

LEATHER

AND STUDS

There's one speed record left that doesn't need a rocket car to attempt. **Piers Ward** hooks up with Juha Kankkunen and his ice-going Bentley

Photography by Matt Vosper

IF YOU HAD TO SCIENTIFICALLY categorise people in the world according to how sane they were, the chances are that rally drivers would come pretty near the section marked 'Loon'. And within that group there would be an exclusive little sub-section entitled 'The Finnish Extreme'.

I know this because I've just seen Juha Kankkunen, four-time World Rally Champion, and in all probability one of the coolest drivers in the history of driving, tear flat-out past me at over 200mph in a Bentley Continental GT. On a frozen sea.

He's here, about 30 miles north of Oulu on Finland's west coast and about 90 miles south of the Arctic Circle, to try to break the world speed record for driving on ice. He and his mate, Kari Mäkelä, came up with the idea about a year ago, after Kari drove his chipped Mercedes-Benz M-Class along an ice road and managed to reach 140mph pretty easily. Kari tells me this as he casually overtakes a truck on a normal A-road which has a bank of snow and ice down the middle of the tarmac. And he's on the phone. This is what I mean by 'The Finnish Extreme.' ☺



ICE SPEED RECORD

As it stands, the ice-driving speed record is 184.15mph, set by Gildo Pallanca-Pastor back in 1995, driving a Bugatti EB110 at the same spot we're on today. To me, setting this record on the frozen sea just adds to the whole crazy nature of it, but there are valid reasons for doing it here. We're in a sort of bay, so the sea freezes more easily, but to a novice Brit like me, a lake would seem a better spot – surely it would freeze flatter because the water's less choppy in the first place? In fact, though, this sea must have been pretty calm when it froze, and the chief problem with a lake is, apparently, its size. The run today is a full 12km, and even in Finland, you'll struggle to find a lake that long and straight.

But don't think that makes it easy. As Juha explains, "The difference with ice is that it's always moving. It can be flat one time, and then it's not the next time." So it's a constant mystery as to what sort of conditions he'll come across on his next run; even the wind can blow snow onto the track in funny places. Kankkunen does a few runs in the morning to "make a mark", in other words to clear a straight line through the snow so that he can see exactly which way he needs to be heading.

Standing out here on the ice, you begin to understand why. It's near white-out conditions, so all contrast has disappeared and it's bloody difficult to differentiate the sea from the sky. And that's when standing still, not travelling at the 200mph plus that Juha will be doing.

If that figure sounds a bit high for a top speed of a Bentley Conti GT, remember that we're at minus 10, so the cold air will help the twin turbos run more efficiently. Plus, there have been some other minor alterations to the car. The wheels, radiator and lights have had blanking plates fitted over them to improve the



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aerodynamics, it's running on 102RON petrol and the ESP has been reprogrammed. As Kankkunen calmly explains, "The ESP programme is different to usual because it normally brakes the car. If it brakes, it takes a kilometre to get the fucking speed back. So it's re-programmed for engine management here."

And, of course, it's running on studded tyres. There are 130 diamond-shaped studs per wheel and a PR honcho from Nokian Tyres tells me that each one of those will strike the ice 40 times per second during the speed run. They're pulling 2,500g's, which will boost each stud's weight from 1g to 2.5kg. To put that into some sort of context, a fighter pilot has to endure about nine g's max. I ask whether they've been tested at this speed before. Apparently not, but the PR chap says that Nokian Tyres 'calculated' that it should be OK. What, just on a computer? It's not been tested before? The Finnish Extreme again.

This laid-back approach is typical of the whole day. A couple of minutes before Juha starts his record run, he's puffing on a small cigar and chatting to friends. But I suppose rally drivers don't get fazed easily – they're used to putting up with danger and terrible conditions. They think it's warm today, even though it's struggling to get above minus 10. My biro freezes solid the moment I take it out of my pocket.

When it comes to the record attempt, there's very little fuss. Juha simply drives to one end of the strip and off he goes – they don't even measure the amount of fuel he needs, I query this, but it's because weight isn't a problem. If anything, you want more to give more grip.

But it's as Juha comes past that you realise this is not just some amateur attempt. He's doing over 200mph as he passes, and it looks outrageously quick. It's more the noise, though,

that assaults your senses. The car sounds like a really low flying aircraft as it approaches. There's a harsh metallic sound, and you can hear a vague echo off the ice from the studs. It's a slightly surreal experience, and you're very aware just how brave Kankkunen is.

Which is confirmed fully when he takes me for a trip later. There's still some of The Finnish Extreme here, because he drives at 100mph with only one hand on the wheel, and it's staggering how much the car moves around. The initial acceleration is impressive, then as Kankkunen notches up speed, the car starts to slide, and you feel it begin to almost float. I know that sounds unlikely in a 2.3-tonne car, but it really seems you're not in total contact with the ice. At lower speeds, it's the rear that moves, but go above 143mph and the whole big Bentley slides and drifts completely off-line.

What amazes me is how little movement Juha makes on the steering wheel – there's no over-correction. The key is to drive with your arse, not your eyes. Your eyes tell you you're well off-line, but as Juha says, "You need to accelerate with your own feeling," and pats his bum: 200mph must be very hard work indeed.

Braking? This is the most stable part of the experience: "I simply lift off and the wind starts to stop me. But I don't brake hard because I've still got six kilometres to go." It's amazing how quickly the Conti hauls itself up – the forces feel strong enough that the back end should start to squirm as the weight transfers to the front, but it manages to stay pretty planted.

Which is a good thing, because on his run today, Kankkunen manages 205.68mph as a peak speed. However, averaged out over 1km and a return run within the hour, that means 196.98mph. Not bad, but still just shy of the new world record he set the week before we went. That was 199.87mph – agonisingly close to 200mph. Conditions then were about minus 20, which is better, because as Juha points out, "In Finland, when it gets that cold, there's no wind that blows across the track." Today, there was a wind straight up and down the run – good for one way and not the other.

Wind is bad because, at these sort of speeds, it's not lack of power that stops you going faster, it's the loss of grip. Which is why, when Kankkunen had a big sideways moment at 200mph on his last run, even he thought he might be asking for it. The Finnish Extreme? Well, perhaps they're extremely sensible, sometimes. ☐

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