The Second Coming

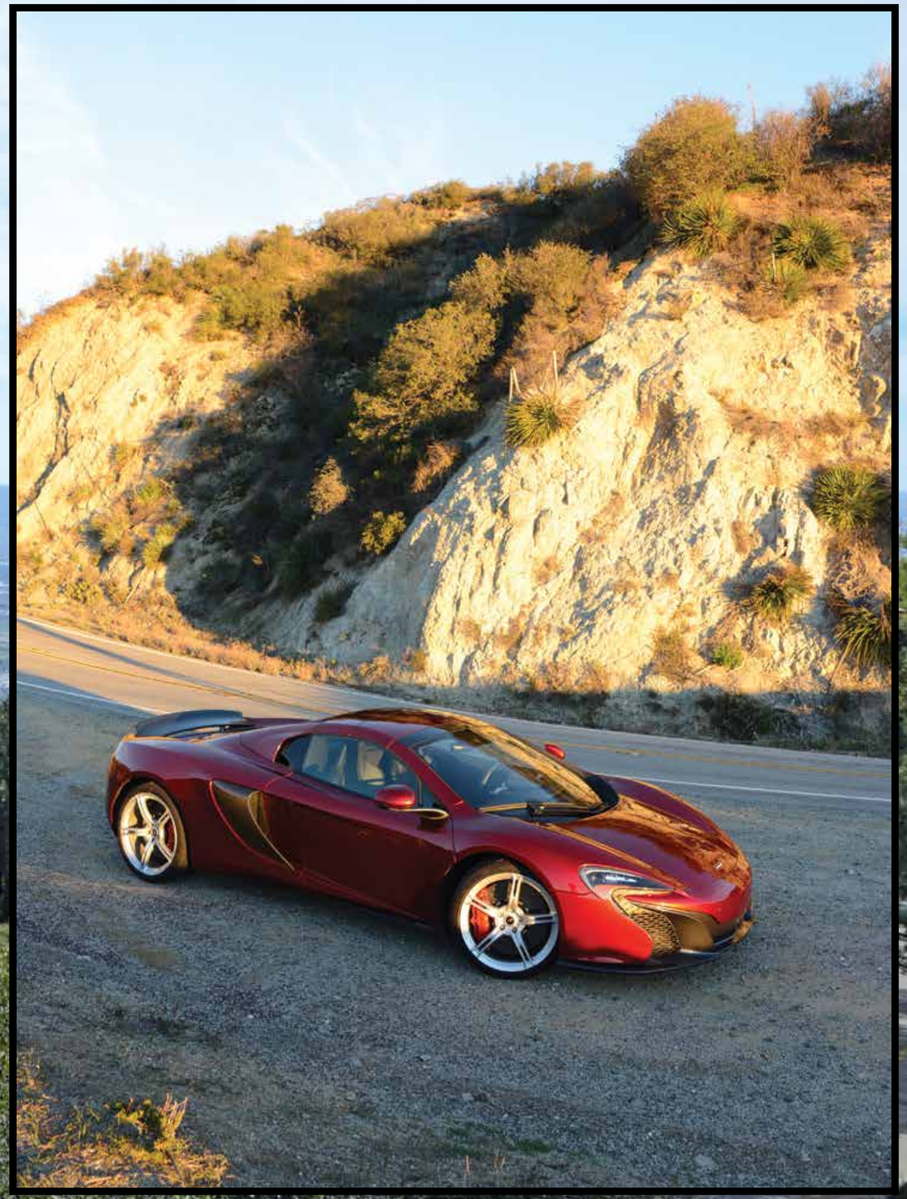
Words by Jennifer Jensen
Photos by Brad Olson

I can't help but love this road. The sweepers, tight turns, switchbacks, off camber drops and quick-blast straights make it something any enthusiast would love. The scenery makes it even better... as long as I can avoid flying off into the canyons below by missing a turn or jumping a guardrail! The sun is shining brightly. It has not rained for days, meaning this gem of an asphalt ribbon is dry and warm: perfect for sticky tires. I would love this road if I were driving the Mk VII Golf GTI that is trying, in vain, to keep up with me. I almost feel bad for our cameraman in the Golf...almost. But I love this road even more because I am behind the wheel of McLaren's brilliant 650S Spider and I can't help but smile. Well, I'm not smiling; my face hurts so much because this is more than a smile. A quick glance in the mirror reveals me to look a little more like the Joker as played by Jack Nicholson in 1989's "Batman." The mirror also reveals that the desperate GTI is long gone.

I gently pull my right foot off of the accelerator to afford my eyes the opportunity to check my speed. The large, centrally mounted tachometer is flanked by a digital speedometer that currently reads “91”. I apply the brakes and ponder that number. 91 miles per hour in a car that, according to McLaren, has a dry weight of just a tick over 3,000 pounds. I am blasting down roads that are hanging on to the sides of these mountains by the skin of their concrete teeth. The ludicrous part is that the 650S makes it all so very easy.

For all the naysayers who have declared McLaren’s automotive offerings to be too clinical and sterile, you are dead wrong. Like Frankenstein’s monster, this car is alive! Every nuance of the road is delivered with succinct perfectness through the steering wheel. The chassis uses my entire body to convey all that is happening underneath me. In fact, if this car wasn’t so good at communication I would be scared shitless to drive it at speed. It is so incredibly, unbelievably fast. It is also a leap forward from the MP4-12C that preceded it.

We first met the 650S at a launch event in New York a little more than one year ago. Both coupe and convertible (spider) were present at this event. We marveled at all of the technical updates on offer with



the updated platform. The 650S utilizes the same basic carbon fiber MonoCell from the 12C and then hangs updated bodywork that shares a strong family resemblance to the P1. Underneath that body, the 650S has 22 percent stiffer springs at the front and 37 percent stiffer at the rear. These rates were increased to help with the added downforce the new body generates... considerably more downforce...24 percent more than the 12C at 150mph. No wonder the car feels so planted and attached to the road at just under 100mph on the twisties!

As in the 12C and the P1, there are no anti roll bars or sway bars. Instead the 650S uses a hydraulic system that mitigates body roll, both side-to-side and front to back. New lightweight alloy wheels house updated Pirelli P-Zero Corsa tires developed with an asymmetric tread pattern specific for the 650S and meant to add a little more initial bite on turn-in. Carbon-ceramic brakes are now standard far though if a buyer really wants steel brakes, the company will oblige.

Further trickle down from the P1 program include tweaks to the now familiar 3.8-liter twin-turbo V8. Several

minor modifications lead to big changes in power. The engine now revs to 8,500rpm and delivers 641bhp along with 500lb-ft of torque, up from 616bhp and 443lb-ft in the outgoing 12C.

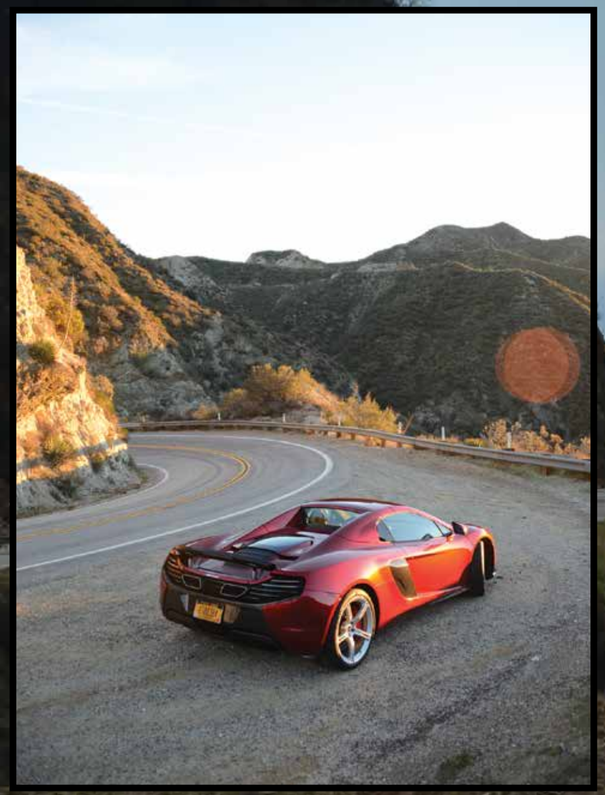
Our next encounter with the 650S was on a press drive along the scenic, but overpopulated, 17-mile drive in Pebble Beach. Our Executive VP, Nick Proctor, declared the 650S “rocket ship fast” and swore that he would start saving every penny, nickel, and dollar to work towards picking one up. On last report, he was “getting closer.” That drive was enough to whet our collective appetites and created a desire to spend more time behind the wheel. So, just a few months later we found ourselves picking up the Volcano Red car you see on these pages to really find out the capabilities of the 650S.

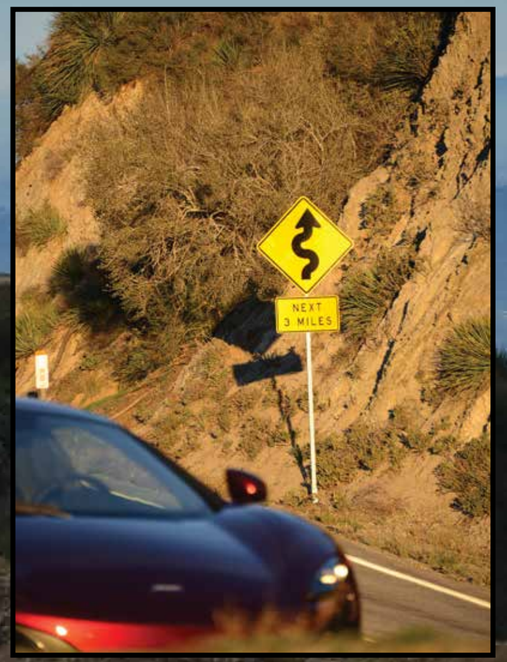
Things didn’t start out too well. We left Los Angeles at around 4:15 in the afternoon. Any of you reading this who have been in or around LA after 4PM know what came next. Gridlock. If nothing else, the next two hours of inching along Interstate 5 taught us that the engineering boffins in Woking know how to

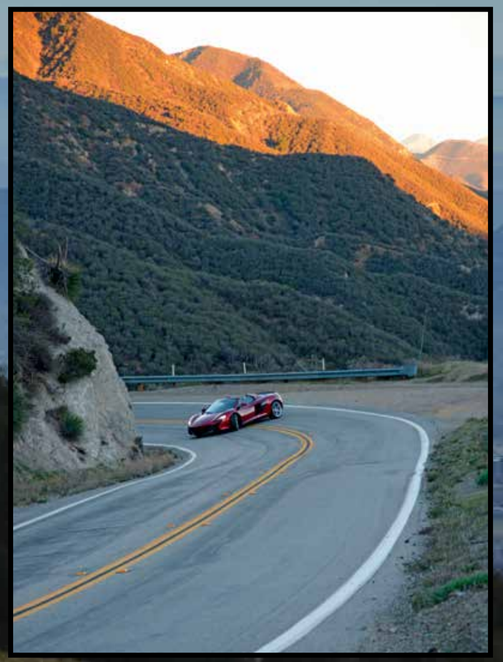
make sure a car runs smoothly in all conditions. The temperature never went above normal, the dual-clutch gearbox never hiccupped and the 650S performed flawlessly. On the other hand, I was getting worn down from the snails-pace progress we were making.

This time spent reading bumper stickers and waving to supercar fans also gave me occasion to thoroughly feel out the interior. The MP4-12C was a very well-engineered and thought out car. The layout of the interior has carried over into the 650S but, to my eyes, everything seems a bit tidier here. The panel gaps and seams are tighter, and everywhere I touch, my hands come across nice materials. The little stalks protruding from the steering column help dial through all sorts of information and data in the screens off to the side of the big tach. Carbon fiber is everywhere.

But, the navigation and infotainment system leaves quite a bit to be desired as it is neither intuitive nor very helpful. It took about half

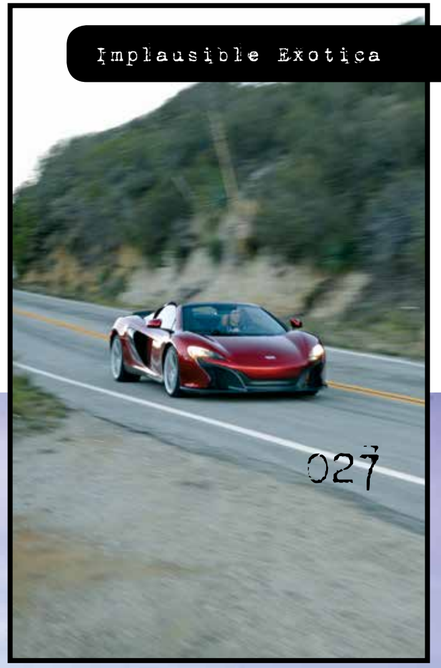






of my gridlock time just to figure out how to shut off the previous driver's set destination in the nav. The polite digital lady telling me to turn around every few minutes did not help the situation. How about a simple MUTE button?

While the interior of the 650S is efficient, it is not particularly inspiring. I could sit for hours in some of the McLaren's competitors just admiring the beautifully finished stitching or the multi-color layout. In this instance, the technical side of McLaren won out over the emotional side. This is really too bad, because drivers (and passengers) sitting in the 650S should be treated to something aesthetically pleasing and tantalizing to the eye rather than the bare-bones minimalist partners of black and plain. It's just a bit austere.



On the plus side, everything in the cabin of the 650S (minus the aforementioned navigation) works. The knobs and dials for the HVAC system reside in the doors themselves. The center console houses the electronic parking brake, a button to raise and lower the roof...a task that takes less than 17 seconds and can be done at speeds up to about 20mph.... Also there is a window switch for the small window between and behind the seats (what better way to hear the engine singing?), and the transmission selectors for drive, neutral and reverse. Just above the parking brake are the important buttons and dials. The uppermost awakens the 3.8-liter twin-turbo V8. Just below the start/stop button are the "H" (Handling) and "P" (Powertrain) dials. These are the controls that dole out the varying levels of

witchcraft and wizardry that the 650S has been blessed with.

Each of these dials has selections for Normal, Sport and Track and can be set independent of each other. For example, you can set Normal mode for the suspension (Handling knob) and Track mode for the Powertrain. This would adjust the hydraulic suspension system to its softest setting and sharpen the throttle response and shifting on the powertrain side of things. This was our setting of choice when shuttling between locations.

We tried out Normal first, but found this setting to be almost lazy in its shift speeds and throttle response. So much so that we wonder why this option is even here. Maybe it is for when you need to pick up the groceries? The ride, on the other hand, was Lexus-like in its ability to smooth out imperfections and road blemishes. However, we found the

650S is better in all things when the selectors are set to Sport. Choosing this mode firms up the suspension, speeds up shift times and throttle response and also changes the angle of the rear wing. This, annoyingly, blocks some of your rearward visibility. With the speeds this car is capable of, you need your eyes looking forward anyway. Don't worry, there is still enough room to see the cherries light up should local law enforcement want to have a chat with you about, well, hopefully just about your car.

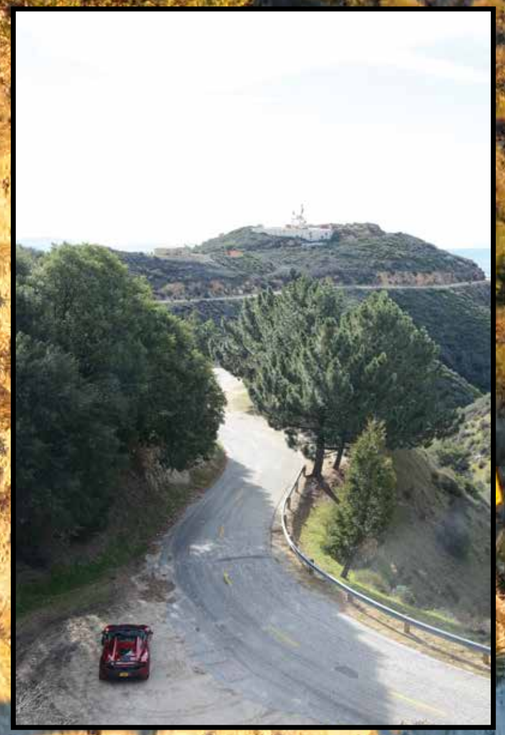
The shifts in Sport mode are a thing of technical beauty. The feel of each gear engaging is mechanical and precise and even though I am a die-hard three-pedal girl, I really fell in love with this dual-clutch tranny. The seven-speed transmission now features something that McLaren

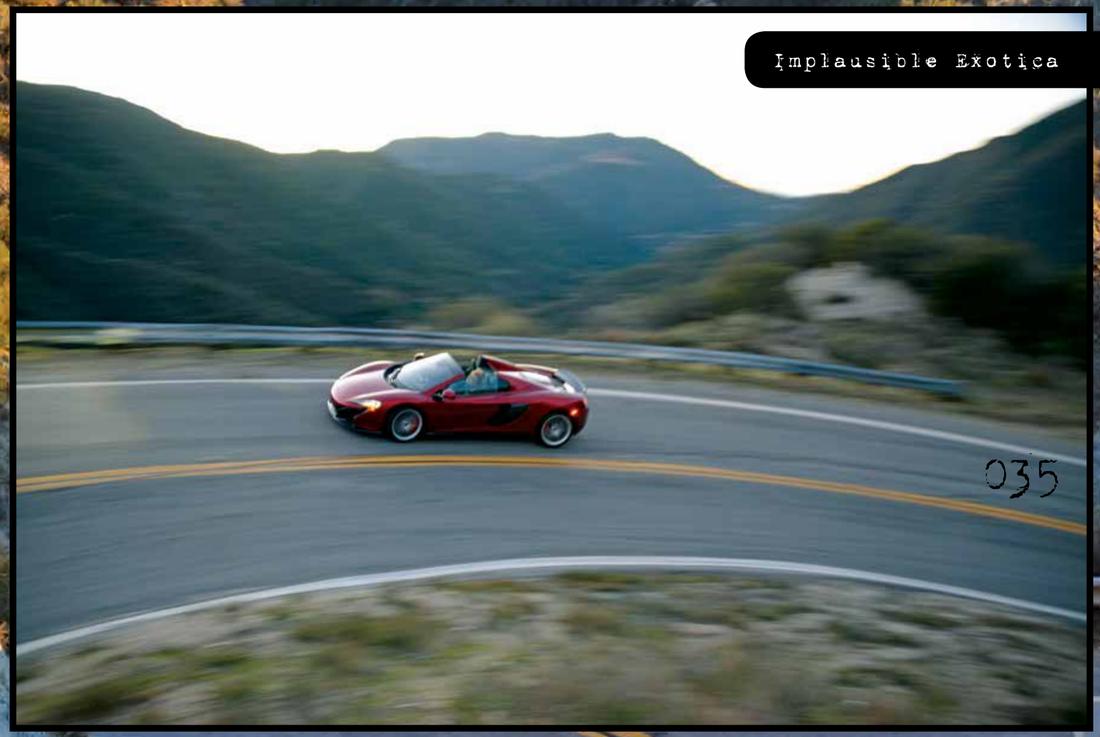
calls “inertia push” which helps to fill the “gap” when shifting under hard acceleration. It engages the next gear with a little more alacrity than normal, sort of like slamming the stick home in a manual transmission car. Sport mode also loosens the leash on the stability and traction control aids releasing the hind-parts to a little sideways fun...something that was very difficult to do in an MP4-12C.

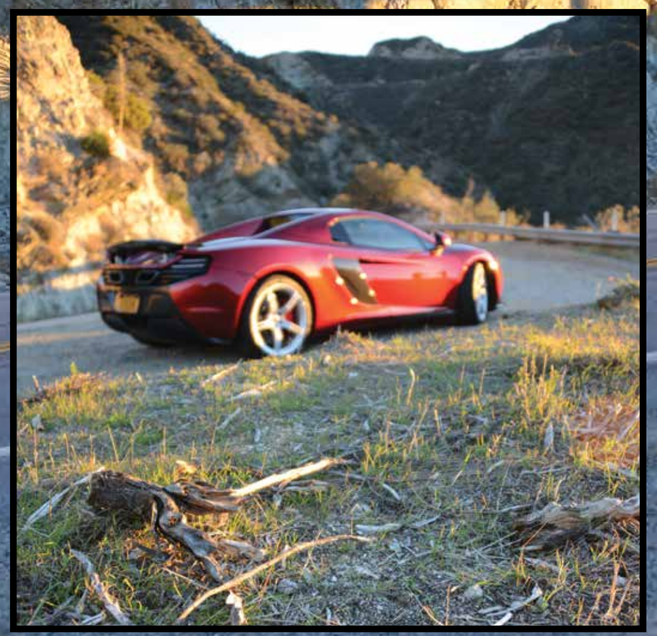
As for Track mode, it is everything you would think a car like this could do in such an aptly named mode. Our recommendation is to leave TRACK for when you are actually on a race track. Trust us on this one!

No matter which driving mode you set, the engine is powerful and it makes some pretty great noises. The turbos can be heard inhaling and the exhaust note is much richer than that of the 12C. With the roof open and the back window tucked away, there is a veritable orchestra just over your shoulder that can be directed with your right foot.

The engine makes great noises. The rest of the car? Not so much. There are odd chimes and bells that seem very out of character for this car. But worse than that was a mechanical buzzing that drove my OCD absolutely insane. My ears tuned in to the resonant pitch every single time I started the car and it never went away, no matter what. Adjusting the HVAC had no effect, neither did engine speed, the roof position, the stereo or anything else that we tried. None of these things would remedy



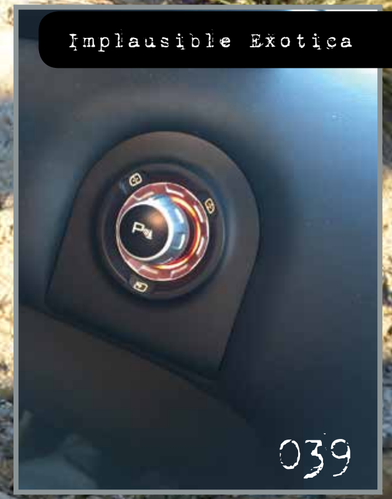




or remove this omnipresent sound from the cockpit. It sounded almost like a dial tone on a telephone, just turned down a notch or two in intensity.

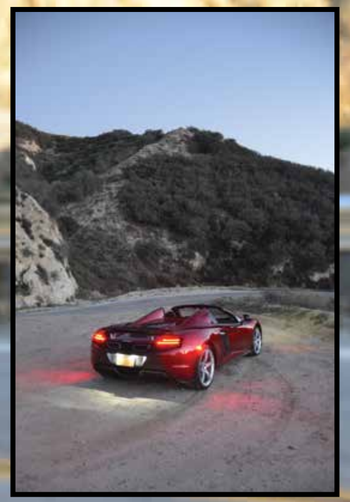
The only thing to pull my attention away from the noise was speed. To be blunt, I just wanted to keep driving. It's only when I stop that this car shows its foibles and flaws. I can ignore them as long as the orange needle keeps swinging back and forth like a hypnotic pendulum and the engine howls in my ears.

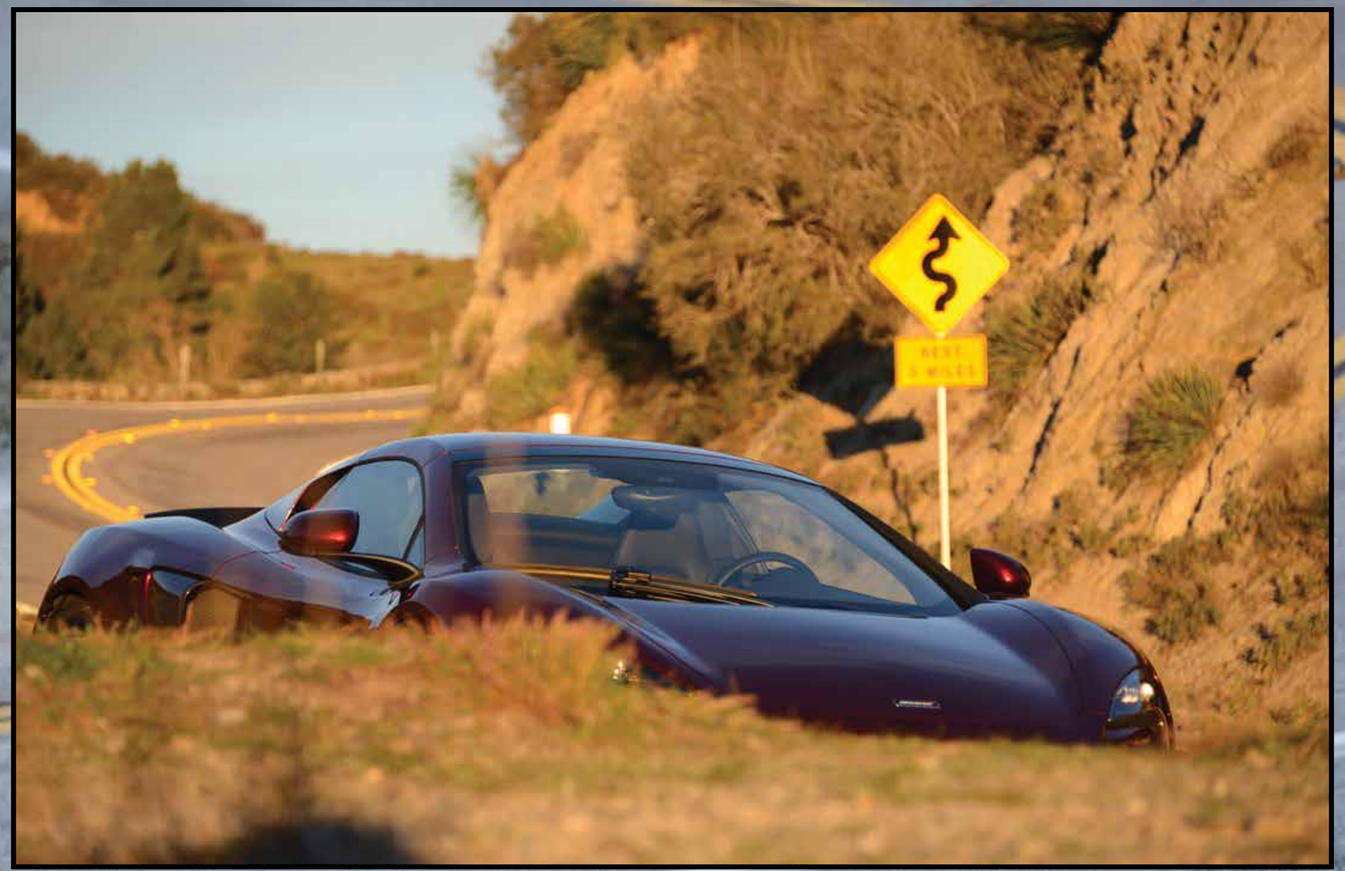
Which brings us back to the mountains. The LA traffic is now a distant memory and the sun dancing through the peaks and valleys before me has me transfixed. The GTI has caught back up to me and I decide that is just not right. My left hand flicks the paddle-shifter and I drop one gear, now two and my right foot



pushes hard on the throttle. The 650S lunges forward with the speed of a pouncing cat. A sweeping left-hander drops down to a blind right and I am hard on the brakes as the active aero wing in the back stands up tall to help me decelerate. It is confidence inspiring and making me a better driver than I really am. I swing around the blind turn and am hard on the accelerator again rushing forward as the scenery blurs out the side windows. I play this cat and mouse game with our cameraman in the GTI all the way down the mountain and find another chink in the McLaren's armor. Turbo lag. It is present; especially in first gear starts with the engine at idle. Keeping the revs up eliminates the problem.

When we reach the bottom, our cameraman looks sweaty and worn. He tells me that the new Golf is fantastic and it is clear he has had a fun go at it, but he also mentions that he was pushing the car to its absolute limit to try to keep up with me. I don't think I ever pushed beyond 8/10ths in my ride.





We move some cameras around and get set to charge back up the mountain which provides a great opportunity to test the launch control button that has been quietly waiting next to the chassis controls. The 650S surprises me yet again in its ability to simply deliver on its promises. With launch control engaged I hold the throttle and brake down simultaneously and then drop off the brakes. With no drama or wheelspin I am launched up the mountain like a pebble from a heavy-duty slingshot and that Joker-esque smile is back on my face.

Is the 650S just an updated 12C? To some extent it is. But it is a car that is better. It adapts everything that McLaren has learned with the rolling test bed known as the MP4-12C and improved it. Now, if it weren't for that damn grating noise I would join Nick in his savings and purchase plan.

SPECS

650S SPIDER SPECIFICATION

PERFORMANCE

MAXIMUM SPEED	204MPH
0-60MPH (97KPH)	2.9S
0-100MPH (161KPH)	5.8S
0-400M (¼ MILE)	10.6S @ 222KPH (138MPH)
0-1,000M	19.0S @ 279KPH (173MPH)

ENGINE

M838T	
ENGINE CAPACITY	3,799CC
TYPE	90° V8
TECHNOLOGY	TWIN-TURBO, DRY SUMP
VALVETRAIN	32-VALVE, DOHC, VVT
BORE X STROKE	93MM X 69.9MM
COMPRESSION RATIO	8.7:1
MAX RPM	8,500
POWER	650PS (478KW) 641HP @ 7,250RPM
TORQUE	678NM (500LB FT) @ 6,000RPM

TRANSMISSION

SEVEN-SPEED McLAREN DUAL CLUTCH SEAMLESS-SHIFT GEARBOX (SSG) WITH PRE-COG FUNCTIONALITY				
Gear ratio:	**1ST**	4.0	**MPH/1,000RPM**	6.0
	2ND	2.6	**MPH/1,000RPM**	9.1
	3RD	1.9	**MPH/1,000RPM**	12.5
	4TH	1.5	**MPH/1,000RPM**	16.2
	5TH	1.2	**MPH/1,000RPM**	20.6
	6TH	0.9	**MPH/1,000RPM**	26.4
	7TH	0.7	**MPH/1,000RPM**	34.8
FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.3			

WHEELS AND BRAKES

WHEEL SIZE	(F/R) 8.5” X 19”/11” X 20”
TYRE TYPE	PIRELLI P-ZERO CORSA
TYRE SIZE	(F/R) 235/35 R19/305/30 R20
BRAKES	CARBON CERAMIC DISCS
BRAKE SIZE	(F/R) 394X36MM/380X34MM
BRAKE CALLIPERS	(F/R) SIX-PISTON/FOUR-PISTON

BRAKING

200-0KPH (124-0MPH)	124M (407FT)
100-0KPH (62-0MPH)	30.7M (101FT)

SUSPENSION

McLAREN PROACTIVE CHASSIS CONTROL DOUBLE-WISHBONE INDEPENDENT SUSPENSION	
DAMPING & ROLL MODES	NORMAL, SPORT & TRACK

EFFICIENCY

CO2	275G/KM
FUEL CONSUMPTION (COM.)	11.7L/100KM (24.2MPG)
POWER TO WEIGHT	485PS/TONNE (478HP/TONNE)
CO2 /POWER	0.42G/KM PER PS

VEHICLE DYNAMICS

OPEN DIFFERENTIAL WITH BRAKE STEER	
STABILITY CONTROL MODES	WINTER, NORMAL, SPORT & TRACK
DRIVER AIDS	ABS, TRACTION CONTROL, ESC, LAUNCH CONTROL, BRAKE STEER

CAPACITIES

FUEL TANK	72 LITRES
ENGINE OIL	8.0 LITRES
COOLANT SYSTEM	26 LITRES
WASHER FLUID	4 LITRES

WEIGHT

DIN WEIGHT	1,468KG (3,236LB)
DRY WEIGHT	1,370KG (3,020LB)
DRY WEIGHT*	1,341KG (2,956LB)
WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION	(F/R) 42%/58%

STEERING

POWER STEERING	VARIABLE RATE, ELECTRO-HYDRAULIC
TURNS	LOCK TO LOCK 2.66
TURNING CIRCLE	12.3M

650S CLEARANCE