



## The verdict

After two full days of driving, it came down to simple maths. Adam Towler is the man with the calculator and scorecard

The track fell silent when the time for decisions came. Huddled in a vacant pit garage, with the detritus of two long days of testing around us – discarded crash helmets, bits of GPS testing apparatus and a mountain of junk-food wrappers – judgement time had arrived. Ahead lay argument and counter-argument; universal gushings of praise and the odd condemnation. One thing we all agreed on: overall, the standard this year had been incredibly high.

Nevertheless, there were a few disappointments. The Morgan was sadly out of its depth here, the Corvette too crude and the Exige 240R promised much and then fizzled instead of inflaming our desires.

The hatchback face-off was always going to be controversial and, as we've come to expect, the Astra VXR was at its epicentre. Put simply, it failed to grasp our judges' imagination over the two days; principally because the conditions and arena exposed its flaws all too clearly. Another time and place and things could have been rather different, but the Golf GTi needs no such

caveat and consistently impressed all of us – we can't think of a more rounded, likeable and sensible performance package on sale at the moment, even if the Clio just nosed in front for raw entertainment.

The real stars, however, lie in the top eight positions. All of them are exceptional in their own way and we'd give any one of them a home on our driveways given half the chance.

The Boxster S was, at times, simply exquisite on the road – everything you could rationally ask for in a sports car – and yet it came in eighth. It's hard to pinpoint why the Boxster doesn't rise any higher. Perhaps it's just a little too smooth, too sensible. Sometimes you want fire in a sports car's soul, and occasionally it felt like Porsche has had the blanket out protecting the 911.

The M5 simply isn't a circuit car, although it's an unsurpassed hooligan if you've got an old set of rear tyres to kill. It's simply too heavy, and although it did better on the road, our tight and challenging routes just didn't suit it as well as the open flowing roads of previous tests. It's an

**The 911 Carrera S is the car for all situations and all drivers**

incredible package, with arguably the finest engine on sale at any price, but just occasionally it felt slightly blunt, constrained by its weight. Factor in its inherent practicality, though, and it's still awesome.

The Nismo 350Z, on the other hand, was an absolute star. Here's a simple message from us to Nissan UK: you must import these components. They're brilliant and turn the 350Z into one of the most enjoyable, raw and loveable cars on the market. Thank you.

The Aston cruises sublimely into fifth place. It isn't quite sharp enough to win a test like this, but we'd all love one just the same. Well, just look at it.

The F430 was as intoxicating and exhilarating as a real Ferrari should be, yet with genuine usability. But it was out-gunned and overshadowed by the Ford GT. What a monster: outrageously fast, but controlled and amazingly useable on the road. If only there was a little more emotion in its character.

So that leaves two cars. The Noble, last year's champ, slips to second this time,