





## Porsche 959

**O**n the surface, the recipe is as simple as bratwurst: take a 911, pump it full of steroids and do something distinctly odd to the rear end. *Voilà*: a Porsche 959. To draw on the 911 comparison is unavoidable, but severely understates the importance and innovation of this twin-turbo-boosted roadrocket. Even today and in this company, it might be a brand new car – rather than 1987 – which suggests its timelessness and durability. That it is owner Trevor Baker's only car – just days before our test he did Kent to Manchester and back for a meeting – speaks volumes about its practicality.

The four-wheel-drive element had been inevitable from the moment a 4wd 911 cabrio design concept was shown in 1981. Two years later, the 959 prototype was unveiled at Geneva, the following year a turboless version won the Paris-Dakar, and two years after that the near-finished product took first, second and sixth in the same event. Yet Group B was uppermost in Zuffenhausen minds when this 450bhp monster was born, as underscored by the fact that 200 were to be built. The 956 was dominating Group C and souped-up 911s were already doing well in Group B in the hands of privateers. That Group B collapsed was to the road car driver's benefit... the 959 hit the streets.

And it did so with a spec that oozed innovation. Despite the similarities – and being built around a 911 Carrera platform – all the 959 shared with the standard 911 was the brake lights. The body (largely kevlar with reinforced glassfibre, aluminium bonnet and doors, plus polyurethane nose cone), combined with a flat undertray, offers a drag coefficient of just 0.31Cd. There are three ground clearance levels, the car lowering automatically at 95mph to eliminate high-speed lift. And that's just the start: four-wheel drive; six-speed gearbox with front and rear torque sensors; two computer-controlled shock absorbers per wheel; tyres that could run flat for 50 miles; and programs for four different road conditions. But the real work was on the engine, the traditional 2850cc flat-six transformed with twin KKK turbos (one operating below 4000rpm, the other coming in progressively thereafter), water-cooled, Nikasil-lined cylinders, the three on each side made from a single casting, twin overhead cams per bank and four valves per cylinder. On paper it's astounding and when the first lhd cars were delivered in April '87 it was declared the most technically advanced road car of all time. So how does it stack up today?

Derek Bell is familiar with the model, but, coming straight after the F40 in our running order, the glaring differences between the Maranello and Stuttgart approaches to building a supercar were writ large. He says: "You realise that you're logically in a 911. They've made it so everybody can drive it and it's too civilised compared to the F40 which is an animal. But it still has searing pace: it doesn't feel that impressive and then you get to 4000rpm and on comes masses of horsepower."

That a 200mph supercar could be created on such a logic-defying basic principle – hanging the engine outside the wheelbase – is testament to the magnificent engineering, but it still causes concern. Bell continues: "I would have liked a bit more stability. As I went down the straight I could feel the car rolling around, just wandering because it was a little uneven. Porsche has never been able to get away with this because the engine is behind the centre line of the rear wheels. Although what's made Porsche is the engine at the

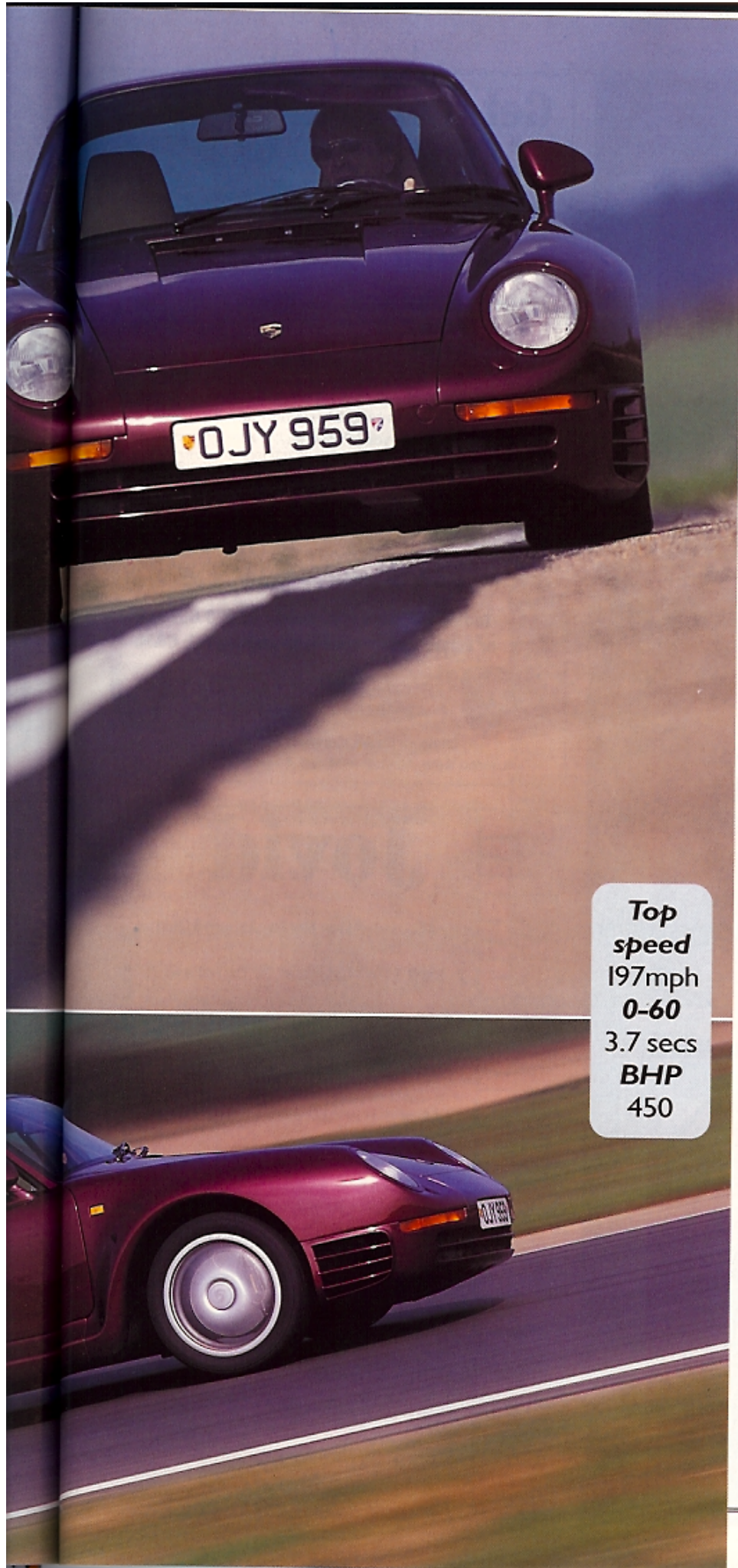
**Material girl: 959's body uses kevlar with reinforced glassfibre, ally and polyurethane nose. Car lowers itself automatically at 95mph to eliminate high-speed lift. Trevor Baker's lovely burgundy model is his daily driver and only car**

## Tails of the unexpected

In theory, the layout of the 959 shouldn't work, but does technology save the day?







**Top  
speed**  
197mph  
**0-60**  
3.7 secs  
**BHP**  
450

## Factfile & prices

**Engine** rear-mounted water-cooled fuel-injected dohc flat-six with twin sequential turbos. 8:1 compression ratio **Transmission** manual six-speed, four-wheel drive with electronic sensors governing torque split **Construction/chassis** steel monocoque, with kevlar glassfibre reinforced bodywork, aluminium doors and bonnet, polyurethane extremities **Suspension** upper and lower wishbones, coil springs and dual shock absorbers, front and rear anti-roll bars **Brakes** ventilated cross-drilled discs all round. ABS **Steering** rack and pinion **Weight** 2980lb **Height** 4ft 2in **Width** 6ft **Length** 13ft 11in **Max power** 450bhp @ 6500rpm **Max torque** 396lb ft @ 7800rpm **0-60mph** 3.7 secs **Top speed** 197mph **Production** 1986-88/200 **Price new** £140,000 **Price now** £175,000

## Rivals

### FERRARI 288 GTO

**Top speed** 189mph **0-60mph** 5 secs  
**Produced/built** 1984-'87/273  
**Price new** approx £80,000 **Price now** £150,000  
Based on the 308GTB and planned as a 200-off homologation special, it went way beyond that. Bigger than the 308 to house longitudinally mounted 2855cc V8, but similar to look at. Twin IHI turbos provide massive power (400bhp) and propel the GTO to 190mph.



### FORD RS200

**Top speed** 140mph **0-60mph** 6 secs  
**Produced/built** 1985-'86/200  
**Price new** £49,995 **Price now** £30,000  
A true Group B car and sharing four-wheel drive with 959. Not truly supercar quick, but turboed Cosworth 1.8 BDT offered between stock 250bhp and outrageous 650 for rally use. Very usable and practical for one of these monsters. Even the police used it.



### LOTUS ESPRIT TURBO

**Top speed** 152mph  
**0-60mph** 5.5 secs  
**Produced/built** 1980-'87/1658  
**Price new** £19,980 ('84) **Price now** £12,500  
The only Lotus with the power to mess with the big boys and a formula the company still exploits today. Comparative Giugiaro-styled models (with 2147cc power) did 60mph in 5.5 secs and broke through 150mph.





# SUPERCARS

luck, I still feel they didn't make the best balance out of it."

In some areas, road car ancestry outweighs racing technology. "The first impression is how firm the brake pedal is, but you get a tremendous amount of body roll on turn-in which is fine for road, but too soft for tracks. On the other hand, as you turn in initially you get a typical Porsche neutral to understeer and then when you get the revs coming on it just picks up and goes. At that point, the car doesn't really get towards oversteer, but it's moving that way. Four-wheel drive cars always understeer and they've done a remarkable job with this – because the car is rolling and all the weight's in the back you're actually inducing an oversteer." In driving terms there are several areas where the car might have been improved yet further and Bell is reluctantly left with the impression that it is an incomplete job: "I would like to stiffen the whole car up, but that would probably induce more understeer. I would try to stop the dive and roll and I'm sure Porsche tried to do the same when they went racing with it. In power terms it is the greatest Porsche, but you still feel you're in a 911 and I'd have wanted more stiffness, rigidity and all the rest of it."

The same gripe, but in far stronger terms, applies to the interior: "I've always been very critical of that; from the outside you go: 'Wow,' but you get inside and think: 'I'm paying all that money and I'm getting a 911.' That was a rather naive mistake by Porsche. Even if they'd put white dials in or a RUF-type interior at least it would have looked special. I would have had a Momo or special Porsche 959 wheel. They made an incredible wolf from the outside, but it was the same old sheep inside."

Bearing in mind that at the height of the market, 959s were reputedly changing hands for £500,000, the criticism is justified. "For the money it should be a 959 not a 911," adds Bell. "I'm not calling for expensive changes, but externally everyone points and exclaims '959' straight away, but you don't want your friends to get in and say: 'Wow, 911s are nice' so you have to reply: 'Hold on a minute mate, I paid four times as much for this!'"

A few more minutes' reflection out of the car and a new, significant thought occurs: "The one thing we haven't mentioned is that it is the only car here that you would be able to drive exactly the same in the wet as the dry – that's how incredibly good four-wheel drives are. I wouldn't drive anything else now because of the stability in the dry as well – you can brake into a roundabout on an angle and you know it's going to go round without the tail wandering out at the back."

If the 959 is the progenitor of any car here, it is the 360 Modena, because it is the result of racing lessons (largely Group C) meticulously applied to a refined, everyday road car. As Derek Bell concludes: "You could head across Europe and hardly know that you'd done it. In the F40 you'd have a bigger smile on your face because you'd have had those moments of sheer thrust. This comes in much more fluently, but again it can come in with a bang. I'm not so sure they shouldn't have brought the power pick up down to 3000-3500rpm. At 4000rpm you keep waiting and waiting while it goes like an ordinary 911 and then there's this huge rush."

"On the other hand, judging it as it was intended to be, as a compromise between track and road car and accepting its road-car roots, I'd give it full marks." The overriding conclusion is that, whatever flaws it may have, however much Porsche skimped on glitz, the 959 is surprisingly easy to drive – too easy. To be damned for being too good, too civilised, is praise indeed.

James Elliott



**Rear treatment is unusual. More technology than you can shake a stick at: maybe that's why Microsoft's Bill Gates has one. Allegedly he fought to have it legalised in the USA. Interior is stock 911; perhaps a bit of RUF would have been in order?**

