



DREAMS DO COME TRUE

Coming face-to-face with the car of my childhood fantasies: The Porsche 911

Porsche 911s are the Marmite of cars—they divide opinion as no other. To some they are an object of desire, something that is the culmination of, and reward for, years of hard work: a marvel of superb German engineering without the overtly flashy nature of a Ferrari but with a usability that really does make it the everyday supercar. To others they are the four-wheeled embodiment of the midlife crisis, a vain attempt to recapture a long gone youth—they are motoring’s equivalent to an advert saying, “I’ve still got it!” These are two camps that will never reconcile.

There could be something in this huge chasm of opinion, because Porsche is a company largely devoid of any form of romanticism (look to Ferrari, Bentley and Aston Martin for that). It is therefore very difficult to set the pulses racing when thinking of a Porsche, and indeed there are those who see them as little more than expensive and glorified Volkswagen Beetles.

Perhaps the Marmite factor stems from the company’s questionable youth. For it was three years after it was formed in 1931 that Hitler informed Dr. Porsche that he was to develop a basic car capable of carrying two adults and three children at sustained speeds of 62 miles per hour on Germany’s new autobahns, all for the cost of a small motorcycle. The “People’s Car” was born, and it went on to be the bestselling automobile in history.

At the first opportunity Porsche broke free and started selling cars under its own name in 1948. It came in the form of the beautiful 356, but it was not until a Le Mans victory in 1951 and the introduction of the 356 Speedster in 1954, which was aimed squarely at the American market and was a huge hit (and nowadays a collector’s dream), that Porsche became a household name. This was undoubtedly added to

by the tragic death of “rebel without a cause” James Dean at the age of 24 at the wheel of his Porsche 550 Spyder in 1955.

Of the two camps I fall firmly into the former. There is a theory that men secretly hanker after the cars that they had on their bedroom walls as kids. As an ’80s child I grew up in that extraordinary environment where the new “mobile phones” were huge, but the hair and the shoulder pads were even bigger. It was a decade of rampant capitalism, pinstripe suits, red suspenders, Brylcreem and Bud Fox. And the car that exemplified all of this excess? Without a doubt the whale-tailed, brash, loud and unapologetic Porsche 911. It is the ’80s.

So when a friend asked me to drive his 1986 Carrera 3.2 from New York to Southampton I leapt at the chance. And I simply could not resist the temptation to start my journey on Wall Street—a stereotype, I know, but you just would, wouldn’t you? They say you should not meet your heroes or drive your childhood dream cars for fear of serious disappointment. There is none of that when seeing the unmistakable outline of the 911, with that outrageous rear wing. It really does look even better than in the pictures. The door shuts with a satisfying “clunk,” but then the doubt sets in.

I take some time to try to acclimatize. The pedals are offset quite badly, and the clutch is heavy. The gear stick is miles away, and the controls for the heater (no air-conditioning in Porsches until 1989) seem to have been scattered around the cabin by a man in a rush to leave on a Friday afternoon. The gearbox is notoriously notchy and difficult until it’s up to temperature, and I am desperately wishing I had started the journey somewhere less conspicuous. The opportunity to look as foolish as many people did on Black Monday passes, and I am heading out onto the Brooklyn Bridge and down the 495, the

HAMPTON DRIVE

continuous “ker-thump, ker-thump” from the surface of the roadbed made all the louder by the sheer size of the tires and one’s proximity to the tarmac.

I pass the signs for Ronkonkoma and know that I am almost halfway there, heading to one of my favorite parts of the journey, through Suffolk County’s pine barrens. Here I can drop a few cogs, and the windows (my God, it’s hot in here!), and let that air-cooled flat six really sing. It is a visceral noise, throaty and loud, but at the same time utterly beautiful and totally unique.

Coming into traffic as the 27 narrows before hitting Southampton, I do not regret for one second meeting my childhood automotive hero.

As a company, Porsche might be cold and Germanic, and the 911 is controversial; however, as a way of evoking a bygone era that I remember so fondly, this hero has really hit the spot. ♦



Porsche: Stats and Facts

The 411 on Porsche and its most iconic model, the 911

1948: The year Ferdinand Porsche and his son Ferdinand “Ferry” Porsche first set up shop to sell cars under their own name.

40: The original horsepower of Porsche’s first sports car, the 356.

1954: The introduction year of the 356 Speedster, which are now among the most sought-after collector models.

24: The age of James Dean during his fatal accident behind the wheel of a Porsche 550 Spyder in 1955.

901: The original name intended for the Porsche 911 (successor to the 356).

5,500: The price in U.S. dollars of the 911 when it debuted as an instant hit in 1964.

1996: The one-millionth Porsche built.

35: Years before the 911 models switched from air-cooled to water-cooled engines.

2009: The opening year of the Porsche Museum in Germany, which features more than 80 vehicles on display in a 60,250 square-foot exhibition area.

47,007: The number of Porsche units sold in 2014, which set a U.S. record.

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