UK motorsport magnate and ex-F1 star Jonathan Palmer is creating a petrolhead nirvana, including a five-mile circuit, in northern France. He pilots Steve Cropley there by helicopter and reveals his plans.

PHOTOGRAPHY STAN PAPIOR
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From the air, the potential of the place hits you between the eyes. It looked breathtaking enough in photographs a few months ago, when Jonathan Palmer first announced that his MotorSport Vision (MSV) group, operator of four race circuits and Bedford Autodrome in the UK, had bought a disused air force base in north-western France with the aim of creating “a huge motorsport village” that would serve the whole of Europe.

But now we’re seeing the place, Laon Autodrome, for the first time, spread out below like a gigantic tablecloth as we look down from JP’s Agusta 109 helicopter, and it’s clear mere pictures are no preparation. This is a truly huge site, fenced, secluded and as big as three Brands Hatches. You can see in a minute how easily it will contain the promised flowing five-mile driving circuit, complete with a 1.5-mile straight on which the quickest road cars will be able to hit 200mph.

Although MSV runs a large chunk of British circuit sport, its biggest business is in the performance driving, track day, corporate event and driver tuition areas. Understandably, JP wants this to be Laon’s focus, too. “We’ll mainly concentrate on high-performance road car driving,” he says, “plus track days and manufacturer promotional events. We’re designing a stunning new PalmerSport Europe corporate/private driving event specifically to attract customers to Laon.”

However, racing won’t miss out, says JP, whose lifelong love of motorsport took him in 10 years from racing an Austin-Healey Sprite to Formula 1 – and then to the BBC as an F1 commentator alongside the legendary Murray Walker. “We’re planning four race weekends a year,” he explains, “for GT and sports prototype cars, historic cars, general club racing and motorcycles. We’ll have extensive engineering space beside the circuits, too, which we think will attract engineering companies and race teams who need an accessible central European base.”

We’re at Laon Autodrome today for three good reasons. First, after endless meetings with residents, vendors, planners, contractors, municipal authorities and various other forms of officedom, JP at last has all the permissions he needs and is free to reveal his plans and begin work.

Second, we’ve borrowed his son, Renault F1 driver Jolyon Palmer, on a rare free day away from the team, so he can set the first-ever lap record on Laon’s proposed five-mile circuit – appropriately driving one of two Renaults the company’s UK arm thoughtfully sent for the purpose.

Third, this is a perfect day, all blue sky, fluffy clouds and moderate winds, so we’ve been able to hurdle the Channel at 200mph in the Agusta from JP’s place in Sussex, on the way dropping into the neat little airfield outside Amiens for customs clearance and lunch in a welcoming restaurant beside the control tower. On board are JP, personal assistant Jess, Jolyon, Autocar chief photographer Stan Papior and me – and just a couple of hours after…
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AUDI RS3/RSQ3 = 420+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
AUDI S3 / GC = R = 373+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
AUDI S3 TD (ALL MODELS) = 315+BHP  
AUDI 3.0 TDI (ALL MODELS) = 380+BHP  
AUDI Q7/T8A 4.2 TDI = 400+BHP

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M5 V10 = 548+BHP (205 MPH)  
X3M / X6M = 618+BHP  
1M = 411+BHP  
M3 E92/92 + 445+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
M135i / M235i = 402+BHP  
M4/M3 LCI = 520+BHP  
M5 F10/M6 (STAGE 1) = 680+BHP  
M5 F10/M6 (STAGE 2) = 730+BHP  
F10 330D = 240+BHP  
F10 330D = 305+BHP  
335i 325i/6 = 370+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
123D = 252+BHP  
316D/216D/116D = 160+BHP  
316D/216D/116D = 225+BHP  
318D/218D/118D = 215+BHP  
320D/212D/120D = 275+BHP  
435i / 335i = 335+BHP  
435i / 335i/335D/335D = 390+BHP  
730D = 305+BHP  
X6 X5 3.0D = 300+BHP  
X6 X5 0.4 = 300+BHP  
X6 M50D/X5M0D/X60D = 450+BHP

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"3.5 5.5L TURBO ALL MODELS = 490+BHP  
"300 " TURBO ALL MODELS = 490+BHP  
"270 " TURBO ALL MODELS = 490+BHP  
SL63 AMG = 690+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
SL5 AMG = 690+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
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C63 AMG 6.3L = 530+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)

C3 AMG 4.0T = CALL FOR DETAILS  
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SL65 B-TURBO = 580+BHP  
SL65 AMG 6.0 = 530+BHP (+DE-LIMIT)  
300 CDI W4 = 274+BHP  
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R ROVER SC 5.0 = 580+BHP  
R ROVER 4.4 SDV8 = 395+BHP  
R ROVER 3.0 TDV6 = 315+BHP  
R ROVER 3.0 SDV6 = 345+BHP  
EVOQUE/DISCO SPORT 2.2 DIESEL = 240+BHP

PORSCHE
997 TURBO/S 3.8 INC PDQ = 611+BHP  
997 TURBO 3.6 = 620+BHP  
997 GT2 RS = 670+BHP  
997 TURBO GT2 = 680+BHP  
997 CARRERA 4S PDQ = 400+BHP  
997 CARRERA 4 = 376+BHP  
997 CARRERA PDQ = 360+BHP  
997 CARRERA GTS = 435+BHP  
997 GT3 UP = 436+BHP  
BOXSTER 2.5 = 334+BHP  
CAYMANN 2.4 = 342+BHP  
MACAN S 3.0 = 375+BHP  
CAYENNE GTS = 440+BHP

CAYENNE TURBO 4.8 = 578+BHP  
CAYENNE TURBO 4.8 = 600+BHP  
CAYENNE 4.2 DIESEL = 450+BHP  
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PANAMERA TURBO = 600+BHP  
PANAMERA DIESEL = 315+BHP

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MCLAREN MP4-12C = 700+BHP  
MCLAREN 650S = 720+BHP  
MURCIELAGO LP640 = 670+BHP  
MASERATI GHIBLI 3.0 PETROL = 470+BHP  
MASERATI GHIBLI 3.0 DIESEL = 312+BHP  
MASERATI GTC/SPORT = 418+BHP  
MASERATI GT S / M = 479+BHP  
BENTLEY 4.0 V8 = 600+BHP  
BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT = 600+BHP

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leaving Sussex we are looking down on the 1263-acre site that in 2018 will open for business as Laon Autodrome.

To the west of a junction between the two mighty runways that define the site, the larger nearly two miles long, is a huge complex of garages and workshops – room enough, perhaps, for a dozen car company or race team bases, even when well separated for privacy reasons. Close to that is a military village with its own grid of roads, street lights and a collection of 60-odd buildings that includes a hospital, post office, barracks blocks, equestrian centre, rifle range, a potential hotel, multi-storey restaurant block and a superb sports hall.

To the east, on the other side of the long runway, is a forbidding-looking complex of bunkers, blastproof hangars and weapons stores, double-fenced with barbed wire and surrounded by protective and disguising earth banks. These are relics of the Cold War, although this airbase’s beginnings go even further back. Laon-Couvron, as it was called, opened in 1938, but by 1940 it had fallen into the hands of the Luftwaffe, which occupied it until liberation. After the war, it was rebuilt and expanded by the US Air Force, which is where the blastproof hangars and many of the buildings came from. The Americans left in 1967 and the French army moved in until 2012, with up to 1000 people based there in its heyday.

For now, precise details of the five-mile circuit and its variations are still developing in JP’s head. However, for our arrival, MSV’s man in France, Nicolas Simon, and his skeleton ground staff have cut the grass and filled ditches to connect the main tarmac-covered areas, show where the circuit will go and give Jolyon a defined route on which to set the autodrome’s first-ever lap time.

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Even before we’ve touched down, it is apparent that there are years of work ahead at Laon Autodrome, but JP is undaunted. His twin business secrets are to think bigger than rivals do and never be satisfied with the status quo. Having pioneered and opened Europe’s best performance driving centre (Bedford), devised and backed several single-seat racing formulae and completely overhauled both the infrastructure and the racing at Brands Hatch, Oulton Park, Snetterton and Cadwell Park, JP might be justified in sitting back and managing the MSV empire, you’d think.

Nothing could be further from his mind. We soon hear that the entrepreneur has been “eager” to expand into Europe for ages.

Jolyon sets the Laon Autodrome lap record. F1 drivers don’t drift…

Jolyon now appreciates what it means to be a Renault F1 star in France

A Renault, but not an F1 car, for Jolyon; this one’s a Kadjar
targeting the region between Paris and Brussels as a way of attracting customers from all over Europe. Turns out he’d already inspected another dormant French military base before buying this one. “It’s important to have the freehold,” he declares. “Then you can give the project what it needs.”

That concern extends to worrying about how progress at the autodrome looks to the locals, who are also rule makers and potential employees. JP has already had the entrances manicured and painted so people can see he’s serious. As a gesture of goodwill, he’s even bought a Kangoo from the local Renault dealer to use as a circuit runabout.

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People swarm around the Palmers, including an effusive Frenchman, Jean-Louis Chene, who just happens to run the annual Laon Historique, a gathering of more than 1000 classic cars and owners from all over Europe (including up to 500 from the UK) that will be held this year on 13-16 May. For Chene, MSV’s arrival – fronted by a former F1 star and his new F1 star son – is like Christmas coming seven months early.

People swirl about. Jolyon survives the selfies, the bear hugs and the adulation with what, I’m learning, is a built-in modesty (while appreciating, perhaps for the first time, what it
really means to be a Renault F1 star in France). But he’s also running out of time. He has an appointment with the BBC in Manchester the following morning, so we finish our drinks and high-tail it back to the autodrome to work on the lap record.

Renault UK has sent a Kadjar 4x4 and a Renault Sport Mégane. The Kadjar soon proves the better choice for this junket – if not for laps of the future – because it has the ground clearance and slippery-roads traction for an exercise like this that involves a fair bit of hurdling gravelly ditches and speeding full tilt over the wet, roughly chopped grass connecting the autodrome’s tarmac areas.

The Kadjar bucks and slides but grips where it counts, often sending mud, grass and gravel flying. It also speeds with poise and impressive stability at 115mph-plus down the mighty runway – not bad for a 1.5-litre diesel. Jolyon takes a couple of runs against the watch and, as the sun sinks, we agree a first-ever lap time on Laon Autodrome’s big circuit is 5min 35.24sec, recorded on Stan’s iPhone stopwatch. Under the circumstances, something close to a 60mph average seems pretty stellar. It will be beaten, and soon, but no one else will ever be first.

Another unlikely star of the proceedings is a well-used Dodge Dakota crew-cab V8 pick-up – all torquey Slushmatic, throbbing 5.2 litres of Magnum bent-eight, deep-pile velour interior and cart-sprung rear axle – which also gets hurled about with total abandon on the rough, while achieving a surprisingly composed 100mph on the straight bits. It’s so much fun that we all want one – and JP is already talking about buying a second one. But Jolyon’s schedule is really pressing now, so we drop him at the airport on the way to our overnight accommodation, arising early the next day to return and see exactly what the military has left behind at Laon-Couvron.

The tour is a revelation. As the basis of a ‘motorsport village’, the autodrome already has extraordinary facilities – mostly built to a regardless-of-cost military standard. It’s a bit shabby but remarkably free of vandalism. Following JP around his new estate is another revelation. The grid of streets would be ideal, he declares, as a test track for autonomous car testing. In the proposed hotel, he’s already talking about bathroom fittings. In the nearby garage complex, there are so many workshops, so widely separated, that it’s obvious that a dozen race teams or prototype developers could operate here in complete privacy. The sports centre, rifle range, restaurant buildings and stables promise interesting alternative pursuits for the families of track obsessives. Here and there we pass a building that JP has already decided is surplus to his requirements; it turns out he has already offered them to film companies to torch or blow up for dramatic purposes – another earner. And when we succeed in opening one of the blast-proof hangars (as serene as a chapel and as clean as an operating theatre), he instantly sees it as the ultimate in secure storage for paranoid owners of multi-million-pound car collections. This is an extraordinary place and it’s a privilege to be on hand at the very beginning.

After another long and bouncy lap with JP in the Dodge, we’re heading back to the Agusta. We’re nearing lunchtime and JP has another appointment in Blighty this afternoon. It’s quite a lesson, seeing how much value he gets out of every day. We call air traffic control for clearance, start the twin turbines and depart, pulling a couple of tight circuits so Stan can snap the autodrome once more from the air. Then we head away to the north and home. But this doesn’t feel anything like a departure – more like the start of something very big.