

WHY MCLAREN'S ARCTIC
EXPERIENCE MIGHT
JUST BE THE MOST FUN
MOTORING EXPERIENCE
MONEY CAN BUY

DANCING ON ICE

Words: Hugh Francis Anderson



I wake with a jolt as the plane judders through the clouds. Glancing out of the window, a barren white landscape radiates in every direction. The pilot's voice sounds over the tannoy; we will shortly be arriving in Ivalo, Lapland, the northernmost region of Finland.

At 300km north of the Arctic Circle, and just 80km from the border of Russia, Ivalo is a minuscule, bleak, immense, beautiful location. As we make our way towards Jávri Lodge, our accommodation for the next few days, feet upon feet of fresh snow lie piled beside the roads, magnificent pines soar skyward, and the horizon seems endless. If there's one place on earth one where a supercar would be an unexpected sight, this would be it.

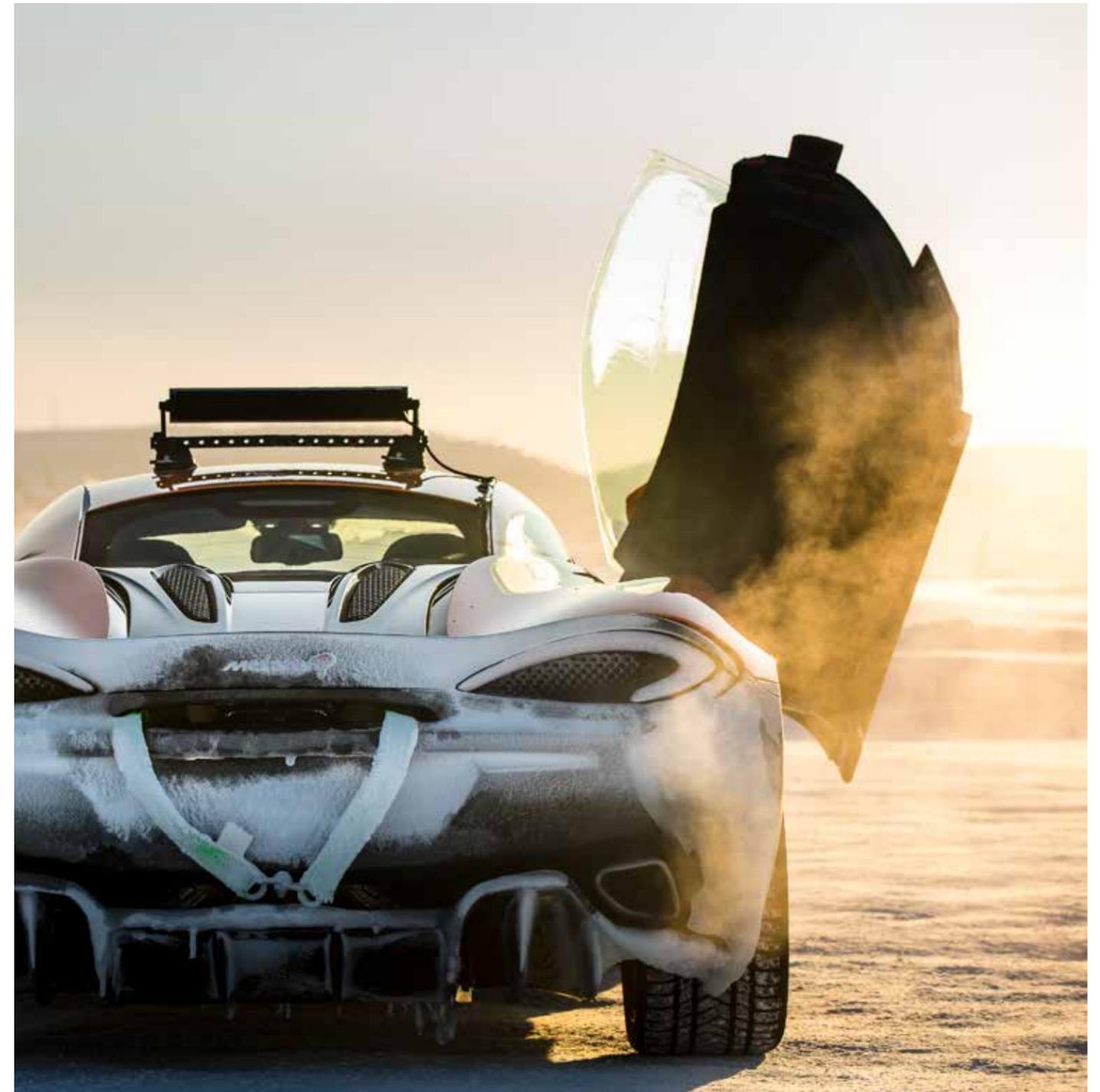
As part of its extensive list of global driving experiences, which in 2018 included a rally through the Iberian Peninsula and a journey across South Africa, McLaren has honed its ability not only to produce some of the finest supercars on the planet, but also to create once-in-a-lifetime experiences. The Pure McLaren Arctic Experience is one of the most extravagant journeys the marque offers.

Some 30 minutes from Jávri Lodge lies Test World, a secretive cold-weather testing site for the world's leading automotive manufacturers where I will learn how to drift on ice. Here, each participant is assigned their own professional racing driver and let loose on an assortment of racing tracks, each designed to test and improve a new skill. By the fire of the welcome cabin, I'm introduced to Bradley Ellis, a former British GT Championship winner and a Pure McLaren driving coach since 2013. He leads me out into the -15°C chill and shows me to our steed, a volcano-yellow 570S Spider.

As we make our way to track number six, a simple oval-shaped circuit used to teach people how to drift into a corner, Ellis talks me through the basics. "When drifting on ice, it is very important to be relaxed and confident," he says. "The same physics apply on the ice as they do on the tarmac, but you are just slightly slower and a little more sideways."

Once on the track, Ellis hammers at the throttle and careers into the first corner, tapping the brakes and turning into the bend. The rear of the car drifts out until we're almost perpendicular before he catches the slide and dabs the throttle again, racing into the next corner of this endless loop. We stop abruptly. "Your turn," he laughs.

So how does one drift on ice? "When drifting, always keep traction with the front tyres whilst maintaining broken traction with the rear tyres," he says, as I clamber behind the wheel. "This is done by having wheel spin to keep the rear wheels spinning faster than the front. This will make the back slide when you try to corner. The real art is to be able to use the slide to steer you around the corner whilst you control the angle of the slide by balancing the throttle and the amount ▶





► of counter-steer you apply.” Sounds simple enough. After a few failed attempts, enormous spin-outs and some close calls with the snowbank that marks the edge of the track, I’ve almost got it. It is one of the most unusual yet thrilling sensations, and you must put aside everything you’ve ever been taught while driving on the road. As the car begins to slide, your initial instinct is to panic. On the road, unless you’re deliberately trying to oversteer, a sliding car means something has gone wrong. On ice, a sliding car means something has gone right. This is the first hurdle. You then need to learn how to hold the slide, which is a very fine line to toe.

We move onto track three, a wide circle designed to perfect holding a slide. “It’s important to have the rear of the car feeling light, which is done by hard acceleration and creating wheel spin, or, if you already have speed in the car, then you’ll need to use the brakes hard to shift the weight of the car to the front,” says Ellis, sliding in an endless drift around the track, one hand on the steering wheel and the other gesticulating wildly. “To hold this slide without spinning you need to counter steer into the slide, and just as you’ve caught the slide to avoid the car straightening back out, you need to re-apply some power to keep the rear wheels spinning. When you’ve caught the slide, use small adjustments of throttle and steering to balance and steer the car in the direction of travel.” I take the helm once again and give it some beans. More spin-outs ensue, but before long it’s starting to make sense, and by the end of the day I’m spending most of my time sideways and loving every minute of it.

Time spent out of the car is exceptional, too. Built by Urho Kekkonen, Finland’s longest serving president, Jávri Lodge is a luxury bolthole in the middle of a white wasteland. There are rumours that JFK stayed here. Our party fills the entire lodge, which has just 13 rooms and feels more home than hotel. We drink in front of the open fires, eat locally sourced reindeer and elk around the communal dining table, swim in the indoor pool, explore the traditional Finnish sauna (which includes rolling in the fresh snow afterwards), embark on a dog-sledding tour and take a midnight stroll in search of the Northern Lights. Even without the driving, this would be a seriously enjoyable trip.

Yet driving is what we are all here for, and a second day helps to hone the lessons taught on day one. Once I’m warmed up again to the notion of going sideways, Ellis takes me through the five Dynamic and two Handling tracks, a mixture of hairpins, long-bends and narrow straights, all in preparation for the technical GP track set off among the trees. Where I have been going 25-35mph at a push, I’m now hitting speeds of 70mph on the GP track, sending my adrenaline levels soaring. And then, suddenly, it all clicks – the moment you master drifting from one corner to the next, when you swiftly transform into a stunt driver from *Fast & Furious*. It’s edge-of-the-seat stuff, and I completely understand why customers shell out a rather princely entry fee to take part.

“Drifting a McLaren on ice is pure, unadulterated fun,” said Ellis back in the welcome cabin on day one. I now know exactly what he meant. ■

The next Pure McLaren Arctic Experience runs from 28 January – 15 February, prices from £12,750 plus taxes. For more information contact experiences@mclaren.com



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