TRACK STAR

Silverstone's new GT86 Experience is a great way to take your first laps on a race track

WORDS: SAMANTHA WHITAKER
PHOTOGRAPHY: THOMAS BUTLER

I'm usually quite a cautious driver, so it was with some trepidation that I approached the Silverstone Experience Centre to try out the GT86, Toyota's multi-award-winning sports coupé, on part of the legendary Silverstone Formula 1 grand prix circuit.

For most people, it's easy enough to put the pedal to the floor. But regardless of the car you're driving, or the speed it's going at, the key to reducing lap times is mastering the racing line – in other words, negotiating corners. So that's where the experience begins, with a comprehensive briefing on where to brake and change gear, turning in while maintaining speed, meeting the inside of the corner at the clipping point and then accelerating away. So far, so good; but could I put the theory into practice behind the wheel?

Out on the trackside, I met Chris Ward, the chief instructor at Silverstone. Chris started his racing career on motorbikes, and then aged 18, followed his parents into racing cars, entering local, British and, eventually, European championships. He's been a driving instructor now for more than 20 years, although he still races regularly and has clocked up an impressive 90 race wins.

With my safety helmet secured and seatbelt on, Chris introduced me to the GT86. Inside, it's intuitive and uncluttered, with sportscar aluminium pedals and low, sculpted seats. Everything is where you expect it to be, so it's easy to just get in and get on with it – however, putting the racing-line theory into practice is like spinning plates. Thankfully, Chris provided a constant stream of instructions, and as I ▶

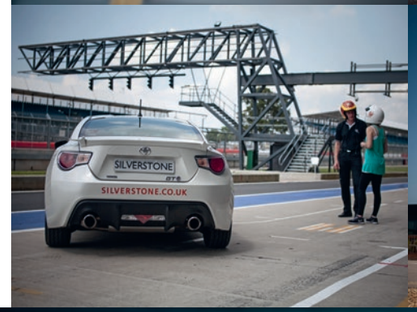
"The GT86 is a great car for instructing as it teaches people about the art of car control," says chief instructor Chris Ward













took each corner I began to get a feel for the car. The circuit has two long straights to really get up some speed – a GT86 is capable of 140mph and can sprint from 0-62mph in 7.6 seconds – before slamming on the brakes and taking the corners.

"It's a great car for instructing as it teaches people about the art of car control," explained Chris. "For example, not only steering with the steering wheel, but also with the throttle pedal, which you can do on a track. Plus, it's got great balance and handling: everyone gets out of the GT86 with a smile," he added. At just 1,150kg, the rear-wheel-drive GT86 is extremely light and boasts a 2-litre boxer engine that produces 200 DIN hp – more than enough power for me.

In fact, the GT86 is so impressive that Silverstone uses its fleet on the circuit's Ferrari Experience events to ease participants into circuit driving because they are such a similar drive. It's an incredible accolade – a car that starts at just £25,110 being compared to cars that cost more than £170,000.

> "EVERYONE GETS OUT OF THE GT86 WITH A SMILE"



After five laps, we took a break so I could reflect on my performance and understand where I needed to improve with Chris's expert guidance. During a second five-lap stint, I had definitely improved and upped my speed a bit. "There's a lot to learn and to master it in 10 laps is very difficult," Chris reassured me. "But the experience gives you an important appreciation of where you need to position the car, how and when you need to input changes and how planning is key." Plus, of course, you get to power around Silverstone's legendary high-speed curves just like a pro – an opportunity not to be missed.

GT86 EXPERIENCES START AT £149. VISIT SILVERSTONE.CO.UK/EXPERIENCES/TOYOTA-GT86-DRIVING-DAYS







DRIVE LIKE A PRO

Silverstone's chief driving instructor, Chris Ward, shares his top tips to help us drive better on the road:

1 **Whether you're on the circuit or the road, planning and preparation are key. Be aware of what's going on around you and look ahead so that you have enough time to make changes**

2 **Know your car and how it works: tyre pressure, and oil and water checks are very important, particularly before a longer drive**

3 **Advanced driving courses are always beneficial and often very enjoyable. Particularly useful to learn is car control in adverse weather conditions**

You're in safe hands with chief instructor Chris Ward (above). A seasoned racing driver, he's been an instructor for 20 years

