

Northwest Passage

Sport, luxury and open air road runners

Unlike most multi-vehicle events we participate in, Run to the Sun is not a comparo. Each manufacturer brings us the most special of their stable; we drive and enjoy. All are numero uno—though we are bound to find a few favorites. Vehicles are typically high in the lineup, in sporty trims. (See sidebars for key details of each.)

Originally all convertibles, the event has broadened to include a variety of highly optioned performance machines. Even with the droptops, we sometimes run a leg with the top up, either because it's 40 degrees in early morning, or because it's midday under a high altitude sun, or just because that's how it was when we hopped in.

Run to the Sun uses a predetermined drive sequence. Other events have anywhere from 40 to 80 to over 100 vehicles, with the a day, day and a half or two days to drive them all. Time is inevitably lost as people (a) decide what to drive next, (b) change their minds because a select few are always out and/or (c) find more opportunities to

shoot the breeze along the way. At Run to the Sun, there are about 25 vehicles, you know exactly what you are driving next—also orchestrated for meaningful groupings, sequences and segues—and you have to keep moving to achieve the schedule, with typical drive stretches of about a half hour each.

FIRST NIGHT. We started on arrival day by driving one vehicle from Portland airport to our lodging in Welches, Oregon (elevation 1320 feet) at the base of Mt Hood. Locals had grabbed their first designated ride midafternoon, but we had a drive event in New York City in the morning, thus grabbings our first in Oregon about 10:30 pm.

Vehicle number one for us was the **Mitsubishi Lancer**. There is no longer a rally-ready Lancer Evolution (although you can still buy a new 2015 model), but ours at \$22k was the top of five trims (the lineup starts at \$17,795), including a sophisticated AWC all-wheel drive system, halogen and



LED lights, leather, an effective touchscreen interface and more. We arrived at our hotel rested and satisfied.

DAY ONE. We started in style, with four top-level sedans and a series of convertibles for the morning stretch through the mountain and valley highways of Oregon's Cascades. The four sedans

totaled 1363 hp.








Volvo S90 is the brand's new luxury line-topper, and this is the top S90, taking on established competition with its T6 powertrain, all-wheel drive and Inscription trim, which adds everything from a 12.3-inch display to walnut inlays and full Nappa leather, competing with the Germans at a very favorable price.

The **Infiniti Q50** joined the lineup a couple of years ago in a new spot, smaller than their other sedan, the Q70 (formerly the M, coming in standard, long or hybrid form, with two engine options and available AWD). The Q50 comes in fully 13 varieties, with two smaller engines and a hybrid, several trim options and available AWD. Our rear-drive Red Sport 400 falls just below line-topping AWD models, but is thus a little lighter and sportier. At 3853 pounds, its 400-hp turbo four is very potent, and Dynamic Sunstone Red paint drives the point home.

We drove the performance **Lexus GS F** in our prior issue, likening its combination of premium features in a sleeper power sedan package to what you might get if a Dodge Charger SRT were a German performance sedan built in Japan, certainly a winning combo, though priced notably higher than the other three in this sequence.

We also drove the all-new **Jaguar XE** in our prior issue, a compact stablemate to the midsize



	(combined mpg)	\$ base / \$ as tested
	 	
2016 Mitsubishi Lancer 2.4 SEL AWC	168 hp / 26 mpg	\$21,995\$22,805
	 	
2017 Volvo S90 T6 AWD Inscription	316 hp / 25 mpg	\$52,950\$66,105
	 	
2016 Infiniti Q50 Red Sport 3.0t 400	400 hp / 22 mpg	\$47,950\$54,085
	 	
2016 Lexus GS F Sedan	467 hp / 19 mpg	\$84,400\$86,770
	 	
2017 Jaguar XE 20d R-Sport	180 hp / 36 mpg	\$46,500\$47,495
	 	
2017 Fiat 124 Spider Lusso	160 hp / 29 mpg	\$27,495\$29,840
	 	
2017 Mazda MX-5 Miata Grand Touring MT	155 hp / 30 mpg	\$30,065na
	 	
2016 Buick Cascada Premium 1SP	200 hp / 23 mpg	\$36,065\$37,385



XF, one of our favorites. R-Sport trim and Italian Racing Red paint were perfect for this drive, and its 20d diesel powerplant is sure to win a lot of buyers, with 42 mpg highway, 36 combined, and its 180 hp belying its 318 lb-ft of diesel torque.

Top down! Next up were five sporty and affordable convertibles, four before lunch. They hovered around \$30k, three in the \$20s, with horsepower under 200 (or exactly 200 for the Buick).

First up were the **Fiat 124 Spider** and **Mazda MX-5 Miata** rear-drive two-seat roadster siblings—the Fiat in top Lusso trim at just \$27,495. Both use the same Mazda engine and offer manual and automatic, depending upon trim. The Fiat manual is from the prior-gen Miata, a better match to their Abarth's turbo. Horsepower and fuel mileage intertwine slightly between manual and automatic, and between Fiat and Mazda. Your choice ultimately will come down to style—European or Japanese, both perfectly executed. Anyone with sporting blood in their veins will have a long and happy relationship with either. (There is also a performance-tweaked Fiat Abarth at just \$700 more.)

We had driven the German GM Opel-based **Buick Cascada** this summer and found quite a bit to like, though it could use a little more Americanization of some features. It fits a neat niche as an American four-seat ragtop, priced in the \$30s, with decent power and fuel economy, and it is a big step in Buick's redefinition of the brand.

Volkswagen has hit the nail on the head with its new "Beetle," replacing the old "New Beetle" a few years ago with classic style and a Golf-like front-drive performance layout. The **Volkswagen Beetle Dune 1.8T** driven here, which started as an auto show concept, is a distinctive iteration with many upgrades, perfect in Sandstorm Yellow paint, though color availability varies year to year.

We broke for lunch, then finished the convertible sequence in the **MINI Cooper S Convertible**—an English brand owned by German BMW and built in The Netherlands. Another front-driver, officially a four-seater, MINI has styling and instruments with special appeal, but we find significant amounts of torque steer, or front-drive torquiness even in a straight line, that we can't ignore.

The next two were a sedan and a coupe, fundamental daily drivers, but each of them special.

The **Kia Cadenza** premium full-size sedan is new for 2017. Cadenza briefly held a flagship position when new three years ago, till the luxury K900 arrived a year later. Starting under \$32,000—less than \$10 grand above the staggeringly popular Optima midsize and \$17k lower than the rear-drive K900—this thoroughly equipped, stylish, roomy 290-hp front-driver achieves 28 mpg highway. It's cleverly crafted to not only fill a spot in the Kia lineup, but to take on European premium sedans as up to double the price. As Kia sales grow exponentially, the new Cadenza's share will do the same.

At first sounding simple among the supercars, roadsters and luxury yachts in this event, the **Honda Accord EX-L V6 Coupe** is top trim shy of Touring, with the lineup's top 278-hp multi-point fuel-injected V6 and of course in a sporty coupe format. Available with the same 6-speed paddle-shift automatic as Touring (the lower trims have a CVT), better still it's also available with a 6-speed manual, which our Run to the Sun car had. Ours had add-ons including an aero kit, 19-inch diamond-cut alloys and sport suspension. This was our prelude to its cousin, the Acura NSX.

Next up were five super performance cars of widely ranging character, from an Audi sedan to Viper, to NSX and GT-R, to Mercedes-AMG luxury. Together, the five generate 2920 horsepower and sell for about three quarters of a million dollars.

The **Acura NSX** is one of the most anticipated vehicles of recent years, returning after more than a decade's absence and a few years of auto show teasers. This supercar has upped its game in every way—with a performance hybrid drivetrain comprising two electric motors for the front (from power in the rear) to its longitudinally mid-mounted 500-hp twin-turbo V6, combining for 573 hp total, yet still delivering 22 mpg highway, 21 combined. Ours had over \$40k in add-ons, including lots of carbon fiber in and out, alcantara leather, \$10,600 carbon-ceramic brakes and more. This car turns heads from a mile away.

The **Nissan GT-R** is a perennial favorite with drifters, racers and supercar aficionados. Priced within spitting distance of \$100k, it's more approachable than its specs and provenance might suggest, both in cost and in driveability. The GT-R has been significantly reworked for 2017. A subtle iteration of Nissan's V-motion grille is one tell-tale. The hood has been recontoured, with other updates to the front fascia, side sills, exhaust tips and beltline, and side vents are added. The interior is completely reworked, with a new instrument panel and Nappa leather. Horsepower is up by 20 points. This remains one standout vehicle.

A sedan in this supercar run may seem an anomaly, but its performance is not. The **Audi RS7** is the max-output version of a favorite from the brand. In Daytona Grey Pearl coat, this four-door is a sleeper, easy to blend but easy to hammer. Power from its 4-liter V8 is up by 45 horses (and top speed up from 174 to 190 mph), and the car has ceramic brakes and 21-inch wheels.

It was then back to an unmistakable show-off American supercar, the **Dodge Viper GTC**, ours in a custom chrome yellow paint. There is nothing like the Viper. And soon there will be nothing, as it enters its final year for its 25th anniversary, with five limited-edition models for 2017. Relatively rare, totally wide open and wild, the Viper is also



	(combined mpg)	\$ base / \$ as tested
		
2016 Volkswagen Beetle Dune 1.8T	170 hp / 28 mpg	\$29,395na
		
2016 MINI Cooper S Convertible	189 hp / 27 mpg	\$29,500\$34,450
		
2017 Kia Cadenza	290 hp / 23 mpgunder \$32,000
		
2017 Honda Accord EX-L V6 Coupe	252 hp / 21 mpg	\$31,175\$36,504
		
2017 Acura NSX	573 hp / 21 mpg	\$156,000\$199,200
		
2017 Nissan GT-R Premium	565 hp / 18 mpg	\$109,990\$115,880
		
Audi RS7	560 hp / TBD mpg	\$110,700na
		
2016 Dodge Viper SRT GTC Coupe	645 hp / 15 mpg	\$95,895\$113,390

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surprisingly manageable, whether on the track or the open highway. Seize your chance to grab this certain collectible while you can.

DAY TWO. Our final day had wide variety—seven cars, five over 400 hp, of those four over 500 hp and one over 700 hp, with one priced over \$400,000, and two very affordable sport coupes.

At dawn, we drove the **Mercedes-AMG SL63 Roadster**, a luxury retractable hardtop with price and power very close to the NSX, but a very different personality in every way. The big S-Class and Maybach are the brand's apparent flagships, but this two-seater can also stake a claim to that spot, especially when done up in AMG form. For almost \$70 grand more, you can get the SL65 with V12 engine and 621 hp, but we've always favored the lighter weight and balance of the V8, plus 93 percent of the horsepower for 69 percent of the price.

From here, we step down to about 18 percent of the SL63's price and 36 percent of its power, in the accessible **Subaru BRZ** and **Toyota 86** siblings. Subaru builds both, the difference in horsepower and fuel mileage on our two due to the transmission (five more horses with the manual in our BRZ) and fuel mileage (three points lower with the manual). Any manual fan will consider the first a win-win and the latter an easy tradeoff. These closed cars join the Fiat 124 Spider and Mazda MX-5 Miata convertibles in delivering the pure sports car experience of 40, 50, 60 years ago.

We wrapped up the event in fine style, with four more horsepower champs, including by far the priciest of the lot and by far the most powerful of the lot, the four totaling 2240 horsepower. We also crossed the Columbia River and drove on the Washington State side with the first of these.

Rolls-Royce Dawn is the latest from this rarified brand, a rear-hinged two-door convertible with as much road presence as any five or ten ordinary cars combined (and priced accordingly). If you think of Rolls-Royce as stodgy or stuffy, think

again—the brand today is likely to appeal to wild young Prince Harry at least as much as to the Queen. The drive is as blissful as its luxury leather and teak decking, and its near three tons light as a cloud, certainly one of the most accessible iterations yet of a car that inevitably makes you feel like king of the world. Across narrow open-grate bridges, on the smoothest asphalt or through rough pavement changes, you maintain a serene feeling that you are just gliding through your world, but you do want the driver's seat for this one—Dawn puts chauffeurs out of work. If you can afford it, you just may have to have it.

With about the same horsepower, significantly less weight, and totally different format and style, the **Ford Shelby GT350**—the most accessible of various ultimate expressions of Mustang—awaited us back on the Oregon side. We had met both the GT350 and GT350R on the track in Arizona last spring, but we had a blast on the open road this time, for a stretch including riverfront, waterfall parks and a climb to a towering viewpoint and our next to last swap.

The **BMW M4 Convertible / Competition Package** is one of the best BMWs we've driven over the past several years—a droptop iteration of the ever popular 3 Series (now 4 Series, when a convertible or coupe) and with not just accessorized M trim parts but the full M treatment. More pricey per pony than some competitors, it nonetheless is a well-tuned and appealing combo.

Hellcat is the star of any show and has been for a few years now. With a whopping 707 horses, yet 22 mpg highway (with cylinder deactivation while cruising, which also makes this a great daily driver), the **Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat** is immensely popular not only for its raw power but for its balance, utility and control—and unlike the equally popular Challenger, its sedan format, making it the fastest four-door you can buy.

With all these horses dancing in our head, we hopped aboard a jetliner with 66,000 pound-feet of thrust and headed back to Phoenix. ■

	(combined mpg)	\$ base / \$ as tested
		
2017 Mercedes-AMG SL63 Roadster	577 hp / 19 mpg	\$151,350 / \$165,505
		
2017 Subaru BRZ Limited / HZE	205 hp / 24 mpg	\$27,645 / \$28,465
		
2017 Toyota 86	200 hp / 27 mpg	\$26,975 / \$31,222
		
2016 Rolls-Royce Dawn	563 hp / 14 mpg	\$335,000 / \$408,895
		
2016 Ford Shelby GT350	526 hp / 16 mpg	\$47,795 / \$56,495
		
BMW M4 Convertible / Competition Package	444 hp / 19 mpg	\$82,645 / na
		
2016 Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat	707 hp / 16 mpg	\$65,945 / \$72,225

