

Great Dane

The newest hypercar on the planet is the 1100bhp Zenvo ST1. And it's Danish. *TopGear* takes the Stig to meet his favourite new car

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YOU DON'T JUST JUMP straight into a car that has 1,100bhp and nail it. I'm not that brave and the men from Zenvo aren't that stupid. Or maybe it's the other way round. Whatever, there has to be some sort of pre-flight familiarisation, a bit of a run-through.

But not much of one, as it turns out. The Zenvo ST1 might be obscenely powerful, but it's not meant to be difficult. That's one of its most attractive USPs.

A man called Troels is in the hot seat. He has the slightly hang-dog look of brilliant Hollywood character actor William H. Macy, who has carved out a strong niche for himself playing men perpetually frustrated by life's unfathomable about-turns. They might look similar, but I don't think Troels is the sort to get frustrated. He's Danish, for a start, and they tend to be pretty stoical. As is the Zenvo. Its Danishness is another USP. A no-nonsense Nordic supercar to stick it to the Koenigsegg.

The Zenvo's 7.0-litre V8 idles at an impressively even-tempered 800rpm. Troels gives the throttle a little blip and the revs rise and decay with an alacrity that seriously quickens the pulse. There's a corresponding pop from the exhaust. Later today, the exhaust will happily emit a jet of flame a metre long. The Zenvo has the rumbling, casually violent

demeanour of a NASCAR. But it's much better dressed, and has better manners.

Troels eases us away, and points the Zenvo's snout towards the desert. We're about 30 miles outside Dubai city, temporarily based beside a small parade of shops. There's a souvenir store stocked with cuddly camels, not-to-scale models of the new Burj Dubai (the recently opened world's tallest building) and hubbly-bubbly pipes. The Zenvo's a fabulously well-executed piece of design, but out here, alongside the Toyota pick-ups and Nissan Patrols, it looks as mad as something teleported from George Lucas's cerebral cortex.

On the move now. Troels is chatting away. "You see, it's easy. The clutch is easy, changing gear is easy, and it's comfortable and quiet enough for us to have a conversation at 80 or 90mph. This is what we've been working towards, a supercar you can drive every day."

We are indeed having a conversation, and it's true, the car is remarkably civilised. Sure, this road's straight and smooth, but there are none of those clonks and groans that bedevil low-volume supercars, nothing to make you wonder if they blew all the money making a car look like a spaceship. It mumbles along in sixth, pulling about 1,300rpm at 70mph. Geared for intergalactic travel, then. Troels glances over. Briefly, I ponder my favourite William H. Macy movie. *Fargo*. Or maybe *Boogie Nights*.

Then he flattens the Zenvo's fast pedal and everything goes a bit strange. This isn't just a quick car, it's a bloody time machine. There's no point trying to affect Danish stoicism in here. The moment Troels first unzips the Zenvo I laugh out loud, like a child or possibly someone experiencing jet air travel for the first time. It's a bit embarrassing, to be honest.

The stats suggest 0-62mph in three seconds and a top speed limited – ha! – to 233mph. But it feels faster. From a standing start, it hooks up and beams itself up the road in a way that really does smack of the Starship Enterprise. At 4,500rpm, the Zenvo's engine and ancillaries are sucking and blowing with heavy-duty industrial intensity. I've no idea what speed we're doing but it feels like we could accelerate until the road runs out, turning the middle of nowhere into the end of days.

Bit dramatic, I know. But then so is this car. Has someone been on the hubbly-bubbly pipe or has Denmark, not previously noted for its car industry, just bludgeoned its way into the supercar elite?

Though the Swedish Koenigsegg has paved the way, there's something even more appealingly random about the Zenvo's Danish origins. I mean, what do you know about the place? There's bacon and Copenhagen. Hamlet was a Dane. The 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index rated Denmark as the world's least



Remember this name. It's Danish for "Aaaarrghh"

Ships of the desert, rocket of the tarmac and one Stig of Arabia



Is a 7.0-litre V8 enough? Maybe...

Low, wide, angry and with 1,100bhp trousers for the visual mouth



Turbo nestles neatly in the Zenvo's bay

Under the desert sun,
Stig appears. How
does he do that?



corrupt country. The more recent Global Peace Index decided it was the second most peaceful country on the planet. Like other Scandinavian countries, it's a model of social justice, a terrific welfare state with a matchless national health service. But the locals pay a hefty 65 per cent basic income tax for the privilege, and a BMW 3-Series costs about 50 grand. Mercedes' modifier Kleeman is the most noted Danish automotive outfit. Eight times Le Mans winner Tom Kristensen is its most famous driver.

So really, the Zenvo should suck. That it doesn't is down to the ingenuity of co-founders Jesper Jensen, Troels Vollertsen and Lasse Stenkilde. Vollertsen is the engineering brains of the operation, a motorsport specialist with a track record in saloon car racing, rallying and rallycross. He's also a tuner with a strong reputation and client base in the Middle East. Jensen is an IT genius and entrepreneur, who sold his company at the right time and made some money. Vollertsen had already squeezed 640bhp from Jensen's AMG Merc CLS 55, and went to work persuading him to collaborate on his dream of building a sports car. ☺

'Has someone been on the hubbly-bubbly pipe or has Denmark, not previously noted for its cars, just bludgeoned its way into the supercar elite?'



Twin-charged
7.0-litre V8 is
fast but benign



Hints of R8, Carrera GT,
Ferrari 458 – but a very
attractive mutant



White, fast machine
meets white, fast
machine. Sparks fly



Some say he can
smell oil under
the desert



"I said to Jesper, 'You've sold your company, so why not do something funny like build your own car?' He replied, 'Come on, we'll never be able to do that.' Pagani and Koenigsegg have done it, I told him, so why not? Though we never thought we'd end up in this league when we started out..."

The Zenvo project – "the name means whatever you want it to mean," says Jensen – was duly fired up in 2005. Images of the car began appearing on the internet in 2008, and I first spoke to Jensen exactly a year ago, when he wouldn't even confirm the whereabouts of the company's premises. They play their cards close to their chests, the Danes, and even now, with the key in my hand and the car ticking away in the desert heat beside me, Jensen is adamant that their creation does the talking.

"This is about the car. We aren't doing this for ego reasons. We realised Denmark had no real car design or automotive engineering heritage, and we took the decision not to reveal anything until we were absolutely ready. Even some of our suppliers and partners were cynical to begin with. But we had the correct finance in place before we started the project, and we paid them properly upfront. When they saw the finished car, they said, 'now we believe you, now we're interested!'"

The ST1's chassis and packaging was confirmed before the car's stunning shape

was even a twinkle in Jensen's eye (Gordon Murray did the McLaren F1 this way round too). Though emphatically not a track car, much of its specification is race-car derived. Its chassis is a steel spaceframe, its body panels carbon fibre. It uses a Ricardo six-speed manual transmission, and its suspension uses double wishbones front and rear, with adjustable gas-hydraulic Ohlins shock absorbers. The brakes are ventilated steel discs from Brembo, 380mm diameter at the front, 280mm at the rear, and grabbed by six-pot pistons. It wears enormous Michelin Sport Pilot rubber, 335/30 on 20in alloys at the rear, 265/35 19ins at the front. The prototype we're driving weighs 1,426kg, but Vollertsen says the first full production car will shave that down to 1,376kg. The press kit claims a power-to-weight ratio of 802bhp-per-tonne – impressive against the Veyron's 446bhp-per-tonne ratio.

The engine's provenance is more mysterious. Being a 16 valve, 7.0-litre V8, it's tempting to think it owes at least something to the Corvette ZO6. And it does, but it's also sufficiently bespoke to stand up to Zenvo's claims to have designed its own power unit. "GM does a thing called an LSX block," Vollertsen says, "but it's steel so it was too heavy. We took its dimensions and did our own aluminium version. It has bigger oil channels, and dry sump lubrication.

The crank, rods, forged pistons, flywheel are all our own design. So really, it's our own engine."

Then they decided to supercharge *and* turbocharge it, using the familiar screw-type Eaton supercharger and exhaust gas-driven Garrett turbocharger. The supercharger improves the engine's flexibility lowdown, though it runs at 0.4 bar continuously. The turbo keeps things kicking at the top end, running boost pressure at 1.4 bar in maximum attack mode. All of which makes for an impressively linear torque curve. Oh, and an earth-moving 1,053lb ft of the stuff at 4,500rpm. And 1100bhp at 6,900rpm. None of which so much as wrinkles the chilled Danish reserve one iota.

"We don't really care about top speed," Jensen claims, poker-faced. "We were never focused intently on the numbers. We actually started with 1,500bhp, and took it down from there. We never wanted to get involved in a big horsepower battle or a top speed war. That's just bragging. What mattered to us were the car's design and driveability."

Hmmm. Driveability and 1,100bhp are generally uneasy bedfellows. But as we head off for an appointment with a certain white-clad driving God – mad dogs, Englishmen and Stigs out in the midday sun – its tractability really is stunning. It uses an AP Racing twin-plate clutch, but there's no need for any high

'High-speed downforce isn't an issue. Stig finds this out immediately. He flags us down, takes the Zenvo and 20 minutes later he's back. Apparently satisfied'



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rev histrionics as you pull away. After that, you need a fairly firm hand on the aluminium gearlever, but no serious effort. The shift action itself isn't that special, and lacks mechanical intimacy, but given the amount of grunt it's harnessing it's pretty good. (A paddleshift system is under development with Xtrac, a necessary sop to some of Zenvo's more image-conscious target markets.)

The ST1's performance ramps up remarkably smoothly for such a powerful car. Vollertsen talks of it being 'organic' and of not wanting to spring any nasty surprises on the driver. "We wanted to avoid the 'ketchup effect'... you know, nothing, nothing, nothing, then, *splat!* as all the sauce comes out in one lump," he says.

The Zenvo dishes up all 1,100bhp of its sauce pretty evenly. Which isn't to say that full-bore acceleration is lacking in drama. Forward motion is fantastically, almost cosmically uninhibited, and it's accompanied by a soundtrack that's comically macho. Inside, it's like a mobile power station. Listening to it from the outside as it passes by, it bellows and barks like it's channelling some primal force from the centre of the earth. You gotta love cars like this.

There are three driving modes: Wet, Sport and Race, which dole out the power in successively, er, saucier increments by altering boost and exhaust mapping. When everyday mode involves just 650bhp, you know you're dealing with something special. In 'Sport' setting, the Zenvo reels in the horizon with eye-popping ferocity. In 'Race' you're pinned into the back of your seat, eyeballs, ears and any other extraneous fleshy bits forced unattractively back like a Basset hound in a wind tunnel.

There aren't many corners out here, but with just 1.5 turns lock-to-lock the ST1's steering and turn-in are super-sharp. Traction is good too, despite its immense power, and though wind-tunnel testing has yet to be carried out – which is a bit worrying – a full CFD analysis suggests that high-speed downforce isn't an issue.

Stig finds this out immediately. As usual, he flags us down without warning after appearing from the high desert, demands the keys and guns it. Before he disappears over a crest about a mile away, he jinks twice, hard. He is back after 20 minutes. Emerging from the cabin, he turns and simply stares at the ST1. I think I see him twitch. Then, as the car ticks and exhales itself cool, he walks off in the direction of Ras Al Khor Industrial Area.

My turn. It certainly feels stable enough, although it wriggles a bit under hard braking. At some point soon, the Stig will trade desert for his more familiar home turf, and we'll find out how well the Zenvo handles high-speed corners. But it should be good.

It's a blast, this car, in every sense. But really, it's not that difficult to squeeze mega-horsepower out of a big old V8 these days. All sorts of tinpot operations are at it, satisfying the lascivious urges of power junkies in Germany, the Middle East and the US. What makes the Zenvo different is the quality of the execution. And the way it looks.

For what is effectively a small start-up, this is a seriously professional bit of work, the best since the Pagani first exploded onto the scene in 2003. Jensen admits he had a million ideas, but elected to hand responsibility for shaping the Zenvo over to former Alfa Romeo designer and RCA graduate, Christian Brandt. Brandt

describes Nordic design as 'consequent', and admits that when you're operating at this level you simply can't skimp on the quality. The end product delivers impressively on both fronts. This is the prototype, so some of the shut-lines could be tighter, but even so it's far from bad. The seats are terrific, the driving position and packaging amazingly good (Jensen's a big bloke), and the fit and finish inside generally high quality. It doesn't smell gluey, either, like so many of its ilk. This particular car uses Porsche instruments, but the finished production cars will have a bespoke panel that riffs off Zenvo's hexagonal motif and is similar in style to the 458 Italia's layout.

As is the car's exterior styling. The longer you look at it, the better it gets. There simply isn't a bad angle on it. It's as long as a Porsche Carrera GT or Lamborghini Murciélago, so it's trading blows with the big boys. I can see 458 Italia, Maserati MC12 and Audi R8 in its complex but connected surfacing, but as these are my three favourite supercar shapes of the past decade this isn't a criticism. Props to Lasse Stenkilde, the quietest of Zenvo's three co-owners, and the one who presided over the ST1's construction.

The Zenvo works. After a long day in the desert, nothing has melted or fallen off. "We offered money and beer to some of the development drivers we've been working with to do their worst to the driveshaft and clutch," Jensen says, "but nothing's broken yet."

At 800,000 euros it's obviously daft money, but since only 15 ST1s will ever be made, cost isn't relevant. What is relevant is how good the thing is. And it seems to me that with the arrival of Zenvo, we've got ourselves a real player here. 🏁

'In "Race", you're pinned into the back of your seat, eyeballs, ears and any other extraneous fleshy bits forced back like a Basset hound in a wind tunnel'

