

STEALTH CARS

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THE THRILL OF DRIVING

DARK FORCES

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In fact 'Stealth' is a strange name for this car. Look it up in the dictionary and you'll find it means 'proceeding unobtrusively'. That might be true of an American bomber but this car? No chance. The only thing they have in common is they're both black; the car wouldn't go unnoticed anywhere (it won't even evade radar) and a lot of the looks would be disapproving ones. The 511bhp 6.3-litre modified Chevy V8 is being warmed up at a steady 3000rpm. It's time for me to clamber in. The cockpit is almost identical to that of the Ultima GTR in which David Vivian and I drove to Le Mans (evo 17) so that means a foot-wide sill to clamber over before I squeeze into the seat. And squeeze is the right word. If you've ever looked inside a current F1 cockpit you'll know what's facing me now - a seat so incredibly deep, inclined and tight that I have to empty my pockets first. Seatbelts hardly seem necessary, I'm so firmly wedged in.

The dash has a race-bred AstraTech display which gives you a smallish tacho, five change-up lights and lap number and time, together with a readout which can be switched between road speed, oil pressure, water temperature and so on. But what I'm interested in is the tiny gear-lever to the right of the dash, tucked in beside the A-pillar. It's supported on exposed rose-joints and it's the bit I've been thinking about ever since my initials were pencilled in next to the Stealth on the office year planner.



The lever controls a Hewland five-speed straight-cut non-syncro dog-leg gearbox. Now, the



gearbox in the Ultima and me didn't get on - it was obstructive in the extreme and punctuated the Ultima's devastating acceleration with very pregnant pauses - and I'm sure this full-race 'box in the Stealth is a step too far. I'm just about to find out. The engine's warm enough now, the industrial unit's shutters go up and we're let loose onto the unsuspecting streets of Horndean, Hampshire, where the car is assembled. It seems incredibly high geared and when I change up I realise why. I've managed to set off in third. In fact first is for occasional use only, out on a dog-leg opposite reverse. Second to fifth follows a standard H-pattern, but there's no springing to keep you in the right plane. This is not a good start. At least visibility is fine - as long as you're going forwards. Reversing's another matter, and the tiny rear-view mirrors are in an unnatural position. But you'll only be using them for checking for flashing blue lights anyway. That's the last thing on my mind right now, though. Noise is what's grabbing my attention, lots of noise. There's only a paper-thin sheet of alloy between you and the engine, and what's more, the cam has a super-aggressive profile so there's plenty of valvetrain clatter. The tubular headers don't help either, radiating the energy of the explosions happening just inside, and then there's the gearbox, the straight-cut cogs singing in disharmony with each other. Against such a sonic onslaught, all else pales into insignificance. Squeeze the throttle and the four-barrel Holley carb opens just two of its butterflies - enough for a sub 9sec 0-100 apparently. Press past the spring's resistance and you open all four butterflies - and then all hell breaks loose. To start with, just two is fine. Think of it as a teaser for the main event. You need to learn this car over a few miles anyway, especially its tendency to sniff out every camber change going. On track I'm sure it's fine but two turns lock-to-lock and rose-jointed suspension don't help its stability on B-roads. The tyres are taller in section than you might have imagined, 295/45x18s at the rear, in an effort to give some compliance to the suspension. It works too, but there's still too much wandering at speed.

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