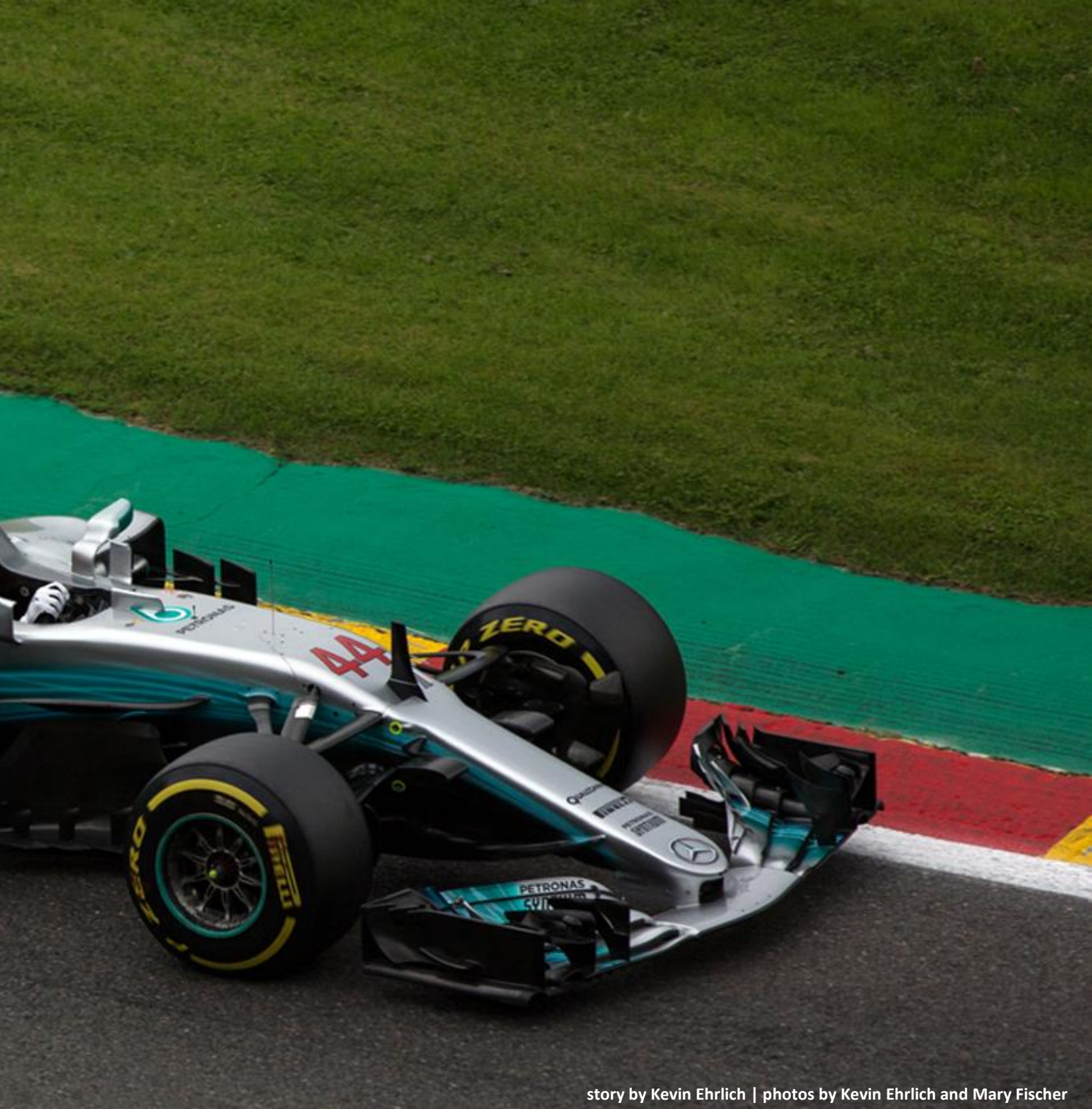




Checking a Formula One Race at Spa Francorchamps Off the Bucket List



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When the stars aligned to permit a visit to Spa Francorchamps in south eastern Belgium for the Formula One race, it was difficult to pass. The echoes of history and the drama of such a natural terrain road course are compelling. A visit to the scenic Ardennes Forest and surrounding areas in August is a lovely way to spend a few days.

Formula One is largely a made for television event with twenty grands prix spread across the globe. Television cameras capture the best views and replays, timing and scoring and driver radio chatter make it easy to feel a part of the action unfolding from the big screen in your home.

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As with any event, however, auto racing is a visceral experience. Television can't adequately capture the buzz of the crowd filing in or the excitement as fans of a particular driver, team or nationality wave their flags and sound their air horns as their favorite passes by.

There are areas in the interior of the circuit where nothing is visible but trees and the single path that leads through the forest. Sunlight struggles to breach the canopy of trees. The full racing circus is far out of sight but the wail of unseen land-based missiles echo through the dark and misty forest.

Spa Francorchamps is also a long track (4.3 miles) and a roller coaster of elevation. Television absolutely undersells this element of the circuit. It is much steeper and the elevation much more striking than digital pictures suggest.



Before going further, a robust caveat is in order. An average day at the track is still better than many good days spent elsewhere. Getting the chance to see the Formula One circus in person is great fun.



However, if you're planning to attend a race in person, it pays to do your homework and be realistic about what to expect.

Aside from the action on track, Formula One is good at selling glamour. Beautiful people strolling the grid and sipping on champagne in spiffy hospitality areas with great views taking in the action looks wonderful. It surely is - but unless you're a celebrity or a wealthy patron, that is not the experience of most visitors. Access is very restricted and very expensive.

Planning to get up close to the Formula One cars and drivers in the garages? There is usually a pit lane walk on Thursday afternoon for 3-day pass holders where you might get a glimpse. Otherwise, there is realistically no chance to get close. Same goes for the support race paddocks like Formula 2 or Porsche Supercup. By comparison, racing fans in IndyCar and sportscars enjoy incredible access.

To take in the track action, most spectators have two choices - reserved grandstand seating or general admission. A reserved ticket for one adult for 3-day weekend on the start/finish straight opposite the pits cost €580. At current exchange rates, that's about USD\$683. For one ticket. In a grandstand. With no celebrities. Or champagne.

Let's say that you would rather move to the other side of the track and watch from the top of the famous Eau Rouge corner. No race start or finish or pit activity, but Spa is all about slicing up Eau Rouge at speeds that test driver and machine, right? A single three-day pass costs €445 or about USD\$523.



Let's say that you still want a grandstand seat, but want a more modest tariff and you don't care how far away from the pits or Eau Rouge you are. A mere €385 gets you a seat at the highest elevation of the track at the Bruxelles hairpin corner. That's USD\$453. It is covered, but there are no celebrities. Or champagne.



If you're getting the sense that Formula One isn't a bargain, you're right. Most spectators at Spa skip the grandstands completely in favor of general admission tickets. A mere €145 (or USD\$171) gets you access to the grounds for three days and then it is up to you to find a spot along the fencing or in the forest. There are no reserved seats. There are no covered grandstands. There are no celebrities or champagne. But there is plenty of atmosphere...



Almost everyone around the track wears some sort of team or driver gear or national colors. Flags are carried and banners are hung. For the 2017 event, it seemed like the entire population of Holland evacuated to the circuit and bathed in orange to support Red Bull driver Max Verstappen. One estimate suggested 80,000 fans made the trip from Holland alone. They were out in numbers and they were excited.



For most, the general admission ticket is the ticket of choice. Spectators bring folding chairs, blankets, seating cushions or just sit on the ground. Steeper hillsides have been carved to create small ledges to sit or stand. In a few cases, creative fans built temporary tree houses or strung hammocks between trees. As you might imagine, the rain makes some seating

(and walking) options more precarious than others. A little mud can make those visions of celebrities, champagne and stunning vistas seem like they are miles away. Well, to be fair, given the length of the track, the fancy paddock clubs are actually miles away...

In theory, a general admission ticket ought to be a great way to move around the circuit, taking in the different parts of the track from different vistas. In practice, many spectators plant along the fences, gather around the photo holes cut into the fencing, and do not wander. The elevation and track length also have an impact on where fans can or are willing to hike for vistas. Reserved grandstands also limit access to areas of the track where they are set up, so your general admission ticket only gives you a vague notion of Eau Rouge or several other corners.



Most spectators treat the event as an opportunity for a picnic. They bring chairs, coolers, beverages and their own food. Track food and beer is always nearby with plenty of vendor trailers with frites and Heineken as the favorites.

Fancy a souvenir? Common trailers sell t-shirts, hats and other clothing and goodies for all teams and marques in the F1 fan village. Don't come expecting bargains. €30 (or



USD\$35) will be required to get a basic t-shirt or hat of your favorite marque or driver. Prices escalate from there.

The Fan Village also includes other displays. This year, Michael Schumacher's 1994 Benetton F1 car was on display. Schumacher claimed his first Formula One win at Spa 25 years ago and not only was the car brought to the track, but his son took it for a ride around the track before the race on Sunday.

Of course, spectators need to actually get to the track. Most spectators arrive by car and park in one of three parking areas – at €16 per day (appx USD\$19) – a tariff not included in your ticket price. Plan ahead because the track is large. After spectating on one end of the track, allocate about an hour to hike back to the car on the other end of track (ask us how we know). Planning ahead to reserve a parking pass closer to where you intend to be is prudent. The inevitable rain can transform the grassy parking lots into wet and muddy challenges for footing and driving to get out to pavement.

Arrive early and plan on taking some time with traffic on the way out. Hundreds of thousands of people exiting via small country roads where the local police have closed off various streets is a recipe for long waits and exiting in a direction that may be opposite of where you're trying to go to get back to your lodging for the evening.

Lodging? Where do hundreds of thousands of people stay? As marvelous is Spa as a track, it is not in a highly populated area. Small hotels and pensions can be found across the countryside, but most lodging options nearby are booked out well in advance and are often expensive. A drive of 30 or 45 minutes to lodging is not uncommon – and is still a challenge to locate and afford. Your Southwest Star correspondents opted to stay just across the German border 20+ miles away.

There are campgrounds adjacent to the track, so a good number of visitors take advantage of that option as well.

The big unknown at Spa is always the weather. It is a consistent threat no matter what the forecast says. From the comfort of a warm and dry living room, rain is an entertaining novelty. Cars throw spray into the air, squirm through corners, and technology advantages give way to driver skill. Rain is less of a welcome wrinkle for the spectators huddled against the fences



trackside. The clouds gathering to the west make no effort to hide their intentions, so the only question is when rather than if.

During the 2017 weekend, rain approached and threatened qualifying but was polite enough to hold off until just after qualifying concluded. Just after the television audience tuned out and Lewis Hamilton begun to take questions from the media regarding his pole position, the heavens opened and torrents of rain drenched the track and everyone without cover. Some spectators fled for their cars. Others retreated into the forest for cover. Others just surrendered to the inevitable soaking.



We've established that attending a Formula One race at Spa Francorchamps requires advance planning, money, a good pair of walking shoes and an umbrella. So, what's the upside?

Formula One cars are fast. Very fast. Three practice sessions, one qualifying session and the race itself gives fans the opportunity to see cornering speed unlike anything else on four wheels. By way of comparison, the fastest lap in the Porsche Supercup support race at Spa on the same weekend was 2.26.287 minutes. The fastest race lap in the Formula One race was 1:46.577 minutes – almost 40 seconds difference. A Porsche 911 GT race car is a quick piece of kit, so a gap of 40 seconds is significant.

Speaking of the Porsche, spectators were treated to a program of support races that included two Porsche Mobil1 Supercup series races. For open-wheel formula cars, the Formula 2 and GP3 series also joined the weekend calendar. Not only are these entertaining, but they often give a glimpse of the future of Formula One since many drivers come through the Formula 2 ranks.

The 2017 Formula One race at Spa proved to be a critical inflection point in the season. Ferrari and Mercedes were neck and neck coming into the race, but Mercedes and Lewis Hamilton claimed

the honors. Hamilton took the pole position on Saturday with a quarter second margin over Sebastian Vettel's Ferrari. Hamilton then converted his pole position into a win on Sunday. Vettel was always close, but just couldn't find that extra margin of speed to challenge Hamilton.

The massive contingent of Dutch fans were disappointed as their countryman Max Verstappen retired on the 8th lap of the race with engine failure.

There are many places accessible with a general admission ticket, so many fans use Friday and Saturday for reconnaissance in order to scope out a preferred location for the race on Sunday. Different areas of the track have different pros and cons. The Kemmel Straight, for example, is a long hillside stretch where cars are at top speed after exiting the Eau Rouge complex. Getting to the area is relatively easy and there are plenty of restrooms and food/beverage vendors.

Another favorite is the Bruxelles corner a little further along at the highest elevation section of the track. This is a favorite for photographers because the cars slow to make the tight corner and the spectator hillside areas allow good viewpoints above fencing. A perch high on the hills also allows a great view of the cars as they wind their way down the hill towards the Pouhon corner. Pouhon is a fast downhill section with visibility up and down the track. This area was a favorite for the Dutch fans to gather on the hillside, with their national orange clothing making for a colorful splash trackside.



Some viewing areas are further away from the track and some are closer. Most areas have a sightline to big screen televisions which are very helpful to keep track of the action and there is a PA system that erratically broadcast commentary in French and English. Regardless of where you choose to perch, always remember to take ear protection.

The headline? What a great experience to take in a Formula One race at a legendary venue. With some prudent advance planning, you'll be better prepared to know what to expect and how to make the best of the visit. Formula One puts a polished product on television, but the trackside experience of spectators in the forest is the fuel that keeps fans engaged and makes Formula One more than just a television reality show.