

The Richard Petty Driving Experience: A Woman's Perspective

by Ginger Withers, PassPorter Guest Contributor

First let me begin by saying I'm not a big Nascar fan.

I have been to a couple of races and I might be able to name a few drivers, but that's about it. I do, however, love to drive fast. Those pesky speed limits are a problem though.

My husband knows this, though he really doesn't understand it. He decided to surprise me while we were at Walt Disney World with an early birthday present. We were having dinner one evening when my husband said, "You need to get to bed early tonight." I was confused since we were planning on sleeping in and doing a water park the next day. He then said, "You have an appointment at the Richard Petty Driving Experience at 7:30 in the morning."

I was shocked but excited and nervous. I'm not a "spur-of-the-moment" person. I am a "planner," big time. I also knew the Richard Petty Driving Experience cars were manual transmission and I hadn't driven a manual in about three years.

If I had to describe the Richard Petty Driving Experience in only one word it would be "Phenomena!" I can't say enough good things about the staff. I had to take a bus to the Magic Kingdom, take the monorail to the Ticket & Transportation Center, walk to the Best Friends Pet Resort kennel where a shuttle bus took me over to the track. These were the directions given to my husband from the track. I later found out that I could have just driven over there from our hotel!

When I arrived and signed in, I found out that we had a class of 28 with only two women. The sign-in process takes a few minutes, mostly consent forms. There are three requirements that you must have before you sign in. 1) You must be at least 18, 2) have a valid driver's license, and 3) know how to drive a manual transmission.

From the minute that you arrive, the staff is doing everything that that can to make everyone feel comfortable. After everyone had signed in, we were fitted for our jumpsuits. These go on over your clothes. I wouldn't want to do this in August because those suits got hot after a while. We then had a classroom session on driving the cars as well as safety. We moved out to the track for the rest of our instruction.

They went over more safety features including the safety gear that you

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are required -- the helmet and the neck gear. If you had never been in one of these cars before either to drive or as a ride-along, they suggested that you do a ride along first. This was to get you accustomed to the speed. They offered us a half-price deal for the ride along. This is a good idea! Trust me, I have driven fast before, but not like this.

I decided to do the ride-along first and I'm glad that I did. They do the ride-alongs all day with no appointment needed, but they got us done quickly so it wouldn't interfere with our driving. The ride-along is three laps with a professional driver. They got me suited up and introduced me to my driver.

He helped me into the car first. The only way to get into the car is to throw your leg up through the side window (no glass there, of course), and crawl in. Once he was in the driver's seat he asked if I was ready. When I said yes, he said "Hold on," and we were off like lightning! I felt like it took the whole first lap before I could get my head off of the headrest. After our three laps, he brought me back to our class.

After everyone was finished with the Richard Petty Driving Experience ride-alongs, they divided our class up and assigned everyone an instructor for more personalized instruction. We were then taken around the track at a "leisurely 70-75 MPH." We were shown different things around the track such as the traffic cones that were signals as to when to let off the gas and when to hit the gas. They told us early-on not to use the brake. Due to the high power, you would spin-out if you used the brake. As we were coming back into pit row, they showed us a sign that said "shift into neutral now." We didn't have to use the brake until we were back to the line up. The cars are not equipped with radios so they have a series of different flags for signals. They go over these at length and have a chart to show these.

I did the Richard Petty Rookie Experience which is an eight-lap drive. There are many other levels but the rookie is the most popular and also the least expensive at \$449. One of the main things that they told us was that you follow behind an instructor in another car. They want you to stay close on them without crowding. Before you pull out, the instructor will pull his car in front of you to show you the distance that they want between the cars. It is closer than you would expect. This is so the instructor can keep a close eye on you. They told us to stick right with our instructor. If he was to go into pit row, we were to follow, which would mean there was something wrong with his car or he had noticed something wrong with our car.

These cars looked exactly like the ones actually driven in Nascar, complete with the same sponsors, and each of us was assigned to a

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specific car. If you are assigned to drive a car like the one that Jeff Gordon drives, they would announce they the next driver (insert name), was substituting for Jeff Gordon.

As I approached the car, it was obvious to the people there to help me just how short I am (5' 2"). Since the driver's seat is not adjustable, one of the guys told another to get me a cushion. As I stood beside him, he turned and asked for another cushion. He made sure that I could reach the clutch without problems. I took off without killing the engine and kept up with my instructor just fine.

They clock you at each turn and give you a print-out at the end. The fastest that you are allowed to go is 120 MPH. Now, I have actually driven faster than that on a straight road, but the Walt Disney World Speedway has curves. I made it to 118 MPH.

The Richard Petty staff takes your picture standing beside the car when you first get there as well as after you are in the car, ready to take off. These and other merchandise are available to buy after you finish.

This was truly an exhilarating experience that I highly recommend. In fact, my husband has already bought me another Richard Petty Driving Experience!

About The Author: Ginger Withers previously contributed to the PassPorter News with an article on [Dollywood](#) in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

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