

MOTORS BENTLEY

# WITH FLYING COLOURS

Braving the unpredictable roads of China with the help of 'a gentle push', **NEIL DAVEY** puts the Bentley Flying Spur through its paces

**WHEN IS A** car launch not a car launch? To be fair to Bentley, when your 'launch' is the unveiling of the newly tweaked Flying Spur, there's not a lot you can do. It was a very good and attractive car before. It's now an even better, slightly more attractive car.

As churlish as it seems, improving on something already exemplary isn't news. What's the story? Bentley make a good car? To quote our youthful citizens, well, duh. Everyone knows that. Tweaks and adjustments are not the stuff of which great motoring features are made. We're journalists, goddammit. Give us a hook.

And, wouldn't you know it, hooks are something else Bentley does extremely well, hence I'm in Beijing to drive the new and improved Flying Spur to the Great Wall of China. Why? Well, for the last few years China has become one of Bentley's key territories. It's the number one sales region for the Flying Spur and, with 2,253 various Bentleys sold there in 2012, the second largest market overall – only 204 sales behind the number one, the US. There's also a blooming great photo opportunity when you have 11 shiny new Flying Spurs lined up against something several thousand years old. You've got to love a bit of juxtaposition...

And the car was, predictably, great. In terms of tweaks and modifications, we're looking at improved consumption – 19.2mpg compared to 2005's 17mpg. We've got a top speed of 200mph compared to the previous 194mph, and 0-60mph in 4.3 seconds, down from 4.9 – no mean feats for a car that now weighs 2,475kg. There's also an eight-speed transmission, compared to the last model's

**Ironically, for a country so rooted in regulations, The Highway Code is soundly ignored**

six-speed. Bentley describes the Flying Spur's acceleration as 'a gentle push', as if a celestial hand has been placed on the back to give you a welcoming nudge. That describes the sensation well enough but doesn't do the acceleration justice. The 0-60mph thing is an indication of just how much power is under the bonnet, but it's 60mph to the "oh-sorry-officer-was-I-going-too-fast?" end of the dial where the Flying Spur, er, flies. At that point it's less 'gentle push', more 'picked up and thrown' – albeit gracefully thrown while cocooned in plush leather.

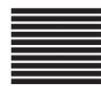
If the car was predictable, Beijing wasn't. It's an interesting spot and, yes, that is a bit euphemistic. This is a city that seems to be struggling with its identity (not least as it will always be associated with *that* photo of Tiananmen Square). On the one hand, luxury car showrooms and our hotel, the Pangu Seven Star Hotel, suggest a desire to be modern and open. On the other, the pollution is eye-stingingly brutal, and just because it says 'seven stars' in the name, that doesn't make it two stars better than the world's leading hotels. Charmingly, though, while the locals are clearly used to tourists, many visitors to Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City have never seen Western faces, hence somewhere in the Chinese provinces, several people now have photos of their nearest and dearest posing alongside a large, balding, slightly bemused **square mile** contributor.

Also, for a country that appears to be eager to arrive on the modern stage, they are paradoxically obsessed with admin. For example, you can't just apply for a journalist visa, you have to be invited to apply. And in order to be invited, you have to supply all sorts of character references and credentials. Once that's all in place, you still have to apply, via a multi-page form, strict ID photo requirements and several days of anxious waiting for the return of your passport. And if you want to drive in the country, well, that requires another request for special dispensation, more forms and then a licence photo in a format that nobody else in the world appears to use. ►

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR	
ENGINE 6.0 LTR W12	POWER (BHP) 616 @6,000RPM
TORQUE (LB-FT) 590 @2,000RPM	TOP SPEED 200 MPH
0-60MPH 4.3 SECS	PRICE £141k ...



**OFF TO A FLIER:** The latest version of the Bentley Flying Spur – a modified and tweaked update of the 2005 original – cuts an impressive figure on the streets of Beijing. As the car's specifications (left) indicate, its performance is on a par with its sleek design



**THE CHINESE WAY:** (clockwise from top) The interior of the faster, more fuel efficient Bentley Flying Spur; the car's dashboard features a clock designed by Swiss brand Breitling; the Great Wall of China is more than 13,000 miles long; a stunning view of the city of Beijing at night



## With 2,253 various Bentleys sold in 2012, China is the second largest market overall

► Ironically, for a country so rooted in regulations, *The Highway Code* is soundly ignored. The first hint of this came in the taxi from the airport. We were on a motorway which had three clearly marked lanes and a hard shoulder. So, er, why are there five lanes of traffic?

The rule of thumb in China, as Bentley helpfully (read: terrifyingly) pointed out in their welcome information, is “in heavy traffic, every space must be filled” – and that means across, clearly, as much as along. That wasn’t the only sphincter-threatening instruction. “Be prepared for oncoming drivers on the wrong side of the road.” “Expect the unexpected.” “Yield and stop signs are often ignored.” As it happens, that last one is incorrect – there was no “often” about it.

Somehow, though, while one suspects there must be occasional road-based carnage, explosions and a scattering of body parts, we saw no accidents. Even five lanes abreast at 60mph, or with what looked like a massive family reunion taking place on the motorway, just past a tollbooth, with cars providing a barrier across the lanes, we saw no accidents.

At one point in the Chinese countryside we came around a blind bend, miles from the nearest village, and encountered a man sitting in a wheelchair in the middle of the road. Expect the unexpected, indeed. We slowed – er, yes, they’re good brakes on the new Flying Spur – and cruised gently past him. Once the giggling had stopped, my co-driver and I speculated that perhaps the reason he was in a wheelchair in the first place was because of his reckless choice of seating locations.

And then, after several tantalising glimpses of the Great Wall – and having avoided the predicted car merrily coming the wrong way down a contraflow – we arrived at Jinshanling. The Wall runs across mountains, from horizon to horizon, and is utterly breathtaking. It is a stunning, simply breathtaking feat of engineering. I could make a Bentley analogy here, but that would be clumsy, even by my standards. Besides, the Great Wall is a Wonder of the World. The Flying Spur is just a car. It is, however, a better car than it used to be. ■

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