

THE ART OF TRAVEL

WORDS RICHARD WEBB

In his book, *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton wrote: “The pleasure we derive from journeys is perhaps dependent more on the mindset with which we travel than on the destination we travel to.”



**“Go hard,
see what she can do”**

In an answer to a question you may not yet have posed, I made a 55,000km round-trip – to Seattle and to Salzburg – to drive two of the world’s most refined and powerful luxury limousines. The burning question, of course, is what do you buy if you want a car that has supercar-rivaling performance, yet cossets you and possibly three passengers in luxury business class comfort? Old, but unequal rivals Jaguar and Mercedes-Benz both reckon they have the answer in their battle for market share and prestige, by launching their XJR and S63 flagships within weeks of each other. Whilst different in character and execution, they both represent all that’s magnificent at the top-end of premium sector cars.

The revived British car marque’s late founder, Sir William Lyons, once said that he strived to make his cars “the closest thing we can create to something that is alive.” Would he have approved of the XJR, the most powerful Jaguar limousine yet?

If the standard Jaguar XJ was known as one of the best driving luxury saloons, it becomes even sharper and more focused with the XJR. In a demonstration of the British brands’ confidence, it launched its luxury limousine at a racetrack – the Ridge Motorsports Park

in Seattle. Hardly its natural habitat, but the undulating fast turns of the racetrack bought out the racecar DNA in this Jaguar. A safety briefing and a few sighting laps later – with my instructor – I was encouraged to provoke this big saber-toothed cat. “Go hard, see what she can do”, he said, smiling little needed encouragement. Somehow, this large executive car seemed to shrink on the track, lapping the tight, twisty circuit as quickly as one might in a Porsche Boxster S and was totally controllable at the limit.

The chassis is deeply impressive in the way it enables you to control lurid slides – with delicate throttle and steering inputs – whilst in its ‘Sport’ setting. This abuse on the track failed to fade or cook the brakes either. Jaguars are not all about straight-line speed, but the electronically limited top end of 279km/h can come at you with a relentless, locomotive-like thrust, causing you – wide eyed – to grip the steering-wheel firmly as the horizon hurtles towards you. The slick-shifting eight-speed ZF automatic gearbox is perfectly mated to the all aluminium 5L V8 404kW supercharged engine, so this is a real gem to drive.

Jaguar has tuned the exhaust and intake to be refined at cruise while it emits a rich, deep rumble under acceleration, achieving 0-100km/h in just 4.4 seconds – which is even quicker than the Bentley Continental V8 GTC. Suspension settings have been fettled at Jaguar’s Nurburgring performance centre, and the steering tweaked using technology from the brilliant F-Type.

The Jaguar XJR is a paradigm-enhancer and will win customers thanks to the way it drives, let alone the way it looks and feels. Sink inside, and you’ll be rewarded with a sumptuous interior that soaks up much of the disciplined aggression from the engine, with its edgy, baritone pitch that urges your prodigious use of the throttle. Its combination of sheer power and crafted elegance defines its driving experience. With its agile handling, the car feels really alive, thanks in part to its aluminum-intensive chassis architecture and illustrious brand heritage. It’s a worthy flagship performance limousine and, yes, William Lyons would be well pleased.

But the Brits don’t have it all their own way, as Mercedes-Benz were keen to point out at their launch in Salzburg of their new S63 AMG. Just as other brands start catching up, the Mercedes-Benz S-Class has again moved on

with a string of innovations in efficiency, comfort and connectivity with a relentless drive to create more emotionally engaging cars. Whilst the Jaguar also boasts a forced induction V8 engine, AMG point out that theirs are all hand-built by one man (or woman) from start to end.

The long-wheelbase S63, like the XJ-R, is only available in rear-wheel drive. AMG have managed to shed 100kg compared to the outgoing car, thanks to special alloy wheels, a lightweight lithium battery and

other assorted high-tech thinking. In an unrivalled sensory treat, this visually enticing, luxury super-car retains the deferential ambience of the standard new S-Class, but with added performance engineering from AMG. An adaptive AMG exhaust keeps aural presence subtle in 'Comfort' mode and entirely consistent with its refined and opulent genes. Caress the 'Sport' button though, and Beelzebub's roar emits – from its two rectangular exhausts – as it lights up the

tarmac whilst occupants remain in an indulgent cocoon of the barely imaginable thrust.

The S63's 2 tonne bulk is very easy on the eye, seemingly reduced in size by some very elegant sheet-metal – and the 5.5L biturbo V8 blasts to 100km/h in a dead heat with the XJR's 4.4sec via its honey-smooth seven-speed Speedshift MCT. Top speed is a jaw-slackening 297km/h.

The steering adds to the pleasure of driving the car by being nicely weighted with a natural feel. The cabin has been spectacularly crafted, with everything the eye surveys being premium-quality with bespoke switchgear and metres of double-stitched leather.

And then there's the comforting poetry of Magic Body Control, which employs stereo cameras to scan ahead and detect imperfections in the road – at up to 128km/h – hydraulically

"Its combination of sheer power and crafted elegance defines its driving experience"



adjusting the suspension ten times a second to smooth your progress. Mercedes-Benz has not so much toned-down the AMG 'madness', rather, discretely layered it with a traditional S-Class calmness, widening the appeal of the car and, thus, giving it a broader range of abilities than the competition.

Jaguar may rankle Mercedes-Benz' claim that their S-Class is 'the best car in world', but

ultimately, these beautiful cars – whilst arch rivals – appeal to slightly different buyers. Both are luxury continent-shrinkers with powerful engines. The Mercedes-Benz is not as agile or involving as the Jaguar, and if you drive yourself, rather than being chauffeured, the XJR may be just be the car to choose. But the S63 is a masterful interpretation of what a fast luxury performance limousine should

be, and will be the majority answer to the original question. The last word goes again to Alain de Botton, who summed up beauty thus: "A dominant impulse on encountering beauty is to wish to hold on to it, to possess it and give it weight in one's life. There is an urge to say, 'I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me.'" Both of these cars are of that kind of beauty and neither will disappoint. **BC**

FANCY SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM YOUR SUPER-LIMO? TRY THESE...

Maserati Quattroporte V8. Quirky, quick and oodles of character.



Porsche Panamera. Fast and feature packed, now better looking.



Audi S8. Fast and capable, a little more anonymous.



Bentley Continental GTC. Awe-inspiring power and beautifully made.



Aston Martin Rapide. Not as well resolved as some, but beautiful to behold.



Range Rover. The best luxury SUV on the market, probably.

