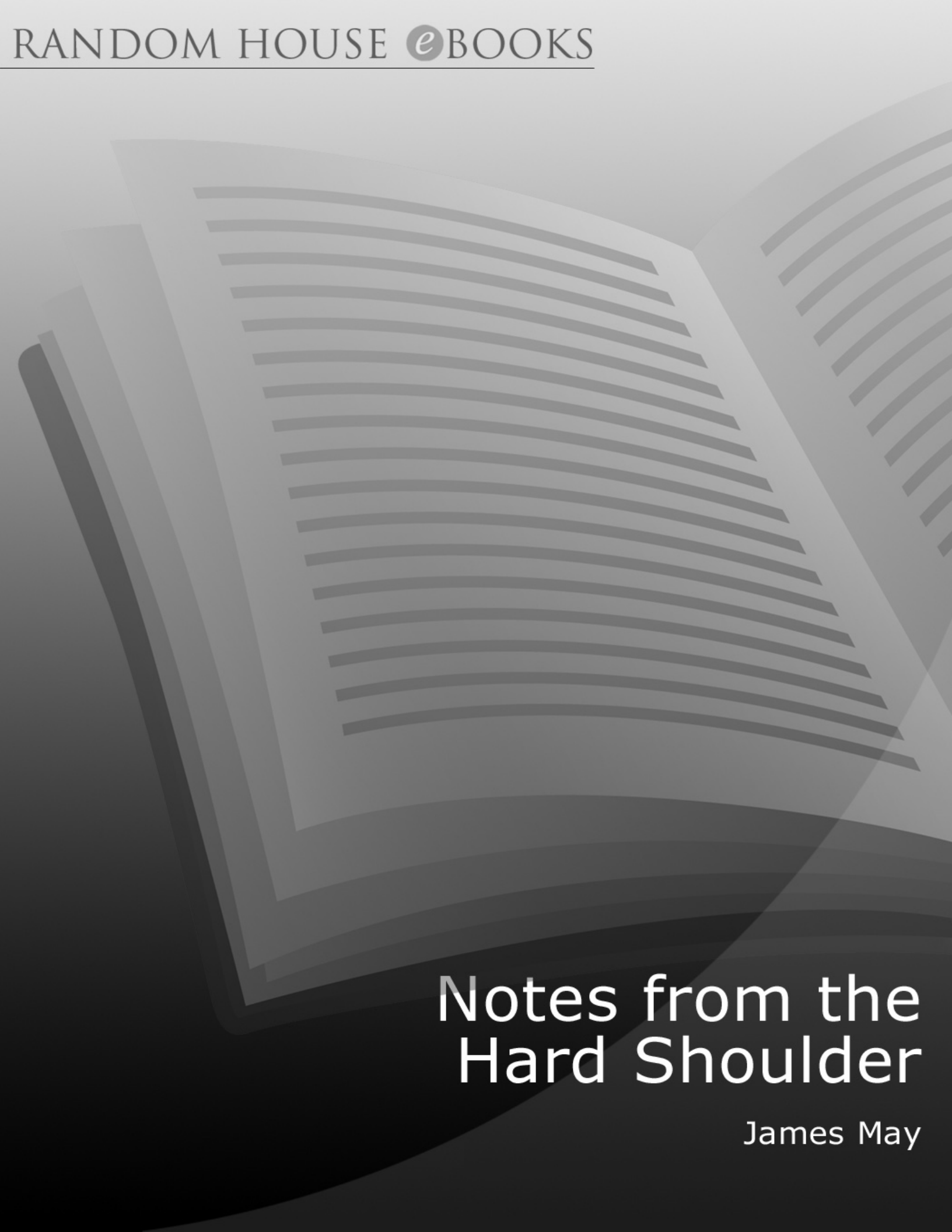
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



# Notes from the Hard Shoulder

James May

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# About the Book

**James May returns in style with another collection of classic journalism. In *Notes from the Hard Shoulder*, the *Top Gear* presenter and columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* brings together more of his most controversial and humorous writing.**

From tales of motoring adventures through India, Russia and Iceland, to classic articles on essential subjects such as the greatest driving songs of all time, the importance of cup holders and haunted car parks, these gems from the number-one car connoisseur will take readers on a motoring journey that will amuse and entertain in equal measure.

# About the Author

Best known as one third of the *Top Gear* trio, James May has lived, breathed and dreamt about cars his entire life. He has written about them over several years in a large number of periodicals. His pieces have appeared in *Car* magazine, the *Scotsman*, *Country Life* and the *Daily Express*, and he writes regular columns in *Top Gear* magazine and the *Daily Telegraph*.

# NOTES FROM THE HARD SHOULDER

James May

*To Pullin and Green, for the opportunity*

# PART 1 – I’VE A GOOD MIND TO WRITE A LETTER

# PLEASE KEEP OFF THE MUD

IT IS TIME, now that someone has raised the truly preposterous notion of congestion charging in our national parks, to acknowledge a few painful realities about the countryside. There is a feeling at large that cars somehow do not belong in the countryside; I now put it to you that in fact the countryside belongs to the car.

Before anyone writes in with a volume of Rupert Brooke, I should make it clear that I understand perfectly the position occupied by the rural idyll in the English national consciousness; how its gently swaying fields of corn are instantly evoked by thoughts of home when abroad; how the memory of England endures not as a shopping centre or theme park but as an endless Arcadian vista who gave her flowers to love etc. But how are we to enjoy all this, if not from the car?

You could go for a walk, say some, but have you seen the size of the place? It would take me two days to reach the edge of it from where I live, and even then there would be a few golf courses to negotiate before I arrived in the other Eden. Cycling? Civilised bicycles only work on the road, and the road is only there because of cars. If you try off-roading on one of these so-called ‘mountain’ bikes, farmers will shoot at you. And I have to say that if I were a farmer, and you rode across my field with an inverted polystyrene fruit bowl on your head astride £2,000-worth of unobtanium, I’d shoot at you as well.

No – the problem is not that people keep driving through the countryside, it’s that people keep living there.

If you’re a farmer, tilling manfully on the land to produce the things I love to eat, then that’s fine. Likewise a gamekeeper or some old toff, since they’re not safe in the

city. Also fine is running a country pub, as that's where I like to stop for a pie. But the rest of you – and especially those of you who think a two-inch-high ribbon of tarmac is somehow 'ruining the countryside' – can bugger off, because your houses are spoiling the view from my Porsche.

If, for example, you're a merchant banker working in the City, you should live in the City near the bank. If you're the manager of a country bank, you should live in the flat above it or in a windowless bothy alongside. Similarly, working for a software consultancy and living in the sticks is as absurd as turning up for work at a software consultancy in a straw hat singing ee-aye-ee-aye-oh. I don't want to escape to the countryside in my car to be rewarded with an endless rolling panorama of Barratt Homes. It's the ruin of England.

Everyone I know who lives in the cuds is, in terms of their demands, aspirations and general lifestyle, exactly the same as my neighbours in London. They are separated from me by nothing more than a very, very big garden. They drive into the town every day and complain about congestion, without stopping to think for long enough to realise that the road isn't there so that they can come in, it's there so I can get out in something with a flat six and enjoy a world as Adam would have known it.

The harsh truth is that cod country living is a privilege bequeathed entirely by the roads and motor transport. So if you live in Chodford and despise all things automotive, you should live as I imagine country folk did before the car was invented. That is, like a chicken; in your own poo, driven mad by blight and at the mercy of wild animals. You should ride a donkey, and the road to your damp dwelling should be a rough track beset by bandits and deranged inbreds with huge hands and one eye in the middle of their faces.

Actually, I'd go further than that. You should not be allowed anything in life that is in any way dependent on

road transport. So no fresh shiitake mushrooms from the charming deli in the village, because they arrived in a van. You'll have to bake your own bread in the little cubby holes at the side of your Aga – the ones with the red-hot handles. And no reading the *Daily Telegraph*, because it isn't really a telegraph at all. It comes in a van as well.

Anti-car sentiment is nowhere as incongruous as it is in the countryside. In fact, the beauty of the countryside in modern times is that you can drive through it, look at it and then leave it alone. Its principal function is for the growing of carrots, but after that, it's what sports cars were invented for.

# THIS JAGUAR LOOKS A BIT HALF-BAKED TO ME

I'VE NOW BEEN sitting here for some hours looking at a picture of the Jaguar X-Type estate fitted with the maker's optional 'Sports Collection' body styling package. And I have to say, I'm just not sure about it.

To explain why, we have to go back a few weeks to an idle evening when I decided that I would make a Chinese meal. And I don't mean one contrived from a packet sauce and a tin of water chestnuts. I mean the real thing, like that bloke Ken Whatsit would do.

Now, I don't really rate myself as a chef. Anything outside the orbit of the old school favourites – shepherd's pie, cheesy pasta – is frankly a bit of a mystery. But that doesn't matter, because you can buy sets of instructions for clever cooking and the picture on the front is usually so good it's tempting just to eat the book.

I did everything properly. I went to a Chinese supermarket for the ingredients and I borrowed a wok from a neighbour. The preparation time amounted to many hours of careful chopping and straining.

But then it started to go wrong. I've heard a theory that oriental cooking is the way it is because of a historical shortage of fuel, so everything is cut up small and it's all cooked together in one very thin utensil that becomes blindingly hot in seconds. It all happened far too quickly.

I think the word that best sums up my Szechuan double-cooked pork with chow mein is 'grey'.

Undeterred, I decided to try an Indian instead, since the cooking process would then be much more leisurely. I visited a proper Indian food shop and started from scratch with raw spices, ghee, basmati rice and what have you. I ground, roasted, made pastes, marinated things overnight –

in fact, my chicken tikka bhuna with peas pilau took almost two days to complete. It could best be described as ‘brown’.

As a result of all this I have decided to abandon any ridiculous pretence of being multi-culti and acknowledge that if I fancy a Chinese or an Indian, I’ll find some Chinese or Indian people to make it for me. There are several within a few hundred paces of my house, as it happens, and they are much, much better at this sort of thing than I am because they are steeped in the appropriate culture and traditions; rather in the way that I know, almost instinctively, what to do with Spam.

Similarly, I may have spent many hours as a boy sketching supercars in the back of my geometry exercise book with my Oxford Mathematical Instruments set, but I will still recognise that real car designers are better. So if I buy a car that I think looks good, I’ll leave it alone. I don’t order a butter chicken from the Light of Nepal and then start adding some extra ingredients I brought along from home.

In fairness to Jaguar, the ‘Sports Collection’ body package is the work of the factory, so presumably all the bits will fit properly. But I can’t help wondering why, if it looks so good, they don’t just make it like that in the first place. And in what other arena of sporting endeavour is weight added for no performance gain? This is like an Olympic sprinter thinking he’d be better off if he was a bit fatter.

Car manufacturers are developing an unhealthy appetite for mucking about with things that were already right. I’ve just driven a new and extra-sporty version of the Audi TT, which has a harder suspension, ridiculous bucket seats that feel like, well, buckets, daft alloy wheels that stick out further than the tyres and which you will kerb on the way home from the showroom and, worst of all, a black roof. They’ve completely ruined it. It was a seminal and much-trumpeted bit of automotive design, but somebody

imagined it could be improved with a tin of Humbrol enamel. Even the Subaru Impreza Turbo, which comes sort of pre-kitted, looks better left alone.

I know the modified-car scene is a huge and vibrant one. I've examined the work of the lads who are into it and a lot of it is really exquisitely done and bought at the expense of still living at home with mum. Good for them. But I still don't believe I've ever seen a modified Citroen Saxo or Vauxhall Corsa that looked better than the ones Citroen and Vauxhall came up with.

So here's a tip. If you open the fridge tonight and find that it contains, like mine, a pork chop, some potatoes and a sprig of broccoli, have pork chop with potatoes and broccoli for dinner.

# BRITAIN’S SURFACE INDUSTRY FAILS TO DELIVER

LAST YEAR, THE main road that runs perpendicular to the little road I live on was resurfaced. And I know what you’re expecting me to say next.

That it’s now worse than it ever was, is covered in nasty grit that destroys underseal, and has already been dug up by the GPO to lay some new telephone cables. But no. This was by far the most professional, efficient and well-managed civil engineering project I’ve ever witnessed at close quarters.

The work began at around 10 o’clock one night, when all the traffic had died down. The whole road was closed, and an army of stout men turned up with a gigantic fire-belching engine, a sort of mechanical version of that Norwegian cheese slicer, the one that you use to put parmesan shavings on the top of your salad if people are coming round for dinner.

This thing, moving at a speed so imperceptible that in the time it took me to drink three pints and have a game of darts it had travelled only about 30 yards, removed exactly three inches from the top of the road surface while somehow avoiding the drains and manhole covers. Once the pub had shut, and because I had no one left to talk to, I went to watch the miracle unfold and have a ride on the iron horse.

The next morning, just before the rush-hour started, the bollards, the security tape, the cheese slicer and the workers’ tea tent thing were all removed and the road was opened again. It wasn’t very good, because each manhole cover now assumed the proportions of Ayers Rock and the grooves left by the skimming machine tended to steer one’s

motorcycle into the path of oncoming traffic. But it was open.

The next night, it was closed again. Now another roaring inferno worthy of Hieronymus Bosch himself turned up to lay the new surface, inching along the street and dispensing the gleaming, sweet-smelling blacktop of hope in its wake. By morning it was finished, and this little corner of UK PLC was back in business, thanks largely to some blokes from Poland.

And the results were – and there really is no other word for this – perfect. People were on their hands and knees at the kerb examining the road and searching vainly for flaws. Small children were riding up and down on bicycles, marvelling at its smoothness. People in shops could be heard saying, 'Have you driven on the new road yet?' There had not been such a collective sense of wonderment since the invention of radio.

Even now, a year on, I can find only two small patches that have been disturbed, and these have been mended almost invisibly. It really is a pleasure to arrive home by car.

So can someone explain the appalling Horlicks that's been made of the side road running parallel to mine? It was closed and excavated for the purposes of installing a new water main, although for the most part it was simply closed. The job is now complete, and in fairness the contractor has made good the road, in the sense that I don't actually fall down a hole when I'm making my way home from the pub at night. But, God in heaven, it's unsightly. The new tarmac is the wrong colour, the wrong texture, and it isn't flush with the old stuff.

How can I portray the sheer horror of these road repairs? Let me put it this way. If one of the perfectly laid green tiles from my bathroom floor was broken, this lot would come around, affix a slightly smaller brown tile of half the thickness, fill in the gaps with the wrong colour

grout and then stand back and say, ‘Yep, that looks pretty good.’

It’s not even an isolated case. Since noting this, I have been walking around with my head bowed, ignoring the cheery greetings of my neighbours, totally absorbed in studying the road surface. Everywhere I look it’s a patchwork of cack-handed repairs completed so shoddily that it’s a mystery the place isn’t littered with spilled bicyclists. Why is this? It can’t be any harder or more expensive to repair a road properly than it is to do it badly.

Tadek, Jarek and Marik have shown that first-class road repairs are possible in Britain. Yet, for some reason, we don’t seem to think it matters beyond the main thoroughfares. The people around here studiously mend their window frames, grow brightly coloured shrubs and flowers in their front gardens and paint their front doors in amusing colours. Yet this model of English urban splendour faces a road that appears to have been imported from 1990s Bosnia.

The side roads of England are a disgrace. Can somebody please explain why?

# MY CUP RUNNETH OVER AND INTO THE CENTRE CONSOLE

SOME TIME AGO, the national press published the findings of a report in which continental Europeans denounced the British as ‘a nation of coffee philistines’.

An important point was missed in all this. We are not coffee philistines at all; we have become philistines because of coffee. There is now barely a corner of a British high street that hasn’t been commandeered by a bean-bashing multinational of some kind, and within them can be found people talking in a strange and subversive code. You’d be forgiven for wondering how the nation had survived until now without a regular double skinny latte mocha choca top before work.

For confirmation of this, look no further than our obsession with in-car cup holders. Over its brief history, the cup holder as found in European and Japanese cars has evolved from a token fixture intended to persuade Americans to buy the car (US sales of the Jaguar XJ once suffered for the car’s want of one) to a device of such cunning and complexity that it can embody more engineering and design expertise than once went into a whole vehicle. And yet the only thing that will fit safely into a cup holder is a cardboard cup from a coffee-shop chain.

Meanwhile, tea – the drink that made Britain great – has been virtually forgotten. Tea is the sustainer of honest toil and remains the second most important commodity of the British building trade after sugar. Some historians believe that the mildly medicinal quality of tea actually encouraged industrialisation, because it allowed our manufacturing centres to proliferate quicker than the bowel disorders that would otherwise have destroyed their populations. Apart

from anything else, a Frenchman or Italian, fuelled by espresso that could be used to build roads, would have been far too jittery to sit down patiently and invent the steam engine or the flying shuttle.

Of course, a nominal cup of tea can be bought from Cafe Nation or Buckstars or whatever these left-wing chattering houses are called, but it is a dismal offering in which bag, tepid water and milk have all been introduced to the vessel simultaneously. Furthermore, tea cannot really be enjoyed out of cardboard. It should be served in a chipped ceramic mug (if engaged in something manly, such as roofing or restoring an old sports car) or a bone china cup and saucer (if there is any risk, however slight, of a visit from your mother). Curiously, neither of these things will fit in a car's cup holder.

The cup holder, then, can be regarded at best as the perpetrator of a dangerous fad; at worst as the cradle of the enemies of Britishness.

The problem becomes even more acute if you fancy a proper drink. The instant I joined Salim Khoury at the *Telegraph* Motor Show, I sensed that he would go home a disappointed man. We had come to test the versatility of cup holders.

Khoury is manager of the American Bar at The Savoy, where he has worked since 1969. He came to Britain from his native Beirut, where he learned the subtleties of cocktail making in response to the demands of a then enormous American hotel clientele. Yet despite the predominantly American image of drinks such as the Manhattan and the Cosmopolitan, he maintains that 'Britain really comes top of the world in cocktails; in making them and in creating them.' His most recent invention is the Telesuite, a new cocktail to celebrate the inauguration of the Savoy's electronic virtual-conferencing arrangement with New York's Waldorf Astoria. The

ingredients include absinthe, which is known to be conducive to brainstorming.

Khoury comes equipped as a sort of roving international ambassador of correct cocktail etiquette. His briefcase is a beautiful wood-inlaid aluminium job divided into foam-lined compartments for measuring jug, log-handled stirring spoon, fruit knife, ice bucket, a strainer for taking the pith, ice tongs, a champagne stopper and, of course, the silver shaker itself. ‘I stir my Martinis. I never shake,’ he says, in response to the inevitable comparison with Bond.

He also brings a selection of glasses, some of them traditional, such as the typical champagne flute, and some of them the trademarks of his bar, such as the Savoy’s own more generous champagne goblet, the Martini glass that has been an unassailable feature of the hotel since the ’20s, and a huge cut-glass balloon suitable for cognac – a particular favourite of Churchill, apparently.

Sadly, none of them fit in a cup holder.

Cup holders can be divided into two basic types. There is the first phase of development, where they took the simple form of a tapered cup-shaped hollow somewhere on the facia, there to satisfy the supposed demand for cup holders at minimum expense. The most pathetic example of Phase One cup holders probably occurred on a Seat Arosa I once owned, in which the inside of the glovebox lid boasted two vague circular indentations. They were little more than a desperate grasp at cup-holder credibility, a sort of visual indication to Place Cups Here, nothing more. But that was in the mid-’90s, a time when it was suddenly believed that not having a cup holder was like admitting to still having drum brakes at the front.

Phase One cup holders still survive on plenty of cars and are at least suitable for storing mobile phones. They might even accept the base of a champagne flute or wine glass, but a lot depends on location. In the VW Beetle, for