

Flying in Fine Style

In a Bentley Flying Spur

By Roger Witherspoon

The sun was high, the road was dry and there was barely enough of a breeze to audibly rustle the fallen leaves along the side of the road as the Bentley sat, poised with its twin exhausts purring, in the center of the Connecticut highway.

Then, as a hawk soared lazily overhead, I floored the accelerator, turning the purr from the 12-cylinder engine into a low, throaty roar as the Flying Spur shot forward, pushing me back into the soft, hand-stitched, leather seats. The Bentley was still in second gear as the speedometer shot past 60, smoothly moving to third with a touch of the paddleshift on the right side of the leather and walnut steering wheel, racing towards triple digits in just over 10 seconds.

There was little sound except for 'Trane blowing over the 12 speakers in the sedan's large cabin, the soft blanket from the air suspension smothered the normal hum from tires hitting fault lines and poorly patched segments of the roadway. The windows were air-tight and the air-foil body styling provided no obstructions to alter the quiet or interfere with the driving stability. The rear of the car even drops a half inch as the speedometer passes 155 to aid the spoiler and improve stability.

I entered a curved at 110 and, with a tap on the paddleshift on the left side of the steering wheel, downshifted to fifth gear and soared through a slow arc at just above 100 before leveling out and quickly gliding back up to 140 with the hawk fading in the rear view mirror. Coltrane was still blowing softly under the Connecticut morning sun.

So what does \$200,000 buy these days?

If you are in the market for a high performance, ultra comfortable, technically perfect, extra safe, family sedan then you do not need to go further than the Bentley showroom and stop at the Flying Spur.

This is the four-door sedan that is a cousin to the Bentley Continental GT Coupe, the two-door sports car that shares its engine and thirst for speed. Both are powered by the 12-cylinder, twin-turbocharged aluminum engine that cranks out 552 horsepower and 479 pound-feet of torque which can rocket you from 0 to 60 miles per hour in just 4.9 seconds and tops out at 195 miles per hour.

The Flying Spur's transmission allows you to operate it in fully automatic mode, or as a six-speed manual using either the shift knob or paddle shifts behind the steering wheel – an arrangement similar to those in the Maserati. And it is just as responsive – there is no hesitation or momentary delay between the time you hit the paddle and instant the gears shift and the engine responds. That response is handy when you simply want it and essential when you need it.

This is a four-door sedan designed to fit anyone, including Shaquille, Yao, and a pair of their clones. And if they are picky about atmospherics, each seat has its own climate control. Those in back can also fold down the walnut tray tables attached, airplane-style, to the backs of the front seats.

Ahh, the seats. These are not pleather, but double-stitched, hand-crafted leather with a diamond pattern – the kind you might find in an expensive, custom-made Lazy-Boy – that invite you to relax for the day. The seats are sectioned: Push one button, and the front portion of the seat extends or retracts to fit the legs of the passenger; push another set of buttons and separately adjust the upper and lower portions of the seat back to best fit the curve of your back and shoulders.

It is real easy to get used to pushing yet another button and starting the roller massage up and down your back, particularly if the heat is on. It's hard, at the end of a trip home, to resist the urge to just sit in the driveway listening to music, and letting the massage ease the cares of the day before tackling the chores of normal home life.

This Bentley's navigation system is easy to use. There are fingertip controls on the steering wheel which allow you to display the instructions in the center of the dials behind the wheel. This way, you do not have to look over at the map on the flat screen window in the center of the dashboard, but can keep looking straight ahead and follow the directions.

It is also one of the few navigation systems which will let you actually use it while you are in motion. This was appreciated when I found myself on the New Jersey Turnpike, sitting for an hour because of some pileup miles ahead which essentially shut the roadway down. I pulled off at the nearest exit and decided to go overland until I found another highway vaguely headed south. While driving I queried the navigation system, which used a DVD and satellite GPS system to get me around the region and to the airport on time. The voice on the Bentley navigation system was more of a mechanical, vaguely female robot than the cheerful, patient lady usually issuing directions in such systems. But she did know her way around.

If I were to nit-pick about the Flying Spur, it is that the designers still have the European emphasis on fine smoking rather than the American preference for drinking water or coffee. As a result, there is an ash tray in the middle of the center console, while the cup holder is pushed under the arm rests. If you want to travel with a drink, the arm rests are useless. The cup holder is secure enough, however to hold one large Starbucks' coffee cup – while presumably the front passenger can hold their cup in their hands. There are two pop-up cup holders for the rear passengers in the center arm rest. Otherwise, the center section of the wide, padded rear seats can be used for a child seat without encroaching on either passenger.

But that is a minor complaint about a nearly perfect machine that was designed to be driven and enjoyed. And once you push the ignition button and grip the wheel, you really don't want to let go.

2007 Bentley Continental Flying Spur

MSRP:		\$190,905
EPA Mileage:	11 MPG City	18 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:	12.5 MPG Mixed	

Performance/ Safety:

0 – 60 MPH
0 – 100 MPH
30 – 50 MPH
Top Speed

4.9 Seconds
11.3 Seconds
2.0 Seconds
195 MPH

6.0-Liter, twin-turbocharged, 12-cylinder aluminum alloy engine producing 552 horsepower and 479 pound-feet of torque; all-wheel drive; 6-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual and paddleshift controls; 405-mm ventilated front, and 335-mm ventilated rear disc brakes and brake assist; 19-inch multi-spoke sports alloy wheels; air suspension with manual driver adjustment for ride height; electronic stability and traction control program; rack and pinion steering; driver and passenger front and side curtain airbags; front and rear compartment side curtain airbags; twin bi-xenon headlights with washer jets; twin oval stainless steel exhausts.

Interior/ Comfort:

4-Zone, individual climate zones; AM/FM radio with 12-speakers; 6-disc CD player; GPS based navigation system; tilt, telescope, leather steering wheel with fingertip controls; walnut wood veneer; walnut seat-back trays; Bluetooth phone system;