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From The Sunday Times

February 11, 2007

Graveyard of supercar dreams

Millionaires are paying with their lives as the power of fantasy cars soars, report Jonathan Bracey Gibbon and Joseph Dunn

Think of a supercar and you think of a flawless Italian sportster cruising a sunlit road in Monte Carlo or revving up a switchback Alpine pass. You probably don't envisage it upside down in a ditch or scythed in half in the middle of a debris-strewn Broad.



But increasingly that is where you are likely to find them, sparking claims that a new generation of fantasy cars are becoming too hot for their owners to handle.

Take the Lamborghini Murciélago LP640. It replaced the original Murciélago late last year, upping the power output from 580bhp to 640bhp and taking the top speed to 210mph. The Italian company claimed it was the fastest Lambo ever, and millionaire customers flocked to sign up and buy one.

The problem was that few of them had the skills to drive it at speed. In its first three months of sale, three LP640s were written off in high-speed crashes as drivers, seduced by the firepower of the V12 engine, drove way beyond their abilities or the car's limits.

Valentino Balboni, Lamborghini's own test driver, crashed his LP640 last year. He was lucky and walked away. Two weeks earlier an Austrian dealer was not so fortunate: he was hospitalised for weeks after pushing his LP640 too hard.

The latest smash was in November, when an LP640 on loan from Lamborghini spun off BBC TV's test track in Dunsfold, Surrey in heavy rain, putting it in the repair workshop for two months. The driver — who has not been named — was unhurt.

It is not just Lamborghinis that seem to be crashing. Last week, in the latest of a spate of crashes involving Ferrari's flagship car, a yellow Enzo was written off in Dubai after the driver lost control.

In November Suleiman Kerimov, a 40-year-old Russian billionaire politician, made headlines around the world when he — allegedly with Tina Kandelaki, a lingerie-wearing FHM cover star in the passenger seat — crashed into a tree on the French Riviera, leaving Kermimov seriously burnt. The previous month Gary Eisenberg, a Ferrari collector, died at the wheel of his Enzo in California.

All of which is meat and drink to the website www.wreckedexotics.com. This is a fast-growing site attracting 500,000 users each month, and is dedicated to documenting the aftermath of supercar crashes.

It has spawned an eagle-eyed community of online rubber-neckers keen to see images of the latest six-figure write-off. It is also the perfect tonic for anyone who has suffered a kerbed alloy or scratched paint job on their Volvo and balked at the repair bill.

"Many submissions carry tales of inexperienced drivers or friends borrowing cars and totalling them, sometimes fatally," says Gregg Carlson, the website's publisher. "Most exotic cars are relatively safe when it comes to protecting the occupants in a crash, and there are many examples of terrible crashes where the driver walked away — most notably a recent Enzo crash at 200mph in Malibu, where the driver only had a cut lip."

But there is a more serious side to the high number of supercar crashes. Some commentators claim they are a sign that car makers have become embroiled in a horsepower arms race, creating ever more powerful engines that drivers are struggling to control.

"I think people are locked into a situation where each successive car is expected to outperform its predecessor," says David Browne, head of

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Video: we test the best, from the R8 to the Lambo LP640



mundane cars often boast performance figures that would have been unheard of 10 years ago. In the mid-1990s Ferrari, Lamborghini and Porsche could be confident of their place at the top of the high-performance car league. But today more mainstream manufacturers are catching up fast.

Audi's current 4.2 litre RS4 quattro boasts 450bhp — far more than the Ferrari Testarossa from the 1980s and 1990s — while the range-topping BMW 7-series manages 445bhp — 60bhp more than the original Lamborghini Countach. Even the lowly £31,000 BMW 335i SE breaks the 300bhp barrier, putting it in the same league as the 1996 Aston Martin DB7 Volante, which boasted 335bhp.

Meanwhile cars such as the VW Golf have seen power output almost double since their first appearance. The original Golf GTI had 108bhp, the latest version has 200bhp.

Manufacturers deny they are on a power binge and claim that extra performance is necessary because of increased weight: modern cars are significantly heavier than previous generations as a result of new safety equipment and electronic driver aids.

But not all the power increases can be put down to the fact that cars have more weight to lug around, and the increases look likely to continue into the coming year: Mercedes has released a limited-edition SLR costing £340,000 (see pages 4-5), uprated from 620bhp to 650bhp, while Audi has just launched its 420bhp R8.

Many thought that raw power had peaked with the Bugatti Veyron, boasting a faintly ludicrous 1,001bhp and a top speed of 253mph. But in November 2006 Bristol, the small-scale British maker of bespoke cars, announced a revamped version of its Fighter two-seater with 1,012bhp and the potential to reach 270mph.

Where will it all end? In a ditch, probably, or else in the dock. Next month Porsche will be in court in America accused of failing to provide adequate training to a man killed while driving in a 205mph Porsche Carrera GT.

The lawyer acting for the man's widow is Craig McClellan, who has form when it comes to holding makers to account: in 1981 he acted for the widow of a passenger killed in a Porsche 930. The jury found the Porsche was too dangerous for the average driver to handle with no experience and awarded \$2.5m to the plaintiff.

This time McClellan is arguing there is a design defect with the Carrera GT that makes it "tail happy", and that the car is too difficult for the average driver to handle at high speeds without instruction — claims that Porsche vigorously denies.

The trial date is set for next month and there will be testimony from expert witnesses that design faults make the Porsche inherently difficult to control. However, it will be McClellan's argument that the German company should be held responsible for the level of training his client's husband was given that will be watched most closely by other supercar makers.

"It [the car] is defective if the risks of its design outweigh the benefits," said McClellan from Germany last month, where he was in meetings with Porsche representatives. "If its power and handling characteristics make it too dangerous for the average driver without training or instruction, then it is defective. Porsche should be liable because it sold a defective vehicle."

The case is unlikely to be replicated in Britain, and car manufacturers such as Lamborghini, Ferrari and Porsche say they offer a voluntary course so that customers can practise driving powerful cars.

According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, however, such training should be mandatory. "We have never seen any justification for producing road vehicles with such excessive speeds, and given these speeds it's not surprising people are getting into serious trouble in these cars," says Kevin Clinton, RoSPA's head of road safety.

"Whoever is selling them has a responsibility for providing training on how to handle these cars, as a condition of sale." But until that happens, www.wreckedexotics.com is unlikely to run out of material any time soon.

The wrecks are piling up

Nice 2006: Russian billionaire Suleiman Kerimov lost control of his borrowed 217mph Ferrari Enzo on a rain-slicked Promenade des Anglais on the French Riviera. The car hit a tree and burst into flames. While Kerimov's FHM cover-girl passenger escaped serious injury, allowing her to fly home to Moscow and deny she was ever in France, Kerimov is still recovering from his life-threatening burns.

Los Angeles 2006: Swedish fraudster Stefan Eriksson crashed his Enzo, while drunk, at 199mph on the Pacific Coast Highway. A videotape recovered from the car showed he was racing a Mercedes SLR at the time. The Enzo broke in two but Eriksson suffered only a cut lip. After the accident he was arrested and found to be facing a long list of other charges including embezzlement and gun possession. He is currently serving three years.

Sheffield 2005: Naseem Hamed, the former world featherweight champion, wrecked his 210mph Mercedes SLR McLaren while attempting to pass a Ford Mondeo. He crossed a solid white line at 90mph, hitting Anthony Burgin head-on. The accident not only wrecked the £300,000 McLaren, but fractured "every major bone in his [Burgin's] body". Hamed was released from jail in September after serving four months, and was

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Milan 2005: One evening, Milanese residents reported seeing a red Enzo blasting through the streets. Next morning the car's wreckage was found strewn over hundreds of yards of a Broad outside the city, along with the body of its driver, businessman Stefano Sidoli, 41, who paid the ultimate price for his passion.

HAVE YOUR SAY

You need a special licence to drive a truck or other large vehicle. I understand that in the UK there are different licences for manual and automatic cars. Surely it is not unreasonable to introduce a special licence to drive a 250mph supercar on a public road?

Ford (not the car), Sydney,

Craig McClellan the American Lawyer has caused the "power race" between manufactures. Cars are now designed to be so stable and safe, that they can drive a stupid speeds. Cars of the 80's are much more fun at lower speeds than cars today, you can find their limits far more easily (and safely on public roads) in modern cars you have to drive at highly illegal speeds if you want to find the cars limits. Lawyers don't understand that 'Drivers' are always going to want to find the limits of any car. If cars were not so safe, people would drive far more carefully!

Gwyn, London, UK

Daren,

Are you seriously recommending a warning sticker that 200mph might not be a very safe speed to travel at? How about one that cautions against doubling the posted speed limit, or one that suggests roads may become wet when it rains. People don't buy these cars for their fuel economy and trunk space, they know full well what the car is capable of yet it's still their responsibility to maintain control and safe operation of the vehicle. That's the whole point of making people take a driver's test to get their licence, not to improve their skills, to make sure they understand the laws and legalities involved with driving on public roads.

Ken, Belleville, IL

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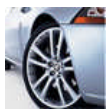
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