

DAX TO THE MAX

Take one up-and-coming Hollywood actor. Add a sexy 2005 Corvette convertible and a luxury resort on the coast. What do you get? Dax Shepard's Ultimate Corvette Weekend.

BY BEAU ALLEN PACHECO
PHOTOS BY JOHN ROE





LEAN and lanky, actor Dax Shepard ambles with long strides to an equally sleek Corvette convertible parked on the ocean side of the street. Eager to begin a couple of days of driving and fun, he looks every inch one of Hollywood's hottest young comedic actors. All smiles and jokes, clad in his full-tilt fashion statement of jeans and sneakers and sporting a late-night talk-show el-blasto hairdo, his accouterments are 10 years ahead of the other silk-and-wool guests at the luxurious Four Seasons Biltmore in Santa Barbara.

Shepard has the confidence and coolness of a guy who's in his element — and on his way up. The 30-year-old Michigan native started out in a comedy troupe and wended his way through MTV's hit show *Punk'd* before hitting the big screen in an escalating series of performances including *Without a Paddle*. Later this year he'll appear in sci-fi spoof *3001*, and next year it's the comedy *Car Wars*, opposite Dustin Hoffman.

Plus, he's a Corvette freak.

We really wanted to know what a young man on top of the world would want to do if he was given free reign with a 400-horsepower Corvette. So we put it to him: Here's a C6 convertible for a few days — what's your ultimate weekend? We figured he would hit the nearest racetrack (Dax is a known lead-foot), or perhaps scorch the pavement from Hollywood to Las Vegas for a weekend of debauchery. Nope. As evidenced by the luxu hotel where we met up with him, Dax has his sights set more upscale. With his beautiful girlfriend Briegh Morrison tucked into the Vette with him, Shepard headed directly up the Pacific Coast Highway to Santa Barbara.

It is known as the American Riviera for its Mediterranean climate and architecture, mesmerizing ocean and mountain views, and such upscale digs as the Biltmore, where Dax's suite ran a cool \$1,800 per night with a view of the Pacific. It's one of those travel-brochure-pretty places that almost demand you visit in an open-cockpit sports car. The beauty of this beach-side town overlooking the azure Pacific Ocean

where the wealthy come to play is reminiscent of Monaco's famous Monte Carlo and Italy's sublime Sestri Levante. In addition to having some incredible restaurants, it's surrounded by terrific driving roads, and at the local airport is an open biplane adventure. Dax wanted it all.

As we soon found out, Shepard loves an audience, and in minutes the crew assigned to photograph him with the Corvette is out of breath from laughter. Passersby break into instant smiles as he lolls on the hood in centerfold poses and vamps as if in a *GQ* fashion shoot. This is a funny guy, and like all great comic actors, he's fearless in a social setting. When he reclines in the luxurious leather of the Vette's plush and roomy interior, he gives the camera his best, "Hey guys, can you believe I'm doing this?" smile for his buddies back home in Detroit.

All is lightness and laughter until the photos are done, and then it's time to drive. He deftly pushes the C6's start button, and the urgency of the LS2 engine emanates from under the hood and burbles from the quad exhausts. At that precise moment, Dr. Dax turns into Mr. Shepard, and all signs of frivolity vanish, replaced by a seriousness that you see in race drivers on the grid. He jazzes the motor twice, shifts into gear, and the rear tires explode in a fog of blue smoke.

In perfect control, Dax gets sideways to the left, sideways to the right, straightens it out and, as quickly as it started, the moment is over, the Corvette sitting quietly fifty yards away and Dax

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Clockwise from above: Dax Shepard's crossed-flags tattoo is no decal — the guy is wild about Corvette performance; arriving in style at the luxurious Biltmore; Dax strikes a pose that leaves passersby howling; on the way up winding San Marcos Pass with girlfriend Briegh Morrison.

smiling broadly again. In one concise moment he has shown with crystal clarity the duality of being an actor and a superb driver. Amazingly, this matches the dual nature of the Corvette — plush and exquisite to look at, brutishly powerful when called upon. It's the perfect beginning for Dax's ultimate weekend.

After enjoying the ambiance of the Biltmore spa on Friday afternoon, on Saturday Dax and Briegh venture forth for a day spent buzzing the clouds in a brilliant red biplane, then challenging the mountain roads in the Corvette. Pilot Mike Howser is polishing the immaculate and very red 1941 Waco replica biplane and keeping an eye on the clouds as Dax parks the Corvette. Dax and Briegh climb through the tiny front-seat cockpit door and Mike cranks up the pristine Pratt & Whitney radial engine. It settles

into a reassuring thrum, and the Waco taxis to the runway and then into the low sky.

They circle lazily over Santa Barbara and the surrounding area for half an hour to the immense delight of Briegh. "It was beautiful," she says afterward. "The ground just seemed to fall away, and almost immediately we were right beneath the clouds. Riding in the open cockpit, it felt like I could almost touch those clouds."

Following their literal adventure in the clouds, Dax and Briegh slide back into the C6 and head up nearby Highway 154, which leaves the narrow land shelf near the coast and snakes into the mountains. Slicing quickly through the curvaceous San Marcos Pass, Shepard toys with the frantically pursuing camera crew, and it becomes quickly evident that this guy does know his way around Corvettes.

In one concise moment he has shown with crystal clarity the duality of being an actor and a superb driver.

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Shepard comes by his skill naturally. “I love Corvettes,” he says with passion. “Those cars and I go way back. My former stepfather, Rick Darling, was a Corvette engineer, so I got to drive all the new Vettes when I was growing up in Detroit.”

While Dax attended college, he earned money by driving GM press-fleet cars back and forth between Detroit and Los Angeles. “It was a wild time,” he says. “I’d blast to L.A., deliver the car, get in a return car and roar back to Detroit. I’d party with my friends a little while, then do it all over again.”

As a byproduct of these adventures, which resemble those of moonshine runners who later went on to NASCAR careers, Shepard got to be an excellent driver. He got so good, in fact, that he started getting the attention of the racing world.

“It was the launch of the C5 in Georgia at Road Atlanta,” he says, becoming serious again. “We had a half-mile autocross track set up and I ran the track for the hundred or so journalists who were invited. Well, when the three fastest lap times were posted on an easel next to the track, I had set the fastest time and it stayed throughout the whole two-week event.

“That was the time,” says Shepard, “when I had to decide on my future. Did I want to become an actor, or a Corvette race-car driver? I thought about it carefully and finally figured out that I could parlay an acting career into a racing career, but not vice versa.”

Given his tour de force behind the wheel, it’s no surprise that Dax’s favorite movies are *Smokey and the Bandit* starring Burt Reynolds and *Bullitt* starring Steve McQueen. “When I was working on the movie *Without a Paddle*, which also starred Burt Reynolds, any free time I had I went to his trailer and bugged him about making *Smokey and the Bandit* — how they did this and how they shot that. Burt was great about it, and he loves to talk about that movie. If they do a remake, I really want to do it.”

When Dax and Briegh finish scorching the road, they return to Santa Barbara for a fantastic dinner at Lucky’s, a local steak-and-chops house. Over a high plate of ribs, Dax talks more about motors and cars and going fast. Pierce Brosnan and Rob Lowe, who are having dinner at a nearby table with their wives, don’t seem to mind the noise.



Dax and Briegh (above) before heading skyward in the replica 1941 Waco biplane for a tour of the mountains and coast. Safely on the ground afterwards (opposite) life is a complete joy — and there’s still a Corvette drive to come.



climbing the star ladder

Dax Shepard was named after a character in the Harold Robbins novel *The Adventurers*. He got his acting start in the ensemble comedy workshop *The Groundlings*, but his breakthrough role came as one of the field agents in MTV’s hit show *Punk’d*. From there he appeared in the Steve Martin flick *Cheaper By The Dozen* in 2003, and as the guy with the Corvette tattoo in *Without a Paddle*.

Now Dax is moving up the Hollywood ladder. Later this year he’ll co-star in the sci-fi spoof *3001*, where he’ll play an average guy “cryoed” into the future, and *Zathura*, a bizarre “house-launched-into-space” flick.

The big leap comes next year when Shepard co-stars opposite Dustin Hoffman in a role made just for him. *Car Wars* is a comedy in which, as the movie-company blurb states, “A fusty Mercedes-Benz dealer (Hoffman) is befriended by an upstart car salesman (Shepard) who opens a classic auto shop across the street.”

Dax Shepard in a car movie — imagine that. It’s a match made in heaven.

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DAX SHEPARD

He also waxes eloquently about the C6 he’s just driven. “I love the tightness of this new Vette — no squeaks, no looseness. It feels far tighter than any other convertible I’ve ridden in and that’s been a long time coming. And of course I love the sense of infinite power. I’m a stick-shift man myself,” he says, a big grin breaking out, “but I gotta tell ya, I didn’t mind driving this automatic at all.”

That’s an impressive statement considering that if he could have a Corvette custom built, it would be a replica of the 2004 Le Mans class-winning C5-R. But his favorite stock Corvette of all time is the 1967 Sting Ray with the 427 motor. Someday he’ll have one sitting in his garage. However, he’ll have to build an add-on because it now houses a 2005 CTS-V Cadillac, a vintage 1967 Lincoln Continental, a 2000 Porsche 911 Cabriolet and his Harley Ultra Classic Electra Glide.

On Sunday morning, after the sinfully sumptuous Biltmore brunch, Dax and Briegh finally pack up the C6 and merge onto California’s famous 101, past the surf and back toward Hollywood.

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