

# >> Words on **Wheels**



**Left: the photographic spreads in *On the Road* have been carefully chosen to evoke the pleasures and emotions of driving.**

## Four-wheeled fascination

What is it about sitting behind the steering wheel that is so satisfying, so addictive? *On the Road* by Peter Schindler is one man's attempt to nail the answer.

"There are a million books about cars, but none about driving, until now." These words, in the introduction to 'On the Road: driving adventures, pleasures and discoveries', explain why it's a difficult book to categorise. It has some sumptuous photography, yet it's no coffee table book of big glossy pictures and short, simple captions. Instead, it's a very personal examination of the whole experience of driving, by an author who has covered more than a million kilometres (621,371 miles) of roads and racetracks in Europe, Asia and the USA, and seems to have enjoyed every metre of them.

Born and raised in Austria, Peter Schindler's first experience of driving independently was at the wheel of 'Kermit', his beloved, if underpowered Renault 5 GL. His book captures the foolhardy daring of the young would-be racer and the obsession with speed and 'personal best' times that we've all been through, and that we later look back on with bemused indulgence.

Schindler's love of driving on snow dates from those early alpine years, and the lessons he learned in car control stood him in good stead when he ventured into motor racing, to be hailed as a star in the making. It was a promise that remained unfulfilled as his life's course took him to Hong Kong and a different career. But, although he never made it as a racing driver, he still managed to pack in a lot of driving, in everything from Ferraris to a hired SUV, and it's clear from *On the Road* that years later his fascination with the subject remains undiminished.

Peter Schindler is an acute observer of the pleasures of driving; he can evoke the sight, scents and sounds of rain falling on hot tarmac or the delightful sensation of kicking out the tail of a car on an uphill, snow-covered hairpin bend. He's clearly a sensualist; his description of meticulously cleaning a beloved car, inside and out, after a long separation, is almost fetishistic (and I speak as someone who has painstakingly removed the dead flies from the cooling fins of an air-cooled motorbike engine on hands and knees, using pipe cleaners and toothbrush).

In a way, this is a kind of *Zen and the Art of Motorcar Driving*. Schindler is keen to get to the root of our fascination with motion and discover what

makes driving such an addictive activity. "All turning motions cast on us a spell", he notes, "be it skiing on white powder, be it skating on blue ice, be it surfing on black waves, or be it driving, turn after turn, into fleeting dusk." I'd add biking to that list, but he's right.

Deliberately, Peter Schindler doesn't get drawn into examinations of 0-60 times and power outputs; this isn't a book about the mechanics of the four-wheeled machine but about the workings of the flesh-and-blood one that controls it. And control is the key word. Braking to a halt - with such fine control that it's near impossible to tell when forward motion has finally ceased - gives the author as much pleasure as tracing the perfect racing line, at speed, through a series of bends. Well, almost.

*On the Road* isn't a book to be read cover-to-cover in one hit; that would be a bit like wolfing down an entire box of amaretti biscuits in one sitting. The subject may be an original one, but it's a style of book that's centuries old: a series of essays, or *pensées*, around one central theme. As such, it's preferable to dip in and out, a chapter at a time (for those who enjoy reading on the loo, each chapter length is just about perfect for one sitting, unless you're a slow reader).

So, is this book for you? It depends. If you've ever deliberately backed off the throttle and wound down the window simply to listen to the sound of your tyres on hot tarmac, if you enjoy driving all cars for the different pleasures and challenges they offer, if you can drive fast but don't always choose to do so, then I'd say yes. (And obviously, if you know of such an individual, it would make an excellent Christmas or birthday present too.) But if you're still at the stage of treating every road as a racetrack and thrashing the last bhp out of everything you drive, maybe not. Not yet, anyway.

For a signed copy of *On the Road*, delivered anywhere in the world, visit [www.ontheroadeditions.com](http://www.ontheroadeditions.com) where it costs £18.99 including worldwide shipping.

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