WHILE ALL eyes were either focused on the Middle East watching Jensen Button win his third grand prix of the season or on Carl Edwards having a spectacular accident at Talladega in the NASCAR Cup Race, I found myself in deepest Virginia at the fabulous Virginia International Raceway (VIR), a track described by the late Paul Newman as heaven on earth.

The reason for the visit was the Grand-Am race but there was much more to it than that. To start with, this part of the world, namely Halifax County in which VIR resides, recognises the value that this great race track brings to the region and is trying very hard to capitalise on attracting high-performance engineering engineering into the county as it goes hand-in-hand with motor racing.

Since my last visit three years ago, it was interesting to see just how much the surrounding infrastructure has developed. What was then a nascent industrial part is now in full bloom. Not only is the VIPER facility in full flow, having come a long way since the Powerpoint demonstration in 2006, but there were other companies on site. One was Volkswagen Racing with its TDI series cars that uses the circuit as a base and another was the US side of Ariel Atom, the specialist KTM X-Bow-like cars that are manufactured there for the North American market.

The VIPER facility was particularly interesting because there was so much to see there. VIPER is actually an acronym for Virginia Institute for Performance Engineering and Research, a strategic partnership among the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, Virginia Tech and Old Dominion University. Lest is sounds all too-academic, it boasts an 8-post test rig, the first in the US, and a full motion, six degree-of-freedom Cruden driving simulator that provides full-immersion simulation of the driving experience with visual, audible and motion cueing. There are also the engine and drivetrain and shock characterisation labs. In other words, this is a one-stop shop for any race team wanting to develop and set up and a racecar.

Back at the circuit, the race itself was about as exciting as it gets. Although it is slightly in the shadow of LMS, which is experiencing a bit of a downturn with the withdrawal of Audi and Porsche from the series, such is the growing importance of the Grand-Am series that none other than Roger Penske himself was at the circuit overseeing his team’s preparations. In the event, it was another close race with the GAINSCO/Bob Stallings Pontiac Riley beating the Michael Shank Racing Ford Riley across the line by .705 seconds. In the GT battle, the Stevenson Motorsports Pontiac GXP.R beat the Banner Racing Pontiac GXP.R by just .107 seconds. It does not get much better than that.

What made the results in both classes quite poignant was that on that day it had been announced that the Pontiac brand was being axed by General Motors. Whilst this is a marque that has few followers outside the US, there are some of us who remember with affection the Pontiac GTO, the car that some claim started the muscle-car era.

Another interesting feature of the weekend was the Volkswagen Jetta TDI Cup race. While Europeans are fully aware of the advantages of the diesel car, there is still a way to go in the US despite Audi’s winning ways in LMS. This series is far lower down the scale but nevertheless is attracting a great deal of attention. VW in particular is taking it very seriously with a huge marquee in the paddock that is open to all drivers, entrants and many others, creating goodwill and awareness for the series. It will be interesting to see whether diesel cars ever do catch on in mainstream motoring in the US, but if it does not, then it will not be for lack of trying by those involved in the technology.

So while all eyes were on the Formula One crowd in Bahrain or on the NASCAR Cup antics in Alabama, there was still a great deal to see, enjoy and appreciate in the less glamorous but far more beautiful state of Virginia.

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