

A Weekend in at Sonoma



s settings for a race track go, Sonoma Raceway's perch at the portal to California's wine country is tough to beat.

The vines are close enough that spectators sitting on the hills look across to the winery and tasting room of Ram's Gate Winery which opened in 2011. Many staff also work in the wine business when they're not at the track, so the wine connection is not cliché – unlike a race in Las Vegas necessarily triggering gambling analogies or race near Los Angeles invoking show business and Hollywood references.

Wine Country Raceway



Article Kevin Ehrlich | photos Mary Fischer

Sonoma Raceway is a natural terrain road course draped across rolling hills adjacent to the San Pablo Bay about 30 miles due north of San Francisco. It features a twelve turn track that is run in different configurations for different series. It is a mainstay on the calendars for both the NASCAR and IndyCar racing series with the honor of hosting the IndyCar season finale. The track also hosts NHRA – the country’s top tier drag racing series – on the dragstrip that slices down through the middle of the facility.

The venue has remarkable sightlines, many different viewpoints to explore and easy paths to use, easy access into and out of the track, and a very friendly staff – including the security team who

will double as tour guides if you're in the wrong place or need directions around the facility. None of those are accidents or should be taken for granted. The track and staff deserve very high marks.



The three-day GoPro Grand Prix of Sonoma held from September 16-18 combined the best of open wheel and sportscar racing. The headline IndyCar series finished its season and crowned its champion during the weekend while the Pirelli World Challenge series ran two races on both

Saturday and Sunday with several different classes of cars. The IndyCars feature the familiar open wheel pure-bred racing car while the Pirelli World Challenge series features sports cars based on road models including a wide range of marques such as McLaren, Ferrari, Porsche, Acura, Bentley, Cadillac, Aston Martin and even a Mercedes AMG SLS. An additional supporting open-wheel series added to ensure that fans were treated to constant action on the track.

The Indycar race served to mostly emphasize Simon Pagenaud's dominance in his Team Penske ride. He claimed pole position in qualifying and won the race en route to formally picking up the season championship crown. While he was clearly the class of the 22 car field and led the most laps, there were many battles behind. Graham Rahal and Juan Pablo Montoya rounded out the

podium positions at the finish.



The Pirelli World Challenge races provided drama of their own. Johnny O'Connell claimed the winner trophies for both of the GT headline class races during the weekend in his red Cadillac ATS-V.R. The Saturday race

saw the veteran stalk young Austin Cindric's blue McLaren for the closing stages and dive to the inside of Turn 7 to take the lead and the win on the very last lap.

The winning margin was considerably wider on Sunday. O'Connell started third, but quickly sliced his way to the lead as a McLaren ended up spinning mid-way through the opening lap ending its day and resulting in damage for others. O'Connell disappeared and claimed the win with a margin in excess of 11 seconds.



The sole Mercedes representative in the field, the DIME Racing AMG SLS finished 13th in class and 19th overall on Saturday after a spin at the start going into the first turn put driver Jonathan Summerton at an immediate disadvantage. He recovered to record an 8th place finish overall and in class on Sunday.

The DIME Racing team struggled through drama at the beginning of the weekend. The car was damaged earlier in the year and the resulting repair was the subject of concern from driver Frankie Montecalvo. A new chassis had apparently been ordered but did not materialize and Montecalvo was concerned about the repair process and certification by Mercedes. The matter culminated on Friday morning when Montecalvo arrived at the track, found the situation



still unresolved and withdrew from the race and the rest of the season. DIME Racing arranged for Jonathan Summerton to take the wheel for the Sonoma weekend but ended up skipping the subsequent round and season finale at Laguna Seca.

The successor to the SLS GT3 race car, the AMG GT3, has been very successful in the 2016 season outside the United States and is expected to have a very visible presence in the states in 2017. The car is expected to be eligible for both the Pirelli World Challenge series and the IMSA series, so the Mercedes faithful should have a three pointed star on the track for which to cheer.

One of the features of going to a race is being able to get up close to the drivers and the cars. Fans can walk among the transporters and paddock areas and there are usually autograph sessions to ensure the spectator can take home a signature or photo as a souvenir.



While the Indycar paddock may require an additional pass and has a touch more formality about it, the sportscar paddock is open and accessible. Remember that you're in the workplace of the drivers and crews but usually teams are very happy to let you get up close for a look and take all the photos you like. It

is particularly heartening to see teams making sure the younger fans get a special tour or even get to sit behind the wheel.

The crowd covers the range of ages, genders and groupings. The presence of Giants and 49ers hats and shirts is evidence of the local pull from the greater San Francisco area. Groups of friends, families, parents with kids, teenagers and grizzled racing veterans – they're all there. The Indycar event draws a reasonable crowd but less than the NASCAR event earlier in the year. If you want more freedom to wander the track and take in the action from different seats and spots at the venue, the Indycar race is for you.

Planning a visit? The September race takes place in the midst of harvest, so it is easy to combine a weekend at the racetrack with a visit to local wineries busy bringing in the grapes. While the mornings are chilly and can be foggy, one potential drawback is that September can be warm when the fog burs off which can put a premium on water and shade. Another challenge can be finding lodging given the demand from other visitors to wine country for harvest. Hotels can be pricey and a selection near the track can be limited. As with any travel, fortune favors those that plan ahead.

With airports in San Francisco, Oakland and Santa Rosa and frequent flights up and down throughout the southwestern United States, getting to Sonoma Raceway is relatively easy. Those that live in the Los Angeles area have a drive of about 6 hours (with the usual caveats of construction, traffic and starting point) which makes both driving or flying viable options.

Sonoma Raceway is only 20 minutes from the charming downtown Sonoma town square. It is also situated in the Carneros micro-region which is famous for the early morning fog that helps to cool grapes which is optimal for pinot noir and chardonnay. The region is also well known for sparkling wine (or champagne if you prefer the French version). If you're more inclined to Napa, the racetrack is only a half an hour to downtown Napa.



The towns of San Rafael, Navato and Petaluma strung along Route 101 are all within easy reach and provide dining and lodging opportunities.

Dates for 2017 are set – NASCAR visits in June, NHRA visits in July and Indycar/Pirelli World Challenge visits in September. Details on these and other events are available at the track's website – www.SonomaRaceway.com.