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## Renaultsport Megane R26.R Owners Review Summer 2019

Slowing through the gears on a dual carriageway for a larger roundabout, the traffic rules out any chance of carrying momentum. I stop and look left, from an elevated position 'White Van Man' smiles and gives the thumbs up. 'When you know you know'. I'd like to acknowledge his approval, but the nearside window hasn't opened for three years. A scenario created by owning a Renaultsport Megane R26.R, the best affordable 'faux racer' yet to be manufactured by anyone, mine one of just 39 licensed with a further 32 SORN'd. There are more counties in the UK than there are these running about so that's a rare car, a sub-Unicorn.

Even driving the murdered out 'Noir Profond' or Deep Black 26R (as a few of us seem to annotate them when corresponding) you do tend to stand out a bit with the red and grey stickers and especially with optional red wheels. Although the carbon bonnet is less showy than combined with other colours. The non-availability of replacement Speedline Corse lightweight alloys from Renault led me to buy a spare set in black (a new car option), which have become regulars on the car. IMO it looks faster standing still with the black wheels although the Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2's on the red wheels are superior in the warm months. The alternative Yokohama AD08Rs still competent and more affordable all-seasons rubber.

Produced by Renaultsport division as a run out halo Phase 2 model, Renault marketing took the opportunity of creating a car to grab the Nurburgring Nordschleife Front Wheel Drive record and set about upgrading the already competent R26 model to do so – of which I know a fair bit about since I sold a Clio 182 Trophy to one of the developers at Ricardo Engineering who were tasked to turn a Megane 225 into a 230 F1 Team R26. At quite some cost I might add. The whole Nurburgring Record thing has got a bit out of hand in recent years, once the singular preserve of Nissan GT-R R32/33/34 now every volume hatchback manufacturer wants a slice of perceived marketing gold. The latest quick Hyundai hot hatch even has an N to replace GTi now! Achieving the objective without for reasons unknown upping the power meant some carte blanche shenanigans from Renaultsport, removing unnecessary weight from bonnet, windows, soundproofing, alloys, and one or two possible myths of less weight in the roof panel and lighter windscreen glass a throwback to 172 Cup development. The result a significant 123Kg saving over the R26 which in real life means a standard R26.R in a straight line goes more like an Impreza WRX STi, or (say) a 260bhp car. Adding back in the half roll cage naturally increases the timber but looks the part and who knows might come in handy in an upside down situation.

By mid-2000's a lifetime interest in cars and the shapes of them that began playing with Hot Wheels & Scalextric to running dad's tractor and Cooper S around the harvested fields, repairing, modifying, buying, selling and actually

driving fast cars, plus leaving my job at Renault UK led me into self-employment reselling used car stock best described in the main as what I'd buy myself. Two decades older I'd have been a 'Sports Car Dealer' but as a grown up child of the sixties I became a 'Hot Hatchback Dealer'. Hopefully those who know me would agree some credibility for this. Obsessiveness though is a gradual disorder made chronic by selling cars to car enthusiasts.

Around a decade ago an e-mail alert popped up... 'Renaultsport claims 'ring record for FWD of 8:17 (\*minutes and seconds!) in New Megane R26.R' <Click Here> this navigated to the Renaultsport.co.uk website page with intriguing renders of all the colours in profile and a few spec details including what? Optional factory lightweight Titanium Exhaust and Roll Cage. Now for this boy who bought a number plate in 2003 to put on a hopeful future purchased GT3RS in 2013, already a fast disappearing goal due to these stubbornly increasing in price the amount I expected them to depreciate, the 26R looked a very appealing prospect and a way out of an intractable problem of getting my backside in a quick two seater tin top car with a roll cage. I'd owned and driven every hot RS Megane so speed and handling boxes were already ticked but what colour combination? Lunar Grey always sought after on Clio V6 255, Racing Blue fabulous as historic, Liquid Yellow a signature RS colour, what about Pearl White to mimic R5 GT Turbos as an alternative to the free colour? Then which colour wheels, red or black, or tyres Toyos or Michelins, then the exhaust and cage, all these choices, no wonder they were difficult to sell, potential buyers were having mental breakdowns choosing their cars! I phoned a friend, that didn't help at all. But one extra talking point was an issue, not just for me but anyone aspiring to own this hottest of hot hatches. The price.

The standard car at £23815 was strong enough, but add in the options that any aficionado would wish for and you're up to £26765 plus a specific colour or 'convenience spec options' which seemed a bit odd to add Climate and Electric Door Mirrors as an option – let's call it Touring Spec features and pretend were back at the Porsche dealer, you're approaching twenty nine grand, plenty for a hot hatch in 2008. You could buy a very good used fast car for that then.

The price 'problem' soon became a major one for Renaultsport, the car was getting rave reviews from car magazine writers, but negative feedback about the 'ridiculous' price from all in sundry. Top Gear didn't even drive the car around the track until The Stig put a lap in. Richard Hammond spent one lap's duration trying do the seatbelt up. The R26.R was apparently both sublime and ridiculous at once. The Ford Focus RS Mk2 was slower around Dunsfold but looked a better bet for both loyal Ford RS fans and conquest performance car sales. The more competent but controversial R26.Rs were sitting around attracting insufficient interest at dealers more used to selling volume. This eventually proved to be both Renault's salvation and my solution. Volume dealers like spot money to clear cars and the 26R was allocated decent model bonus to register and clear the decks. I'd been chatting with Marc Elgar at

Seward Renault in Portsmouth about buying one and he called to say I could buy them very cheaply if I put my hand up for 'a few'. I bought six, (let's just say I found the money and I had form for buying multiple Renaults at once) immediately resolving the colour and spec issues because they were all different in either colour or more subtle ways. Not to keep mind you, but sell on. This way I got to drive them and pay the bills. The other intended or unintended consequence, whichever way you look at it, was the interesting part exchanges these brought in. Clio V6 255, an R26 Megane, a total spec M3 CSL (sold for £23250, yes, £23250) to name but three coincidentally all black. R26.R have been good to me over the last decade having purchased, regularly bought back and sold around thirty. The owners are all interesting enthusiasts too with a story to tell usually, bonus!

On my hard drive is a file called LISTE R26R.pdf. It's the definitive Renault ex-works build list of every 26R both RHD and LHD, although it's fairly common knowledge that evidently 159 RHD were produced and not the anticipated 230. If you take a peek at [howmanyleft.co.uk](http://howmanyleft.co.uk) a maximum of only 95 were ever registered in the UK. Anyone who tells you how many there are of each colour is taking a stab in the dark, Renault might know, somehow I doubt anyone recorded which RHD unsold cars were sent off elsewhere in the world to dispose of them. Heaven forbid any were crushed. I can assure you having worked for the manufacturer that cars sometimes actually do end up as steel blocks.

The first 26R I collected I can still recall having a poke around outside the dealer, still in wax and plastic bags it stood out on the slightly odd looking Toyos, aggressive looking semi slicks with barely a tread pattern but 225 profile tyres don't look quite right on the '727' Capsicum Red 18"x 8" Speedlines. Driving it home I remember the deep carbon Sabelt buckets, the harnesses and of course, that noise! L.J.K. Setright a once erudite contributor to Car Magazine of the eighties would have described it as an 'aural cacophony' latter day writers describe it as like an even more asthmatic 'Darth Vader' – it's a mix of mechanical noise, worn out wheel bearings, tyre din and turbo car associated whooshing sounds enhanced by the lack of bulkhead, door and rear panel soundproofing, plastic windows and resonating titanium exhaust. The five point harnesses, I've only ever used as a three point, a downside being at junctions you cannot lean forward to look to the sides. Also, odds on you're buckled in only to see the passenger mirror is folded in. Maybe electric folding mirrors are a good option after all! I've never driven or been in a full on tarmac rally car, but I'd imagine this is about as close as you get. I bought a Lunar Grey 26R once from Tony Lewis (another serial RS buyer) who had a Miltek exhaust fitted. I have to say, it sounded the absolute bollocks inside and more like a Touring Car For The Road my initial thoughts at the time. One hack described the sounds of a Titanium equipped 26R as the closest you can get to a Group C racer. So that's tarmac rally, touring cars and Group C in one paragraph. You're getting the gist. Buying and selling for a living meant I was rarely without, collecting or delivering one. Happy days.

White Van Man is now a white spot in the mirror, the rear view mirror was saved from the weight saving exercise, but I'm already scanning ahead, because with only 1220Kg plus me to haul around, with 229 lb/ft of torque at 3000rpm and a mechanical Limited Slip Differential you can really put the power down early, be pulled around and fire away from roundabouts. Never mind the Nurburgring record, a standard R26.R is as fast around the Bedford Autodrome West Circuit as a BMW M3 CSL E46. Naturally on the open road 100mph would come up real quick if you wanted it to, consequently I am already scanning ahead to a favourite spot for the 'Speed Awareness Camera Van' and backing off accordingly, but the run home from there is perfect for the 26R's carefully chosen softer spring and damper rates, with some fast A and B roads including the twistys near my old industrial unit many Renaultsport buyers from the past might recognize which is Manx Rally-esque with fast 3<sup>rd</sup> gear curves and high banked edges and open farmland. I'm a slower driver in my fifties than twenties but you never tire of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> gear performance in each power band of even a standard R. You really need to drive a lightweight car to appreciate the nimbleness that reducing unsprung and kerb weight creates. You really don't want to return to regular cars if you're going out for a fast road run. Honestly, I think Renaultsport would have done us all a favour if stock out of the box these had a larger intercooler, 260bhp and the typical braided brake hoses most upgrade to for a fabulously firm and pretty much fade free brake pedal. 260bhp would have felt like driving a normal weight 320bhp car, so perhaps an RB320 Impreza which covers 0-60 in 4.8 seconds – something like that maybe.

My present car? Well, 036 is not one of those first six. Although from that spree and weeks after the event I ended up with a now sought after R26.R Presentation Pack. I cannot believe Renault sent all of them out because I only received one which must make the beautifully engineered box including DVD, RS Megane Development Book, Brochure, and 'Nurburgring free laps' voucher card rarer than the car. No doubt a few are languishing in lofts. I bought my current 26R from my friend Dan Sait who had sourced from the original owner with 4000 miles and 6000 upon sale to me. I had it detailed by Ed at Divine Detailing in Coulsdon who applied a Gyeon Ceramic Coating and we nicknamed it Black Mirror before James, a City professional from Surrey took the plunge buying it on sight. I mentioned I'd always have it back and true to his word I was offered it in January 2017 now with 9000 miles and with £2500 of service, Michelins, new brakes (incl. front and rear Brembo discs, EBC Yellow Stuff brake pads and Castrol SRX Brake Fluid) and cam belt replacement literally just completed. It's now recorded 11300 and in great condition having been re-detailed by Ed and a fabulously durable Kamikaze Collection Miyabi Ceramic coating applied. It still smells like a new car inside and apart from that window electrical connection is mechanically perfect. The carbon bonnet has slightly marred the carbon fibre clear coat where they all go above the hot turbo, but that's a badge of honour and not too bad compared to many.

When I collected from Ed I was spotted on the M23 by another member of the great Renaultsport community driving a black MK3 RS265 Megane – yes, I spot them too, many buyers and sellers have become friends since I set up in 2005. You know who you are.

I'll keep the car as long as I can afford to have the money tied up in the garage. Work commitments mean I get to only use occasionally and do just 800 miles a year. That's sacrilege to many readers, but I wouldn't use it during salty road months, nor soon after when that's reactivated by rain. Life limits using it, but thankfully an upside of owning a rare and sought after model is that it's appreciating about as much as it costs to run, around £900 annually for servicing, MOT, tax and insurance. At this rate I'll never wear down the tyres on the car or stacked in the garage. Next year is cambelt time again with only 3000 miles since the last one it makes me feel like a Ferrari owner. I will get the passenger window fixed because it bugs me, I'd enjoy driving it on sunny days with the windows down, I might hear more of what people describe as the great noise when the car is around.

The way things have gone with performance cars over the last decade, with fewer manual options, being heavier for crash safety reasons thus requiring a lot more power for the desired effect and let alone hybrid or electric there won't be many cars like this around, so in the same way as the analogue Porsches and Ferraris are holding up, hopefully this one will too. There's nothing quicker and more nimble that I could replace it with that has a roof. I've already ticked the fast road Lotus Exige Performance Pack box so maybe a Caterham, but that doesn't have a roof and they're more money for a really quick one. Car manufacturers are increasingly ruled by bean counters and influenced by the environmentalists and lobbyists, there's little space in budgets for a very niche performance car that circuits the 'ring quickest. Honda, Renaultsport and Hyundai seem to be at it, each in slightly different ways.

If you thought the controversy surrounding a two seat RS Megane and the price of the Titanium Exhaust was enough a decade ago, it's had a reboot recently with the price tag of the Mk4 RS Megane Trophy-R and its premium priced carbon fibre alloys and carbon ceramic brakes offered as factory options. Hey, 2008 called, it wants its controversy back. I'm already laughing with friends about my use of the word 'correct' wheels when describing the carbon wheels on the new car. But since that car comes with a set of unique to the model (and the UK for now, apart from one set belonging to an RS fanatic) lighter than standard red 'Fuji' alloys too and probably tyres that actually seem a bargain at £10000, yes you read that right, break it all down and they're cheap! I firmly believe the carbon wheel equipped cars will be the ones to hold their value in the same way the Ti Exhaust & Roll Cage are vital options on a 26R. Ongoing don't worry if you own a more basic 26R, or one that's had a bit of life, been modified or panels re-sprayed. Look at (say) a Renault 5 Turbo 2, they're nearly forty years old, most have been 'got at' big time by John Price Rallying, few even have original wheels or seats but

nobody gives a toss, they just want one. There were (probably) a similar amount of R5 Turbo 2 when they were sold brand new as there were R26.Rs. A few R26.R will be mint and in the 'right' colours, they'll get passed around at elevated prices, most R26Rs should be available between £18000 and £25000 and there's not much out there in that range that beats them. Just enjoy owning and using your cars, they're special.

Finally, as a creative thinker, former technician and more over hot hatch enthusiast, having driven a 964 Carrera RS Lightweight I can only imagine what might have been with the R26.R really let off the leash. Personally I wouldn't have stopped at my aforementioned slight power upgrades to the ex-stock car. I'd have sprinkled more Colin Chapman add-lightness magic over the car with complete A/C delete, Lexan polycarbonate front slider windows, sticky back vinyl covered cardboard door cards with bright nylon door pulls, very little if no carpets at all (see F430 Scuderia), the practical addition of gold film under the bonnet to reflect the heat and like the CSL and MR FQ Evos maybe a carbon fibre roof to lower the centre of gravity. I know of someone who drilled a multitude of one inch diameter holes in non stressed metal panels....I'm getting carried away now.

If anyone is ever thinking about buying a 26R you're welcome to contact me for the tips and traps of buying and owning via my Instagram @r26rdriver.

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