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AN INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION



Words by David Sutherland
Photography by Dave Woodall

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The Porsche 959 was a technical *tour de force* and, even now, it's mechanically the most advanced car Porsche has ever built

Anyone looking for a single detail to sum up the legend that is the Porsche 959 could do worse than home in on the extra stalk on the right-hand side of the steering-column. Flicking this up and down takes the four-wheel-drive system through four modes: 'Ice', 'Wet Road', 'Dry Road' and 'Traction'. Examine the road ahead, pick the setting and accelerate, comfortable in the knowledge that the most suitable front/rear torque split has been selected. And that's not all: the dial to the far right of the instrument panel contains two gauges, one showing the percentage front/rear torque split currently deployed, and the other the percentage locking of the rear differential.

No other four-wheel-drive road car of the time offered anything like it, and it's this loving attention to detail that can be seen throughout the 959, a car that Porsche built to go rallying in, but which came to be a showcase for the company's engineering

pro prowess, rather than its motorsport ambitions. It was to the 1980s what the £300,000-plus Carrera GT is to the noughties, even though the latter has no racing connection.

Design work on the 959 began in 1983 and the finished product was available for purchase in 1987/88. It was based on the 911, but almost every part of it was bespoke. Thus, it was easily the most technically sophisticated car among its 'Group B' contemporaries, although not particularly expensive considering what it was – the 292 examples built to satisfy the motorsport homologation regulations (the actual requirement was 200 cars) were priced at £125,000.

The 2.85-litre engine was based on that from Porsche's Le Mans endurance racers, and a far cry from the regular 3.2-litre 911 Carrera unit. It featured twin, sequential turbochargers, water-cooled cylinder-heads and four-valves per cylinder. Output in road

trim was 450bhp (almost double that of the Carrera 3.2), but an optional factory upgrade of larger turbos and remapped ECU saw that rise to 550bhp. Power was transmitted through a six-speed gearbox and the aforementioned permanent four-wheel-drive transmission, which would later surface in simplified form in the 1989 911 Carrera 4.

Front and rear suspension was changed to the classic double-wishbone set-up, and with dashboard-adjustable damper firmness and ride height, while the brakes were from the 917 racer (among the few components not specifically designed for the 959). Other examples of the exotic and cost-no-object nature of the car are the tyre pressure sensors built into the valve caps, and the unique, hollow-spoked alloy wheels – actually quite modest in size by today's standards, at 235/45 front and 255/40 rear. If, by the way, you want a full, in-depth analysis of the 959, our 959 Buyer's Guide,

What they said at the time

'Porsche didn't give a fig for the looks or the presence of the car, when it designed the 959. Ditto the engine note. It was a technological statement. Look what we can do: that was the message to the world's motor industry. Try if you dare, to come up with a computer-controlled four-wheel drive twin-turbocharged 200mph road car that has electronically controlled suspension and every other high tech bit that Porsche could lay its hands on.'

Car magazine, November 1989

Porsche 959 specifications

Engine Flat-six, air-cooled, with water-cooled cylinder heads, four valves per cylinder, twin turbochargers

Capacity 2847cc

Power 450bhp at 6500rpm

Torque 369lb/ft at 5500rpm

Transmission six-speed manual, ur-wheel drive, with manually variable torque split

Suspension Double wishbone, front and rear, variable damper stiffness and ride height

Wheels Hollow-spoke 17-inch alloy wheels, for run-flat tyres

Tyres Front 235/45, rear 255/40

Weight 1650kg

0-62mph 3.7sec

Max speed 197mph

Number built 292

published in the November 2003 issue, is highly recommended, and still available – see the Back Issue pages.

The 959 continued to cause a stir after all were delivered to customers, including the estimated 12 for UK buyers. It was a headline performer in the runaway classic car boom of the late 1980s, regularly to be seen advertised for £500,000. This was an interesting reversal of financial fortunes because, while the 959 clearly cost Porsche far more to develop and build than would ever be recouped in sales revenue,

customers who bought one new could trouser a massive profit by re-selling. As we now know, of course, values collapsed to a fraction of their peak by the early 1990s.

Nearly two decades on, the 959 has become a recluse. Few venture out on to the road, due to their still considerable value – say £100,000 – and also for fear of their custom-made panels collecting scrapes. If you want to see one, you'll have to go to one of the various Porsche specialists who keep one (such as Charles Ivey, in Fulham, South West London, or

Porsche Centre Swindon), or to one of the bigger Porsche shows in the summer.

The fact that its competition potential was never fully realised, because Group B was banned before the 959 was ready, has left a hole in its CV and, unthinkable as it may seem to those steeped in Porsches, there's a generation of car enthusiasts out there who simply don't know what it is. And the nightmare question for any 959 owner to be asked: 'Is it a kit car?' is actually not such a daft question, because 959 lookalikes do exist (including the

extraordinary one built without access to full 959 measurements for aircraft engineer Eric Lantz in 1987 (see October 2003 issue).

So what are we to make of the 959 in 2006? The first issue to address is the body styling which, frankly, is a love-it-or-loathe-it affair. With its faired-in headlamps (actually very similar looking to the current 997's) and full, smooth nose treatment, the 959 can look stunning from the front three-quarter angle. But, at the back, it's harder to call the 959 a treat to the eyeballs. The massive rear overhang, plus the huge engine cover, give it a tail-heavy appearance, the vast composite appendage seeming almost to be tacked on to the slender 911 body.

Inside, though, the Porsche takes on an entirely different character. Without using the mirrors, you can't see any of the bulbous add-ons from the driver's seat, and the initial impression is of sitting in an extremely well appointed, but normal 911.

This car pictured has gorgeous, light tan leather seats with nicely contrasting wine red for the fascia. Look closer, though, and a same-but-different feel emerges.

For example the clock gives way to what could be called the 4WD information centre, and been displaced to the centre console. Almost incongruously, the far left dial includes a water temperature gauge – for the cylinder-heads. Down on the transmission tunnel, ahead of the gear lever, are positioned the switches for the variable damper stiffness and ride height.

The exclusivity of the 959 is also reflected in the accessories that came with it. The wallet for the various handbooks and the service record is made from a high-quality leather matching the body colour, and with the name of the original owner neatly stamped into a corner. In this case it's that of Peter Grant, a name Led Zeppelin fans will be familiar with (see owner box). Furthermore, the briefcase which





carrier for the high-quality tool kit could also have come from Harrods, and one particularly impressive accessory supplied with the car is a special adaptor with its own torque wrench for the single, central wheel nut.

The 959 does, of course, have its ardent fans, and can attract six-figure prices. But it's probably fair to sum it up as a car you'd admire, but not covet. As a demonstration

of the technical expertise within Porsche, it flattened everything else. Everything about the 959 was beautifully designed and executed, with no shortcuts taken. As a result, two decades on the 959's technology is superseded, but somehow it doesn't feel dated.

The one aspect that hasn't stood the test of time is the styling. The heavily-skirted

shape is reminiscent of a fashion long departed and little mourned, and many would surely agree that the 959 is neither pretty enough to seduce nor aggressive enough to create a big presence. But beauty is more than skin deep and, whatever you make of the aesthetics, the Porsche 959 remains one of the key supercars from the 1980s. ■

