

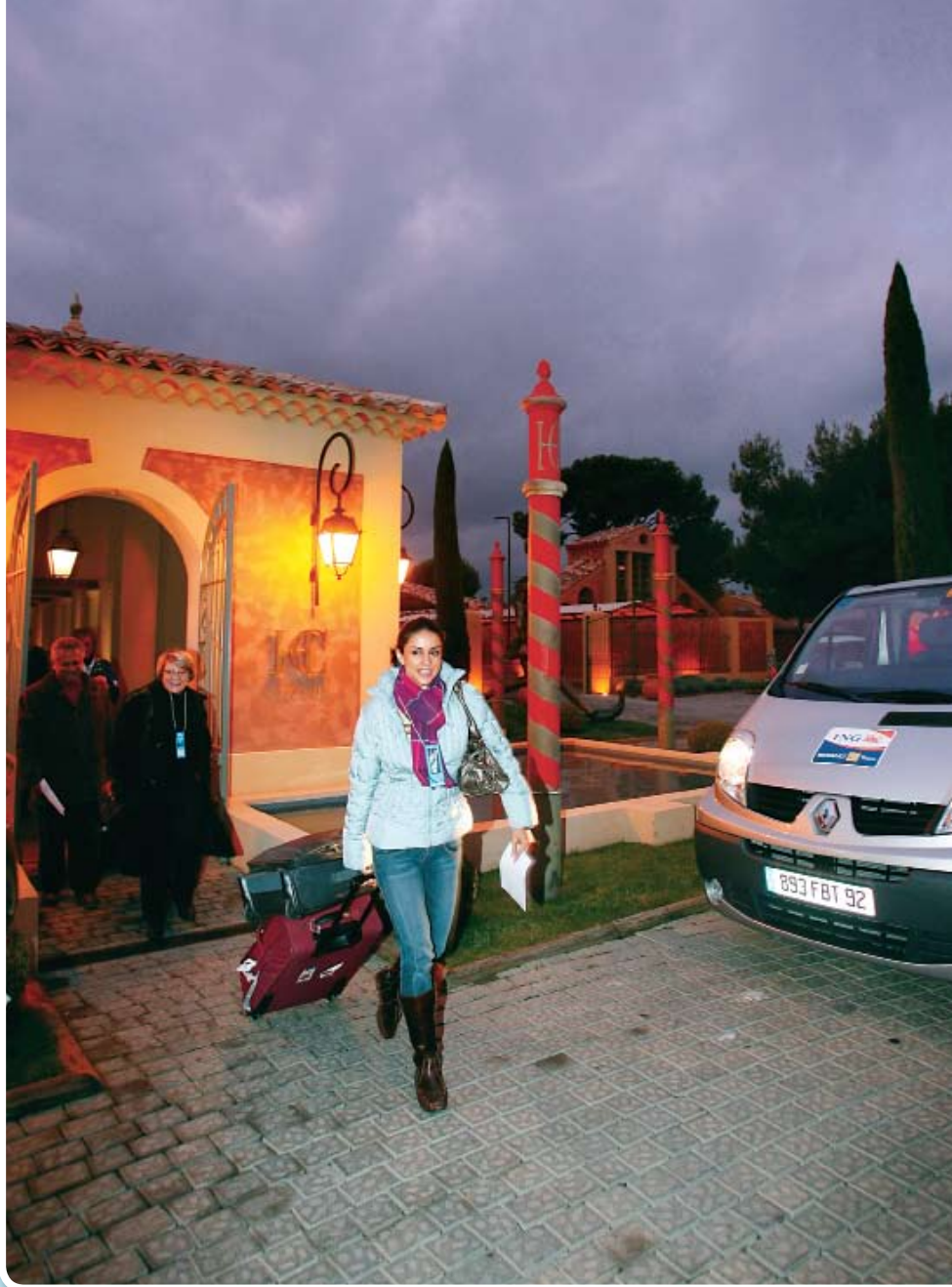
XTREME

BOLLYWOOD GOES FORMULA

NO, NOT FOR A MOVIE.
NOT MAKE-BELIEVE
EITHER, BUT SOME REAL
DRIVING, IN A REAL F1
CAR, WITH REAL PEOPLE.
THREE INDIANS AND A
BOLLYWOOD STAR

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That slightly worried smile before the big moment. But Gul's all set



I AM A VETERAN, I THOUGHT. I HAD done it before. Okay, just once before, but that's good enough to say that I was no F1 virgin. So I shouldn't have been nervous. But I was. Like crazy. Kept waking up through the night. Okay my nose was blocked, my throat running dry, I needed to drink water... but the real reason was that I was nervous. In a few hours time I was going to drive an F1 car.

Are you into F1? Are you into that sport where those mighty men in their magnificent machines do battle at speeds over 300kph in tight circuits that don't allow for the slightest of mistakes? Where the lack of concentration for a fraction of a second can be the difference between life and death. Where technology, money, glamour, skills, physical fitness, strategy, team effort and, of

course, speed, all come together.

And have you ever wondered what it must be like to drive one of those hi-tech projectiles? Those space machines that are capable of 380kph or more, weigh just 600kg, with engines that develop over 800bhp and cost crores and crores of rupees. If you are into F1 you must have wanted to drive one. And even if you are not into F1, but are into challenges, you must have wanted to drive one. I have always wanted to. And I did, about six months ago.

In less than six months I was getting a second drive in an F1 car. Karun Chandhok had, just weeks before, tested an F1 car at Barcelona, clocking 11th fastest time in a field led by a certain gentleman by the name of Michael Schumacher. And here was another Indian getting to drive an F1 car weeks

after Karun had made headlines in India. So yours truly was going to make the headlines too? No such luck. There was just this little bit of a dampener: yours truly wasn't going to be the only Indian on the track. Three others were going to share the limelight with me.

Correction: the limelight was really going to be on just one of us, a beautiful lady by the name of Gul Panag. Me, and the two other Indians – Anil Dharker and Amy Fernandes – were barely the supporting act, the three Indian journo's invited essentially to report on how and what Ms Panag did that day. But the Renault guys are good guys, there was an incentive: live that same F1 experience, drive an F1 car too.

Experiencing the F1 experience – driving a real F1 car – is an interesting concept that Renault has been experiment-

ARE YOU INTO THAT SPORT WHERE MIGHTY MEN IN THEIR MAGNIFICENT MACHINES DO 300KPH? WHERE THE LACK OF CONCENTRATION FOR A FRACTION OF A SECOND CAN BE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH



ing with for a few years now. F1 world champions during 2005 and 2006, Renault aren't quite the first though – some private teams, like Larrouse and Minardi, had also come up with this idea several years ago. But they have been charging money to do so. A lot of money. Renault are doing it (obviously for free) for select journos and people who they believe matter: to let the man on the street get a feel of what it takes to drive an F1 machine.

Several times every year, Renault hires the very picturesque and very safe circuit of Paul Ricard at Le Castellet, in the South of France, brings across about two dozen of the lucky few, houses them in a magnificent hotel, feeds them a great dinner, and then the next day, lets them loose in their million euro F1 cars. Crazy guys, these French...

Well, not that crazy really. The concept is very well thought out, with each person taken through a series of explanations, flip charts, preparatory drives in less powerful Formula Renault single-seaters, medical tests and so on. And after a few hours of mental, physical and skill grooming, finally a go at the real thing, a detuned F1 car. In a very safe circuit with enough run-off areas allowing you to do stupid things and not get hurt.

When I had done my bit six months ago, I hadn't done much of the stupid bits; enough to convince the Renault guys that it wouldn't be unsafe to invite me again. But there was this rider: I had to bring along an Indian star. That time around they had a French movie star, Francois Cluzet, a Dustin Hoffman look-alike (with a great fascination for India)





WILDEST DREAM

THE FIRST THING THAT STRIKES YOU about driving a F1 car is that it's NOT as easy as it looks on TV; you're practically lying down in the driver's seat, a position even the most hardcore motorists are not accustomed to. Secondly you have at the disposal of your hands and feet 700 horses!!! All together, propelling a car that ONLY weighs 580kg. If you can't do the math, this would be a good time to move on to the next story.

I have always secretly believed, that deep down I am a schizophrenic of sorts. Wanting to be different kinds of people all at once. Lawyer, doctor, secret service agent, actor and yes even F1 driver (I guess that's why the career choice). Yet, never in my wildest dreams did I think I would actu-

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Le Mans ace Jonathan Cochet reassures Gul before she's off

ally find myself in the driver's seat of not one but two such cars. I would be lying if I said I was cool as a cucumber as I first sat in the Formula Renault (I first drove the two-litre, 180bhp Formula Renault, before graduating on to the Renault Formula 1). The pedals seemed so far away, and my seating (or shall I say lying) posture was better suited for a lazy afternoon on the beach, not to mention the steering wheel that felt small and ridiculous, almost like a toy. I stared incredulously at the little steering wheel and wondered how it was going to control the car, which was fairly big. (Of course I was still to get a taste of the bigger and faster F1). With my mouth totally dry I got out of the pit lane, quite hesitant to wake up all the horses inside the car, lest the car

go on autopilot and drive itself off the track. Slowly I coaxed the throttle and took a tentative lap. I was alive. But not breathing, for each time I negotiated a corner or went into higher gear I would subconsciously hold my breath!! By the second lap I was getting more comfy and by the third and fourth I was an absolute pro, or so I thought.

I was a lot more confident getting into the F1. Same seating posture and same childlike steering wheel; but that's where the similarity ended. This machine was wider, with bigger tyres and about four times more powerful. The same feeling of anxiety returned. But this time I was like, what the hell.... you only live once. And I gunned it. The safety expert's warning of keeping the car above 6000rpm kept ringing in my ears

and I didn't let him down. I took corners at speeds I would never attempt again and on straight stretches even tried to floor it. And through all of this, the car was stable like rock (must have wondered who this crazy driver was, I am sure). I emerged after my drive, quivering with the rush. So thrilled, and paradoxically lacking in basic motor control as I was barely able to hold a bottle of water to my lips!! Phew, these Formula 1 drivers are truly made of something else. I now have the deepest respect and admiration for them. Not only do they do for a living what I just did, but they do it faster, quicker and with 21 other cars to watch out for, and sometimes with rain on tracks like Monte Carlo. God!

- Gul Panag



who caught the airwaves in France. So to catch the Indian airwaves, why not an Indian star? "How about that Miss World with green eyes?" asked Renault PR person Clement Peltier. "Difficult," I said, "and not too sure whether she can really drive."

But I promised to find a Miss India - at the least, a star, and one who could really drive. The choices narrowed down very, very quickly to Gul Panag. Miss India 1999, sixth at Miss Universe and with half a dozen movies under her belt (*Dhoop*, *Jurm*, the award-winning *Dor* and recently, *Manorama Six Feet Under*), Gul is also known for her passion for cars. So I got Gul's number from colleague Ranojoy - who's a good pal of

hers - put through a call to a very-friendly-on-the-phone star and Gul was more than game.

Renault also wanted to invite two other journos, clearly non-car types, who would write from a non-car point of view. And so we decided on Anil Dharker and Amy Fernandes. Anil, one of India's best known columnists, likes cars and I have known him for many years. Amy, till recently the editor of Femina, was a 'neighbour' at work, at my earlier job. And so there we were: the star Gul and her friend Rishi, Anil, Amy and me. All set for one hugely exciting day in the cold of a European November.

Going across to the track from the hotel that morning, I was nervous. Amy,

Anil and Gul were not. So much for confident, done-it-all me. But once they had seen those exciting yellow-and-blue projectiles lined up along the track and once they had changed into the fireproof Nomex driving suits and then been taken around the track by the instructor explaining the racing line, the apexes, the gear changes, the braking points, even Amy, Anil and Gul were starting to get visibly nervous. I felt better.

Driving instructions for the Formula Renault (FR) single-seaters and an examination by the physiotherapists later, we were all set for the FR drive. The FRs are 185bhp two-litre single-seaters with six-speed sequential 'boxes that weigh just 450kg. That's like 700bhp in a Maruti



An ecstatic Gul with programme manager Tariq Ait Said

"FAT MAN STUCK IN FORMULA 1 CAR," WOULD READ THE HEADLINES. NEEDS TO STARVE TO BREAK FREE

RIGHT SIZE ME

THE ONLY INDIAN TO DRIVE AN F1 RACE car so far? Apart from Narain Karthikeyan of course. Paid good money to do so. So eat your heart out Gautam Singhania. I was invited. And by Renault, no less.

The Feel It experience, they called it, which if you have a dirty mind, will make you go completely off track. The 'IT' Renault wanted you to feel, wasn't rounded and pink, as you probably think, but the sleek, long, aerodynamic monster that burns rubber on all the world's famed racing tracks. However, there was a catch: my invitation was conditional. "For technical reasons," the Renault letter said, "we have a maximum size for the driver. The driver should be under 1.90 metres high and weigh less than 100kg."

I realised why when I got into the 'cockpit' of the car. It was long and narrow. You got in by hoisting yourself over the side, then stretched your legs till they met the pedals. A hundred-kilo gent wouldn't be able to get in. And if he did, by some not so gentle squeezing and tugging and pushing by sadistic friends, he wouldn't be able to get out. "Fat man stuck in Formula One car," would read the headline. "Needs to starve to break free, says doc." Happily, I got in unassisted.



Now even if I say so myself, I am a refined driver. You sit with me in my Sonata and you will, at worst, hear the engine purr. There will be no useless revving up, no sudden speeding and cataclysmic braking, no drunken lurches; just a gossamer transition from smooth start to smooth finish, with the car moving at regal speed in between.

But wrong, completely wrong for an F1 beast. To drive one of those, you have to first leave your refinement behind and do the exact opposite of whatever you do on your city roads. The Renault F1 is an unruly animal, light of weight, pulled by 750 horses, and it doesn't take kindly to being mistaken for a wedding car. So unlearn everything you have learnt, floor the accelerator

to rev up the engine till its high powered whine becomes a full-throated scream, and then let go. Brake hard and late in the curve, hug the corners around each bend, and on the straight unleash its full power (or at least as much as you dare).

Did I do well? There was no one to tell me. How fast did I go? There was no speedo to tell me. Could I have done better? Yes, and I don't need anyone to tell me. The next time around, (if there is a next time around) I will be less polite with the car. I will stop trying to not be Anil Dharker. I will try to be Narain Karthikeyan. Who knows they might make me an offer I can't refuse. I am (almost) the right size to start with!

- Anil Dharker



800. Frightening thought, that.

First round, one has to follow the instructors who are in Renault Meganes, which I do. Gul is just behind me, but she needs some time to get used to her car and progress is slow, till another Megane pulls alongside, waves me on behind that one and we are off at a pace that I like. Promptly after, I spin. Yes I remember, never floor the throttle when in a corner, but it's too late, the mistake has been made and I am in the middle of the track facing the wrong direction, engine stalled. And I can see the next car approaching in the distance...

I press the start button, the engine comes to life, I shift into first and manage to get around and get on to the track. Just in time before the next car comes charging by. Whew!

Yet when we are back and the telemetry is analysed I am told that I am too slow and that I need to be harder both on the throttle and the brakes. Having had the same feedback the last time around, and not having learnt, I am

wondering whether I'm really ready for the next round.

Next round out with the FRs, we are six on the grid, me on the first row alongside French cinema and theatre star Daniele Evenou. The flag comes down and Evenou makes a much better start than me. Evenou is a young 63. Ego mightily pricked I give chase. Floor the throttle, yank the gear towards me to change up, slam the brakes approaching into a corner, downshift rapidly, take the corner in either second or third, floor the throttle when out of the corner; hey it's all falling into a fine rhythm. I overtake Evenou - yeah! - I lap Anil, oh yeah! But then it's all over... four laps done and we are flagged back to the pits.

Feeling pleased with meself, I check out on Gul, Anil and Amy. Gul's got a huge grin right across her face. Anil seems happy too, except miffed by my overtaking manoeuvre. But Amy seems to have had the willies - she found the cockpit too claustrophobic and decided to opt out. But she gets to drive the



DOFFING MY HAT

WHAT I'VE LEARN'T FROM MY BRIEF engagement with Formula 1 is, 'what you see is not what you get'. How often have I sat before the television, chewing my nails watching Schumacher zoom to the finish and thought to myself, "Well why not? An F1 engine is geared for speed". How often have I ranted and railed when Juan Pablo Montoya nearly missed prime position? Thinking: "how could he do that! The engine is geared for speed."

And then I sat in the Renault F1 myself. It should have been a breeze, having watched so many of the race drivers zoom in nanoseconds across my TV screen. And yet, here I was, at every step of the way, from the preparation to the journey, wondering what it might have been for every of these legends when they went in for their first run.

Did they sleep well the night before, or did they toss and turn out of a sense of excitement or nervousness? Used as they were, unlike many of us, to the finer nuances of driving, did the hard control of the Formula 1 car offend their sensibilities or is it a guy thing to step hard on the brakes, virtually stand on the accelerator, tap the gears with all your might as you fly across the circuit?

Most of us had the luxury of the entire track to ourselves at the Feel It event. But when I next see those men in their 'flying machines', having to slide into a coffin-like space, keep their wits about them while doing 300kph and doing this with 20 others trying to get to the finishing line within a matter of a few minutes, I shall doff my invisible hat to them, again and again and again.

— Amy Fernandes





ACCELERATING OUT ON THE STRAIGHTS, TAP, TAP, TAP, ON THE PADDLE SHIFT AND THE CAR KEEPS GOING FASTER. STAND ON THE BRAKES, DOWNSHIFT DOWN TO SECOND FOR THAT CORNER. WOW!

Renault's PR person Clement Peltier checks on the Bollywood star



230bhp RenaultSport Megane instead.

And then it's our turn to be chauffeured around. Though Gul would prefer Le Mans driver and Renault F1 tester Jonathan Cochet, it's Matthieu Zangarelli instead – French vice-champion in endurance racing – who will be driving us around that same circuit in the Megane, bumper-to-bumper, fender-to-fender with Cochet and his three hapless passengers strapped up with seatbelts – just like us – in another Megane.

Having survived that roller-coaster ride – at speeds that seem to be twice what I'd been doing in the Formula Renault in a car that was three times as heavy as the single-seater, sobering thought that – it's time for the real thing. That 700bhp, 580kg, projectile.

I'm second in the queue – just don't have time to get butterflies in the stomach. Slide my feet into that narrow orifice, and much padding later I am wedged tightly into the body-hugging cockpit. Feet far away into the dark yonder, I have to gingerly move my toes to 'feel out' the three closely located pedals. Press the very hard clutch deep, deep in until the firewall, softly caress

the throttle pedal till it shows just seven per cent power, follow the instructor's hand motions that say that the clutch must be fed in gently, and voila, the car is rolling, and we are off. Whipped, I haven't stalled it.

And then it's all a blur. Accelerating out on the straights, tap, tap, tap, or rather pull, pull, pull, on the paddle shift at the right and the car just keeps going faster, faster; see those red cones flashing by alongside the track, and I know it is time to stand on the brakes, tap, tap, tap, on the left paddle shift to downshift down to second into that sharp corner. Accelerate out, upshift, stand on the brakes, downshift, wow! Seventh heaven and all that.

And the best part: the straight where you could be doing 260, even more, eeeennnn, third, eeeennnn, fourth, eeeennnn, fifth, eeeennnnnn, sixth. Brake, brake, brake, tap, tap, tap. But just as you are getting into the rhythm of it all, that chequered flag is out, you have just this last lap to do before the red flag beckons you back to the pits... It's over. Leaving you wanting more, much more. 