

Run to the Sun

Twenty-five one-of-a-kinds *By Joe Sage*

Washington State has the kind of variety anyone might seek for a drive: dramatic mountain roads, coastal twisties, rain forests, high elevation straightaways and historic stops. Run to the Sun—an annual two-day event of the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA)—takes full advantage of this variety.

The media group comprises members mostly from Oregon and Washington. Last year's event—our first time participating—was in Oregon.

This year, we met near Sea-Tac Airport (between Seattle and Tacoma), heading to Mount Rainier National Park one day, then onto the inner reaches of the Olympic Peninsula the next.

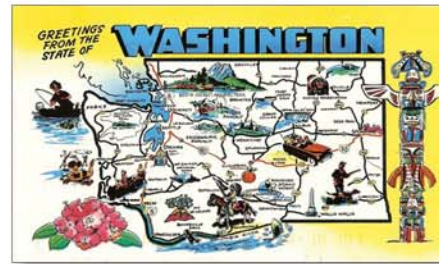
This is not a competitive event. No winners are chosen, no trophies are presented. We don't have to keep detailed track of drive experiences or rank features on a scale. We can simply take it all in.

The event features just under two million dollars' worth of machinery, from a Kia or Hyundai at \$21,600 or so, to a Viper at \$126,085, to a \$382,825 Rolls-Royce. Each model has its own superlative, chosen as a chance for each builder to show off. A Dodge Charger will certainly be a Hellcat, the Miata a Club Edition, that Veloster an R-Spec, a Honda Accord a performance coupe and so on.

There are exactly 25 drivers, exactly 25 cars and exactly two days to get the job done—no time for milling around and deciding what to drive next, a time-waster at most comparative driving events. For Run to the Sun, each driver is charted out against the list of cars, with every driver having the same well choreographed sequence, but each with a different opening movement, melody, crescendo and finale. Our list—our symphony—is shown at right, continuing on two pages.

DAY ONE. Our show started off with a bang, in the Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat. This well known and well-loved 707-hp all-American, billed as the world's fastest sedan, had the most horsepower of any. Equally at home on the track (we've driven it at Summit Point Motorsports Park in West Virginia) or the road, such easy daily driver road manners are rare in a top-performance model.

Comfortable and spacious though the Charger was, we then moved straight to the lap of luxury, the most expensive vehicle in the lineup, the new Rolls-Royce Ghost II. With about \$100k in options, you can easily think of the other things just that add-on price could buy, including three or four various desirable cars on this list. But that's a differ-



ent kind of thinking from the typical Rolls-Royce buyer, who can of course probably buy those, too.

For half that dough, though, you can buy our third car. The once separate Maybach marque has reappeared as the ultimate S-Class—the Mercedes-Maybach S600 (named similarly to current Mercedes-AMG models). In addition to power and luxury, this super luxury sedan offers another feature valued by many a Rolls-Royce buyer—enormous rear seat space, an attribute often sought by rider-owners with chauffeurs, but detracting in no way from the owner-driver experience.

Our next six cars—combined—cost some 20 percent less than the Rolls, at base prices, or 42 percent less as optioned. It takes all six to equal a bit more than twice the Ghost's individual horsepower, but each one's weight is far less. None of that is the point in choosing among them, but it underscores the fact that there is a lot of fun on tap in each of these, with five out of six starting below \$30k (or just a hair above in one case).

The Alfa Romeo 4C Spider is pricier but is unlike any other, from its extreme light weight to its particularly sexy Italian lines to its midengine

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Run to the Sun Day One had fourteen cars, with thirteen swap stops along the way. We worked our way roughly east from Sea-Tac Airport (elevation 433') to Auburn, south to Alder Lake Park (1200'), east to Ashford County Park (1800'), entering Mountain Rainier National Park with a stop at the National Park Inn at Longmire (2700'), then continuing to the historic Paradise Inn (5400'), our lunch spot with this view of Mt Rainier (14,409' elevation)—the turnaround spot for our return via Enumclaw.

Day 1: Mt Rainier

- 1: Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat 2015**
707hp 6.2L V8, RWD
▼ BASE\$62,295
▼ AS DRIVEN\$66,175
- 2: Rolls-Royce Ghost Series II 2015**
563hp 6.6L aluminum-alloy DFI V12, 8-spd electronic automatic trans, RWD
▼ BASE\$286,750
▼ AS DRIVEN\$382,825
- 3: Mercedes-Maybach S600 2016**
523hp 6.0L V12 biturbo, 7-spd auto, RWD
▼ BASE\$189,350
▼ AS DRIVEN\$204,635
- 4: Fiat 500C Abarth Cabrio 2015**
157hp 1.4L 16v turbo 4-cyl, 6-spd auto, FWD
▼ BASE\$26,595
▼ AS DRIVEN\$32,975
- 5: Mazda MX-5 Miata Club 2016**
155hp SkyActiv 2.0L 4-cyl, 6-spd man, RWD
▼ BASE\$28,600
▼ AS DRIVEN\$33,120
- 6: Alfa Romeo 4C Spider 2015**
237hp 1750cc turbo intercooled 4-cyl mid-eng, 6-spd Alfa TCT twin-clutch/paddle, RWD
▼ BASE\$63,900
▼ AS DRIVEN\$73,395
- 7: Hyundai Veloster R-Spec M/T 2016**
201hp 1.6L GDI twin-scroll turbo 4-cyl, 6-spd manual B&M Racing shifter, FWD
▼ BASE\$21,600
▼ AS DRIVEN\$22,570
- 8: Kia Forte Koup SX 2015**
201hp 1.6L 4-cyl turbo, 6-spd auto, FWD
▼ BASE\$21,590
▼ AS DRIVEN\$26,435
- 9: Honda Accord EX-L V6 2D Coupe 2016**
278hp 3.5L 24v V6, 6-spd manual, FWD
▼ BASE\$30,925
▼ AS DRIVEN\$31,745
- 10: Nissan Maxima SR 2016**
300hp 3.5L V6, Xtronic transmission, FWD
▼ BASE\$37,670
▼ AS DRIVEN\$38,750
- 11: Acura ILX Tech Plus A-Spec 2016**
201hp 2.4L 4cyl, 8-spd dual-clutch, FWD
▼ BASE\$34,890
▼ AS DRIVEN\$35,810
- 12: Buick Regal GS AWD 2015**
259hp 2.0L turbo 4-cyl, AWD
▼ BASE\$39,810
▼ AS DRIVEN\$44,670
- 13: Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution MR 2015**
291hp 2.0L MIVEC 4-cyl turbo, 6-spd TC-SST twin-clutch Sportronic, AWD
▼ BASE\$38,995
▼ AS DRIVEN\$41,805
- 14: Subaru WRX STI Series HyperBlue 2016**
305hp 2.5L DOHC intercooled turbo 4-cyl, 6-spd manual, AWD
▼ BASE\$38,995
▼ AS DRIVEN\$39,790

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Car thumbnail photos: Doug Berger / NWAPA • Pine cone photo: Didier Descouens

placement—now in convertible form. Its cousin, the Fiat 500C Abarth cabriolet, follows much the same formula, but with front-wheel drive, quirkiest styling, a bit less horsepower and a significantly lower price. We've driven both on the track in hardtop form, and both proved to be equally stunning (and great conversation pieces) on the road.

Mazda has never made anything but friends with its MX-5 Miata, and the smaller, lighter, faster gen-four 2016 model is no exception. To make a splash, they created a Launch Edition and this Club Edition, with larger wheels and—when equipped with a manual as ours was this day—a limited slip differential, Bilstein shocks, beefier shock tower braces, front air dam and rear spoiler. And the whole thing is still under \$30 grand.

The least expensive on the list, just ten bucks apart, were special Hyundai Veloster R-Spec and Kia Forte Koup models. You can option either one a bit closer to the other, but we did enjoy the manual transmission and racing shifter in the Veloster, and its final build added little to its cost.

Honda brought a semi-sleeper—an Accord, sure, but in coupe form (and bright red), with a 278-hp V6 and 6-speed manual, as well as sharp new styling. This Honda does deliver in this trim.

Nissan's all new Maxima, billed as their four-door sports car, is also a bit of a sleep, achieving 300 hp. Under a highly styled new skin is Nissan's trademark combination of premium features and intuitive controls—all under \$40 grand.

Four more performance sedans rounded out our first day, and "sedan" understates most of them. The Acura ILX is a decent car, though its combination of 201 hp and a mid-to-upper-\$30s price are pitted against some stiff competition this day.

The final three were all-wheel-drivers, and as we descended Mt Rainier, this only enhanced our

enjoyment. Buick has been transformed, and the Regal GS earns the spot it seeks on the 3-Series-killer list. Mitsubishi EVO and Subaru WRX STI defined the hot sedan segment and always deliver in spades. The EVO is being discontinued, so get your order in quickly—perhaps for the performance-bumped GSR-based Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution Final Edition. The MR we drove here actually costs more, but has a 6-speed twin-clutch instead of the other models' 5-speed manual. Or know that the WRX STI is not going anywhere.

DAY TWO, over to the Olympic Peninsula, had flatter roads and fewer cars, though some of the hottest of the hot. Our first seven averaged 481 hp. Add in the eighth, the four-cylinder Mustang, and the average is still 458, underscoring Ford's bragging point that Mustang is the first to offer 4-, 6- and 8-cylinder versions, all at 300 hp or more.

We had another strong start, in the Lexus RC-F Coupe. Our run was largely down I-5, through the snaking feeder highways of downtown Tacoma, then along old town's waterfront, not really a performance run. Such are the straws we draw.

Cadillac's ATS is of note for its manual transmission, its chassis (the basis for next year's new Camaro) and in this case for its V trim. This is not your uncle's Cadillac. Another 3-killer.

We had driven both Mustangs before and love 'em both. You can't beat the power and sound of the V8, yet we looked forward to driving the EcoBoost four again. Before we'd get to it, we would run through exactly 2000 hp from just four cars totaling \$377,175 (\$94,294 average).

Nissan's mastery of ergonomic, user-friendly yet aggressively exciting driver interfaces is tops in the 370Z. The NISMO's modest power bump carries the car's 3398 pounds very well.

A Jaguar F-Type R Convertible was a group favorite in 2014. This year we had the lighter R Coupe, which weighs a bit less even than the 370Z, but with 200 more horsepower on tap (but of course at almost three times the price).

Our first time behind the wheel of the 2015 Corvette Stingray is in a convertible, which adds Z51 performance suspension, while our sample also added a 2LT package, magnetic ride control, performance data recorder and 8-speed automatic plus a couple of other details. It runs \$75 grand, yes, but can beat European supercars for fun per dollar, or maybe even overall.

We broke form with the Viper—the second-most-powerful in the group, after the Hellcat. An off the cuff offer led to us letting one of the professional performance drivers on hand take a turn behind the wheel. Right seat time with a superb driver is always well worth it. As we've already learned ourselves, on road and on track, a modern Viper is a precision handling thrill ride.

Moving to the four-cylinder Mustang from the Viper may sound unfair, even cruel, but it wasn't. The EcoBoost continues to impress us, delivering well beyond what's expected—and it also sounds great, just in a different way from a V8.

AND OOPS, IT'S A WRAP. This all took us through car 22 out of 25—just three to go. We had driven the Scion FR-S a few years back for a week in Arizona, but another spin would be good. We were enthusiastically looking forward to the Volkswagen Golf R, a coveted high-performance compact quattro cousin with almost 300 hp, four doors and a price under \$40 grand. And we had not been exposed to an Acura RLX.

But time ran out. At our 22-23 swap stop—which admittedly was taking a little longer, as the

Day 2: Olympic Peninsula

15: Lexus RC-F Coupe 2015
467hp 5.0L 32v V8, 8-spd sport direct transmission w paddle shift, RWD
▼ BASE\$62,400
▼ AS DRIVEN\$74,560

16: Cadillac ATS-V Coupe RWD 2016
464hp 3.6L V6, 6-spd manual rev mtch, RWD
▼ BASE\$62,665
▼ AS DRIVEN\$75,775

17: Ford Mustang GT Coupe Premium 2015
435hp 5.0L V8, 6-spd manual, RWD
▼ BASE\$36,300
▼ AS DRIVEN\$46,085

18: Nissan 370Z NISMO Tech 6M/T 2016
350hp 3.7L DOHC 24v V6, 6-spd synchrorev manual, RWD
▼ BASE\$45,490
▼ AS DRIVEN\$46,835

19: Jaguar F-Type R Coupe 2016
550hp supercharged V8, 8-spd auto, AWD
▼ BASE\$106,600
▼ AS DRIVEN\$128,695

20: Chevrolet Corvette Stingray Conv Z51 2015
455hp LT1 6.2L V8, 7-spd manual w/rev matching, Z51 suspension, RWD
▼ BASE\$64,000
▼ AS DRIVEN\$75,560

21: Dodge Viper GTC 2015
645hp V10 SFI, 6-spd manual, RWD
▼ BASE\$94,995
▼ AS DRIVEN\$126,085

22: Ford Mustang I-4 Coupe Premium 2015
310hp 2.3L EcoBoost 4-cyl, 6-spd man, RWD
▼ BASE\$29,300
▼ AS DRIVEN\$37,485

23: Scion FR-S 2016
200hp 2.0L boxer 4-cyl, 6-spd manual, RWD
▼ BASE\$25,305
▼ AS DRIVEN\$28,544

24: Volkswagen Golf R 2015
292hp 2.0L TSI DOHC 16v turbo 4-cyl DI, 4Motion AWD w 5th-gen Haldex
▼ BASE\$39,090
▼ AS DRIVEN\$39,910

25: Acura RLX Sport Hybrid AWD ADV 2016
310hp 3.5L V6, 377 total incl hybrid, 7-spd dual-clutch, AWD
▼ BASE\$65,950
▼ AS DRIVEN\$66,870



Run to the Sun Day Two had eleven cars, with ten swap stops along the way. The first few legs ran through towns with heavy traffic and a big of construction. But ultimately, our route offered us one thing we do not have in Arizona—salt water coast, and plenty of it, surrounded by tall evergreen forests, with the peaks of the Olympic Range on the horizon. At right, we stopped for lunch at My Girl Drive-In & Museum in Kingston; the Tacoma Narrows Bridge was our connector to and from.

