

after hours: *on line*

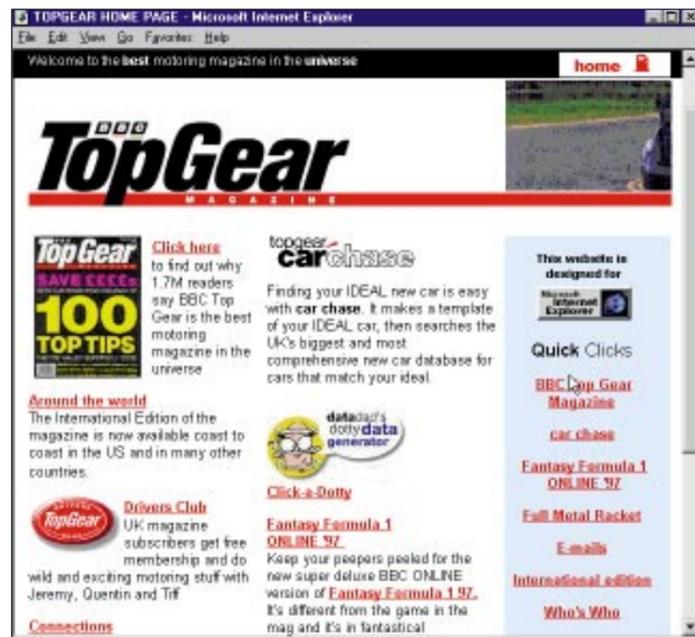
Top Gear

It's a matter of speculation, given current space exploration, whether *Top Gear* is 'the best motoring magazine in the universe,' as its Web page declares. But here on Earth the boast is probably not too wild. The magazine's popularity arose largely from BBC2's *Top Gear* motoring programme. The site's strength probably lies in its mixture of irreverence and breezily presented expertise. The Web site is an unabashed advertisement for the

This month Terry Pinnell tries to find a new car bargain but ends up with a virtual Ferrari, takes in a bit of opera, and tests out a holiday site

magazine, but there are some fun and novelty pages too. For example, you can choose from four Ferraris and revel in their engine noise as they simulate a brisk circuit lap at Goodwood.

The Carchase pages are the



Vauxhall Astra LS 1.4i 16v	
Outline	Secondary safety
List price	£ 12870
Body type	H5
Fuel System	MPFI
Automatic	n/a
Power steering	standard
Economy	
Touring mpg	40.00
Performance	
0-60mph	12.0
Maximum speed	110.0mph
Power to weight	85.79 bhp per ton
Security	
Central locking	standard
Drivers airbag	stand
passenger airbag	optio
Side impact protection	stand
Seat belt pretensioners	stand
Driver Convenience	
Front electric windows	
Rear electric windows	
Electric door mirrors	
Trip computer	
Adjustable steering column	
Height adjustable	stand



most interesting, and illustrate the likely trend in interactive Net applications. You enter factors such as type of car and how much you want to pay, plus choices like manual or automatic, petrol or diesel and so on. You can also specify priorities for aspects such as fuel economy, performance and comfort. Carchase then searches its new car database for matches and lists the ranked results and you click an entry for a full specification. In the enhanced version that's soon to be launched you'll also get a link to the appro-

priate dealer in your area. What a pity Carchase couldn't find that new sports convertible we specified - maybe we'll have to spend more than £4,000 after all!

• www.topgear.com/

Opera

And now, after last month's Spice Girls and Elvis Presley, for something completely different. First, take a look at Blackpool-based Marton Operatic Society's site. The group performs one full Gilbert and Sullivan production each year, with concerts all year round.

Also, there is the Opera della Luna company, a registered charity that is currently touring the UK. You will find details of its touring schedule and cast, but some of the pictures don't display correctly. 'The Parson's Pirates', a costumed extravaganza containing songs and snatches from popular Gilbert and Sullivan operas, had excellent press reports.

• ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/davidcookson/martonop.htm/
 • ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/davidcookson/luna.htm

Genie

This one is a real hoot! Making innovative use of ActiveX, the HolidayNet site includes the UK's first Web genie. You need to download Microsoft Agent. Genie then describes the site briefly and places himself at your service. If you have sound facilities on your PC and a microphone plugged in, you'll be able to speak your commands.

The site's content isn't up to the standard of the technology, as it suffers from spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. There is useful information on around 50 holiday

destinations, but it's a bit thin for serious travellers.

My session with Genie went well at first. He responded accurately and politely. Saying 'Destinations' prompted: 'OK, where would you like to go?' Genie then dozed off, breathing gently. During such a nap I said sharply: 'Snap out of it.' Genie sprang to attention, saying 'OK, sure, let's visit Florida.' After that he lost it for a time. After he'd tried to get me on an unrequested trip to Madagascar for the third time in succession, I shouted 'Drop dead!' Remarkably, his accuracy returned immediately. With what I swear was a hurt look, he replied: 'OK, just click my lamp if you need me,' and slipped down to the Windows 95 task tray.

• www.holidaynet.com/

No blarney

The Irish Tourist Board's Web site promotes the attractions of the Emerald Isle and is a rich source of information on everything Irish. Hotels, places to visit, food and drink, night life - it's all here. Pity you can't book travel, accommodation or theatre tickets though.

Not surprisingly, the Irish landscape scenery is featured strongly. These pages take advantage of the surround video feature of Microsoft ActiveX. You can click on an opening view and drag your mouse to get a panoramic view in any direction, over the lake or across the hills. Given Ireland's rainfall, it's arguably better than being there.

• www.ireland.travel.ie

Feedback welcomed:

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getting started

In six easy steps...

- 1 Install a fast modem on your PC (preferably 28.8 or 36.6Kbits/s).
- 2 For full Internet access, open an account with one of the many Internet Service Providers (ISPs), within local call range.
- 3 If you can afford the extra cost, extend your scope by opening another account with a general on-line service provider, within local call range. You may be able to combine 2 and 3 with a single provider, but separate services generally provide better performance.
- 4 Install software for browsing the Web and using other Net and on-line services, plus off-line utilities.
- 5 'Internet connectivity kits' are available which package the above elements into one bundle.
- 6 Revise your phone budget and free up a lot of hard drive space.

Glossary popular gobbledegook

- FTP** File Transfer Protocol; an 'FTP site' is a source for downloading files.
- HTML** Hypertext Mark-up Language; for making Web pages.
- IRC** Inter Relay Chat; using the Net like a CB radio.
- IP** Internet Protocol; an addressing system.
- ISP** Internet Service Provider; sometimes confusingly abbreviated to IP.
- JPEG** Joint Photographic Experts Group; popular graphics file format (JPG).
- PPP** Point-to-Point Protocol; communications program.
- SLIP** Serial Line Internet Protocol; another program for communications.
- UUE** UUEncoded files used with Internet News Groups.
- URL** Uniform Resource Locator; Web addressing system.
- Winsock** Windows Socket; standard interface between applications (like Netscape) and networking protocols (like PPP).

Contacts major on-line services and ISPs

- Pipex** 01223 250100
- CompuServe** 0800 289378
- CIX** 0181 296 9666
- Microsoft** 0800 750800
- AOL** 0800 376 5432
- UK Online** 01749 333300
- Demon** 0181 371 1234
- Pinnacle** 01293 613686
- Direct Connection** 0181 297 2200
- BT** 0345 776666
- Cityscape** 01223 566950
- Global Internet** 0181 957 1003

