

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

There's a hillclimb in South Africa that attracts a lot of hairy cars – and baboons. So Robert Coucher heads back to his homeland to compete in a Ford Capri Perana V8

Photography Colin Mileman



CAPRI PERANA ON SIMOLA HILLCLIMB



Sunny South Africa. Except today it's emphatically not. Angry black clouds are rolling over the hilltops of Knysna, an upmarket resort town perched along the beautiful Garden Route that runs up the east coast. While standing on a ribbon of road that snakes up the valley, I'm nervously eyeballing the glisteningly wet tarmac. The seventh annual running of the Jaguar Simola Hillclimb will certainly be entertaining for the thousands of spectators and very attention-grabbing for the 145 competitors. And I'm one of them.

Team *Octane* had arrived in Knysna with Charles Arton acting as team leader. Last year he won the Classic Conqueror trophy on Classic Car Friday in his rapid March Formula Atlantic 79B with a time of 45.894 seconds (see *Octane* 146). This year Charles has invited me along to drive his Burnt Orange 1972 Ford Capri Perana.

After we arrive at the scenic seaside resort, the cars are scrutineered while we do our documentation on the waterfront. Naturally there's a glitch with my UK paperwork (isn't there always!) but things are pragmatically and cheerfully resolved, which makes a pleasant change. The whole atmosphere in the town is relaxed and friendly as competing cars ranging from Austin Sevens, a DKW and Bugatti to a

Dallara F1, Chevron B26 and numerous Nissan GTRs are readying for the weekend.

Team *Octane's* digs are at a fabulous holiday home on the exclusive Thesen Island estate, generously provided by Jean Groenewald. Jean sets about building a huge fire on the deck for a fulsome *braai* while I get to know our fourth musketeer, one Enzo Kuun, who turns out to be a multiple South African rally champion. After the feast it's relatively early to bed as we have to face Classic Car Friday the next morning. And the clouds are *really* starting to roll in...

THE JAGUAR SIMOLA Hillclimb consists of two distinct challenges: Classic Car Friday and the King of the Hill on the Saturday and Sunday. The course is 1.9km long, up through the valley towards the picturesque Simola Hotel and Country Club. The wide climb is all about power and, unlike a well-known hillclimb in West Sussex, England, this one has a return road that leads straight back to the pits at the startline. So there's plenty of track time, with three practice runs, three qualifying runs, the Class Final, then the Shootout for the Classic Conqueror trophy for Classic Car Friday.

The King of the Hill challenge has even more track time on the Saturday and Sunday, with no fewer than a dozen practice sessions and qualifying runs before the Shootout.

Interestingly the FTD record at the similar-length Goodwood Hillclimb (1.86km) stands at 41.6 seconds, set by Nick Heidfeld in a McLaren MP4/13 F1 car back in 1999. Here the big guns are chasing last year's FTD of 40.148 seconds, mostly in modified road cars! Admittedly the Simola climb is up a much wider and more open piece of tarmac.

Team *Octane's* plan is to assault Classic Car Friday with South African rally champ Enzo Kuun driving a race-prepared Datsun 240Z, and Clive Corder in his fierce-looking Lola T70 – which is licensed, taxed and has effective air-conditioning fitted because Clive uses it on the road as well as on track! Team manager Charles Arton had planned to return this year with his winning March but somehow managed to grenade its BDA engine the day before. So he is relegated to the King of the Hill challenge in his big V8 Masters Mustang. Kuun will be driving a similar Mustang as well – serious kit all-round.

My weapon for Classic Car Friday is Arton's 280bhp 5.0-litre V8 Perana. Developed by legendary race engineer Basil Green, the Perana was one of South Africa's most successful and charismatic racing cars. Only six racing Peranas

Above and right
Brent Watts is extremely quick in the grippy Porsche 911 RSR; Coucher struggles with the HANS device and slick tyres on the wet course.

were produced and this one is in Group 2 spec, built as a continuation car with Basil Green's sanction on an original Capri Perana, chassis number BG0349. Rare and valuable, it looks immaculate in its Team Gunston livery.

IT'S FRIDAY MORNING and I'm standing on the wet startline. Having warned Team *Octane* (all veterans of this hillclimb) that I'd be taking things carefully, especially in the rain, relaxed team manager Arton casually informs me: 'Oh, by the way, we didn't bring any wets for the Perana so you'll have to run on slicks.' Ah, 280bhp in the wet on slicks up an unknown hillclimb. Why do I do this to myself?

The first of the three practice runs start at 8.30 and I hurriedly suit-up and strap in. The Perana's interior is obviously stripped bare and fitted with a substantial rollcage. The modern racing seat is fixed a bit far back for me, necessitating an old-tech cushion. Mechanic Pierre shows me the controls: kill switch, fan and wipers. Charles insists I wear one of his HANS devices, so my head movement is severely restricted and visibility limited by the high-back wrap-around racing seat.

Two pumps of the throttle pedal and firing the 5.0-litre V8 fills the car with a tin-drum cacophony. The throttle action is well-modulated and the clutch is surprisingly forgiving. I've been instructed not to dump it at full revs nor to slip it. The long gearshift, topped with a white knob, feels a bit loose and has large movements but is at least co-operative.

The tyre-warmers are removed and the Capri is dropped to the deck as the marshal waves me out onto the startline. Temperatures are all good and the starter shows me a five-finger countdown, then flourishes the flag. I give it some revs and let the clutch out but not too gently. The V8 erupts and the warm rear slicks instantly lose out to the lashings of torque and spin. Finally they manage some grip and the Perana fishtails off into the unknown.

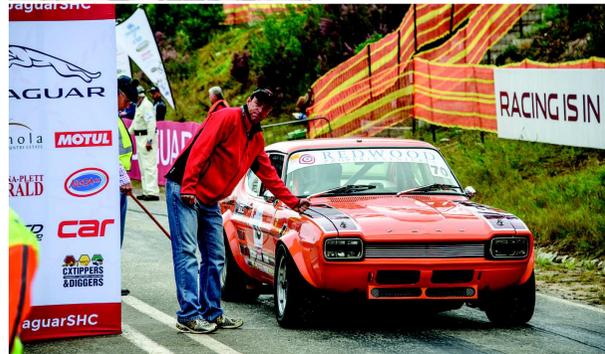
As the V8 revs to just over six thou', the tin can sound is replaced with a beautifully creamy bellow from that glorious FoMoCo lump. The change to second is exacted and the Capri keeps on lunging. The first corner is a right-hander and I brake too early before pushing on through. The car feels well-planted and responsive via its lovely, direct and light steering. The grunt slams its lithe 1200kg form up the next straight with ease before the left under the footbridge (where I'd been warned 'There's a river running across the track!').

I wiggle through and the rain is now blurring the windscreen, so I fiddle for the wipers as the back end slithers about on the greasy tarmac. It's a case of trying to keep it on the track up the wiggle-woggle to the finish line on the crest of the hill.

I arrive back in the pits and the team are relieved but somewhat overwhelmed by my time. It seems that nervous-looking Clive Corder has posted the fastest time, some 11 seconds ahead of me. Yes, well, he's not on slicks is he, blah, whinge, excuse. And Enzo



'We have to stop because there are baboons on the track. Where else does that happen?'



TEAM OCTANE

It wasn't just Coucher who tackled the 1.9km hill... here's the equipie in full



1972 FORD CAPRI PERANA
Robert Coucher's steed has a cracking V8 and great steering, and weighs just 1200kg.



1972 DATSUN 240Z
Rally Champ Enzo Kuun is very fast in the Z, even though he hasn't driven it before.



1969 LOLA T70
Clive Corder finishes third overall in his road-legal and air-conditioned (!) 450bhp Lola.



2008 MUSTANG MASTERS V8
Last year's Classic Car Friday winner Charles Arton struggles for grip in the rear-drive 'Stang.



2015 MUSTANG MASTERS V8
Ever-cool Kuun wrestles the Mustang into the Top 10 King of the Hill weekend Shootout.

CAPRI PERANA ON SIMOLA HILLCLIMB



Clockwise from left
Thousands of spectators enjoy the hill; *Octane* reader Alexander Krahe blasts his E-type off the startline; veteran Rodney Green at speed in the Bugatti Type 35B; Arton and Kuun on the podium; winner Franco Scribante in the record-setting Chevron B26.



FRANKIEJUNKYFOTOS

Kuun in the Datsun 240Z (who has never driven the car) is in P4. On slicks.

And so it goes on. I actually sit out one practice run because of rain but on the final (and drying) qualifying session after lunch I get a bit braver and improve my admittedly slow time by 14 seconds. That's what grunt and grip can do. After ample practice and qualifying runs it's the Classic Conqueror shoot-out, though not before the race is red-flagged and the commentator announces: 'Sorry, we have to stop proceedings because there are baboons on the track.' Where else in the world does that happen?

The winning Classic Conqueror is Franco Scribante in his quick Chevron B19, with a record time of 41.432 seconds. Team *Octane* does (mostly) extremely well, with Corder

finishing in P3 in the Lola with a time of 49.124 seconds and Kuun right behind him in 49.412 seconds. Afraid I'm about 10 seconds adrift, though still in one piece!

That evening at the welcome party held at the Simola golf course hotel, I'm flattered to be put on stage with Ian Scheckter (South Africa's Stirling Moss) to be interviewed by Roger McCleery (South Africa's Murray Walker). Ian – brother of Jody, Grand Prix competitor and three times Formula Atlantic champion – is attending as the event's grand marshal and his anecdotes are forthright, honest, extremely amusing – and unprintable.

On Saturday and Sunday things get properly serious, with Arton and Kuun matching each other at 45 seconds in the Mustangs. The times tumble as the track dries and, on the last

Shootout, Franco Scribante is again the winner in another Chevron B26, with an incredible time of 38.646 seconds, the fastest ever. Kuun finishes eighth in 45.452 seconds and Arton is 11th with a time of 45.905 seconds.

The Jaguar Simola Hillclimb is a relaxed, friendly, competitive and exhilarating meeting in one of the most beautiful locations in South Africa. Overseas competitors are very welcome and guaranteed a huge amount of track time as well as the chance to enjoy the beautiful Garden Route. Just beware that combination of slick tyres, an even slicker surface – and the occasional baboon. **End**

THANKS TO Team *Octane* manager Charles Arton. The Jaguar Simola Hillclimb will run next on 4-7 May 2017, www.speedfestival.co.za.