



THE TVR TRAVELLING CIRCUS

The invitation to drive an S to Europe, then to pilot a selection of TVR models around two race tracks, was an appealing one. The torrential rain that followed the party did not stop Howard Lees from making it a weekend to remember



Even the crew was impressed. Townsend Thoresen's giant *Pride of Dover* reverberated to the sound of V6 and V8 engines as 1800bhp worth of TVR sports cars cruised on to the car deck from the Zeebrugge ramp. OK, so one of the engines was in a Range Rover and the race car lay silent on a trailer behind, but no one was counting.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Join a travelling circus of TVR sports cars at Dover, catch a ferry and then spend the next two days at Zolder and Zandvoort race circuits while the cars were shown off to eager Belgian and Dutch journalists.

The brief was to put plenty of miles on a new S and bring it back for figuring at GM's Millbrook test track, and spend some time on road and track with the rest of the range: the 350i, 390SE and one of the few 420 SEACs in captivity. TVR had brought two 350s, a 390 and an S, while Dave Haughin of the Northern TVR Centre had brought his own S demonstrator and arranged to borrow a SEAC. The factory had even laid on its 420 racer complete with passenger seat and driver Steve Cole to frighten over-confident journalists.

We hadn't bargained on the rain. It rains in Belgium on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays — for all I know, in October it rains the rest of the week too, and the Belgians have enough spare rain to let Holland have a cloud or two. It rained, hard and with only a couple of brief let-ups, from the moment we landed until I arrived home three days later. We only saw a stretch of truly dry road for a couple of hours at Zandvoort.

Photographer Stan Papior and myself took TVR's own S for the journey to Zolder. Noel Palmer, TVR's marketing director, had intended all the cars to travel in convoy — but that plan was scuppered by the combination of rush-hour motorway traffic at Brussels, nil visibility in the torrential rain and the fact that it was already night.

Having some experience of trying to travel in convoy before, I had equipped myself with a map and the name of our hotel before we set out — this was a comfortable establishment above Zolder's main grandstand called rather inappropriately The Pits.

All the cars managed to find the hotel without incident — as well as ourselves and Noel Palmer, TVR's engineer Chris Scherle, mechanic Dave Bentley and a three-man video crew filming for TVR's new promo video had been roped into ferry the cars. After that sort of drive no one was in the mood to do much more than eat and sleep, especially with the threat of a 7am car-cleaning session hanging over us.

Washing seven filthy cars is hardly a task to be looked forward to, especially when it's done in the pouring rain with the certain knowledge that they will look just as bad again within half an hour. Job done and breakfast eaten, we drove, in convoy this time, through the tunnel to Zolder's pit complex.

Zolder hasn't staged an F1 race since Gilles Villeneuve's fatal crash in 1982, but the circuit has been slowed down since then by a number of chicanes. After the night's rain, Lake Zolder didn't look in the least inviting — some of the chicanes were inches deep in water and mooring a few buoys at the apexes might have helped navigation. The rain showed no signs of stopping as the first journalists arrived, many never having set foot in a TVR before — TVR faces began to fall.

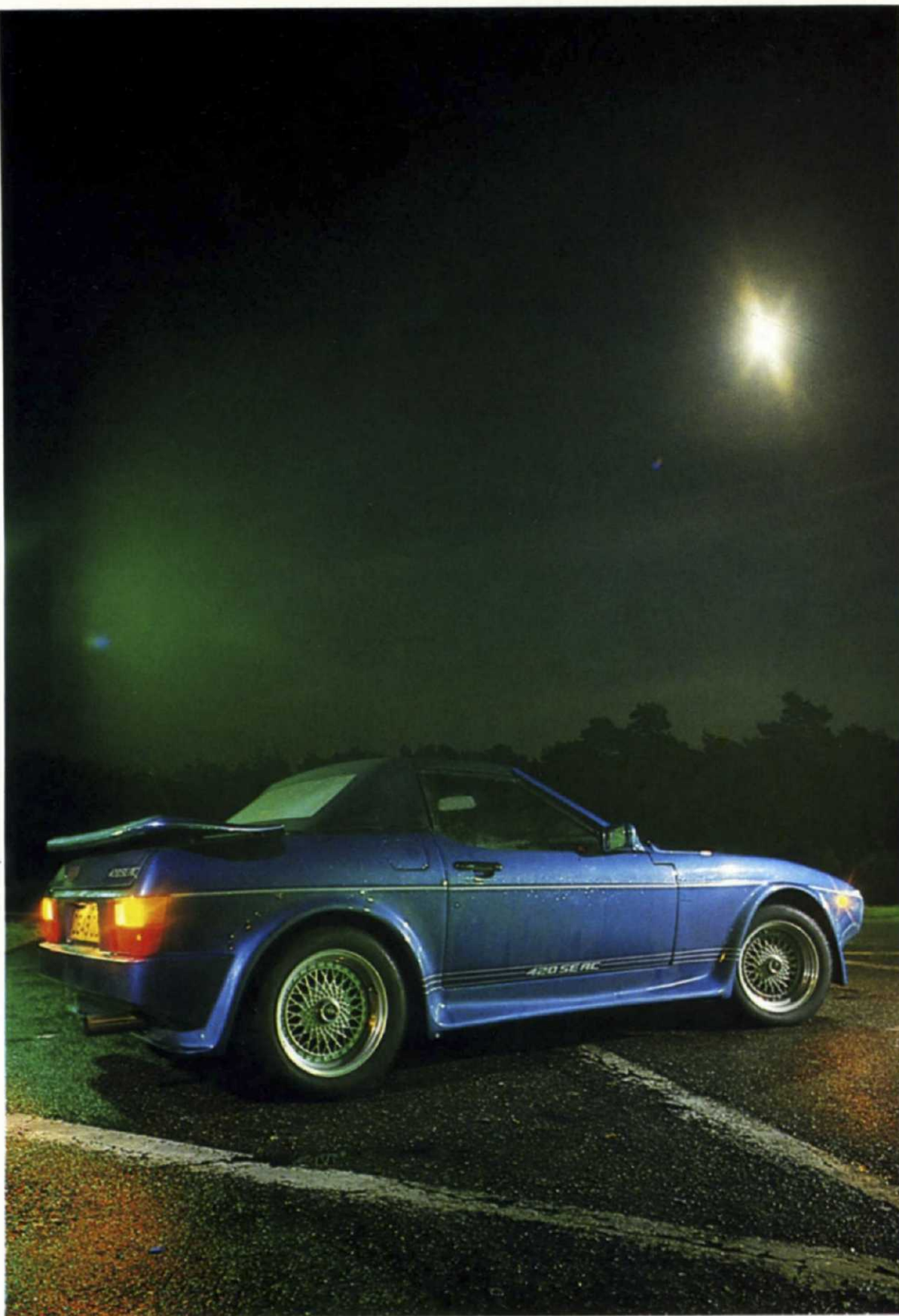
Going for a few exploratory laps in a 350i reminded me what a vice-free and totally manageable car it is. In 197bhp trim, the Rover V8 provides a smooth spread of power in every gear and plenty of top-end punch — only criticism of the car was that the optional power assistance made the steering a little too light for the conditions.

After getting some idea of which way the circuit went, I ventured out in the S. Here was a very different animal. For a start the rasp of the Ford V6 was in complete contrast to the music generated by the 350's V8 — and it seemed somehow louder as a result. The ride was firmer, body roll less pronounced and the high-g geared manual steering ▶

STAN PAPIOR



Rain stopped briefly after lunch allowing a few laps in the 420 SEAC road car (above): an exhilarating experience. Race car (left) is checked over before returning to the track



420SEAC bodyshell (left) is based on that of 390. Main difference is composite structure which saves weight but costs a fortune. **Video crew** (above) is shooting a promotional film to be shown at Motorfair and at selected sales outlets



Feedback from the front wheels of the S (left) is absolutely faithful, and steering response immediate. It could be hustled around the soaking wet track in complete confidence

