

The 2016 Bentley Continental GT Speed proves its worth on Norway's super challenging roads where every turn is an adventure.

By Mark Hacking

FORCE OF NATURE

An aerial photograph of a dramatic mountain landscape. A dark asphalt road winds through a valley, featuring several sharp, hairpin turns. The valley floor is a mix of green grass and grey rocky terrain, with a small stream or riverbed visible. In the background, steep, rocky mountains rise, some with patches of snow and partially shrouded in white mist or low clouds. The overall scene conveys a sense of wild, untamed nature and a challenging driving environment.

I was in Norway for all of six hours before the Land of the Midnight Sun began to work its magic. A short haul from Amsterdam landed us in the western Norwegian town of Ålesund. From there, it was a 200-metre shuttle ride from the main terminal to a helipad where our next mode of transportation awaited.

A taxi would have sufficed, but our hosts decided that a tour of this coastal oasis from high above created a greater sense of occasion. They were right—although the weather did not cooperate.

My impression of travel by helicopter was that inclement conditions brought everything to a grinding halt. I was mistaken: Our two pilots, members of the Royal Norwegian Air Force, laughed in the face of the fog and driving rain. Literally. They joked about how they had seen a few moments of sun earlier that week in early June—in what was supposed to be the brightest month on the calendar. They



apologized for the weather as well, but needn't have; the view of Ålesund through the murk revealed a fairy tale sequence of settlements atop slivers of land set within the Atlantic Ocean: magic.

Our chopper banked sharply to the left and then careened into a forested valley on the outskirts of town, nearly nudging the treetops. It was a manoeuvre so extreme, our pilots felt compelled to warn us that it was about to happen. A landing spot came into view; it was little more than a dirt circle carved into a dirt road. We touched down and were ushered by our umbrella-laden hosts along this road to the main building of the Storfjord Hotel, our accommodations for the evening.

A group of automobile writers, including myself, had come to Norway for a grand tour from behind the wheel of one of the world's best grand touring machines, the Bentley Continental GT Speed. On the surface of it, this seemed a long way to go for a sightseeing jaunt by car, no matter how

spectacular the car.

But from very early on, as we began to explore the county of Møre og Romsdal in greater depth and under sunnier skies, the reason behind the trip became evident. Remote, yet far from desolate, western Norway is blessed with plenty of natural beauty.

So, too, is the Bentley Continental GT Speed.

For the 2016 model year, the most popular model in the Bentley line-up has received numerous design and engineering changes. There were six versions of the car for us to sample, an amount equal to three-quarters of the newly nipped and tucked Continental fleet.

In the interests of pursuing the ultimate in cool, comfort, and sheer performance, I opted for the Continental GT Speed Convertible—the most powerful drop-top currently available.

Powered by a hulking, twin-turbocharged W-12 engine that displaces a gargantuan 6.0 litres, this Continental can sprint from 0-100 km/h in 4.3 seconds before motoring on to a terminal velocity of 327 km/h.

Driving at these speeds is not advisable in Norway, where going over the limit is considered a serious transgression of the law. People caught going a mere 20 km/h over should expect a €436 fine. Those exceeding the posted limit by 40 km/h automatically lose their licenses. The next level involves jail time.

Here's the thing, though: Despite the Continental GT Speed Convertible being all too capable of speed—it's right there in the name, after all—the scenery demands a more leisurely approach.

The first leg of the 370-km drive sent us out in search of one of the best driving routes in the world, the notorious Trollstigen Mountain Road. A section of Norwegian National Road 63, the Trollstigen ("Troll's Ladder") features a 10 per cent grade, 11 hairpin turns and huge drop-offs. The route includes regal corner names such as Kongen (the king), Dronningen (the queen) and the Bispen (the bishop).

We approached the road from the south, passing through mountain ranges seemingly cut from carbon—the extreme angles and carved features were awe-inspiring and otherworldly. Before descending "the Ladder," we took in the Trollstigen Visitor Centre, which offers dramatic views of the Stigfossen waterfall, the valley below, and the road itself.

As we plunged down the road, the Bentley Continental GT Speed Convertible felt remarkably nimble. This is a large grand touring soft-top with 626 horsepower and a plush



The physics-defying Atlantic Road, the country's construction project of the century.



Beast amidst the beauty: the Continental GT Speed Convertible and a typically stunning Norwegian backdrop.



Two Bentleys climb the Troll's Ladder, one switchback at a time.

interior filled with wood, leather and metal. Yet it carves the series of hairpin turns and scampers around slower-moving vehicles with remarkable alacrity. The challenge completed, we set off in search of more sights and further challenges.

Around every corner, the scenery on the west coast of Norway sprang a new surprise. The area is replete with waterfalls, which allow run-off from the Scandinavian Mountains to flow into the fjords below. We drove coastal roads that skirt these fjords, back and forth, one blending into the next, and the next, and so on. The lesson here: Repetition is not necessarily tedious, far from it.

Despite harsh winters and the area's proximity to the ocean, the roads themselves are in generally fantastic shape, making the experience all the more enjoyable. There is some freedom to explore the capabilities of the Bentley—but these are far greater than the twisting roads and restrictive laws will allow, so the car's limits remain a mystery for now.

More coastal roads and small towns led us to the hamlet of Kårvåg. This is an otherwise unremarkable community, beautiful like all the rest in western Norway, except for one small fact: It marks the start of the Atlantic Road, otherwise known as the Atlantic Ocean Road.

This series of bridges and causeways link several partially inhabited islands together and was opened in 1989 after six years of construction. The Atlantic Road is also considered to be one of the most extreme driving roads in the world due to its close proximity to the at-times stormy Norwegian Sea.

In 2005, this archipelago-navigating wonder was chosen "Norway's construction of the century." Certainly, the undulating bridges that comprise part of the Atlantic Road create a fantastic motoring experience, particularly when the weather cooperates. There were no storms on this occasion, so the images were less spectacular, but the driving was no less rewarding.

One pass was not sufficient for any of us. With the sun shining, the top down and the wind whistling, the Atlantic Road from behind the wheel of the Continental GT Speed Convertible was akin to a roller coaster ride. This was not the fastest I'd ever driven a car, but it may have felt as if it were.

We ended our grand tour in the city of Kristiansund, at the tiny regional airport where a private plane would fly us back to civilization and far away from the natural beauty of western Norway. The trip was too quick—and this had nothing to do with the power of the Bentley Continental GT Speed.

