

THE GRAND OUTDOORS ISSUE | GEAR & GADGETS



OPEN PLAN The Ariel Atom 4's exoskeletal design simulates the feeling of flying at zero altitude.



convenience, although it won't do much for their hearing.

Speaking of helmets: Only a fraction of Ariel owners ever drive their cars on a racetrack, according to Mr. Swain. That's surprising. With respect, why would anyone buy this ass-hammering mosquito and not track it, like, every weekend?

Last week, as part of its media

The machinery seems to vanish, leaving just the unscrolling of the road.

day, the company belted me into the re-engineered Atom 4 to drive a few laps around Virginia International Raceway's 1.1-mile Patriot Course. It was special. It might have been more special if I hadn't had a 200-pound factory representative in the right seat, or if the car's optional three-stage engine mapping (turbo boost) and seven-stage traction control had not both been set to "Assisted Living."

I didn't take it personally. Even a dialed-back and ballasted Atom 4 demands respect. Mounted just ahead of the rear axle and seemingly bolted to one's vertebrae, the exquisite 2.0-liter Honda turbo-four puts out up to 350 hp at 7,000 rpm and 310 lb-ft, channeled through a six-speed manual gearbox. These ponies are pitted against a mass of only 1,350 pounds, giving the Atom 4 roughly the power-to-weight ratio of a McLaren F1.

Point this little erector set straight, unload the clutch pedal in 2nd gear, and hang on. The Atom 4 will clap you between the shoulders, swirl your eyeballs and smother your reason with the shrill shimmer of turbosuck and a bypass valve that sounds like your right ear is being blown out of an airlock—*bu-WHISHHH!*

Under ideal conditions, and with adroit shifting, the Atom 4 can hyperventilate its way to 100 mph in 6.8 seconds on its way to a top speed of 162 mph.

Some glad morning, if I win the lotto, I'll fly away.

RUMBLE SEAT / DAN NEIL



Get Ready to Fly: No Roof, No Doors, Helmet Optional

WHAT URGE MAKES middle-aged men want to slip the surly bonds of inertia in ever more minimalist machinery? I'm asking for a friend. The Ariel Atom 4—a skeletonized version of a mid-engine two-seater (\$87,910, as tested)—belongs to a class of barely-there G-force generators that also includes sailplanes, parasails, ultralights, hang-gliders and hot-air balloons. You can't tell me that's not symbolic.

Why just men? No one can say. When I asked Mark Swain, president of TMI AutoTech, which builds the Ariel in Virginia under license from the UK-based founders, he only noted the clientele were "almost entirely male," which made me giggle, but I took his point. The

shop in Virginia is tooled up to make 50-70 Ariel Atom 4s per year, said Mr. Swain.

Introduced in 2000, the Atom became famous in a 2004 episode of *Top Gear* in which host Jeremy Clarkson's face flaps in the wind like Air Force Colonel John Stapp's on the rocket sled. Now that was good television. It also nicely illustrated the Atom's unique transparency to the elements at speed.

No top, ever. There are two frameless windshields available, small and smaller. The reinforced-plastic seat is bolted to the floor. Looking over the Alcantara-wrapped steering wheel, the TFT display, and the cockpit switches, the driver sees, well, almost nothing—or everything, depending on

one's phenomenological status.

Holding up the car's slender nose, the pushrod/inboard-coilover suspension and double wishbones do their kinematic thing practically at arm's reach. Dancing at their ends are the hubs, wheels and wide tires, wearing small skull caps of fiberglass: The fenders.

These sight lines are fundamental to the Ariel's magic. At times the machinery seems to vanish below the experiential horizon, leaving just the driver, the sound, and moment-by-moment unscrolling of the road. This is the view of an angel flying at zero altitude just before he gets thrown in jail in Virginia.

The Ariel's other secret is no secret. Anyone who has driven an open-wheel car knows how awe-

some, how empowering, how liberating it is to be able to see through the corners, over the squirming and squawking tires. It's just science.

Outside of the Ariel, about the only way to scratch that itch is a single-seat race car, like Formula Ford. But that means hanging around in the paddock with people half your weight and a third your age. Besides, no other car has that gorgeous trellis of tubular steel through which the rushing tarmac and terrain can be seen, like, right there.

Another of the Ariel's talking points is that—unlike motorcycles or even three-wheelers such as the Polaris Slingshot—it is exempt from state laws requiring helmets. That's huge in terms of owners'



Get Star Struck

Our universe has produced few things more magnificent than the Whirlpool Galaxy, but the distant star system—31 million light years from Earth—defies most average telescopes. If you equip yourself more grandly with the new eVscope from Unistellar, which can also photograph and share your view of the night sky, you can be suitably humbled by the (crisp) sight.

The WiFi-enabled smart device uses the astrophotography technique of image-stacking to show stars in incredible detail, even if you're on an urban-light-polluted penthouse rooftop with a Cosmo aptly in hand. Controlled by a smartphone app that doubles as your primary viewfinder, the eVscope adds considerable finesse to nerdiness. \$2,999, unistellaroptycs.com

Be Well-Caffeinated

For a cup of Joe at the campsite that could pass for something snooty and Parisian, pair VSSL's new copper-colored Java grinder with the BruTrek French Press. The hand grinder operates so smoothly you won't miss your electric version back home and cuts beans to a uniform size without pulverizing them, ensuring a better brew (\$145, vsslgear.com). The precisely fitted gasket on BruTrek's brewer, meanwhile, makes it work better than most we've tried and its thermos-like lid helps retain heat and prevent the sort of spills that would undermine your "tenting in the Tulleries Gardens" fantasy. From \$60, planetarydesign.com



Tick Off Your Accomplishments

Garmin's new top-of-the-line Enduro watch packs all the info you need when adventuring—like where trail runners should turn next to avoid becoming bear food and how much higher cyclists have to pedal up a looming hill—into a chic square inch and a half on your wrist, no cellular connection required. Since it automatically charges via solar energy to extend battery life, you'll only have to juice up every 80 hours or so in GPS mode. Post-workout, the device's VO2 max feature assesses how changing elevation is affecting your cardio then tells you whether to push it or take it easy on the next workout. \$800, garmin.com



Add Zip to Life

Traditional sleeping bags doom campers to lie burritoed on their backs. But the new Sidewinder bag from Big Agnes will let natural side-sleepers embrace their inner odalisques (see Matisse's paintings of nudes lying poised on one hip). Known for lifetime guarantees and waste-reducing production methods, the company engineered the stretchy Sidewinder to eliminate the mummification effect and mapped its insulation to minimize impact on pressure points. Even after a night in the dirt you can wake up refreshed. From \$279, bigagnes.com