

THE HELMET COMES OFF: NISSAN REVEALS THE IDENTITY OF ITS SECRET STIG

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Some say he eats a whole Micra for breakfast every day. Some say his bed is a GT-R chassis and he sleeps sideways. All we know is that he's called Paul Eames, and he is Nissan's very own tame racing driver.

As car fans around the world prepare for the eagerly anticipated new series of hit BBC TV show *Top Gear*, Nissan has removed the helmet of its top European test driver for the first time to reveal his identity.

Paul plays a key role in the team charged with making sure every new vehicle Nissan develops is dynamically the best it can be for EU roads. As one of only four expert drivers outside Japan who's earned Nissan's ultimate driving qualification, Paul completes countless laps of the company's various test tracks around the world.

With 20 years of experience at Nissan, Paul knows instinctively if a new car's chassis is optimised for the best balance between performance and passenger comfort. While he undoubtedly has super-human skills behind the wheel, he also has a talent for putting himself in the mind of the customer.

Paul explained: "With the new GT-R, which goes on sale this summer, the objective was to make it as exciting, grippy and stable as possible when being driven to extremes, because that's what a GT-R owner wants."

But the rules are very different when developing best-selling models such as the Nissan Juke or Qashqai crossovers. "These cars need to be as agile, stable and safe as possible, but at the same time deliver comfort and suppleness for the people who will buy them," said Paul, who began his automotive career in the mid-Eighties as a technician.

Paul's job isn't just about shaving tenths of a second off lap times... although he's very good at that. It's more about replicating how Nissan customers will actually drive their cars in the real world.

"I drive at different speeds, in different positions on the road, up and down kerbs, across rutted tracks, on motorways and in heavy stop/start congestion. For Nissan, it's all about the quality of the driving experience. Only then can I really evaluate the true dynamic performance of a car and make sure it's right for the customer."

Paul's job is a massively complex one because Nissan develops cars for markets all across Europe, and road surfaces vary in terms of construction, camber and quality of surface. What works dynamically in one country might not work in another. As a result, he travels all over the continent – from cold-weather testing near the Arctic Circle to hot-weather testing in Spain.

He is currently working closely with Nissan's Autonomous Drive engineers, refining the technology for customers across Europe. Nissan is already establishing itself as a global leader in the emerging technology, with ProPilot (single-lane autonomous driving) set to debut on the Nissan Qashqai next year.

"Autonomous Drive is about giving the driver more control; about keeping the enjoyable elements of driving and taking away some of the less enjoyable parts, as well as enhancing customer safety. This technology is hugely exciting for me and the Nissan Europe engineering team as we're at the cutting edge of huge change in the automotive industry."

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