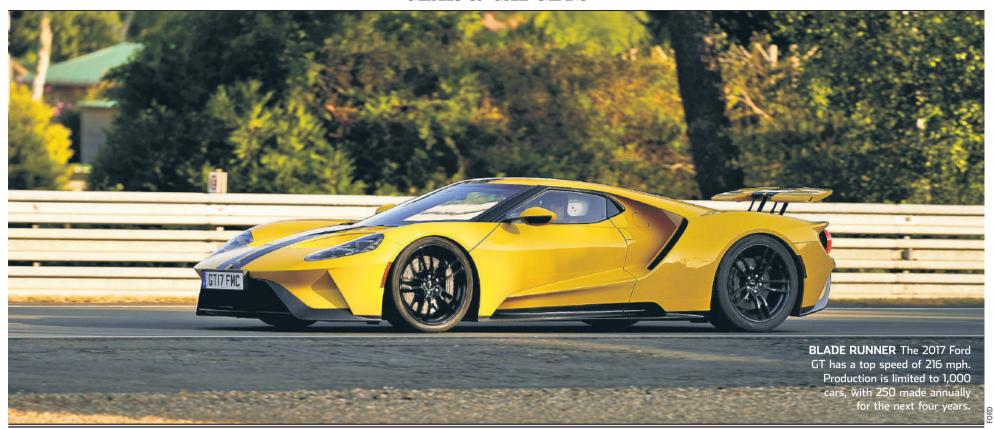
GEAR & GADGETS



RUMBLE SEAT: DAN NEIL



2017 Ford GT: When Performance Tops All

STRAPPED INTO the slim-hipped driver's seat, my helmet bumping the roof, my heart in my throat, I swung the nose of the pharmaceutical-yellow Ford GT toward the main straight of Le Mans and opened the taps. Destiny.

Officially, and for tax purposes, I went to France last month to test this car, the DOT-approved version of Ford's Le Mans-winning GT, now being built at a rate of one per day by Ford's assembly partner, Multimatic, in Markham, Ontario. Unofficially, my audience was with *la belle circuit*: the circus maximus of grandstands, the blind approach to Dunlop Bridge, the Porsche curves, all splitting at speed around me for three whole laps.

I'm sorry to say these laps were merely warm, not hot. I had to stay behind a safety car limited to 140 mph, which in the GT felt like following a Bourbon Street funeral procession. Still, this was bucket-list sports tourism. Imagine getting to play pitch-and-putt at Augusta, or plinking grounders from home plate in an empty Yankee Stadium, or excusing yourself from the tour at Churchill Downs to hurl in Eddie Arcaro's private stall.

If you think the price is high, remember the GT is like getting two cars in one.

The car is pretty special, too: a slashing, belt-high fantasy of grilles and glass, a pinup of hips and headlights coming at you at angles you never saw in Euclid. This thing looks like it flew off God's ax handle.

At first you may be blind to all but the spectacular roof buttresses staving off the rear side-pods. The buttresses are one of many design details that turned out to be good for both the race and road car. The arrangement reduces overall form drag (top speed is a whopping 216 mph) by channeling air around the

teardrop-shaped fuselage like blood grooves on a sword. The design also aids cooling by positioning the heat exchangers into cleaner airflow.

At speed, these buttresses also act like airfoils, generating a bit of downforce while also looking like hell's kitchen drawer.

Deep inside its folded figure is the cause of all the fuss: a production-based 3.5-liter twin-turbo V6, massively boosted to generate 647 hp and 550 lb-ft of torque, blasting creation through high-mounted dual exhaust ports that are always nicely blackened, like the tips of retrorockets. Crackle, Pop? Your ride is here.

Let's just run the checklist: seven-speed dual-clutch rear transaxle; inboard spring-and-damper suspension with hydraulic rideheight adjustment (which, put a pin in it, is the secret to the whole operation); active aerodynamics in the front and rear, including the articulating rear wing/air brake; carbon-ceramic brakes that would stop time.

It is rather fast. The following day I was able to take a GT into the French countryside, with Ford executive vice president Raj Nair joining me in the narrow cockpit or conjoined, like Siamese twins. Here and there on two-lane roads, I was able to drift back from the cars I was going to overtake, downshift into 2nd and lean into the GT's throttle. A blur, a sawtooth roar, a flash of the digital tachometer, and then a thudding upshift like a meat mallet on a thick steak. The GT's quickness from a standing start—under 3 seconds to 60 mph—is the first act of a much bigger performance drama.

And now, dear readers, as we come to the price, please refrain from eating or drinking anything spit-able: \$450,000. Ford will limit production to 1,000 cars over four years. That's right: as in Henry Ford.

While it looks like a machine, the Ford GT is actually 100% narrative. From its initial conception, in 2013, as the "Phoenix Project," the GT was blueprinted to win its class at Le Mans. Management targeted the 2016 race for the big push to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Ford's epic 1-2-3 sweep, with Carroll Shelby and the original GT40s.

After a pretty horrible 24 hours, a Ford GT did win the GTE Pro class, by the skin of team owner Chip Ganassi's teeth. In 2017, they weren't even as lucky as that, quelle dommage.

While many sports cars are turned into professional race cars—Porsche 911, Ferrari 488 GTB, Aston Martin V8 Vantage, Chevrolet Corvette—not many purpose-built race cars go the other way. The design compromises are pretty fundamental. For example, in order to minimize the GT's from tal area—one of the multipliers of aerodynamic drag-the GT's greenhouse canopy was kept low and narrow, requiring driver and passenger to sit/slump shoulder to shoulder. The seats are molded into the floor, and the pedal box, steering wheel and seat-back adjust to accommodate.

Whereas other production sports car must get a roll cage installed, the GT's carbon-composite safety cell has one already built in, partly explaining the low ceiling.

The GT's very proportions, especially its grandiose nose, are dictated by the slew of radiators required to run Le Mans, around which cars are at wide-open throt-

tle 80% of the time.

Talk about an afterthought: The entire cargo capacity amounts to a hatched compartment, built into the rear deck of the car, that's about the size of a four-slice toaster. Your grand touring better involve a lot of nudity.

Between the 12.8-inch rear tires and the thrumming turbo V6 in the small of your back, the GT's cabin noise and vibration levels are also pretty vivid. Fortunately, my declining hearing compensated.

The key enabler is the car's two-stage hydraulic ride-height ad-

justment, and if you think the price is high, just remember it's like getting two cars in one. At normal ride height, the GT sits on a sophisticated inboard suspension with spring-and-damper sets, an arrangement typical of race cars. In part thanks to its extra long lower suspension arms, the GT's real-world ride comfort is surprisingly tolerable. But when the driver switches over from Sport to Track, everything changes. The car's chassis abruptly drops 2 full inches, as hydraulic pistons compress the springs completely. This leaves the torsion bars as the only source of elasticity. The damping gets hard, the road feel gets thrashy, the body roll goes from

Switching to Normal mode causes the car to jump back up like a Pop-Tart.

There was a time when the beau ideal was to drive your sports car to the track, paint numbers on it, go racing and then drive home. It's been decades since any road car could be really convincing on track against purpose-built race cars—the McLaren F1 and Maserati MC12 come to mind. But in its thoroughly dual nature, its ability to leave public roads and hunker down to speed work with a press of a button, the GT can do this gallant old trick as well as any car I've ever driven.

For all its blade-running futurism, it's actually a bit of a throwback.





nil to none.

2017 FORD GT

Price, as tested \$450,000
Layout/construction Two-seat, midengine berlinetta coupe, carbon-fiber safety cell/monocoque, aluminum front and rear subframes, inboard suspension, rear-wheel drive.
Powertrain longitudinally midmounted, dual turbocharged and intercooled, port- and direct-fuel injected, 3.5-liter DOHC V6; sevenspeed dual-clutch rear transaxle; rear-

wheel drive

Horsepower/torque 647 at 6,250 rpm/550 lb-ft at 5,900 rpm

Length/dry weight 187.5 inches/3,054 pounds

Wheelbase 106.7 inches

0-60 mph < 3 seconds (est.)

¼-mile elapsed time <10.5 seconds (est.)

EPA fuel economy 11/18/14 mpg, city/highway/combined

