



Fantastic 4s & the furious

WORDS JAMES WHITBOURN PHOTOS CHRIS BENNY & CRISTIAN BRUNELLI

FORCED INDUCTION FRONT-DRIVE FOURS (AND A FIVE) PLUS TWO WITHOUT TURBOS AND TWO WITH ALL-WHEEL DRIVE MAKE UP OUR FIELD OF SO-HOT-RIGHT-NOW HATCHES



SOME OF THE WORLD'S HOTTEST HATCHBACKS IN CONVOY ON SOME OF VICTORIA'S BEST ROADS: BRILLIANT, UNTIL YOU NEED FUEL (ABOVE RIGHT)



ELEVEN TASTY MORSELS SAT IN THE SHIMMERING HAZE OF A BLAZING HOT HEATHCOTE RACEWAY

T WAS like a starved circus lion at Sizzler as we were presented with our colourful smorgasbord of hot hatchbacks. See, I'd spent the previous two weeks driving a diesel Triton, and in doing so worked up a healthy appetite for devouring twisty country roads. Now 11 tasty morsels representing the hot-hatch class of 2011 sat in the shimmering haze of a blazing hot Heathcote Raceway, raring to be unleashed.

My eye was in. At St Kilda's Esplanade Hotel the previous night, writer James Cleary, photographer Chris Benny and I had spied a *Sega Rally* arcade machine. In a tacit nod to the theme, the Lancia Delta Integrale was the pick over the Celica GT-Four. Interesting how virtual Scando skills improve up to a point – about four pots – before falling off steeply...

It's not a difficult entry criteria to get your head round: car must have herbs, handling and a hatch. There are commonalities across the field, like front-drive (all bar the all-wheel-drive WRX and Golf R) and forced induction (all bar the Clio Gordini and Civic Type R). And of course there are differences, like the two size classes of car: Light – Citroën DS3, Polo GTI, Mini JCW and Clio; and, Small – Megane and Focus RSs, Mazda 3 MPS, WRX and Golf GTI and R. Only the Polo has a supercharger (in addition to its turbo), and it and its bigger GTI brother are the only self-shifters here (the Polo is only offered as a DSG).

Our 11-strong field would snake cross-country over some of Victoria's best driver's roads, from Heathcote Raceway north of Melbourne, to Healesville to its east, before continuing south-east for a finale shootout at the Haunted Hills Hillclimb in the Latrobe Valley.

A big part of the appeal of hot hatchbacks is

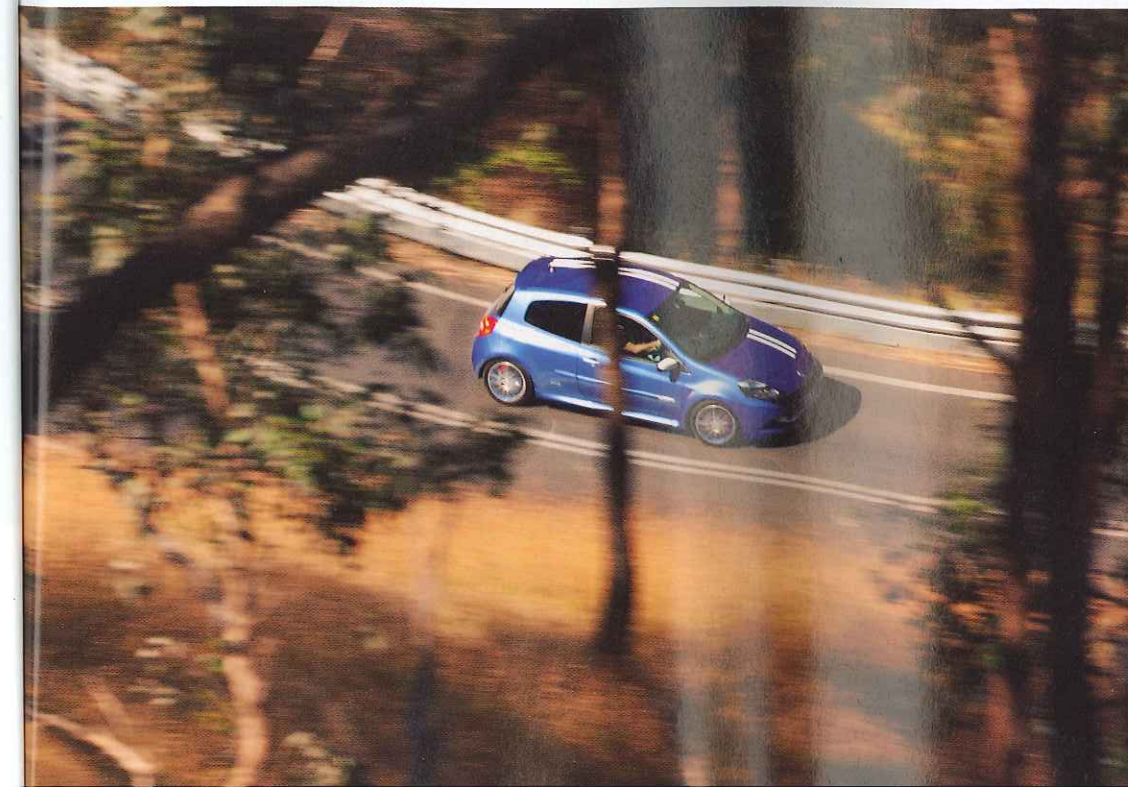
that they make fast affordable, so let's consider the cash. The average sticker in the light class is \$38K; the Clio Gordini costs a bit more, the DS3 DSport manual a bit less. The least expensive starter, Volkswagen's \$27,790 Polo GTI, undercuts this average by \$10K, while the Mini JCW, the second most expensive in the field, costs \$10K more than the average, at \$49,200.

The average of the small starters is \$46K. Forty grand, give or take, gets you into the Type R, 3 MPS, WRX and Golf GTI, \$46,990 for Megane RS and \$48,490 for the Golf R in its least expensive three-door, manual form (it's \$52,490 for the five-door DSG). Only the \$59,990 Focus RS is over the odds.

We couldn't get a Subaru STi, but now it's again offered as a sedan, its even more Evo rival than hot hatch. Mitsubishi's Evo junior – the Lancer Ralliart Sportback – while plenty more entertaining than an oil-burning, tri-diamond ute, can't quite mix it with the talented latest crop.

Audi's too-new RS3 and Alfa's Guilietta QV (see p129) will fight another day because the German's not yet on sale and the Italian was just off the boat.

Our road-test crew fell into natural roles. Contributing writer Glenn Butler led the Mexican army, armed with his local knowledge and handy wheel skills. COTY wranglers 'Disco' Stu Orford and James 'Cletus' Lacey sorted grub and took the piss. Butler's buddy, Dave McMaster, Brunelli's mate, Darren Fahey, and father of the Commodore Cup, Maurie Platt all proved top blokes to have around when you need a job done, a car spanked, or a pot drained. Driver trainer, racer, engineer and COTY





judge Samantha Reid dissected cars and lap times, even drivers. While Melbourne race driver Sam Abay is the fella you want if you're after consistently quick driving and ace feedback.

PART 1: YARRA RANGES

TWO YEARS on from the Black Saturday bushfires that devastated the region, the landscape surrounding Marysville, in Victoria's Murrindindi Shire, remains stark. Blackened Mountain Ash stand free of foliage, others with a fuzz of small leaves, making them appear like towering, green pipe cleaners.

The corners – signposted in many areas sub-50km/h – duck, weave, climb and fall through the Yarra Ranges National Park. Undulations to test body control, and gravel-strewn switchbacks to test commitment, make the region the ideal testing ground.

"It's the only one so far that's stepped out on me unexpectedly," warned James Cleary of the Mini John Cooper Works. I approached with a degree of caution.

The Mini's performance is instantly gratifying. Less than a kay down the road, I was convinced. This is the very blueprint for a hot hatch.

To some, the dash and cabin were evocative of the original Mini. Others thought it naff, citing the switchgear and that enormous central speedo. It certainly feels expensive and well-built – the Mini's doors are chunky, and heavier than you'd expect for its size – which it bloody should for almost 50 grand.

Just as the 1275cc Cooper S did 48 years ago, the latest hot Mini stuffs a big engine into a light chassis. Not big in capacity, at 1598cc, but big on grunt, with 155kW and 260Nm (or 280Nm, foot flattened, on overboost) in the lightest chassis here, at a trim 1130kg. Golf GTI grunt, then, in a package 250kg lighter.

There's lusty shove on a cracked throttle, and fast-forward urgency held wide-open, to a sweetly tuned,

richly rorty – and loud – tune that's more old-school atmo than an engine clearly relying so heavily on boost for power has any right to be. The only enticement out of the frantic, fruity grunt zone is the uncultured *whip-crack-pop-clap* that accompanies a lift.

Slide the oiled shift lever for a new cog and there's perceptibly no pause in the fury; the little mill immediately on boost in each gear, reeling in the road. However, the single-wheelspin-prone JCW would benefit hugely from a real LSD (see breakout, below).

Despite that, the Mini could run with the big guns on the dragstrip. Its terminal speed of 159km/h over 400m was topped only by the Focus RS (164km/h), and it was third-quickest 80-120km/h with a 3.72sec sprint. Meanwhile, it was fourth-quickest overall to 400m, only bettered by the AWD pair and the Ford.

Although we didn't encounter blemished tar of the kind you find in cities, the ride on country roads felt less 'karty' than I recalled from a previous squirt in inner Sydney; the dynamic flavour more fluid, less reliant on grip and stiffness; more on poise and polish.

It reacts to the well-weighted steering wheel with immediacy and points with alacrity. Agility and plenty of grip mean 'chuckable' is the word. The trade-off is stability can suffer, the tail hinting it's not afraid to be first through the corner, especially when you've been hard on the powerful picks.

From the second most expensive, to a rival that's the group's least expensive starter. The Polo GTI is less than half the price of the Focus RS.

Okay, so immediately the Polo GTI is less focused. But cabin comfort, ambience and quality give nothing away to the \$20K more expensive Mini. The tartan seats – not for everyone, but I like them – grip and locate front-seaters better than those of its rival.

There's not the visceral engine experience of the JCW. In comparison, the tailpipes emit a muted sportiness. But the twice-forced 1.4 offers generous flexibility, and has grunt everywhere. After a small stumble from a standstill as the seven-speed gearbox engages the first of its clutches, the supercharger gets things moving with oomph to defy the four's 1390cc capacity. The turbo then takes the baton and powers seamlessly to a 132kW peak.

With its perfect rim thickness and soft-feel material, the VW steering wheel itself is a delight, but is allied to light steering that takes an enthusiastic hook into a corner to reveal feel. The softness pervades, with chassis squirm on change of direction, a feeling it's working the squeal-prone front rubber harder than



THE MINI'S PERFORMANCE IS INSTANTLY GRATIFYING. THIS IS THE VERY BLUEPRINT FOR A HOT HATCH



BELOW: BIG TORQUIN' FRONT-DRIVES BATTLE – THE FOCUS HAS MORE AND PUTS IT DOWN BETTER. GOLF HEADS POLO IN VOLKSWAGEN GTI FACE-OFF

Pick the diff

You can pick a serious hot hatch from its differential. Ford thinks its approach is best; the Focus RS's press release reading: "[the RS's Quaife helical LSD] was very deliberately chosen over other available solutions, such as electronic torque truncation." That description refers to the 'electronic differential lock' strategy at work in Mini's JCW and Volkswagen's Polo and Golf

GTI and Golf R (which don't have LSDs). It uses the ESC and ABS systems to control wheelspin and divert torque by braking left or right wheels. The Megane RS shares its planetary gear-type diff with the Ford, while the 3 MPS uses a cone-type LSD, and the WRX applies torque through its AWD and a viscous LSD. With 200Nm less than the Focus, there's no LSD at all in Citroën's DS3.



ivals, and a longer, less-responsive brake pedal.

Perhaps the compliance in springs, dampers and bushes integral to the compact Vee Dub's class-leading ride and refinement also rob it of crispness to match harder competitors. Still, that's probably a compromise many buyers will be happy with.

Clearly aptly summarised the Polo: "Quick, safe and fun". Add to that 'cheap', and it's a worthy package.

Citroën's DS3 and Renaultsport's Clio Gordini bring a welcome Gallic charm and flavour to the genre from the country that was there (with Germany) in the pioneering days of the hot hatch. The French pair rounds out the charge of the light brigade.

Renaultsport's Clio is something of a benchmark for focus and driver involvement. But the buzz among the crew was the Clio was a bit gutless. That's perhaps a function of the fact it now represents the last of the atmo heroes battling a force-fed invasion. But also that its once heroic torque-to-weight has been diluted. Ten years ago, the RS Clio – with essentially the same, high-revving 2.0-litre four – weighed little more than a tonne. It now weighs 1281kg...

Still, the immediate impression after a quick blat was that through a broad mid-range and low gearing it does a good job with what it's got, even if that isn't much. Meanwhile, the tasty, muted throb that ripens as revs pile on subjectively adds an earful of kilowatts.

The perceived quality in the third-gen Clio marks massive improvement over its predecessors. Recaro does the comfortable, supportive and well-cited front pews, but Renault has done a fine job of making the other bits you touch feel – pedals, gearlever and wheel. It's well-weighted and attached to an apex-homing front-end that delivers reassuring grip.

The Clio gives you confidence thanks to a palpable sense of front-to-rear balance. Cornered hard, tripod-style, the overworked outside rear will slew into progressive oversteer on lift-off, helping point the nose. Not that exuberant? The powerful brakes and well-calibrated stability control system do a great job of slowing you down, tidying you up, and keeping you out of the scenery. Yep, the Clio RS remains a cracker.

We welcome such a defiantly French aesthetic as that at work with the DS3. Approached from almost any angle, the Citroën looks quirky. Its odd, floating triangular B-pillar adds to an impression it's in fact not a hatch at all, but rather a small delivery van. And perhaps it was the yellow hue that left some punters unconvinced, though Maurie was full of praise for the richness and depth of the paint.

Despite what for some was a slightly 'Italian' driving position, few could fault the DS3 from sat behind the wheel. Here's a rare small car in which to demolish kilometres in comfort, courtesy of lush ride quality that smooths ripples and takes hits in its stroke. Light, precise steering, moonshot gearing and a level of softness that means a perceptible period to settle after quick directional changes reinforce the DS3's laid-back demeanour, yet at its core is a front-driver sorted by chassis engineers who know their rebound valves from their bump stops. This newest Citroën is a driver's beacon in an otherwise ordinary line-up. If you're looking for some offbeat Euro-cool this is so much better than a Mito.

My notes read: "Less focused than Clio, possibly not too far off on track". With the extra turbo mid-range, you get the feeling that this poised Frenchie could give the Clio a hard time. But would either of them – or the Polo – have the pace to out sprint the hard-charging Mini? We would have to wait until Haunted Hills to find out.

PART 2: THE ROAD TO HAUNTED HILLS

WITHOUT choosing it, it seemed I ended up in the Civic Type R a lot when the time came to grab keys and make for the cars. With plenty of fresh metal and a bunch of occasional road-testers, it gave a good gauge of appeal. The Focus RS was a favourite. Although few actually said they'd consider owning one, *everyone* wanted to drive it. It just looked the fastest, what with its gaping air intakes, wings, flared arches, massive rubber and toxic green shade. And kinda was. Other popular picks: the Golfs – easy-going yet quick – and the Megane somewhere between them and the Ford.

At launch in mid 2007 the Type R looked futuristic, but the look – inside and out – has dated, along with its approach to performance. Volkswagen's benchmark for hot-hatch liveability – the Golf GTI – delivers its performance effortlessly; in the Civic, you really have to work for it.

But it's not too much of a hardship. The gearlever slots into each gate swiftly and without resistance, the VTEC 2.0-litre four revving without relent, before swapping to a new cam profile – and a deep vibrato – above about five grand and powering with new-found conviction to the 8000rpm redline. You need to keep this mill spinning up there for it to do its best work.

Honda – former maker of winning Formula 1 engines – brings rare race-car sonics to a road-registered hatchback with the Type R's super-tourer soundtrack. Trouble is, with 1345kg to haul, and gearing lower than your average rock crawler, the sound and fury doesn't signify anything fast. You're swapping cogs frantically, engine buzzing like a swarm of march flies, but it just ain't that quick.

On a flowing country road, where you can keep it

Hot or wot?

REWIND to the late 1960s, and Lamborghini's stunningly beautiful Miura stood as the poster car for a generation of playboys; its 3.9-litre, mid-mounted V12 producing a quad-cam, quad-Weber Italian symphony.

But if you've just laid down seven figures for a pristine example of this landmark supercar, prepare to be embarrassed.

Contemporary tests had the original P400 Miura – with its Bizzarrini-designed 260kW V12 – taking around 6.5 seconds to reach 100km/h. That's Golf GTI pace. A bog-standard WRX, the quickest of our hot hatches, would positively hose it off.

So while the Miura might still get you the prime nightclub parking spot, best not to take on that Mini JCW revving maniacally at the lights.

Clearly, the hot hatch has come a long way since the original Mk1 Golf GTI arrived in the mid-1970s. With 82kW to shift just 830kg, it defined the big-power, small-car genre.

The hot hatch

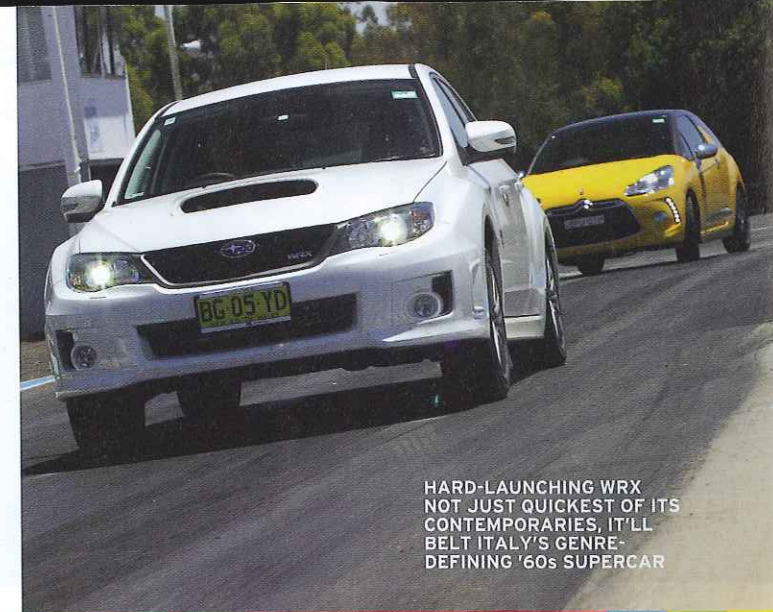
phenomenon really hit its straps locally with the 1989 launch of the sixth-generation Corolla. The hot SX variant set a new benchmark for affordable performance. A huge fuss was made of the fact the SX produced 100kW from 1.6-litres. Weighing 1085kg, its power-to-weight ratio of 92kW/tonne was close to the original featherweight Golf's 99kW/tonne.

Fast-forward a couple of decades and the current entry-level Corolla Ascent develops – you guessed it – 100kW. But there's no talk of record-breaking performance here. This grocery-getter is a little more portly, its engine slightly bigger at 1.8-litres, but that power output is now cost of entry for garden-variety hatches.

Even the least powerful hot hatch in our test line-up, the Citroën DS3, bests it by 15kW and 100Nm.

And the most powerful, the Focus RS, swamps it. Clearly, compact performance is now in an altogether different and more serious league.

JAMES CLEARY



HARD-LAUNCHING WRX NOT JUST QUICKEST OF ITS CONTEMPORARIES, IT'LL BELT ITALY'S GENRE-DEFINING '60s SUPERCAR

Interior design

Those helpful artists gave us 50 words to describe 11 interiors. That's less than five words per cabin. Generous, huh? So, here they are, from cheap (WRX and 3) to cheerful (DS3 and Clio), retro (Mini) to futuristic (Type R), and from classy (VWs) to racey (Focus and Megane).

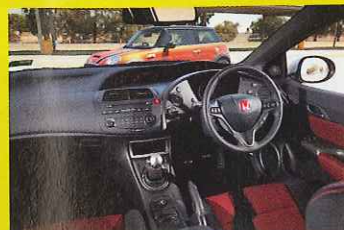
02 FORD FOCUS RS



04 MAZDA 3 MPS



03 HONDA CIVIC TYPE R



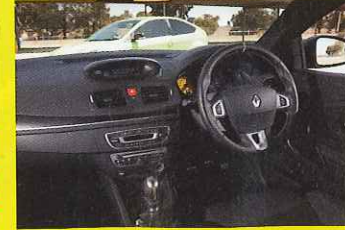
05 MINI JCW



06 RENAULT CLIO RS 200



07 RENAULT MEGANE RS 250



08 SUBARU WRX



09 VW GOLF GTI



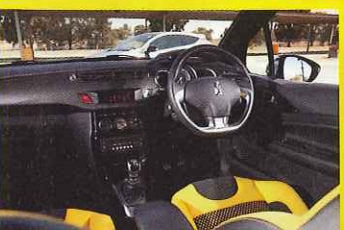
10 VW GOLF R



11 VW POLO GTI



01 CITROËN DS3 DSPORT





SQUIRM AND WEIGHT TRANSFER ARE NON-EXISTENT AS YOU OFFER THE MEGANE'S NOSE TO THE APEX



Hey, knucklehead

d's much-hyped
roknuckle front
ension is a big part of
y the Focus RS puts its
kW and 440Nm through a
r of front tyres so
actively. But the lesser-
own PerfoHub front-end
nd on Renault's Megane
since the 225, and on Clio

since the 197, is almost
identical. Like a strut front
suspension, but with an
upright and a hub carrier
like a double-A-arm front
suspension, it gives the
steering its own axis of
rotation independent of
the strut (which no longer
rotates). Clever stuff.



CLIO MAY LACK GRUNT IN
THIS COMPANY BUT NOT
ENTERTAINMENT VALUE.
SEEN HERE DOING ITS BEST
SPRINTCAR IMPERSONATION



singing it's a lot of fun. In the suburbs if you're not prepared for a max-commitment launch you'll lose the traffic light Grand Prix to ... anything automatic.

Lining up the Type R next to the 3 MPS at Heathcote illustrates the point. The Honda's low-down torque deficit helped it off the line cleanly, nosing it ahead slightly, while the Mazda's excess had the opposite effect. Keep it in the revs and shift quickly, and it can hold off the Mazda's turbo comeback until midway through third. But in its third-gear, 80-120km/h rolling response, the Honda trails the torquey Mazda by more than 30 percent (5.08sec versus 3.79).

(Man) Sam had derided the Type R for its lack of front-end grip, blaming its too-stiff rear suspension. He was right; the Honda's entry speeds were dictated by the early, and scrubby, onset of understeer, meaning you had to rely on getting out the other side quickly ... clearly not going to happen.

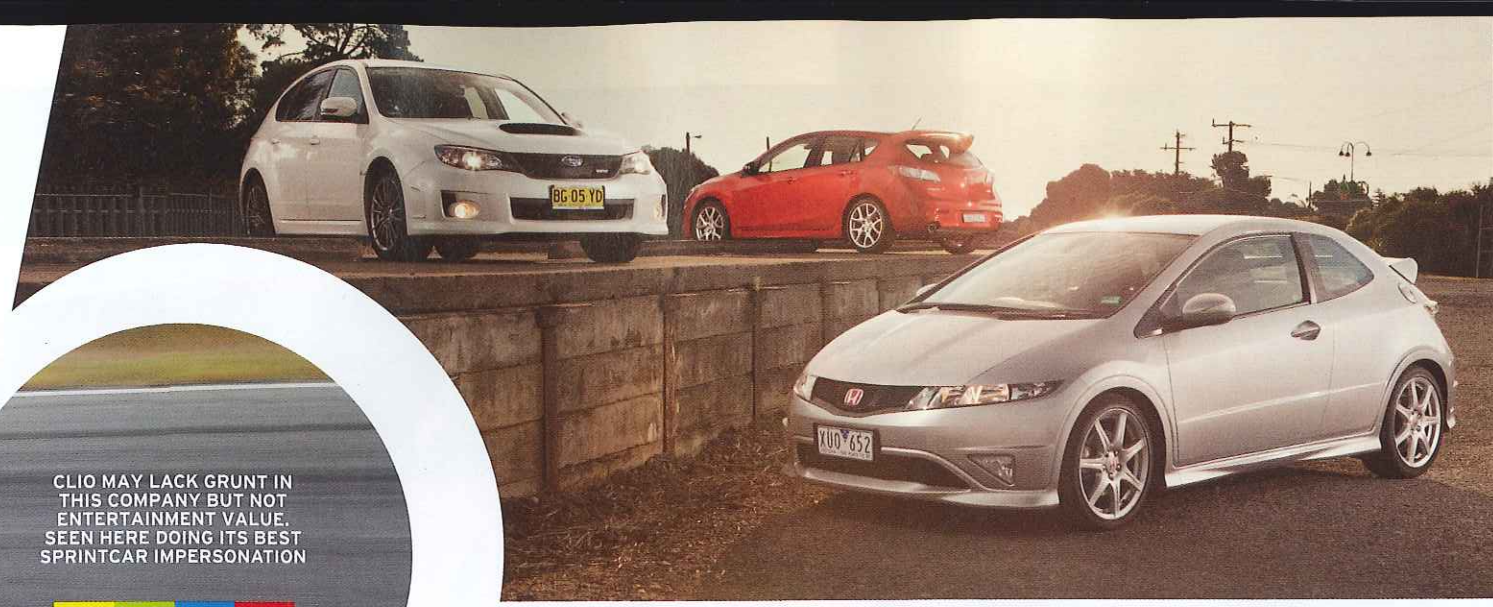
In the words of ... um, me, it was turbo time – everything else in the class has a snail.

As probably one of the last motor journos on the planet to steer the RS 250, and as a former Clio RS owner, I approached the squat, sexy Megane with great anticipation.

It's hard to believe that the hot hatch that was previously the big-bummed oddball is now firmly the best looking. In RS guise, it blends French adventure with genuine coupe-like appeal and muscle. The charcoal worn by our example also elevated the Renault above the rude-boy style of its little brother.

The cabin is approaching VW-perceived quality, but the card key and yellow tachometer are a reminder this is no austere German. The Recaro recliners offered in the Trophée spec of our test car do without the anti-submerging airbags of the basic RS, but bring near fixed-back race-seat levels of lateral support. Sam reckoned the Megane felt the most race-car-like to sit in, and the former British F3 driver has sat in a few.

Race-car-like to drive, too. Squirm, float and lateral weight transfer are almost non-existent as you offer the nose to the clipping point via the lovely sculpted wheel. It's connected to accurate steering that sends quality feedback streaming up the column. Wipe pace on the progressive Brembos, turn in, and front grip levels defy the bugged rubber on our example. A brief lift is rewarded with a perfect attitude-finessing nose tuck in readiness to fire on a fat slug of torque backed by a delicious blend of turbo whoosh and throaty induction growl.



It's a triumph of chassis development that the suspension – while not DS3-plush – controls the body so well while rounding off bumps and blotting hits. It all amounts to a thoroughly honed, well-engineered character that makes the Megane feel much more than its \$47K, and ready to obliterate any scything, sinuous road you care to point it at. Impressive.

Meanwhile, the Lambo-esque pearlescent lime of the Focus RS signposts it as the supercar of hot hatches, and that's exactly what it amounts to.

Like a shiny, new Aussie muscle car in a country town, the Ford has a magnetic pull. A long-time reader we chatted to in Moe professed a love for local muscle, but said he'd park an RS in his garage as a weekend toy. I wanted to let him take it for a spin, before I remembered the buzz-kill that is OH&S.

Sitting in the Focus isn't the best advertisement for it. It's the most expensive car here, but from a quick look around the interior you wouldn't know it. Ford Team RS has wasted no cash inside that could be better spent making kilowatts or applying them to the road. Developing the 'Revoknuckle' front suspension, and mustering a warrantable 224kW and 440Nm from the Volvo-sourced 2.5-litre turbo five surely consumed a fair chunk of the bucks.

Given it's the engine and its prodigious output that defines the Focus RS, it's a remarkable achievement that the chassis leaves such a lasting impression.

Ford's succeeded in giving the steering across its range a slick, friction-free feel. Only, they don't usually possess such sharpness and reactivity as the RS. Mid-corner, there's so much grip that it suddenly seems feasible to give it a bootful. Or, erm ... a squeeze of throttle, because this donk is a bit feral.

You can feel the sophistication in the front suspension helping the green streak hook up to busted bitumen with just a trace of wheel-wriggle as you feed in grunt.

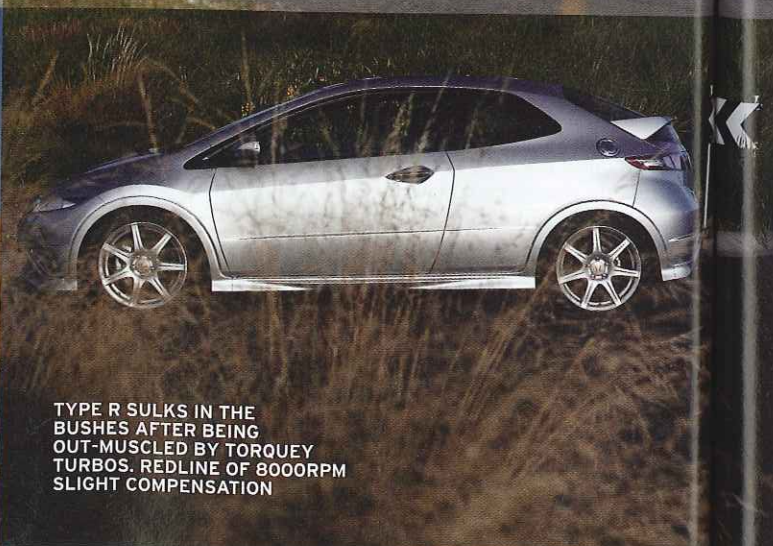
On yer bike

Hot hatches may represent brilliant bang for the buck in the car world, but they've got nothing on the crotch-rocket insanity provided by Japanese sports motorcycles. Current models of the metal pictured here at a rest stop on Lake Mountain produce around 150kW, weigh less than 200kg wet, and spit you from 0-400m in under 10sec. For less than \$20K. What you save not buying a car you can use to top up your life insurance.





LITTLE IN THE LIGHT CLASS
COULD TOUCH THE MINI JCW
T HAUNTED HILLS, BUT THE
OLO GTI IS NEXT-QUICKEST
AND \$20K CHEAPER



TYPE R SULKES IN THE
BUSHES AFTER BEING
OUT-MUSCLED BY TORQUEY
TURBOS. REDLINE OF 8000RPM
SLIGHT COMPENSATION

Soon you build up to deploying the full force of 440Nm and riding the power curve to its 7000rpm peak.

Given the cat-on-carpet ability to change direction, the pair of thinly padded, heavily bolstered front seats are a necessity, much like everything else in the Focus.

There's supercar in the way the RS inhales the suddenly short straights linking the corners; its evil five-pot howl reminiscent of a Lambo V10 (it's kinda half of one), but overlaid by a manic turbo whoosh and the rasp of tortured gases exiting the exhaust. I want one ... for a weekend.

It could have been unfair to the Golf GTI to jump straight from the Focus into it. To its credit, the direct comparison did the Volkswagen no disservice. As the reigning all-rounder king of the hot hatches, the GTI offered the refuge I was seeking from the noise and fury of our most frenetic contenders, and from the searing Melbourne summer heat.

It's damning when applied to a potential mate, but calling the Golf 'nice' is no criticism. Its appeals are rich from the moment you thud the door shut and hunker down in the driver's seat; the GTI cabin is simply a nice place.

It's not a function of money spent because you can pay a lot more and be less cosseted – witness the bare-bones Focus – more an illustration of the skill with which Volkswagen crafts its interiors. The seats, trimmed in cloth with tartan inserts, are ergonomically spot-on; the design and materials a joy to behold and a tactile delight to touch.

With the air-con cranking and the soundtrack of summer – the Ashes – piped in via AM radio, the DSG turbo Golf represented fast, relaxed country road motoring.

There were spurts of enthusiasm. Paddle the six-speed 'box back a couple of ratios and tap into the rich vein of mid-range offered by the 155kW 2.0-litre turbo; guide via the precise – if not feelsome – steering and revel in a chassis beautifully balanced and unperturbed by imperfect roads.

However those in search of the nth degree of involvement will look elsewhere; the GTI flatters, rather than challenges the driver. But for many – and this is already the case if you look at how many of them there are on Aussie roads – a Golf GTI will represent the perfect blend of everyday transport with the ability to entertain for the occasional country road adventure.

BURNING QUESTION FOR WOULD-BE GTI BUYERS IS: "SHOULD I GET THE GOLF R?"

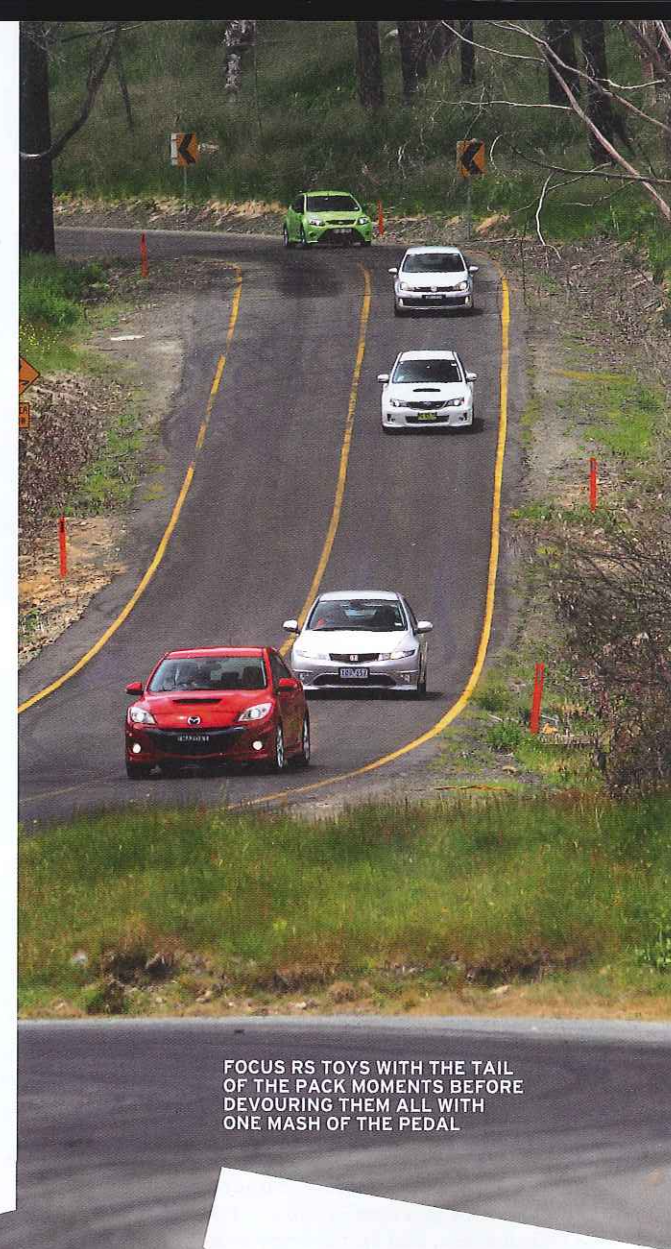
The burning question in the minds of many would-be GTI buyers, though, is: "Should I spend the extra and get the R?"

In the sense that it offers more of a good thing, the simple answer is "yes". Interesting that the R represented here in three-door manual form narrows the price gap from \$9500 like-for-like (in terms of number of doors and transmission) to \$5500 compared with our five-door, DSG GTI.

The improvements are well-rounded and take nothing away from the liveability of the basic package. The R looks tougher; burbles a fraction more deeply; goes harder; grips with added tenacity, and feels a bit more special inside.

At Heathcote, despite having a handful fewer kilowatts-per-tonne, the Golf R headed the Megane RS off the line and carried the advantage all the way to the 400-metre mark. Its AWD, while difficult to fully capitalise on due to the high-grip surface (our best launch was on grass/gravel), meant clean launches where the Renault scrambled for grip.

It really depends on how occasional the country road adventures are. If your Golf is bound to spend most of its days doing the commute, it's arguably less worthwhile outlaying the extra, so effectively does the GTI fulfil that dual role.



FOCUS RS TOYS WITH THE TAIL
OF THE PACK MOMENTS BEFORE
DEVOURING THEM ALL WITH
ONE MASH OF THE PEDAL





If you're seeking the involvement that's lacking in the GTI, you won't really find it in the R, either. If you want more grunt and grip because you can have it, a universally appealing package, go right ahead. You won't be disappointed with VW's hottest Golf yet.

Unlike the Focus-to-Golf comparison, stepping directly from the Golfs to the Mazda 3 MPS perhaps doesn't hurt the Japanese car.

You work out your priorities quickly after driving the turbo Mazda hatch. The former king of front-drive cars, or at least, power and torque – because it isn't really easy turning it into actual forward motion – isn't quite a place to sit as the Volkswagens. Okay, so little bit of an Audi can out-do Volkswagen for welcoming cabin comfort and ambience. But the Mazda's materials look and feel markedly cheaper than the GTI and R's, and the design is less elegant.

Still, you clearly buy the MPS for its grunt – 380Nm and 190kW, in that order – rather than its grace. It's quicker but less comfortable or relaxed than the Volkswagens, and surprisingly more prone to torque-induced wheel-wrenching than even the Ford.

The 3 is properly urgent, its burbly note off idle turning into a whooshing wall of Newton-metres as the tachometer swings towards the red with intent, meaning there's little need to stir via the long-throw gearlever. When it's not being torn from your hands, the Mazda's wheel is light, slick and quick, but not a great use of the traction available to the front tyres.

The chassis is sweetly balanced and there's generous grip on offer, but with the torque-steer and a lack of limit body control, it can all end up feeling ragged. Rewarding when you get it right, the MPS is a challenge to pedal cleanly and quickly, lacking the Volkswagens' ability to devour a country road without using a sweat. That said, even seven-tenths in the 3 still see you covering ground at a rapid rate.

In the end, it depends on what you prioritise – will it

be classy sophistication, or cheap speed?

It's a near-identical trade-off at work with Subaru's WRX; a car whose three letters still stand for affordable performance. Impressively, the 195kW 2011 Rex is an identical \$39,990 to the 155kW 1994 original.

The boxer builds progressively from its newly deep, dulcet *dub-dub-dub* cruise to a forceful, free-revving top-end that, while not pleasing to the ear in a traditional sense, is unmistakably quick-Subie.

With its trademark AWD, the WRX sidesteps the Mazda's power-down problems. It demolished the Heathcote strip and all comers, reeling off the quickest time as its boxer throb segued into a mechanical thresh, with a whine from the hard-worked, notchy-shifting gearbox, followed by the wafting stench of punished clutch. Subaru's former '90s cult car remains highly effective against the stopwatch (or VBox), if not particularly pleasant to extract the best from.

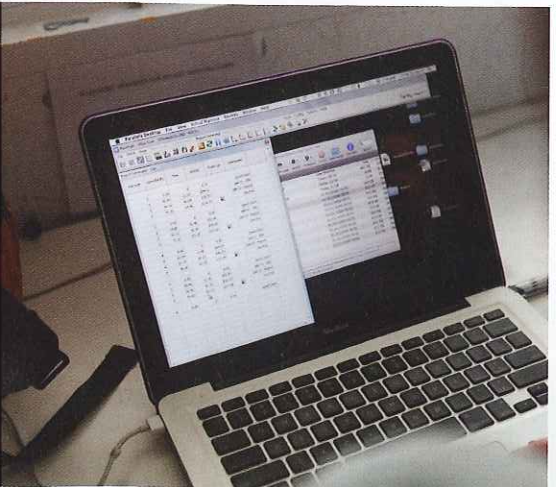
In its most recent facelift, in 2010, Fuji's heavies had their second crack in as many years at getting the WRX's dynamics and aesthetics right. And, with its adopted STi cues – most notably the pumped guards, but also its four-tailpipe exhaust system – the third-generation turbo Impreza at last has the visuals to match the mechanical muscle. Inside, though, there's still little that's 'soft-touch' or 'high-grade', just lots of hard, shiny plastic.

Under the skin, it boasts wider front and rear tracks (by 35 and 40mm respectively), wider rubber on new, charcoal 17s, and revised suspension featuring new rear sub-frame bushings designed to better maintain toe and camber angles under dynamic loads.

The weak link remains the steering – lifeless and devoid of feel, but also prone to kickback and running out of assistance under duress. Compounding the front-end disconnect is a pervasive rubberiness that, while less pronounced than in previous iterations, saps confidence and enjoyment. The sensation is of a chassis with tenacious all-wheel-drive purchase, underpinning a body perched on it via too-soft bushes.

There's grip and pace in the Subaru but not the feel-good experience offered by more traditional hot-hatch rivals. But then, the WRX has never been about offering feedback and tactility to rival a 911. Rather, it's about providing affordable boosty grunt and grip to run with supercars on back-roads.

So, how would it fare against its rivals at Haunted Hills, where driver appeal matters less than what the stopwatch says? We were about to find out.



Go the pro

Our hired gun, Sam Abay, 23, raced karts from the age of nine, before spending two years in Formula BMW and a year in British Formula 3. It was sweaty work wringing the best from our hatches in the sweltering heat, but like the pro he is, Sam dug in and took one for team...

VW POLO GTI

"Top end is good, steering is very direct, great brakes"

RENAULT MEGANE RS 250

"The most race-car-like of the lot"

CITROËN DS3

"Soft, predictable: doesn't bite"

MAZDA 3 MPS

"Can't cope with the power"

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

"Rear end sits so flat, which means it just pushes into understeer"

FORD FOCUS RS

"The engine's immense; chassis really fun"

SUBARU WRX

"Felt like I was bouncing around in a jumping castle"

RENAULT CLIO RS 200

"Loves to rev to 7500rpm. Good little chassis; very tight – great to drive"

"Puts power down much earlier than FWDs can"

VW GOLF R

"Chassis tells you everything; I felt like driving lap after lap"

MINI JCW

"Wow! Such a balanced chassis. Fantastic engine"

VW GOLF GTI

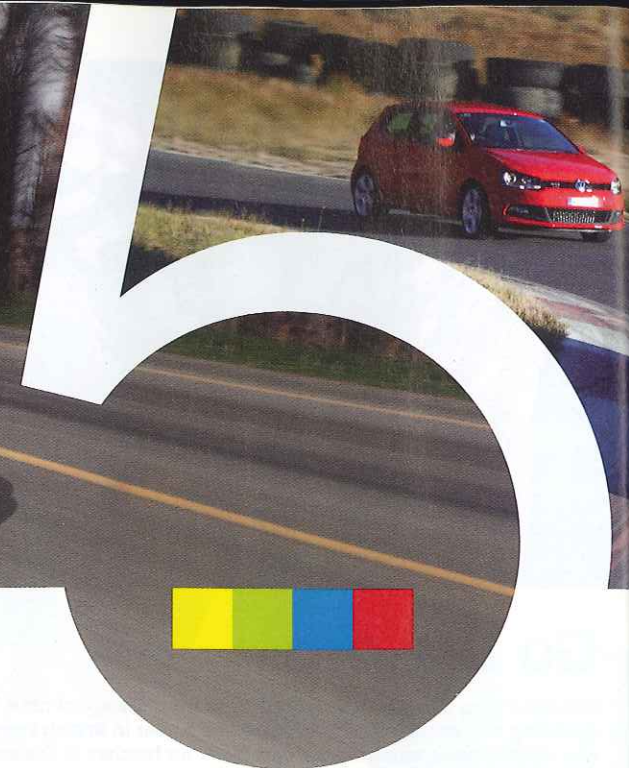




dvance from the rear

While all our hatched heroes use strut front suspension, there are broadly two types of rear suspension featured. Torsion beam rear suspension is cost-effective to produce and superior from a packaging point of view. However, it isn't independent because each wheel is tied to a lateral beam. Proven,

though: legendary hot hatches like the Peugeot 205 GTI and Clio Williams utilised the design. So do the Polo, Clio, DS3, Type R and Megane. The rest use independent rear suspensions – double A-arms in the WRX, and multi-links for the rest – which brings the potential for improved ride and handling.



EXCITEMENT PEAKED AS SPECTATORS GATHERED AT THE BEST VANTAGE POINTS IN WAIT FOR THE FOCUS RS TO TAKE TO THE STARTLINE

HAUNTED HILLS SHOOTOUT

THEY were about to meet their toughest test yet at Haunted Hills, but not before the Moe Hotel Bar Support Superstructure, aka The Test Crew, had put them through the ringer. Dave, or 'Crash' as I only now discover they call him, is looking for a replacement for his leased Golf GTI and reckons the R is it, despite the Megane RS being similar cash and more fun: "If I buy a Renault the poor resale means I'll be stuck with Renaults." Stu and Cletus agree the Golf R lacks real driver-involving fizz and are genuinely surprised it's actually quicker than most in a straight line.

Maurie, meanwhile, not knowing the Clio's reputation, had earlier been a bit underwhelmed. That's not Euro-snobbery from the 1998 Commodore Cup champ, because he reckons the Citroën DS3 is a great little car. He's just emerged from the 3 MPS and, judging by the amount of time it spent filling my WRX's rear-view mirror, found it pretty effective, too.

About 150km east of Melbourne, Haunted Hills nestles in the rolling hills of the former State

Electricity Commission-owned town of Yallourn. It's as much hill descent as climb, narrow and picturesque in the diffuse morning light. Surrounded by yellowed grass, stunted by the scorching sun, one of its many excitements is 'Oh shit', a steeply falling, off-camber right-hander over a crest where I'm told a bloke once binned his Skyline on a sighter.

Taking a guess at the finishing order, Abay heads out roughly from least-quick to quickest. The Type R first, which sounds fantastically rorty, but proves slowest by more than half a second. It needs more torque and less understeer.

The Clio, too, sounds terrific, but only tops the DS3 by virtue of its more focused chassis and the extra corner speed this allows. Sam says of the Citroën, "Good torque – pulls from very low down". The Polo GTI, with less focus than the Renault, but more grunt than the Citroën, beats them both, but there was less than a tenth from it back to the Clio.

The Golf GTI – The Benchmark – sat bang in the middle, which was neither surprising nor

disappointing. Sam reckons it has great balance and plenty of grunt. See, nice. But the 3 MPS is a bit of a disappointment given its similarity to the Volkswagen in terms of specification and price. Its extra 35kW and 100Nm compared with the VW hurt rather than help it, and it looks untidy. "Turn-in is a bit sloppy; it doesn't want to carry too much mid-corner speed," says Sam, adding that "There's prominent kickback through the wheel ... you're constantly fighting it."


The Golf R's first strafe rings out like a round of warning shots; it's more than a second quicker than anything else so far. With lots of slower corners, its all-wheel drive helps the R shave tenths everywhere, using its boosted 188kW to slingshot from apices.

The WRX, in a repeat demo of the benefits of all-paw grip, goes a fraction quicker than the Volkswagen, but is less fun. Sam: "It feels like the driveline's made out of rubber," though adding that "the engine loves to rev – it really does pick up and go."

Excitement peaks as Saturday arvo spectators gather at the best vantage points in wait for the Focus RS to

take to the startline. The fluoro Ford leaves the line with turbo five-pot fury to mark itself as a serious contender for outright honours. It looks seriously fast along the back straight, but ultimately can't stay neatly on line like its best rivals. I think everyone is surprised and a bit disappointed that it can't better the two AWDs. Not on the tight confines of Haunted Hills at least, though it almost certainly could on a full-size circuit.

There are two standouts. Not content to pick on rivals its own size, the Mini John Cooper Works leaves them in its dust, recording the fifth-quickest time overall, one spot (albeit almost a second) behind the Focus RS. "Lots of fun – engine is so powerful," says Abay.

But it's Renault's Megane RS 250 that is King of the Hill(s). Blisteringly fast, it moves with race-car fluency to be more than two-tenths quicker than the AWD pair and almost half a second quicker than the Focus RS. Sam sums it up: "Makes you feel like you've done all the work, when really the car is just so great at what it does." Good looking, great value, fun and fast. It's our hot hatch hero. 



Data central

The numbers on the quickest, fastest, most-accelerative and hardest-launching – that'll be the WRX and Focus RS – and the best-handling. Plus surprises, like the Mini beating everything from 80-120km/h in sixth...

11th
HONDA CIVIC TYPE R



63.40 SEC

Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1998 in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 148kW @ 7800rpm
Torque 193Nm @ 5600rpm
Power-to-weight 110kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 143Nm/tonne
Weight 1345kg
Price \$39,990

1st

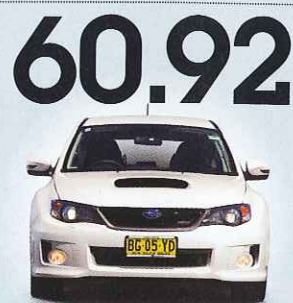
RENAULT MEGANE RS 250 TROPHÉE



60.70 SEC

Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1998 in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 184kW @ 5500rpm
Torque 340Nm @ 3000rpm
Power-to-weight 132kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 244Nm/tonne
Weight 1393kg
Price \$46,990

2nd
SUBARU WRX



60.92 SEC

Drivetrain front engine (north-south), all drive
Engine 2457cc flat 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 5-speed manual
Power 195kW @ 6000rpm
Torque 343Nm @ 4000rpm
Power-to-weight 138kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 243Nm/tonne
Weight 1410kg
Price \$39,990

10th

CITROËN DS3 DSPORT

62.80 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1598cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 115kW @ 6000rpm
Torque 240Nm @ 1400-4000rpm
Power-to-weight 99kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 206Nm/tonne
Weight 1165kg
Price \$35,990

9th

RENAULT CLIO RS 200 GORDINI

62.47 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1998cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 148kW @ 7100rpm
Torque 215Nm @ 5400rpm
Power-to-weight 116kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 168Nm/tonne
Weight 1281kg
Price \$39,140

8th

VOLKSWAGEN POLO GTI 3-DOOR

62.41 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1390cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 7-speed dual-clutch
Power 132kW @ 6200rpm
Torque 250Nm @ 2000-4500rpm
Power-to-weight 111kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 210Nm/tonne
Weight 1189kg
Price \$27,790

7th

MAZDA 3 MPS LUXURY

62.40 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 2261cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 190kW @ 5500rpm
Torque 380Nm @ 3000rpm
Power-to-weight 130kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 261Nm/tonne
Weight 1456kg
Price \$41,915

6th

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF GTI 5-DOOR

62.33 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1984cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed dual-clutch
Power 155kW @ 5300-6200rpm
Torque 280Nm 1700-5200rpm
Power-to-weight 112kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 203Nm/tonne
Weight 1380kg
Price \$42,990

5th

MINI JOHN COOPER WORKS

62.01 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 1598cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 155kW @ 6000rpm
Torque 280Nm @ 2000-5300rpm
Power-to-weight 137kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 248Nm/tonne
Weight 1130kg
Price \$49,200

4th

FORD FOCUS RS



61.14 SEC

Drivetrain front engine (east-west), front drive
Engine 2522cc in-line 5cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 224kW @ 6500rpm
Torque 440Nm @ 2300-4500rpm
Power-to-weight 150kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 295Nm/tonne
Weight 1492kg
Price \$59,990

Winner

French flyer smashed front-drive Focus RS – with 40kW and 100Nm more stick – and a pair of AWD turbos to snag the Trophée by two-tenths

3rd

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF R 3-DOOR

60.98 SEC



Drivetrain front engine (east-west), all drive
Engine 1984cc in-line 4cyl, dohc, 16v turbo
Transmission 6-speed manual
Power 188kW @ 6000rpm
Torque 330Nm @ 2400-5200rpm
Power-to-weight 127kW/tonne
Torque-to-weight 224Nm/tonne
Weight 1476kg
Price \$48,490

How quick?

All-wheel drive and turbo trumped front-drive and atmo as we sorted the torquey from the porky at Heathcote...

Standing start



Rolling 80-120km/h

