



MASTER OF SPEED

FINDING LEADFOOT NIRVANA AT THE BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS

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Previous pages: room to roam on the Bonneville Salt Flats. This page: preparing for take-off. Opposite page, inset: The author rests between runs.

MY SNEAKERS ARE SALTY.

The floor mats of my IS Special Edition are caked with salt.

The car, encrusted with a thick carapace of—you guessed it—salt, is on its third pass through the car wash, and I'm just beginning to reglimpse the metallic exterior.

How did this happen?

Blame speed.

There are those who speed to save time, and those who speed because they prefer the destination to the journey. Others speed just because they can. But for some people, speed is an end in itself. They are the hard-core leadfoots for whom horsepower and torque are not mere numbers but the spare, eviscerating essence of the equation that is speed.

Let's be clear: Crowded highways are no place for speedsters. Speedsters don't dream of weaving through traffic at 90 miles an hour. That's for the foolish, the criminal, and the suicidal. Real speedsters dream of racetracks: silky smooth asphalt with high, gravity-defying turns. Or they fantasize about long stretches of remote, uninhabited road begging to be driven—fast. Real speedsters long for places where the only legal

limits are those dictated by vehicle weight, engine power, and raw nerve. For this special class of acceleration addict, speed—as Gordon Gekko might have put it—is good. Speed is right. Speed works. And there is, quite simply, no place else in America where speed has worked quite as well for quite as long as the 30,000 desolate acres that constitute the Bonneville Salt Flats.

There aren't that many places in America where the speed limit is 763 mph, but the Bonneville Salt Flats—home of the world's land speed record—is one of them. For decades, on this parched salt surface, speed freaks have been strapping themselves to jet engines with wheels, seeking to go faster than anyone else on earth. Bonneville is where the 400-, 500-, and 600-mph marks have been shattered. Most men of a certain age can still remember the moment, as adolescents, when they first saw the photos of the amazing machines that broke those speed records: *Blue Flame*, *Spirit of America*. Low-slung rocket cars, ripping across Bonneville's parched white moonscape.

I am one of those men, and today my plan is simple. I'm going to the Bonneville Salt Flats to

IN THE SIX SECONDS IT SHOULD TAKE YOU TO COMPLETELY READ THIS SENTENCE, I WILL HAVE TRAVELED NEARLY A QUARTER OF A MILE.

push a car to its limits. I'm driving to a place where it's perfectly legal to floor the accelerator until the 24-valve, 3.0-liter 215-horsepower in-line 6 tops out, giving up everything it has.

I'm cruising north along I-15, aiming my shiny new Lexus toward I-80 and the big turn west. Poking along at 60, considering my mission, I pass four highway patrol guys on gold Harleys: They're pulling everyone over. I smile at them from the middle lane, knowing that it won't be long before I'm beyond their reach—in a jurisdiction entirely free from traffic cops and speed limits.

About 10 miles west of the Salt Lake City airport, I-80 loops gently around the southern flank of the Great Salt Lake and opens up

into the kind of straightaway that dragsters dream about. It's 86 degrees outside and the temperature is climbing. Heat mirages shimmer, forever receding as I approach. Billboards advertise the Montego Bay Casino in Wendover and the slots at the Red Garter. Tumbleweeds careen across the road, their irregular, bumpy gait dictated by the wind that howls across the barren landscape. Hit one and you can watch it disintegrate, blown to a thousand twiggy pieces.

Delle, Utah, is mostly just the Skull Valley Sinclair station—the last service area for 66 miles. Savoring the low-desert air, the hazy magical light, and the unobstructed views, I gas up. And 20 minutes later, back on the interstate, I zoom past Clive, better known as Exit 49. There are no services in Clive—in fact there's nothing other than an overpass in the middle of nowhere with roads heading to no discernible or even signed destination. I motor on.

There's a sculpture in the middle of the desert: an incongruous palm dropping concrete fruit. Past it is the scenic overlook—the place from which most tourists briefly view the Bonneville Salt Flats. It's just a few miles from the overlook to the access road—marked with an unassuming green highway sign whose words themselves suggest the promise of the place ahead: "bonneville speedway this exit."

The access road is five miles long: two uneven lanes jogging from east to north, slicing



through terrain administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). By the time I hit the final two-mile straightaway, the adrenaline has kicked in. I crank the car up well past the speed limit, testing its handling and acceleration while I'm still on the pavement. And just as I ease back, almost without warning, the asphalt ends: an utterly unremarkable peninsula of tar and gravel giving way to the bleak serenity of the salt flats.

For a moment, I hesitate: a tremulous acknowledgment that I'm moving from one world to another—from the world of speed limits and well-trodden paths to a world of uninterrupted promise, where speed and direction are functions of pure whimsy. Jog left, spin the car right, yank the emergency brake, and force a stuntman-style spinout. There's no one here to stop you. No one here who would. No one who even wants to. Thanks to the BLM's regulations, the salt flats constitute a world of nearly absolute driving freedom.

I inch the car off the road, taking the first quarter mile like a kid stepping tentatively onto a frozen lake. The wind is howling at 40 miles an hour, and it looks as if a storm is almost upon me. So despite my enthusiasm and rapid breathing, I decide to retreat to nearby Wendover to wait it out. Two and a half hours pass like molasses. But as the sun begins to sink, the sky finally clears. From the end of the access road, the milky, translucent salt stretches aching to the horizon. (The IS will pay a price for this delay. It doesn't take much rain to make the salt soft and damp enough to stick to everything.)

The salt flats are steamrolled for official speed events, compressed to a glassy smoothness—a uniform surface that bakes hard in the sun. But I'm on my own. The salt that I'll be driving on hasn't been groomed in any way. It's pebbly, as if it were paved with sunflower seeds. There are small, raised pressure ridges, too. They snake through the salt like spidery dendrites.

At long last, I gun it. The short-throw shifter slips smoothly between gears as I redline the

RESOURCES

Getting There: The Bonneville Salt Flats lie just off I-80, about 110 miles west of Salt Lake City, Utah; 350 miles north of Las Vegas; and 300 miles southeast of Boise, Idaho. Unless you're driving your own car, the best way to get there is to fly into Salt Lake City.

Accommodations: Wendover, Nevada, is the closest town to the Bonneville Speedway. If it's proximity you want, your best options for lodging are casinos; if you're looking for luxury, your overnight base camp should be Salt Lake City. The Hotel Monaco, at 15 West 200 South, sits just minutes from an on-ramp for I-80 West. This pet-friendly hotel provides stylish accommodations with free WiFi—and a bowl of goldfish on request.

Car Care: Salt is corrosive and can damage your car. Some tips: Hit the car wash immediately after leaving the flats. The Chevron station in the middle of Wendover, Nevada, has a brushless wash. It's best to go through twice, and be sure at least one of your washes utilizes the side sprayers and the bottom blasters. Up the street is a car wash with vacuum hoses, to clean the interior. (Leaving the windows open is a sure way to get a salty backseat.) Slushy salt can cake your undercarriage and bake onto your exhaust system and shocks. Your Lexus dealer can hoist your car and clean the undercarriage with an extremely high-pressure hose. It's a good idea to do this right after leaving the flats, too. Troy from Larry Miller Lexus at 5701 S. State St. in Murray, Utah, did a great job on ours.



SAFETY FIRST

The salt flats are highly inhospitable to most life forms, including us. Wind can be fierce, weather unpredictable, and conditions varied. The salt also reflects UV rays like snow.

- Bring sunscreen, sunglasses, and a hat. Also bring warm clothes, plenty of water, and some food, just in case you get stuck.
- Don't enter the flats from anyplace other than the end of the access road. Especially avoid a quick foray from the freeway! The salt crust is particularly thin around the edges. In the area between the access road and I-80, a detour is almost certain to leave you dialing a tow truck.
- Before opening up, scout your route to be sure the salt is smooth and free of pressure ridges and other obstacles. Use orange road cones to mark your route.
- GPS is very helpful during the day and critical after sunset. Though the flats are beautiful after dark, the BLM recommends against night travel and prohibits overnight stays.
- Cell phones generally work on the flats, but service fades notably toward the north end.
- Try to stay on the whitest part of the flats. When the surface becomes gray and lumpy, it's because the salt crust is thinning. A thin crust increases the chances that you'll get stuck in the mud or slide around on the mushy salt above.
- The wind can blow water into shallow pools that are difficult to see at higher speeds. This supersaturated saline solution can splash up and short out your electrical system. Proceed very slowly through any standing water.
- Slushy salt can be treacherous. Varied resistance can cause you to spin out, especially at high speed.

engine. I make four passes—each a little longer, each a little faster. I'm scouting: staying in a comfort zone to be sure that my chosen course contains no huge pressure ridges, no standing water—nothing that would interrupt my eventual three-mile top-speed runs. Behind me, painted on the salt, barely discernible in the fading light, are my tracks: two sets of perfectly parallel lines, fading into the distance—the small bumps from the minor pressure ridges smoothed out by the weight of the speeding car.

Finally, I turn the car around and roll up the windows. At anything much over 110 mph, the noise of the wind becomes nearly unbearable. I'm staring down my own tracks, into the vast expanse, and I am, I should admit, a bit nervous. I overcome this by revving the engine. Then I stand on the accelerator.

As the speedometer creeps past 130 for the first time, and as the vast expanse of gently veined salt rushes toward me like liquid, whatever residual nervousness I've been feeling gives way to fear—pulse-pounding, gut-numbing fear. The kind roller-coaster riders wait hours on line for.

The downwind leg provides a significant speed boost. While I can barely inch the IS over 131 into the wind, I top out at 142 with it at my back. One hundred and forty-two miles per hour is fast. Really fast. At 142, in the six seconds it should take you to completely read this sentence, I will have traveled nearly a quarter of a mile. One forty-two is passing traffic doing 70 at 70. It's doing a mile every 25 seconds.

All told, I make well over a dozen runs, hurtling headlong toward the almost undifferentiated horizon, following my own track or using the compass in the mirror to keep track

of my direction. Speed does wonders for your concentration. I can feel every little shake and rumble, and I realize that I'm passing things almost before I can see them.

Under the hood, the IS's in-line 6 can propel the vehicle beyond 140 mph.

Before I call it a night, I switch off the traction control and enjoy the tightness of the IS's speed-sensitive steering—spinning the car out, doing high-speed doughnuts. It's as if I've found the perfect, vast, frozen high-school parking lot of my dreams.

Back in the immaculate dealership, chock-ablock with shiny vehicles getting their final buff and polish, a specialist named Troy pulls a lever, raising the car on a lift so that he can remove the salt with a specialized high-pressure hose. The jet of water is powerful enough to bruise one badly, and three or four of the dealership employees gather around to murmur as the penetrating stream dislodges golf-ball-size chunks of salt from the recesses of the undercarriage. Standing there, we all share a speed lover's moment.

"Salt flats, huh?" one of the younger guys ventures.

"Yup." I nod, savoring the memories as I watch the evidence seep into the drain in the center of the floor.

"Did'ja open it up?" asks a young kid with sharp eyes.

"Yup," I say again, sharing a smile, knowing that it's a prelude to the question they all harbor: "What'dja get it up to?"

Troy shuts off the jet of water so everyone can hear the answer.

"One forty-two, downwind," I say nonchalantly, fulfilling a boyhood fantasy of automotive inclusion.

"Seriously?" the kid asks, his eyes wide.

Seriously. □

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