



The Basics

## New cars that are too hot to handle

As more 500-horsepower cars hit the road, some drivers are finding they've bought more than they bargained for. The result: A crash.

By [The Wall Street Journal](#)

Call it a metaphor for a prosperous, risk-embracing age or just call it bad driving.

Automakers are turning out a new breed of supremely fast sports cars that sell for upward of \$250,000 and share many characteristics of purebred race cars. But as more of them hit the road, often in the hands of inexperienced drivers, a growing number are ending up wrapped around trees, smashed into guardrails or otherwise totaled in accidents.

In the past 18 months, drivers across the world have cracked up at least six \$1 million Enzo Ferraris -- only 400 of which were built. In March, a California man rammed his \$300,000 Lamborghini Murcielago into five parked cars. While in England, a 39-year-old driver caused an international stir among car enthusiasts by crashing a Bugatti Veyron 16.4, an extremely rare \$1.5 million turbocharged missile with a top speed of 253 mph.

It's not just drunken celebrities doing the damage. On the way to an MBA class near San Diego one recent morning, Nasar Aboubakare, a 40-year-old private equity firm president, lost control of his new 550-horsepower Ford GT and wrenched it over a lane divider. "The car is like a wild animal," he says.

To compound matters, it's tough to be inconspicuous when you damage a \$150,000 automobile. After Aboubakare's accident, several passing motorists snapped pictures while one leaned out the window of his pickup and shouted: "What an idiot!"

Police in wealthy enclaves across the country say these accidents are not unusual. A spokesman for the Beverly Hills Police Department says his officers "regularly" handle accidents involving exotic vehicles, while Sgt. Jeffrey Kelly of Boca Raton, Fla., says his department has logged two Ferrari crashes in the past two years. "We've had our fair share," he says.

According to the California Highway Patrol, the total number of accidents involving Aston Martins, Bentleys, Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Lotuses and Maseratis rose to 141 last year, an 81% increase from 2002, while overall crashes declined statewide during that period. Porsche, BMW and Mercedes-Benz, which sell a wider range of models, saw a 22% increase during that time frame.

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These accidents are happening so regularly that a Web site called [WreckedExotics.com](#) -- which contains photos of dream cars reduced to smoking heaps -- added as many as 700 new examples to its gallery last year and says it attracts about 650,000 visitors a month. Founder Gregg Fidan explains the attraction this way: "It's like seeing a supermodel fall off the runway."

### More cars, more crashes

One reason for the increase is that there are simply more of these so-called supercars on the road. CNW Marketing Research, a firm that analyzes the auto market, says Americans bought about 8,400 "ultraluxury" sports cars last year -- more than three times the number from 2003.

While the number of supercars registered in California is up sharply, the rate at which they are getting into accidents is still small -- just over 1% -- and hasn't changed appreciably since the state began breaking data down by make in 2002. The statewide accident rate for all vehicles in 2006 was 3%.

Stefan Winkelmann, the president and chief executive officer of Lamborghini, a unit of Volkswagen's Audi Group, says he's aware of "four or five" incidents involving one of the company's new 640-horsepower Murcielagos -- a small fraction of the nearly 500 models the company sold last year. Toscan Bennett, a spokesman for Ferrari, a unit of Fiat Group, says the company does not track the number of accidents involving its cars but adds that several high-profile incidents may have contributed to a false impression that these crashes are common.

Automakers say the rising horsepower is being offset by safety advancements ranging from all-wheel drive to ceramic brakes, rearview cameras, extra airbags and monocoque safety cages, which are built with a "skin" that directs impact forces away from passengers. "The cars give themselves up for the safety of the driver," says Porsche spokesman Tony Fouladpour. Many supercars come with traction and stability control systems that automatically vary the power delivered to the wheels to help prevent drivers from sliding and skidding.

**Video on MSN Money**

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### ▶ [More Ferraris, more crashes](#)

The Wall Street Journal's Jennifer Saranow reports on the increasing number of accidents and wealthy sports-car owners who don't just take weekend drives.

Insurance companies say that while the majority of supercar accidents do not result in serious injuries, there has been an uptick in collision claims on these cars. In some cases, insurance rates are rising. Based on the rising cost of claims, State Farm says the same driver would have paid 9% more last year to buy physical damage insurance for a new Lamborghini Murcielago than in 2003.

Expensive sports cars have always been intimidatingly fast, but experts say the latest models are not just more powerful, they're also lighter: Ferrari's new 599 GTB Fiorano produces about 0.164 horsepower per pound, a 21% improvement over the model it replaced. The trouble begins when overconfident drivers start trying to push the cars to speeds that even experienced drivers may not be capable of handling. "Generally speaking, the cars are well over the heads of the drivers," says Glenn Roberts, the owner of an auto-body shop in Fountain Hills, Ariz., that repairs damaged exotic cars.

### *[Continued: Younger owners driving more](#)*

The people buying these cars are also changing. Unlike previous supercar collectors who often babied their machines, they tend to drive about 4,000 to 6,000 miles per year -- more than double the average from a decade ago. And they're not getting any more mature: The median age for ultraluxury sports-car buyers dropped to 47 last year from an average of 56 just 10 years ago, according to CNW. And you don't have to be an actuary to know that younger people are more likely to drive aggressively. A spokeswoman for Leland-West Insurance Brokers says most of the supercar claims the company handles each year involve men aged 25 to 40 driving newer high-performance cars too fast and losing control.

### 'Controllable' speed

Adnan Mehmood, a 32-year-old fabric importer and stock trader from Miami, counts himself among those who don't believe a high-performance car should be pampered. He says he has driven his 2006 Lamborghini Murcielago Roadster faster than 190 mph a number of times on freeways. Mehmood says it's the engineering that gives him the confidence to go that fast. "When you are in the car, it's so stable," he says. "It's such a controllable speed. In a normal car, when you are going 80 or 90, it feels like you are going really, really fast. In the Lambo, you are going 120 or 140, and honestly, it feels like it's stopped on the freeway. It feels like it's not moving."

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He is awaiting delivery of Lamborghini's new Murcielago LP640 Roadster, which has an extra 60 horsepower and a new suspension design that will help make it one of the fastest cars the company has ever built -- traveling up to 211 mph and from 0 to 60 in 3.7 seconds. "I want to go to 200 mph," Mehmood says.

Veteran sports-car connoisseur Michael Fux says he has a pretty good idea why all these crashes are happening. The 64-year-old mattress entrepreneur from Miami, whose collection includes a Bugatti Veyron, a Ferrari 599, an Enzo and five Lamborghinis, says younger drivers are constantly challenging him to race. "These kids, they don't use their heads," he says. "They think they're back in the old Wild West."

Driving experts say most accidents in these cars happen when drivers take turns too fast for the road conditions or start turning prematurely and then snap off the accelerator to compensate. If the car's back end starts to fishtail, many inexperienced drivers will fail to steer in the direction of the sliding tail or will overcorrect by turning too severely in that direction. Both mistakes can cause a spin. "It's a symphony of inputs and adjustments to keep the car under control," says David Champion, the senior director of Consumer Reports Auto Test Division.

For Anthony Almada, a 46-year-old nutritional biochemist and entrepreneur from Dana Point, Calif., the catalyst was a deceptively slick road. While driving his \$440,000 Porsche Carrera GT on a bend near his home at 80 mph on a slightly wet road early last year, he says the car snapped into a spin. He followed the procedure he'd been taught in driving class and "put both feet in" -- pressing down on the brake and the clutch at the same time -- and hoped for the best. The car broadsided a brick wall and spun at least six times and caught fire. "It wasn't something I could have corrected," says Almada, who climbed out unhurt. "I was going too fast for the road conditions. It's that simple."

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General Motors is working on automobiles with 'vehicle to vehicle,' or V2V,

communication capabilities that would help them avoid accidents.

Another common mistake: failing to warm up the tires. Standing inside his garage last month at Classic Coach Repair in Elizabeth, N.J., owner Onofrio Triarsi points out two damaged Ferraris -- a red 360 that needs a new quarter panel and bumper and a blue 550 Maranello with similar damage. Both cars had been taken out on racetracks on cold mornings by drivers who had not given the tires enough time to heat up (and thus adhere better to the asphalt). When customers drive off now, Triarsi leaves them with the same advice: "Don't forget the tires."

In some cases, drivers say they got into trouble after shutting off the car's traction-control system to get a more "authentic" sports-car experience. During a test for Car and Driver magazine last spring in Italy, technical editor Aaron Robinson, 37, flicked off the electronic stability control in a 611-horsepower Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano so he could get the vehicle's rear end to flare out around a curve for a photo. But after giving the car "too much throttle and not enough core steering," he says he wound up sideswiping a wall. "Any car with 600 horsepower is intimidating," Robinson says.

Many of these accidents are, of course, just examples of pure recklessness. The Bugatti Veyron owner who crashed in Surrey, England, this year was said to be traveling at least 100 mph on a country lane before colliding with a station wagon. He was cited by police for driving "without due care and attention." The 26-year-old who crashed his 2005 Lamborghini into five parked cars in Santa Monica, Calif., in March was reportedly racing at 75 mph around a 35-mph curve. He was charged with driving under the influence.

#### [Continued: Rentals fall victim](#)

You don't have to buy one of these cars to trash one, either: New York's Gotham Dream Cars, one of a growing number of companies that allow people to rent supercars for the day, says about one in 50 of its rentals come back damaged.

#### **High speed, low clearance**

Speed isn't always the culprit. Because of their odd dimensions and miniscule ground clearance, supercars have always been vulnerable to damage from curbs, speed bumps or even objects in the road. While driving his yellow Enzo Ferrari for only the third time, Ali Haas, a 51-year-old plastic surgeon from Florida, ran over a spool of wire on the road. In most cars this would have been a nonevent -- but in this case the low-slung Ferrari was knocked airborne, breaking its grip on the road and sending it skidding into a guardrail. "If I ran over that spool of wire in my Ford Expedition, probably nothing would have happened," Haas says.

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Regardless of the cause, anyone who wrecks one of these cars has a more immediate problem than finding a mechanic: the possibility of public humiliation. After smashing his silver Ferrari 360 into a light pole in November in Palm Beach, Fla., David Riggs says none of the 50 or so onlookers who stopped to gawk asked him if he was OK. Instead, the 42-year-old says he heard comments like "Wow, you are really having a bad day," "That is really a bummer," and "Your toy is broke." "Nobody is really concerned if you are hurt," Riggs says.

Car companies say they do what they can to make sure their most-powerful vehicles get into the hands of experienced drivers. Buyers of Ferrari limited-production cars like the Enzo "were chosen by the factory based on their history and loyalty to Ferrari," says the spokesman, Bennett.

#### **Driving academies**

Manufacturers are also rolling out driver-education programs. Later this year, Bugatti plans to start offering buyers a "security driving course" at a test track near its factory in France. Ferrari has offered driver training in Italy since the early 1990s and just opened the first authorized school outside Italy last year in Mount Tremblant, Canada. Lamborghini started offering winter- and summer-driving academies last year, formalizing classes long offered by dealers.

Bentley offered its first driving class in the United States last year, and Lotus is launching a driving school outside Las Vegas this month called the Lotus Performance Driving Experience, that will include instruction in "the dynamics of skid control."

One recent driving-school graduate: Aboubakare, the private equity company president who spun out his Ford GT. He hopes to be better equipped to drive the new Lamborghini Murcielago LP640 Roadster he is getting later this summer. "I think with training, I'm a little more equipped to drive the car," he says.

#### **Video on MSN Money**



#### **[Cars that think for you](#)**

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For automakers, the horsepower binge is continuing to accelerate. Even in an era of high gas prices, some, like Audi and Lexus, are building or testing new supercar designs. The 2007 Chevrolet Corvette Z06 packs 505 horsepower, and Ford recently introduced a \$41,000 Mustang with 500 horsepower.

There's no sign people are less interested in speeding, either. Movies such as "The Fast and the Furious" and "Redline" have glamorized the notion of driving fast on public roads. Drivers have been using sites like YouTube to post videos of themselves making flamboyant maneuvers. Mix in the growing number of supercars, their soaring horsepower and the increasing number of states raising speed limits and "we have almost the perfect storm going on here," says Adrian Lund, the president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Standing in his garage on a Sunday morning last month, Almada pulls out what's left of his beloved Porsche Carrera GT: one severed headlight and one rear tire and brake assembly. Finally, from a shelf he built to hold surfboards, he pulls down his last keepsake, the car's badly scraped carbon-fiber wing. He stares at it for a few moments, then gently lays it down. "It's like the memento of a family member who passed away," he says.

*This article was reported and written by Jennifer Saranow for The Wall Street Journal.*

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