

Opinion

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# A Heretic in the Corvette Chapel

Could a run in a C8 through the Devil's Triangle in Tennessee make Spencer Hall believe?

By Spencer Hall Published: Oct 24, 2021



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DOMINIC BUGATTO | CAR AND DRIVER

*From the December 2021 issue of Car and Driver.*

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## The Beliefs

The Devil's Triangle is a diabolically winding loop in East Tennessee favored for hairpin turns, leafy scenery, and the tantalizing ever-present danger of flying off the road at speed. It has ecstatic terrain and interesting history in its corner. I had a 2021 [Corvette Stingray](#) with the Z51 Performance package and a friend who suggested we head north from Georgia and see what the car and "the coal road," as he called it, were made of.

I am not a card-carrying member of the Corvette cult and never have been. The Corvette is the car of people I am not. When I was young, Corvettes belonged to guys named Todd, freshly divorced dentists, and country singers with awe-inspiring substance-abuse issues.

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I am none of these. I grew up watching what I thought real speed was: rally cars flying off Corsican cliffs, NASCAR machines roaring at Talladega, and Ayrton Senna ripping up Monaco in a McLaren. I loved either speed or danger in my cars, the cheaper the better. A Mazdaspeed 3 torque-steering off the road or a derelict Volkswagen Thing moving any faster than 35 mph fit my needs perfectly. Nothing pleased or still pleases me more than cheap thrills in rally frames and eccentric rattletraps seconds away from falling to ribbons.

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The Corvette seemed to be a kind of mostly cosmetic speed machine enjoyed by the mostly cosmetic. Give me something focused less on aesthetics and more on

beating skulls on straightaways. (That car would be an '87 Grand National, the looks-don't-matter hero of my youth.)

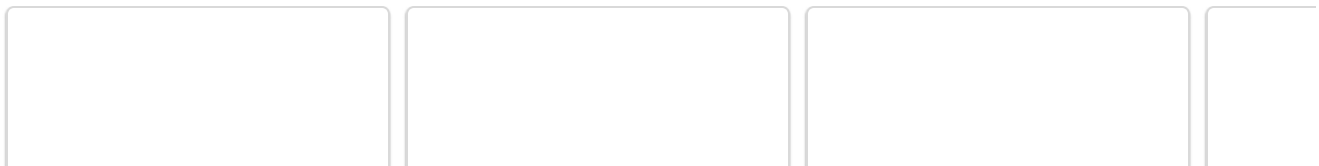
Also, I spend most of my working hours considering college football, the sort of thing that can immunize one to elegies for the everlasting American spirit, be they aimed at storied universities or storied automotive brands.

So maybe I am the wrong person to drive a Corvette, or the right one, because the car C/D sent wasn't the Corvette I remembered, the kind the neighborhood dads would wreck two weeks after bringing them home. The car deposited at my house in Atlanta was a 495-hp C8, the mid-engine Vette that GM built to deliver exotic performance at American middle-manager pricing.

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Used 2023  
**Chevrolet Corvette  
Stingray Premium Conv**  
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**\$86,005**



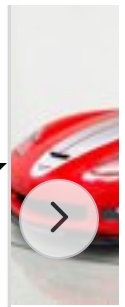
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3LT Preferred Equipment Group

**\$49,005**

General Motors dropped it into a mire of historical circumstances it could not control. The C8 debuted, and in short order a UAW strike, a global pandemic, a subsequent economic recession, and a chip shortage made the cars harder to find than GM probably would have liked. But the ones who found them loved them. It was an unfair entry into the world for a mid-engine move that had been teased for decades. But what is fair? Fair describes a breeze. The C8 looks more like a cyclone someone equipped with exactly two cupholders.



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# The Road

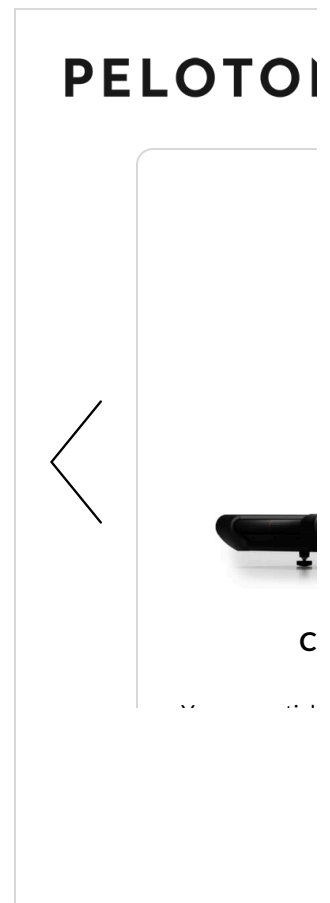
The state of Tennessee built its meanest prison in the Devil's Triangle for the same reason the road could pass for a licensing exam for the amateur aspiring rally driver. It sits on the Cumberland Plateau in a crimped piece of geography known for two things:

1. It's where [James Earl Ray and six other prisoners escaped](#) from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, spurring a massive two-day manhunt that ended less than 10 miles from the prison when Ray realized the surrounding terrain put up too much of a fight for even the most desperate man to want to continue running.
2. It's where [the Barkley Marathons](#) is run, a footrace so long, brutal, and hellish that most competitors don't come close to finishing. The leg passing through the prison grounds is considered to be one of the more pleasant.

A friend followed me in a Honda Civic Type R, and another gamely took the passenger's seat next to me. I pressed the Z button on the steering wheel and the car shot out claws by stiffening the suspension, sharpening the throttle and brake response, opening the exhaust, and adding some heft to the steering. Most important for anyone buying a C8 simply because they can (and not because they care to know a single spec): That big honking Z button ignites the vehicle display, turning it red, and the car starts thrashing its way down the road like Oldboy with a hammer running through a hallway of thugs with two-by-fours.

**The C8 ripped so hard, it shook loose lunatics from the rocks and boulders as it blew past. The only thing slowing me on the way down the hollers came out of the woods like a brightly colored hallucination.**

Even at extralegal speeds, I realized I didn't really have to brake for corners. I boggled as the Corvette shot out of turns without so much as a stutter. When I had to brake, the Brembos held every corner in a headlock. Without even really trying, I dropped my friend in the Type R twice. The C8 ripped so hard, it shook loose lunatics from the rocks and boulders as it blew past. The only thing slowing me on the way down the hollers came out of the woods like a brightly colored hallucination.



A side-by-side apparated from the trees. I knew four-by-fours climb rocks all over those hills, but honestly, I didn't even see it drive onto the road in front of me. It was just there, rigged with neon and steered by a local giant in Realtree camo. I thought I'd have to slam on the brakes, but he knew the road well. The side-by-side leaned and rocked hard around each corner. I envisioned the phrasing of the police report I'd have to fill out: A huge man in camo cut off my Corvette, then leaned his entire massive body like an Olympic sailor from side to side until even that didn't help. The crater containing his body and the remains

of the flossiest overgrown golf cart I have ever seen may be found a mile and a half below us.

Despite every law of physics, he didn't crater. When I finally found a safe stretch of road to pass him, he pumped his fist as we zipped by down the hill and out of the kind of giddy automotive wormhole only spaceships like the C8 can navigate. I heard him say "Hell yeah, brother," as we left, even if I didn't.

## The Conversion

I get it now, but first let me say that "getting it" has nothing to do with finding perfection. After all, I should be the one who gets a Corvette. I am in my 40s, firmly on the radar of the car's midlife-crisis targeting system. I had a cool uncle who blew paychecks on Camaros, AC/DC tickets, and replica jackets of anything Burt Reynolds ever wore on camera. For better and worse, I'm there.

Putting the targa roof on the car in the driveway after a two-hour moonshine scramble through the hills of East Tennessee, I spotted two little nicks in the paint where the top edged back into the body of the car. Then my eye lingered on the row of buttons riding the right rail of the dash, which now that I examine them do in fact look a little chintzy and definitely like a corner cut in the name of optimizing everything else. The front and back of the car both are great and also seem to belong to two completely different cars. Coming, it fronts a razor-sharp Euro-supercar face and a long torso. Leaving, it waggles a Costco-size American sports booty.

On the drive down the highway from Tennessee into Georgia, I was tucked in the little cocoon of the driver's seat, riding in near silence with the display lights glowing ahead of me. Steering the C8 headfirst at blazing speed through traffic was effortless with the comfort of air conditioning and a silky sound system, the world whipping past through the windows.

I forgive a lot for that feeling and way more for the turn through the hills in a car simply unwilling to let me lose. Maybe it's because I can, at the end of my youth, actually drive a little, or maybe it's forgiving myself for being just selfish enough to enjoy it. Either way, the C8 actually sometimes makes you, the fleshy,

vulnerable driver, disappear for a moment like a supercar does. It erases everything else and leaves only a thrilled ghost driving the wheel—just a brain, eyes, hands, and feet pulled through space by the machine.

My biggest complaint—that the car behaves too well and does feats of speed with too much well-engineered gentility—is wild and extravagant. But that will likely all change with subsequent versions that have more power and likely a predilection toward putting more fear into the driver. Think of it this way: When someone drives the Stingray, they are driving a brilliant first draft. And there's the thrill.

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A sports and travel writer, Spencer Hall is co-host of the college-football podcast [Shutdown Fullcast](#) and digs in on a range of topics at the subscription site Channel 6 ([channel-6.ghost.io](#)). He's on Twitter [@edsbs](#).

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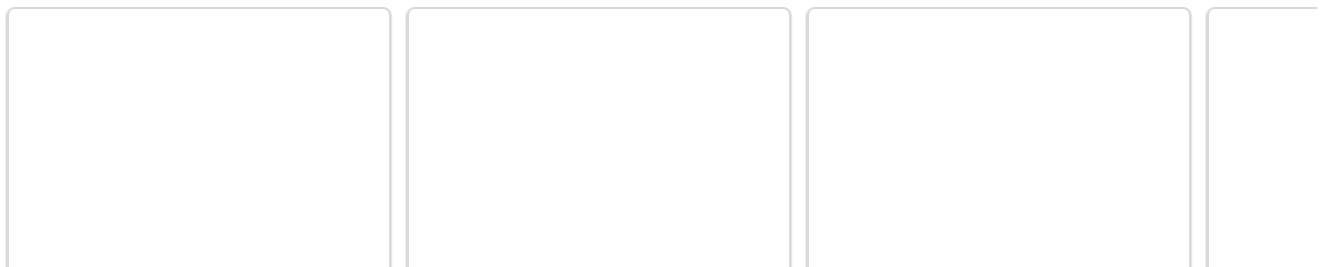
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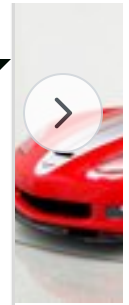
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