

D E S E R T

Dear Aston Martin. Please could I take this opportunity to apologise for the state of the Vanquish you lent us for our road trip. In my defence, I didn't know how dusty a desert can be, and I did spend \$20 of my own money having it valeted by a man so smitten that he tried to polish under the wheelarches. Yours sincerely, David Lillywhite

S T O R M

PHOTOGRAPHY MATTHEW HOWELL





When we land in Los Angeles it's Saturday afternoon and we've been awake for 24 hours. Our legs are cramped, our stomachs heavy with airline food, our arms aching with the weight of camera gear and our eyelids barely open – but we're here! And there's an Aston Martin waiting for us.

We've a number of things planned for our visit, but stage one is to sample El Mirage, the six-mile-long dry lake area roughly halfway between LA and Vegas, on the edge of the sprawling Mojave Desert. For some, this is a place to ride quad bikes or dune buggies. For others it's for mountain biking. There are even those who land their planes and gliders here. But all this is inconsequential of course, because we know El Mirage as a home to land speed racing, as it has been since the 1930s – and tomorrow is one of just six race days in the year.

So that's where we're heading. And the icing on this particular cake is that we're heading there in a new Vanquish, true Brits abroad, cases and cameras fitting tightly-but-neatly into the boot and on the back seats, sunglasses at the ready as we steel ourselves for the LA traffic: six lanes of pure madness.

An hour later, and I realise with a start that this is almost too easy. It's not that I'd forgotten we're travelling in something special, just that the expected downsides of driving a super-GT on the potholed freeways of recently bankrupt California just haven't made themselves known.

The sun is still blazing, a taste of things to come, and cars and trucks of every shape and size seem to come at us

from every angle, at every speed. Quick wits, all-round vision and bloody good air-con are essential. With the adaptive dampers set to Normal mode, the Vanquish remains unruffled save for the thump-thump-thump of those 20in Pirellis over the joints in the road. The three-hour journey to Victorville, San Bernadino County, really doesn't seem such a problem any more.

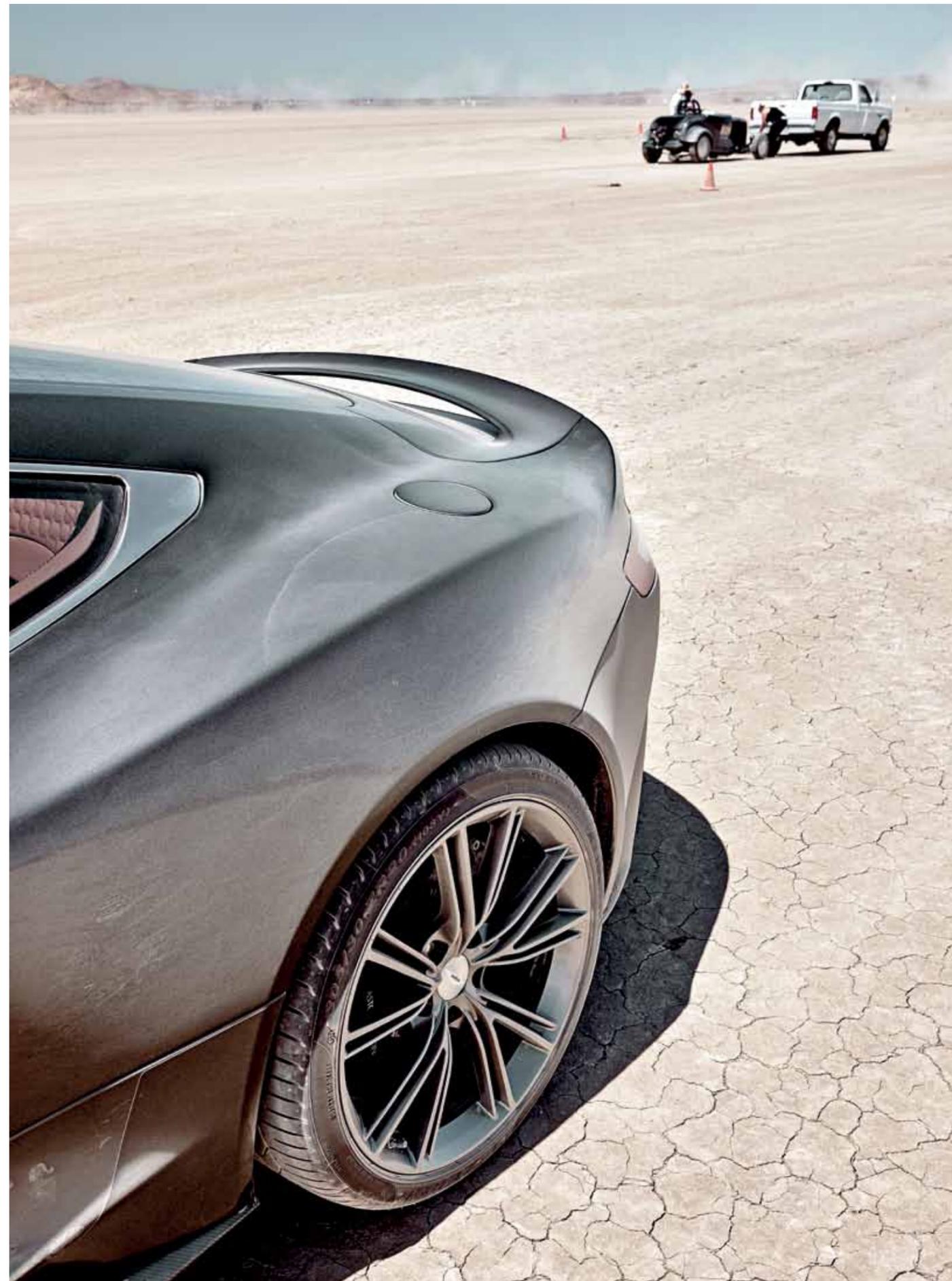
But maybe it *should* feel more exciting, so when the road opens up a little I boot the Aston and that superb eight-speed transmission kicks down beautifully, exhaust roaring, 5.9-litre, 568bhp V12 spinning up like a dervish to 6000rpm-plus, as we briefly cheat the freeway equivalent of the space/time continuum – until memories of previous encounters with the California Highway Patrol overcome the adrenalin. Ah well, back to reality, but boy does this thing go. Aston Martin claims 201mph and a 0-60mph time of 3.6 seconds and I've no reason to doubt those figures.

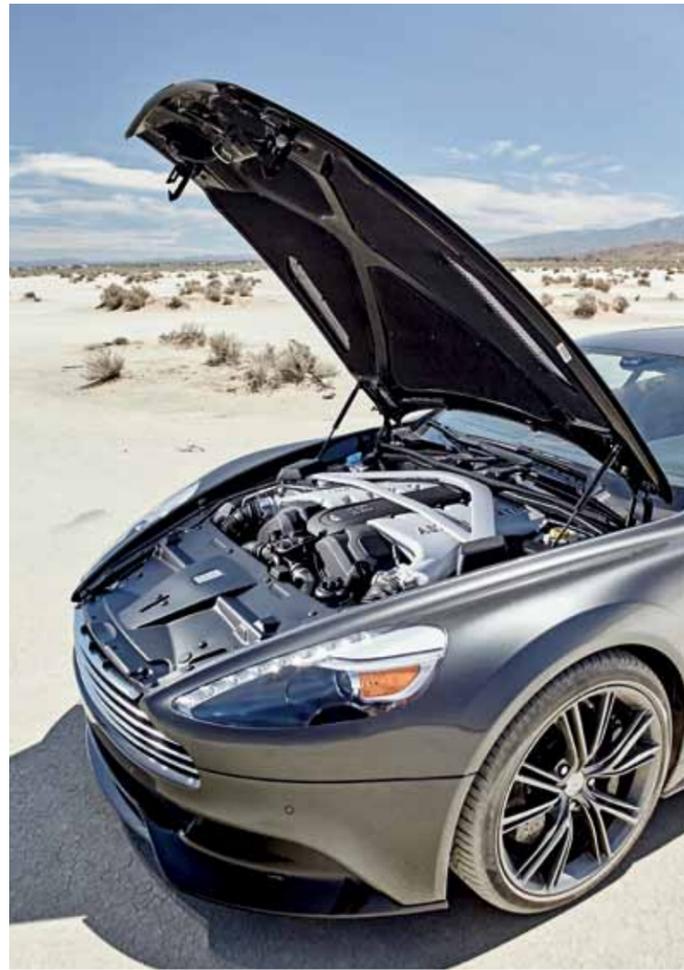
Whatever the speed, the Vanquish's cabin is a lovely environment to be in. Acres of dark-tan leather make for a wonderfully calming, luxurious feel, the seats cossetingly comfortable even for a skinny-arsed perpetual chair-critic. I still find those glass-faced gear selector buttons high on the centre console a little odd, especially with the 'P', 'R', 'N' and 'D' in such a basic typeface, but perhaps I'm getting picky here...

We're off the freeway now, and wondering if the sat-nav has got it right as we skirt suburbia in search of desert. A quick double-check confirms we're on track, and gives us the chance for a little lairy exhaust action as we nip from junction to junction. The houses become less frequent and significantly scruffier, and the thump of tyre over broken concrete more prominent. Wow, these roads are bad.

I don't know what I'd expected. A big sign flanked by

Above and right 100deg heat, appalling roads and choking dust... not, you would imagine, the perfect conditions for Aston's roadgoing flagship. In fact Vanquish copes brilliantly. The dry lake bed at El Mirage, in the Mojave Desert, hosts speed runs several times a year





DRIVE | VANQUISH TO EL MIRAGE

Left and right

Vanquish's 568bhp 5.9-litre V12 is a magnificent device, but even it's put in the shade by the drag cars, hotrods and slipstreamers at El Mirage. Speed trials have been held here since the 1930s

cactus plants welcoming us to the Mojave Desert? I can be so naïve. Instead, we simply ease into scrubland, the road narrowing and becoming increasingly more pockmarked with potholes, the sun fiercer now we've escaped the lingering haze of the city.

Victorville turns out to be a strange place. Clusters of what in the UK we'd still refer to as Barratt houses, albeit supersized, a handful of equally soulless hotels, and a sort-of retail park based around a cavernous Target store and a host of restaurants demonstrating different ways to serve huge slabs of cow are all we see of it. I find it disturbing that there's so little grass, anywhere.

This is the nearest town to El Mirage, so I was hoping for a collection of wacky racers holed-up in readiness for the dry lake tomorrow, but there's nothing. The Aston stands out conspicuously in a car park drudgery of anonymous sedans and pick-ups. We glance back nervously as we head for the nearest steak house.

Next morning, body clocks askew, we're up and out good and early, keen to catch maximum exposure of sun and fuel fumes. The Mojave Desert offers little more than scrub and broken roads, and the supposed majesty of the place is beginning to be called into question until we spot our first Joshua tree. U2 have a lot to answer for – but, as the trees grow more frequent and the terrain becomes more rugged, excitement builds. Still, we wonder, where the hell is El Mirage!

And then a tall wooden sign for the El Mirage Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area (courtesy of the US Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, no less) points us down a long, straight road, punctuated incongruously by speed bumps. At the end is a wooden building, the El Mirage visitor centre, where friendly rangers sell day-tickets for \$15 and helpfully mention that a season ticket costs just \$90. Maybe not this time.

We're directed down a short, dusty slope into a landscape of searingly bright nothingness. No, really, we can't distinguish anything other than a dusty concrete-like surface and, perhaps, as our shell-shocked eyes adjust, mountains in the distance. We pull over, a little startled. Where the hell do we go? And, thinking about it, are we actually in hell?

Well, if we are, the devil drives a sand buggy. There's a roar as a cloud of dust hurtles past, wheels, chassis rails and dust-encrusted pilot just about visible within it. This isn't helping... Thank God, then, for divine intervention in the shape of a scruffy old hotrod that rattles by at slightly lower speed, allowing us to hook onto its dust trail until, in the shimmering distance, we make out a series of orange traffic cones marking the edge of the race strip. Rarely have such objects been so welcome a sight: we've found the real El Mirage!

A little further and huge RVs in varying degrees of beigeness and shabbiness hove into view, each one sheltering some form of race machinery – from 1960s Brit motorcycles to full-on missile-shaped rocketships, via a Kawasaki-engined Subaru 360 and Hayabusa'd Triumph GT6. We park up, switch off, open the doors and – hell's teeth! – are hit by a heat so fierce it has us reeling back in the seats before we've even tried to exit the car. Two



'As we open the doors we're hit by a heat so fierce it has us reeling back in the seats before we've even tried to exit the car'



Vanquish specifications

ENGINE V12, 5935cc **MAX POWER** 568bhp @ 6650rpm **MAX TORQUE** 465lb ft @ 5500rpm **TRANSMISSION** Eight-speed automatic with paddle-shift, rear-wheel drive, limited-slip diff **SUSPENSION** Front and rear: double wishbones, coil springs, adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar **STEERING** Rack-and-pinion, power-assisted **BRAKES** Vented, carbon-ceramic discs, 398mm front, 360mm rear, ABS, EBD **WHEELS** 9 x 20in front, 11.5 x 20in rear **TYRES** 245/35 ZR20 front, 295/30 ZR20 rear, Pirelli P Zero **WEIGHT** 1739kg **POWER TO WEIGHT** 332bhp/ton **0-60MPH** 3.6sec (claimed) **TOP SPEED** 201mph (claimed) **BASIC PRICE** £192,995



Above
Vanquish coped rather better with the heat and dust than our two Englishmen abroad... Latest model with the eight-speed gearbox is a consummate all-rounder

50-something guys in speed record T-shirts, shorts and baseball caps (standard garb, we soon realise) wander over, smile wryly at the shock on our faces and ask 'You boys English?' (I wonder how they knew...) and then 'Beautiful car. Vanquish?' We nod and nod again.

'You going to race this?' We shake our heads. It's too hot to speak. We wander, dazed, onto the parched lake-bed and spend a happy few hours watching a wild variety of vehicles head off into the heat haze in search of a new personal best or outright record. It may be 100 degrees F or more, but this is one wonderful place.

By mid-afternoon, the Vanquish is covered in dust and, though we don't realise until that evening, so are we. Racing ceases at 3pm, a fairly recent Department of the Interior stipulated rule, and we decide, with wild optimism and less-than-perfect logic, to explore some more of the Mojave Desert, and to take the long way back to LA, ignoring the onset of heatstroke and dehydration. Sure, most people would do this in a 4x4 but...

Anyway, Matt wants to photograph a Joshua tree. By this point, the Vanquish is looking decidedly 'used' and after hours in the sun its interior is so hot that for a few seconds it feels as though it won't be possible to breathe in there. The secret is to lean in, place foot on brake, start the engine (ah, will I ever tire of that neighbour-baiting *waoorooom* roar it makes every time?), turn air-con to maximum and step aside for two minutes. Then, lo and behold, the interior is cool, and all is good with the world.

Out we head, past dustcaked RVs, past the heat-seared scrutineering bay and the merchandise stand, and out across the featureless plain once more towards, we think, the exit, though it takes several disorientated attempts

actually to find the way out. Would a few signs be too much to ask for out here?

Turns out the roads don't really get any worse further out into the desert, though the environment becomes more hostile, spikier, tougher. Narrow tracks lead to... well, we never work out where they lead, but we try a couple in search of the perfect Joshua tree, and occasionally find odd piles of rubbish, usually at least part-automotive: a tattered vinyl car seat here, an unidentifiable battered body panel there. Nothing that could be called treasure, even to a pair of inveterate classic-car hoarders.

Matt lies on the too-hot-to-touch ground in the name of photography while I patrol the area for snakes. We carry on, initially out towards the Shadow Mountains, and frown suspiciously at the flood warning signs. El Mirage sits at an elevation of 2800ft but there are areas of the 47,877 square-mile desert that lie slightly below sea level.

Eventually, as the sun goes down and we're beginning to wonder why we chose such a circuitous route back to the coast, we arrive in LA and head for Santa Monica, where the streets are packed with tourists, who we're sure will never have seen anything so cool as an Aston Martin caked in the dust of El Mirage. But they're staring into shop windows. We head to the more relaxed Marina del Rey, and there the exhaust note attracts attention, even applause. We park up and emerge as heroic gladiators to looks of... oh, disappointment on the faces of the perfect beach babes. (What, you're not interested in a pair of dirt-encrusted sunburnt Englishmen in their mid-40s?)

We head to the hotel. It feels like we've been on a proper adventure, and the civilised-but-exciting GT-cum-supercar Vanquish has been the perfect companion. ✓