

CLASSIC DRIVER

Adelaide Alive! F1 legends flood the city streets for this sunny festival down under

Lead
Ahead of the Australian Formula One Grand Prix in Melbourne this weekend, Aussie enthusiasts and F1 legends gathered at the Adelaide Motorsport Festival to celebrate all things on four wheels.



Sitting on a coastal plain sandwiched between an interminable white sand beach and a mountain range that's home to three of Australia's best wine regions, once-sleepy Adelaide is fast becoming a hot destination. These days, the South Australian capital is renowned as a gastronomic wonderland, yet its time as host of the Australian Grand Prix from 1985 until 1995 gives it true motorsport heritage, too. Both were fervently celebrated at the Adelaide Motorsport Festival.

Adelaide's fast street circuit twists under old gum trees in the city's fringing parklands and kisses the downtown restaurant district. It was the venue of Lauda's last race, of Senna's emotional final win, and the still-contentious Schumacher/Hill altercation that determined the outcome of the 1994 World Championship. The season-ending race came with a carnival atmosphere and quickly earned a hard-partying reputation among teams - old dogs of the sport still remember their visits to Adelaide with a glint in their eye.



The Adelaide Motorsport Festival loosely hangs its theme around this period, and being held the weekend before the Australian Grand Prix (now staged at Melbourne’s Albert Park), attracts the great and the good of world motorsport to stop by. Special guests this year included Damon Hill, returning to the city for the first time since winning the final race in 1995, honorary Aussie Valtteri Bottas, Drive to Survive star and ex-Haas Team Principle Guenther Steiner, Sky Sports pundit David Croft, and rising Kiwi star Liam Lawson.



The festival hit its stride when Friday evening rush hour was gloriously interrupted by a parade of racing cars running right through the very heart of the city. Thousands looked on as grand prix cars from the Adelaide era, Group C prototypes (including a flame-spitting Mazda 767B visiting from a Japanese collection), touring cars, concept cars, race bikes, and hypercars passed by.



The destination was a party at Gouger Street, in the city’s Chinatown district. Pubs overflowed and restaurant kitchens served plates at full pace as the fiery sun dipped into the horizon. Seeing these cars and their bold liveries in such a juxtaposed setting away from the track was an unrepeatable experience. And as for the two-mile escorted drive back to the track in the dark? Let’s just say that there are petrolheads in Adelaide’s police force!



The following two days of untimed track action unfolded on a shortened version of the circuit in Victoria Park, taking in the original main straight and Senna Chicane (still with Senna's handprints cast into a concrete memorial at its apex). The stars took the headlines – Steiner rode with Supercars champion James Courtney, Bottas drove the ex-Denny Hulme VK Commodore and the Leyton House CG891, and Hill returned to the scene of his famous clash with Schumacher.



But it was the depth of passion from the 40,000 spectators that astounded us the most. Much of the crowd came dressed in period team kit, and one semi-retired mechanic helping a friend run his Benetton noticed a spectator wearing the very shirt he wore at the 1995 race, when he was an engineer for Williams!



For those of us in the northern hemisphere, the prospect of escaping south to hear V10s scream in the balmy summer air is a tantalising one. And with a glass or two of South Australian shiraz in a nearby wine bar afterwards, is there a better way to spend a weekend in March? We don't think so.

Photos by Andrew Coles

Gallery

