How the Mustang Shelby GT500 Saved the Fourth of July

Your public fireworks shows are canceled this year. What to do? Drive to South Carolina, buy a trunk full of pyrotechnics, and put on your own.

By Ezra Dyer Published: Jul 4, 2020

JEREMY M. LANGE | CAR AND DRIVER

South Carolina is loosey-goosey when it comes to rules. You can ride a motorcycle without a helmet. Golf carts ply the streets. And fireworks are not just legal but extremely legal. Roman candles, mortars, 50-milligram M-80s: What's your pleasure? Marquees outside the fireworks stores brag that they offer the biggest booms. Want a seven-inch artillery shell? Step right in!

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As a resident of (relatively) sane North Carolina, I typically don't pay much attention to the gunpowder bonanza happening in the neighboring state. This year, however, with most public shows canceled, South Carolina's lax fireworks policy assumes greater import. My normal Independence Day routine—setting up some folding chairs and gazing skyward while regularly asking, "Think that was the finale?"—isn't going to happen. So I decide to rectify the situation by road-tripping to South Carolina, buying a barge's worth of fireworks, and staging my own show. Given everything else going on, 2020 would not deny me my sky explosions.

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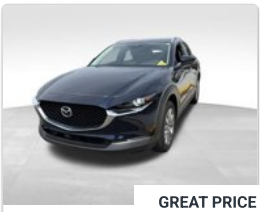

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What kind of car do you select for this kind of a mission? I figure one with 760 horsepower, four exhaust modes of differing volumes, and a hood vent that measures six square feet. Enter the **Ford Mustang Shelby GT500**, drenched in Grabber Lime green paint—the "1812 Overture" on wheels. I'm gonna point that prow toward South Carolina and put on a show for anyone who loves colorful, outrageously loud spectacles. And then I'll buy some fireworks.

Normally, a North Carolinian looking for pyrotechnics would go to South of the Border, a Mexico-themed resort and fireworks emporium in Dillon, South Carolina, that gleefully plays up the state's anything-goes attitude relative to its neighbor to the north. South of the Border could only be more on-the-nose if it offered long-distance desert racing and discount butt implants.

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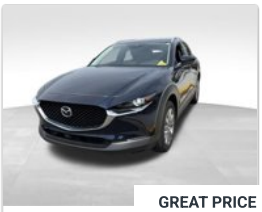
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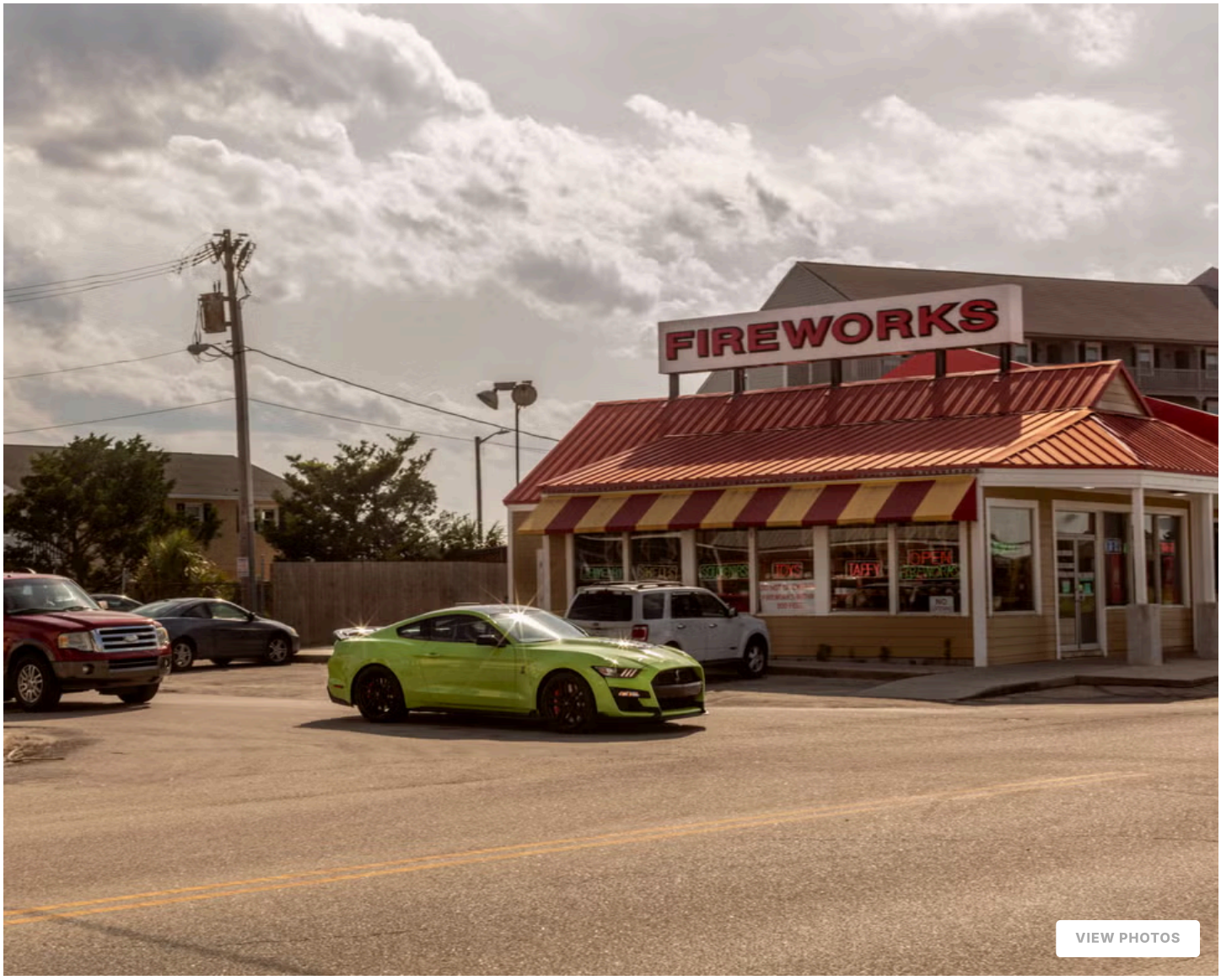
Problem is, I have no idea where you can light fireworks near South of the Border. Accommodating as South Carolina's state laws may be, local municipalities have their own ideas. Some of them allow fireworks only on July 4. Others—like Myrtle Beach—impose a total ban, punishable by stiff fines. Garden City Beach, though, just south of Myrtle, is totally in sync with the state policy, in that there's not much of a policy. I've been there a few times in the summer, and every night is Independence Day. Since that's nearly two hours deep into SC, I figure I'll buy my arsenal somewhere closer to the light-off locale. No point in driving farther than necessary with a trunk full of gunpowder.



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The GT500 serves as a surprisingly amiable road-trip companion. Put the exhaust in Quiet mode and the MagneRide dampers in their cushiest setting and the stacked Shelby can convincingly imitate the kind of mellow Mustang rental that's been optimized for schlepping around Orlando. Of course, I never, ever drive it that way. Pretty much the first thing I do every time I fire it up is put the exhaust in Sport mode (loud) or Track (seemingly louder than the 2012 Boss 302 with its side-pipe caps removed). Then I push the M button in the center of the shifter, activating manual mode so I can enjoy excessive rpm or the bass thrum of high-gear lugging. Maybe you'd like to tell me that's obnoxious, but I can't hear you because the stereo is also very loud and I'm blasting Fergie's "My Humps." Nobody knows what it means, but it's provocative! It gets the people going!

As does the GT500. I stop for gas, and a woman and her teenage son approach. She says, "Excuse me, but what model is this?" I reply that it's the Shelby GT500, and the kid blurts, "Holy shit!" Later, in Dillon, I pull into an empty parking lot because the GPS system is apparently offline; neither my phone nor the car's nav knows where we are. A guy in a black **Mustang GT** pulls up alongside, rolls down his window, and does the *Wayne's World* "We're not worthy" bowing gesture. Even out on the road, I see fingers point and thumbs raised from two lanes over. Mustang drivers recognize their sovereign ruler and genuflect accordingly.

When I pull into the parking lot at Phantom Fireworks just outside Myrtle, the GT500 isn't lonely for long. Almost immediately, a red **Camaro** in Lightning McQueen livery (white BFGoodrich stickers on the sidewalls, vanity plate reading "IMSPEED") pulls up. Then a black Challenger Hellcat (vanity plate: "PURRGTRY") parks next to it. If this were a movie, we'd be accused of typecasting. Hey, not everyone who buys fireworks drives a V-8-powered American muscle car. Oh, I see. They actually do. Carry on.

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Inside, I summon my powers of restraint to keep walking past the $1,500 Grounds for Divorce assortment. When it comes to fireworks, I know what I like, and what I like are the multishot cubes and big fountains. I used to buy mortars until I realized that mortars tend to tip over. And if you think a toppled mortar ever ends up pointing in a harmless direction, then you're a stranger to the fuse, my friend. I also skip the M-80s—your straight-up explosives—for reasons that should be obvious but, for too many citizens, aren't.

I choose my ordnance mostly according to which products have the funniest names. Wizard of Ahhhs goes in the cart, as do Popo Magnet, Big n Bad, Triton's Tempest, and sundry other eye-catchers. While I don't approach the store's high score for profligacy—recorded on the Big Spender board up front (current leader: Grice, $4524.87)—I do fill the trunk of the Mustang with enough ammo to ensure a great show for whoever cares to watch.

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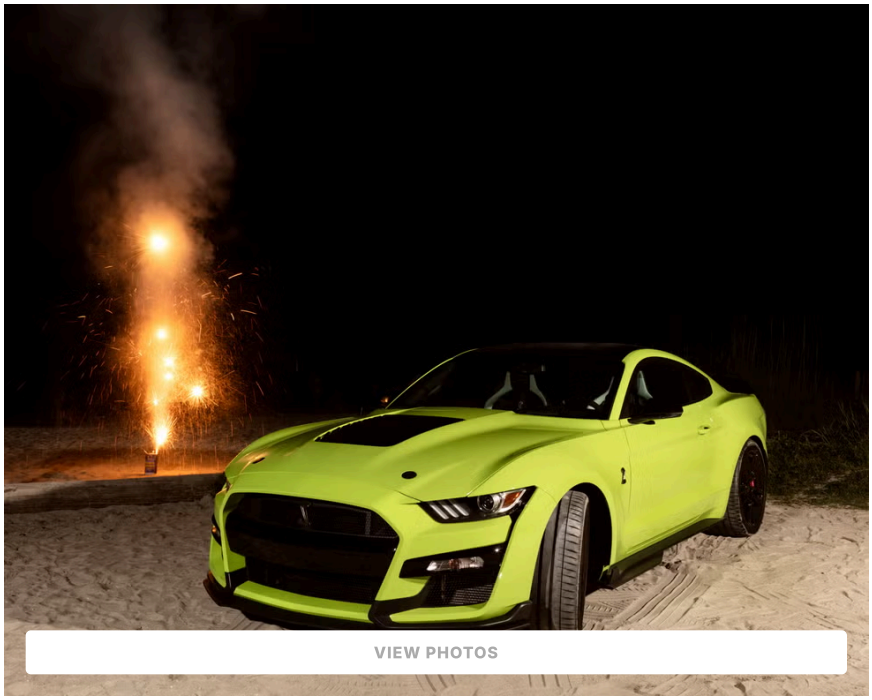
On the way from Phantom to Garden City Beach, I see two guys riding Hayabusas wearing face masks but no helmets, expressing an admirable commitment to public, if not personal, health. Running through the gears, windows down, it occurs to me that the GT500 reminds me a lot of the **Mustang GT4 race car** I drove last year—basically the same thundering soundtrack, same paddle-shift up and down through a gearbox. Except, of course, the street car is way more powerful than the race car and with way less grip. The Michelin Pilot Sport 4S is a great tire, but you must be mindful of the throttle when you've got 760 horsepower.



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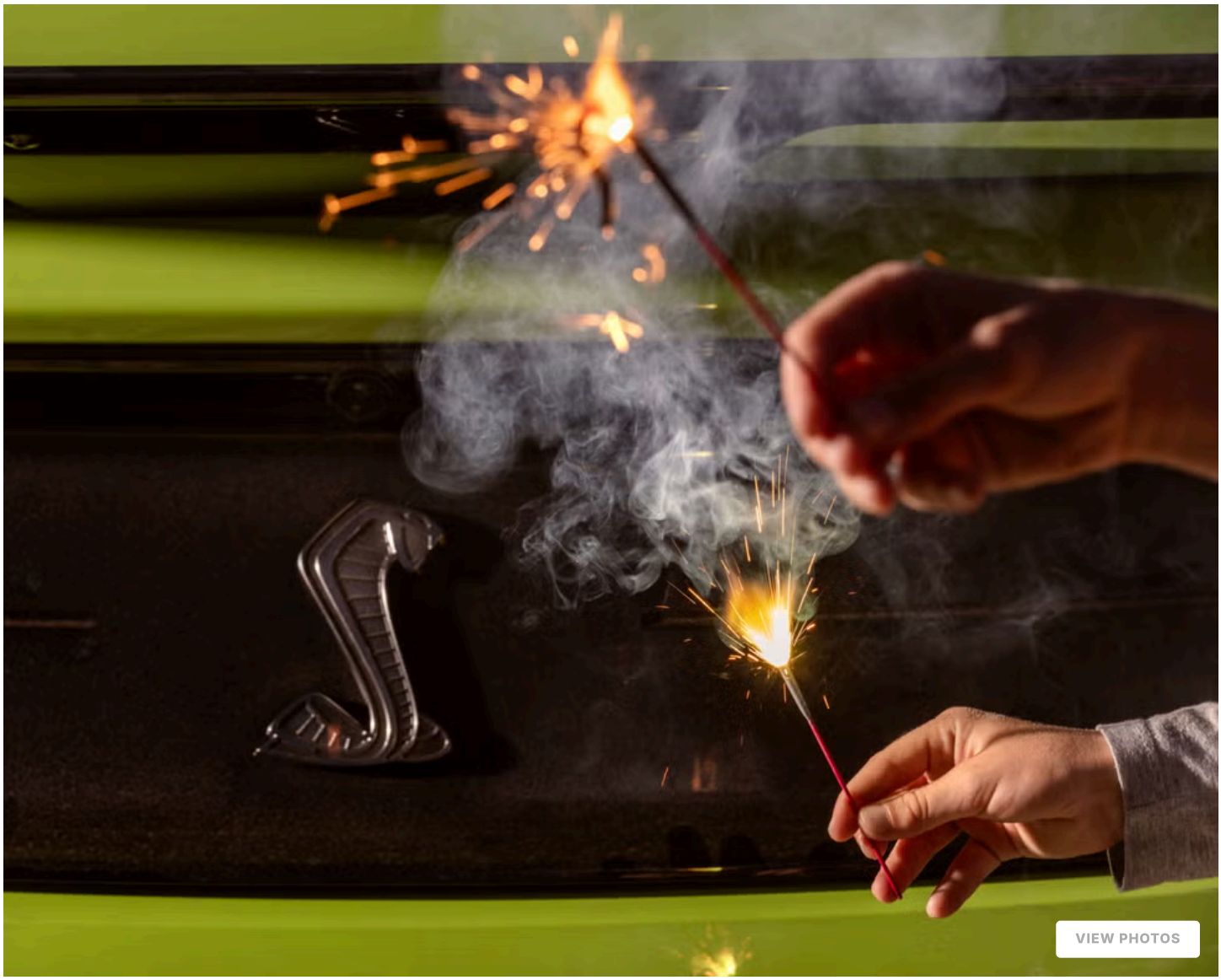
When I reach the beach, twilight falling, I back up to the edge of the sand and begin unloading. There are a few beachgoers in the vicinity, so I take a walk around and give fair warning of my pyrotechnic intentions. Nobody seems to care. Yet, I'm so conditioned to think of fireworks as illegal and a nuisance that I'm still apprehensive when I light the first fuse. Really? This is cool?

Oh yeah, it is. Within a few minutes I'm like a fuse-crazed conductor, orchestrating fountains of fire on the ground and blossoms of color in the sky. Popo Magnet, Party Foul, Polar Vortex, Pyro Pulverizer—those are just the *p*'s. The lame-sounding Willow among the Palm fountain is so good, I wish I'd bought two more. Meanwhile, down the beach, someone begins lighting off mortars, the shells commingling with my display to create a damn fine public spectacle. Have some of that, 2020! Is it too much to say this is a life-affirming experience? Because it is. When I've exhausted my cache, I drag the spent boxes down to the water for a dousing, and a woman approaches through the tendrils of dissipating smoke. "Thank you for doing that!" she says. "I'm so glad we got to see that."

And that's how the Mustang Shelby GT500 saved the Fourth of July. Now let's not make this an annual thing.



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Ezra Dyer

Senior Editor

Ezra Dyer is a *Car and Driver* senior editor and columnist. He's now based in North Carolina but still remembers how to turn right. He owns a 2009 GEM e4 and once drove 206 mph. Those facts are mutually exclusive.

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