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[Greatest 911]

**'The original GT2 sounds so raw
you wouldn't guess it was turbocharged
and delivers its power in one lag-free,
breathtaking lunge'**



Left: two GT2s, two generations of 911. In the red, the current 996 GT2, in silver the mid-'90s 993 version. Both cars have twin turbochargers, both are rear-wheel drive only, but they're very different animals



and clearly likes it a lot. I expected he would, because this is where I reckoned the charm of the older cars would meet the ability of the moderns to greatest effect. The 993 is the last air-cooled RS, the last with the original 2.7's compactness, but also the first 911 with the LSA (Lightweight Stable Axle) rear suspension.

John Probert's example is tweaked slightly, with the front set to full stiffness and lightly treaded Michelin Pilot Cup tyres for track days, but it still works superbly on the road. It's planted like the 964 isn't, feeling four-square and so stable that it isn't obvious that the weight is mostly at the rear. That 3.8-litre engine has a lovely, rounded *wokka-wok* tone at idle, though it doesn't rev through the mid-range with the vigour of the 964. There are now six ratios to play with, and the shift itself is wonderful – meatily precise, a real joy. As the rev-counter swings for the redline, the engine really comes alive, filling the cockpit with a delicious hollow bark. And yet...



Above: beefy roll-cage leaves you in no doubt about the 993 GT2's true *raison d'être*. This car was built to win races

Meaden first: 'In such demanding company it feels fractionally less involving than I remember. The engine is a peach, the balance is slightly more forgiving, and the performance potential that bit easier to release than in the 964. It's a smoother act all-round.' I sense he's already tasted something he likes more.

Green is keener. 'My enthusiasm for this car isn't dulled. You can really take it by the scruff and it does everything with great efficiency without removing any of the driver satisfaction.' Hayman disagrees, reckoning that the 964 is 'more honest, more what an RS should be about', while Bovingdon is still standing where I left him: 'You could thrash this car to within an inch of its life for the next 10 years without any mechanical failure. I'd still rather have a 2.7 RS, though...'

If the 993 RS wasn't gritty enough for some of them, the 993 GT2 should go down very well indeed. 'Nothing looks tougher than this car,' says Meaden, surveying those riveted wheelarches, that massive rear wing complete with air intakes, and the curly edges of the front splitter. 'The whole thing screams Le Mans.' Yes indeed, for while the new GT2 has no competition intentions, Porsche built this version to do a job.

So it's a surprise to find leather seats, air-conditioning and electric windows, plus some of the interior brightwork that will be along soon in the 996s. Don't be fooled by the comfort spec of this model, however: with 430bhp and rear drive, this is one mean motor. It sounds so raw you wouldn't guess it was turbocharged and delivers its humongous power in one lag-free, breathtaking lunge. It's 964-stiff, too, its nose occasionally skipping from the crest of one bump to the next, though there never seems any danger of its fat rear tyres coming unstuck. Power steering makes it less tiring and the gearshift is



'Even on damp roads you can feel the GT3's suspension keeping the front tyres at the optimum angle, maintaining bite'



like the 993 RS's only more so, with a to-die-for precision action that conjures up images of polished steel blocks sliding into place.

Hayman, who, it's becoming clear, likes his 911s with edge, is in love. 'Wow! I knew it would be good but not that good! Yes it's a little stiff and can hop about a wee bit, but the power is really usable in all situations. I grabbed the keys from Richard [Green, its owner] with any excuse I could come up with.'

The GT2's pedigree shows through in its brakes, too, which are sensationally powerful, full of feel and un-fadable on the road. And despite lacking traction control, the chances of overpowering its rear tyres in the dry seem negligible. 'Intimidating but enjoyable, hugely quick and a deadly overtaking tool,' concludes Meaden. But he adds that it's 'not as fast as the last one I drove'. I agree, but I wonder if our extended exposure to the new GT2 led us to expect more...

When we shuffle our ten 911s into position for the group portrait, the three 996s look massive. They're not actually *that* much bigger, but when photographer Morgan arranges a back-to-back shot of the 2.7 RS and new GT2, it reveals just how much they've filled out. The 996s don't need distended arches to cover their broad tyres – the bodywork has been widened along the doors so there's now no 'waisting' to accentuate their wide-track stance.

After spending so many miles in the old-shaped cars, I'm concerned that the current crop will be, well, a bit flabby and dulled. I'm anticipating more refinement, more space, more user-friendliness, but is that what 911 enthusiasts want? Think positive, I tell myself; this is Porsche with a clean sheet and a keen sense of evolution. Imagine what the engineers will have achieved in terms of structural integrity, suspension honing and engine development...

After a couple of miles in the 996 GT3 I feel foolish for ever having doubted. Sure, the new fascia lacks the singular character of the original but the new, more compact instrument pack is really neat – it looks like all the other dials are huddled behind the large, fearless tacho. And dynamically the GT3 is quite superb. Between you and the chassis exists a detailed dialogue that connects you to the road surface, yet the suspension ensures that you're not dictated to by it. Even on damp roads you can feel the geometry keeping the front tyres at the optimum angle, maintaining bite as you wind on lock at speed but letting you know when you're near the edge.

For John Hayman, driving the GT3 again is like rekindling an old love affair. He helped drive one all the way to Sicily for our Targa Florio feature (evo 28) and he's not about to hold back: 'The GT3 gels with the road in a way that makes it the ultimate achievement of 21st century chassis/suspension development. *Meld* is probably the **evo** word to describe it.' He continues: 'I could rant on about this love of my life...' and he did, but sadly my tape ran out at that point. Meaden is a big fan, too: 'It's a nimble and aggressive set-up, far sharper than the excellent but everyday set-up of the regular Carrera. There's no question that the GT3 does the best job of concealing the 996's softer edges and bulkier dimensions.'

It's not just the chassis that draws praise, though. The 996's 360bhp flat-six may be water-cooled but in this GT3 – a Club Sport spec car with the lightweight, single-mass flywheel – it's got guts, a keen edge, and its power builds with a natural progression. It feels organic like the best air-cooled versions, flexible and responsive. Meaden likes it as much as the chassis: 'It's more rev-happy than



you expect – it really sings at high revs, a hair-prickling yowl as you work the red line – but retains that deep-chested low-rev grunt you want out of slow corners.' So here's another contender for top honours, then. ➔

GT3 (left and above) is first of the current-generation 911s to come into contention. A former winner of our **evo** Car of the Year competition, it feels every bit as good as we remember it. Cockpit (above) shows most radical changes yet, with its new-look instrument cluster and more organic shapes



Unexpectedly, the 996 Turbo, which captured our Car of the Year title 12 months after the GT3, gets a decidedly lukewarm reception. It might be considerably more potent, but right from the off it quite clearly lacks the feel that marks out the truly great 911s – the standard is that high.

For me, its chances are blown within a mile of it taking on the same road as the GT3. A very light clutch pedal ruins the consistency of its controls, the suspension feels like it's running positive camber so the tyres don't feel like they're biting, and the sound of that 420bhp, turbocharged engine is uninspiring. Plant your right foot and the Turbo shifts all right, but the sound is so muted, just a windy roar, and with so little encouragement from the chassis how can you exploit its 4wd?

'The contrast between the Turbo and GT3 is stark,' agrees Meaden. 'Its steering feels treacherous, its 4wd chassis cumbersome after the instinctive rear-drive GT3. It's stupidly rapid even at seven-tenths but it's almost as though Porsche decided that the driver was always going to be the weakest link and so removed them from the equation.' Hayman isn't enamoured, either.

'It may have won eCOTY, but in this company it has returned to being the effective but dull car it was on the big supercar test (evo 22). Fast and very capable no matter who's behind the wheel, but unrewarding' Nuff said. ➔



Above: current Turbo is comfiest, most refined and easiest to drive quickly of all the 911s. It's also one of the least engaging





'The 996 Turbo is stupidly rapid even at seven-tenths, but it's almost as though the driver has been removed from the equation'

**'Step on the gas and
the new GT2 goes like few other cars
this side of a McLaren F1'**



996 GT2 is massively impressive in the metal, looking like a much meaner, slightly scary version of the Turbo, which is effectively what it is. And rear-wheel drive only of course, which helps focus the mind...



So, what about the 996 GT2, the car that promises to combine the best elements of GT3 and Turbo? It certainly looks the part with its aggressive stance, its wheels and tyres filling its arches almost as fully as the 964 RS's. It makes the GT3 look a bit undernourished, in fact.

I drove it straight after its daddy, the 993 GT2, and I reckon it's quicker. Partly this is because it has even less turbo lag, though even deep into the full-on, maximum boost rush, there's nothing in it. Step on the gas and the new GT2 goes like few other cars this side of a McLaren F1. Porsche claims 0-62mph in 4.1sec and 196mph flat-out and the GT2 feels good for it. Think how little faster the 959 goes and then consider the GT2's £109,800 price tag.

The new GT2 is a hardcore 911 all right, but I don't think it delivers everything it promises. You can't argue with its staggering performance but its chassis isn't as decisive, as keen and communicative as it ought to be. Sure, it states its intention with its lack of traction control (don't bother searching its dashboard for the PSM stability control button) but it ought to arm you with copious, detailed feedback so that you can tell when you're getting close to the edge. Sadly it doesn't.

It'll go far faster than the legal limit in absolute security, but that's shallow entertainment, particularly in this company. The Porsche GB press office tells us that the suspension can be adjusted to neutralise the understeer but that alone wouldn't turn it into a faster GT3. The GT2 simply isn't as precise and rewarding a tool.

Everyone is gob-smacked by its pace but left a little cold. 'It feels a bit blunt in the steering department and there's a nasty, skittery feeling when you load up the front tyres which makes it an unnerving thing to push hard,' says Meaden,

adding: 'It's almost as though the front tyres never warm up, and it's not much better at the rear – the tail seems to slip into a few degrees of oversteer without you knowing it.'

Green agrees. 'It's hard to predict what it's going to do. The more I drove the more I got to grips with it, but it never completely gelled.' Bovingdon was equally bemused. 'It's very unusual for a Porsche to feel so out of sorts. I can't remember the last time a new Porker opened itself up to such criticism in the handling department. Disappointing.'

The only dissenting voice is Hayman's. 'After sitting alongside Meaden and experiencing its tendency to snap from understeer into oversteer I was, to say the least, a little wary. I suppose I wanted and expected a faster GT3, which it isn't. You have to bully it or be bullied. I did gain confidence and then it becomes an absolute joy to push, as long as the road is dry. But respect is due at all times.'



Above: GT2 in Club Sport spec comes with winged Recaro seats and a beefy roll-cage – just the thing for track days

[Greatest 911]

So, what is the 'Greatest 911 Ever'? Not the new GT2, that's for sure. In fact, not any turbocharged 911, though John Hayman has been blown away by the earlier 993 GT2 and wants to elope with it when nobody's looking. Meaden has praise for the 993 GT2, too: 'The greatest turbocharged 911,' he declares, 'but not the greatest 911.'

Overall, it's the normally aspirated cars that have monopolised our enthusiasm, though perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise. Enjoying the 911's tail-heavy layout, making it work for you and reaping its unique rewards – this is at the very heart of the 911 experience, and best achieved with a finely responsive engine. And so on our short list we have the 2.7 RS, Club Sport, 964 RS and 996 GT3.

What this absorbing comparison also reveals is that the formula that created the original, compelling 911, the 2.7 RS, has been pretty much emulated by its successors. But which is the one? It's not easy because, as Meaden says, picking the best is like trying to decide between great racing drivers from different eras; the 2.7 RS is Fangio, the GT3 Schumacher, and there's Jim Clark and Senna in there, too. They're all brilliant and you can construct valid arguments for each of them.

So let's get personal. To my mind, the best 911 ever should be the model that is most 911-like, which makes mine a short list of two – 2.7 RS and Club Sport. And much as I love the 2.7, the CS has its looks, a more engaging and vocal

engine, a more tactile gearshift and better brakes. I could own it and not hanker after any other.

Meaden is also a fan of both. 'No wonder the 2.7 is regarded as the source of the 911 legend,' he says. 'It has the purest shape, the best balance of power, weight and grip and delivers the most involving, absorbing driving experience of the lot. You could drive this car all your life and still learn something new from it. Glorious.'

He describes the Club Sport as 'probably the most involving after the 2.7' and marvels that it's the most affordable car here, but there's a third car fighting for his affections. It's not the GT3, though we've agreed this is the greatest of the current-generation cars. No, Dickie's smitten with the 964 RS. 'Of the modern era cars, this is the one I really lust after,' he says. After a heated debate with himself, the like of which I've only ever seen on *Who wants to be a millionaire?*, he plumps for... the 2.7 RS.

He's in good company. Lord Mexborough, a dedicated driver and collector of Ferraris and Porsches, holds the 2.7 in the highest regard: 'It's a fine driver's car, the finest, I think.' Green is in love, too, musing: 'If you had one you'd never sell it. It's a true classic in every sense.' Ah, but is it his definitive choice, I wonder? 'The 964 RS comes very close to winning for me; it's a perfect bridge between the old and new, it retains the scale and nimbleness of the early cars whilst including a few modern comforts such as decent brakes. But even so, some of that original purity has gone, it doesn't quite have the magic of 2.7 RS and, as usual, my heart rules my head.'

Bovingdon, who was just a twinkle in his father's trousers when the 2.7 RS was launched, is amazed. 'How good is this? Almost 30 years old but still bloody brilliant.' His favourite, then? 'The stupid grin on everyone who drove it tells you all you need to know. Others cover ground more quickly but none delivers the undiluted thrills that this does. Put simply, it's the most engaging car I've ever driven.'

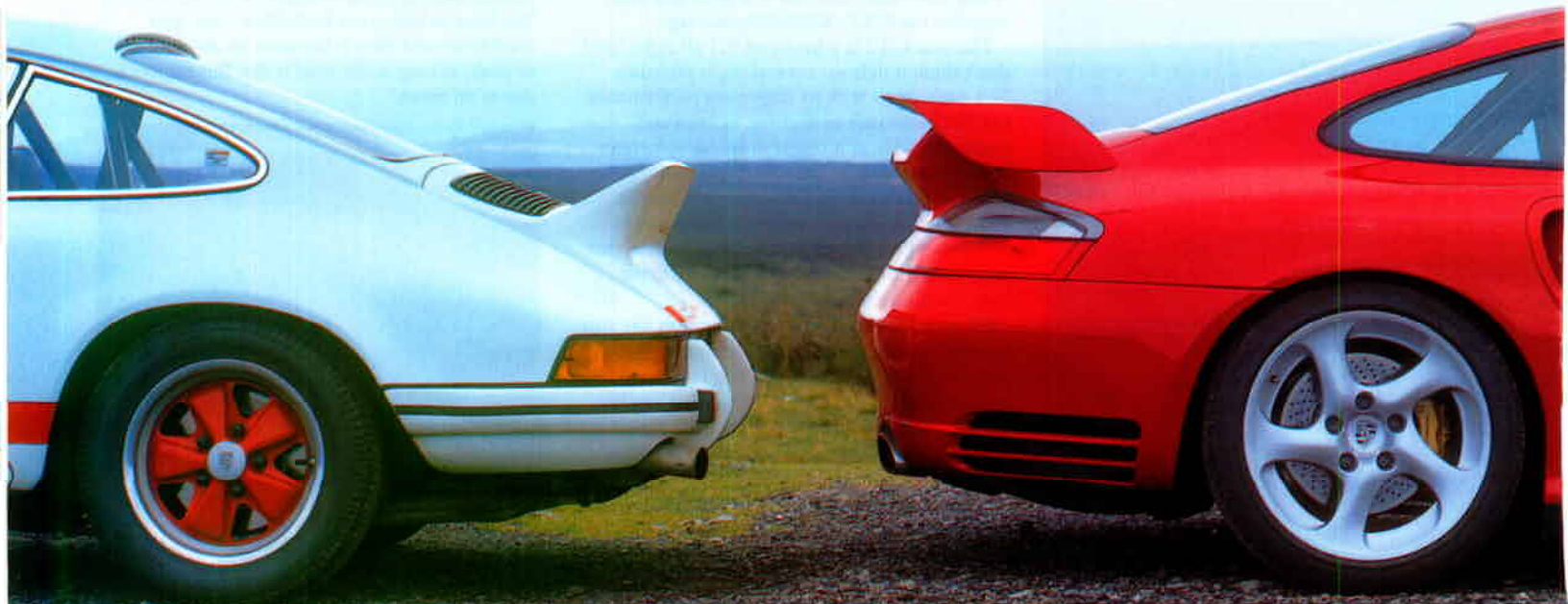
So, there you have it. The consensus after two days' driving is that the greatest is the 2.7 RS, which is also the oldest of our group. I can't help feeling that there's a message here for Porsche, if it's interested. The new GT2 is a sensational car but the most impressive of the recent 911s is the GT3. 'By far the best 996 generation car,' says Meaden. 'Maybe one day I will find something I do not like about this car,' adds Hayman.

And it wouldn't have taken much to put the GT3 into close-quarters contention with the 2.7 RS, either – maybe a few less creature comforts, some thinner glass, a few lightweight panels...

In short, what we'd really like is a 996 RS. Come on Porsche, we know you can do it. ■

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'No wonder the 2.7 is regarded as the source of the 911 legend'



THE ONES THAT GOT AWAY

There are a number of 'ultimate' 911s that we might have included in this test, starting with the 911 GT1. Although we did track down one example in the UK, sadly the owner wasn't able to supply the car. Though the prospect of threading half a million quids' worth of thinly disguised Le Mans racer across the north Yorks moors would have had our insurers taking up permanent residence in the executive toilets, it would have been an awe-inspiring, if ultimately terrifying experience. And since it is so far removed from roadgoing reality, not a very illuminating one.

Any of the pure race RSR models (or indeed the super lightweight late-'60s 911R) would also have been fantastic, but in the end we decided their no-compromise characters and extreme rarity precluded them.

Then there were the two incarnations of the little-known Turbo S model. Both the two-wheel-drive, 380bhp, single-turbo car, and the later all-wheel drive, 430bhp, twin-turbo version were fabulous, combining non-turbo deftness with explosive turbocharged power, but our findings suggest they would have struggled to beat the best of the non-turbo 911s.

We could have made a case for several of the more humble Carrera models (and indeed the original 964 model Carrera 4) but simple logistics meant we had to draw a line. Deciding which cars to include was the easy bit. Deciding which to leave out was tougher.



The GT1 that got away; ultra-rare million-dollar roadgoing racer. Above: Turbo S would have been on the pace



EXCESS ALL AREAS

Though the idea of modifying a 911 is sacrilege to some, a number of German tuning specialists have successfully enhanced the performance of Porsche's legendary supercar. Ruf, TechArt and Gemballa have all put their own spin on the 911, and though the results are sometimes in rather poor taste, certain cars have been devastatingly effective.

One of the most famous tuned 911s was Ruf's CTR. With a 463bhp turbocharged motor slotted into the narrow 3.2 Carrera bodysell, the CTR was a genuine 200mph car – and handled too. If you've seen the infamous *Faszination* video, in which test driver Stefan Roser drives Ruf's heroic demo CTR, Yellowbird, around the Nürburgring in awesomely sideways style, you'll know the fastest 911s don't necessarily come straight from Stuttgart.

More recent proof can be found in the form of



Ruf's legendary CTR and TechArt's awesome GT Street (left), holder of the road car lap record at the Nürburgring

TechArt's 600bhp GT Street, based on the 996 Turbo, which has just lowered the outright road car lap record of the Nürburgring to a barely believable 7min 43.4sec. Driven by an independent test driver,

German motoring magazine *Sport Auto's* editor Horst von Saurma, it destroyed the new GT2's recent production car record of 7min 49sec set in the hands of the vastly experienced Walter Röhrl.