



# Catching a Legend

Does this last air-cooled 911 Turbo finally match the landmark 959?

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Since a particular road test in 1987, I've had a ready answer for the question "What's the best car in the world?" The Porsche 959.

Unveiled at the 1983 Frankfurt auto show as the Group B concept car, the 959 was conceived as the ultimate 911, a car so relentlessly rapid and so technically overpowering that it would provide a platform for world-class rally and road-racing efforts, as well as elevate the 911 to the top of the sports-car heap.

If that seems like overkill, remember that in the early Eighties the 911 was coming back from the brink. The company's hope that sales of the new front-engined, water-cooled 928 model would overtake the 911 had not panned out. The 959 served

as tangible evidence that Porsche again saw a future in its rear-engine tradition.

When the production 959 finally appeared in 1987, it proved to be the fastest production car we had ever tested—by far. Sidestepping the clutch at just under the 7300 redline—procedure that 959 project manager Manfred Bantle had assured me would not grenade the gearbox—lit up all four tires in glorious fashion. Just as the tires bit, the turbo boost kicked in, and we were off, furiously rowing through the six-speed gearbox to keep the rapidly spinning tachometer needle out of the red zone.

In 3.6 seconds, we reached 60 mph. A mere 5.2 seconds later we were at 100 mph. The quarter-mile flashed by in 12 seconds flat at 116 mph. And we hit 140

mph in less than 20 seconds.

That night, we explored the 959's top speed on the autobahn but were prevented by traffic from seeing more than a true, two-way 190 mph. Even at that speed, there was still power to spare, so we didn't doubt Porsche's claim of a top speed of 195 mph.

But the 959 was much more than a mere vision-blurring rocket sled. Our sound meter recorded interior noise of just 71 dBA at 70mph and 56 dBA at idle (quieter than garden-variety 911s of the day). The 959 also rode more comfortably than other 911s, and it came with a leather interior as well as air conditioning and the usual power options.

Engineer Bantle achieved this remark-

able blend of velocity and serenity by packing every nook and cranny of the 959 with the trickiest hardware available. The DOHC 24-valve engine, for example, came from the Le Mans-winning 962 race car, complete with twin turbochargers that were staged, like an old four-barrel carburetor, to boost low-rpm performance.

To apply this power, Porsche invented what was, and probably remains, the world's most complex four-wheel-drive system. A computer-controlled clutch determined the front-to-rear torque split to match the dynamic weight distribution of the car. What's more, flicking a steering-column stalk could alter the program to better suit wet or icy weather.

Even the 959's suspension departed from the 911 norm with unequal-length control arms at all four corners as well as dual shocks, which provided electronically adjustable damping and ride height. The 959 also pioneered power steering and anti-lock brakes on rear-engined Porsches.

All of this was wrapped in stunningly purposeful bodywork, much of it formed from lightweight aluminum and Kevlar and liberally perforated with scoops and grilles. The deep front air dam and the huge rear wing ensured no lift at any speed despite a low 0.31 drag coefficient.

It all added up to an automotive high-



**Unlike the underspoiler mounting of the intercooler in the current Turbo S, the 959 intercoolers did not hide the glorious 962-derived engine. Instead, they were stuffed into the lower, rear corners and cooled by the scoops carved into the rear tenders.**

water mark—the four-wheeled equivalent of running the four-minute mile. Unfortunately, with a \$227,000 sticker in Germany in 1987, only the likes of Microsoft boss Bill Gates could buy one. And we hear that

even he lacks the juice to get an exemption from the EPA and the DOT for this U.S.-illegal sports car.

This latest 911 Turbo S, however, has the credentials to make us stop pining away for the 959, at least on paper. With only a 20-hp deficit and weighing 200 pounds less, it nearly matches the 959's acceleration. And thanks to its larger, grippier tires, it easily exceeds the 959's cornering and braking. To see whether it matches the original's sizzle, however, we rounded up one of the few 959s in North America and drove them back-to-back.

This Guard's Red 959 belongs to Danny Chauvier, the president of Kreepy Krauly, makers of the popular self-powered swimming pool cleaners. A former big-time IMSA GTP sponsor, Chauvier bought this 959 new in 1987 in Germany and has since applied about 14,000 miles (fast miles, judging by the fact that he's on his fourth set of tires). His car is only occasionally stateside; it is registered in South Africa, where Chauvier has a home.

Sliding behind the wheel of his 959 felt instantly familiar, thanks to the 911 heritage, which has remained remarkably unchanged through the decades. Only the thin-rimmed steering wheel and the lack of airbags revealed the supercar's age. When I fired the engine, though, this 959 generated a mechanical cacophony and bassy exhaust note that are far more promi-





The extensive air ducting in the 959's nose feeds a water radiator in the center and twin oil coolers in either corner.

ment than those produced by the new Turbo S. Apparently, 911s have become much quieter over the past 10 years.

Chauvier's car fully justifies my memories of the 959's energy level. Even a modest press on the accelerator causes a strong push in the backside, and the acceleration doesn't diminish much with speed. When the second turbo cuts in at about 4500 rpm, it's like an afterburner lighting off as the tachometer needle surges toward the redline (even in fifth gear at 100mph).

The shifter requires a heavier hand than I remembered, and you do shift the 959 a lot because the engine is soft below 4000 rpm. In contrast, the new Turbo S is plenty rapid even when driven between 2500 and 4000 rpm. That's the benefit of an engine with 26 percent more displacement, even one that's technically more pedestrian. Combined with its lighter shifter, the Turbo S is far more flexible around town.

Strangely enough, the 959 maintains its clear advantage in ride comfort. In comparison to the Turbo S, the old supercar

**1987 PORSCHE 959**

**Vehicle type:** rear-engine, 4-wheel-drive, 2+2-passenger, 2-door coupe

**Price as tested (Germany, 1987):** \$227,000

**Engine type:** twin-turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 24-valve 2.8-liter flat-6, aluminum block, cylinders, and heads, Bosch Motronic engine-control system with port fuel injection.

**Transmission** ..... 6-speed manual

	1987 Porsche 959*	1998 Porsche 911 Turbo S
Power (SAE net) .....	444 bhp	424 bhp
Torque (SAE net) .....	369 lb-ft	400 lb-ft
Wheelbase .....	89.4 in	89.4 in
Length .....	167.7 in	167.7 in
Width .....	72.4 in	70.7 in
Height .....	47.2 in	51.8 in
Curb weight .....	3593 lb	3390 lb
Zero to 60mph .....	3.6 sec	3.7 sec
Zero to 100mph .....	8.8 sec	8.8 sec
Zero to 130 mph .....	15.9 sec	15.9 sec
Street start, 5-60mph .....	4.9 sec	4.3 sec
Top-gear passing time,		
30-50mph .....	11.9 sec	9.4 sec
50-70mph .....	8.8 sec	7.6 sec
Standing 1/4-mile .....	12.0 Sec	12.2 sec
@116 mph .....		@114mph
Braking, 70-0 mph .....	166 ft	151 ft
Roadholding,		
300ft-dia skidpad .....	0.87g	0.94g
Top speed .....	195** mph	188mph
C/D observed fuel economy .....	13 mpg	16 mpg

\*Test results from C/D, November 1987

\*\*Estimated, see text

feels positively cushy, even after dialing the suspension control knob on the console to the car's hardest shock-absorber setting.

Despite this pillowy suspension, the 959 is supernaturally stable at high speed. It hunkers down on the road and tracks perfectly straight, whereas the Turbo S becomes darty and nervous above 175 mph. These are the aerodynamic benefits of the 959's special body, complete with the flamboyant rear wing, as well as the more-forgiving, higher-profile tires,

All in all, however, it would be hard to argue that the 959 is clearly superior to the new Turbo S. Especially since the new car costs some \$200,000 less than an uncertified 959, which currently goes for about \$350,000. Still, the 959's distinctive bodywork, its amazing portfolio of exotic technology, and its historical significance ensure that it will be remembered as one of the greatest cars of all time. Besides, who remembers the second man to run a mile in less than four minutes? ●