

959

Helmuth Bott, one of Porsche's greatest engineers and the leader of the team that produced the 959, said in 1986 that it was "a car which demonstrates the abilities of the Weissach development team in every aspect of automobile design". The essence of the extraordinary 959 was just that: every conceivable example of the latest technology was applied to it and the result was that, for some time, it was undeniably the undisputed top supercar.

The all-wheel drive, 200mph, 911-based concept was first revealed at the Frankfurt Show in 1983, and 200 deposits were soon accepted. Because of problems, mainly the result of shifting internal policies, it was four long years before road cars began to be delivered to the patient customers. When that day came, in 1987, they were not disappointed. The 959 looked fabulous, it was outrageously quick and it did everything that had been claimed for it. It still is today even by modern supercar standards!

Part of the fascination was learning how to get the best from it: the 959 drove like no previous rear-engined car, nor any previous road car for that matter. Already a proven winner, the 959 had won the daunting Paris-Dakar Rally first time out in 1984 and it was surprisingly successful even at Le Mans. It still commands genuine respect, to this day. In the end, 283 were made.

Under the skin

Back in the mid-1980s, the 959 gave a clear look into the automotive technology of the future. Rear-engined, with 450bhp available, it had variable four-wheel drive, complex traction control, variable ride height on the standard model, superb aerodynamics and anti-lock brakes. There simply wasn't anything else like it. Advantages of the design included superior safety in accidents, the 959's ability to turn into corners much more sharply than any front-engined cars could, its amazing traction and the fact that it remained extraordinarily stable in the corners. Despite all that power, it did not want to spin out.

A steering column stalk enabled drivers to select one of four transmission modes of traction control: Dry, Wet, Snow or Traction. Basically, 80% of the drive went to the back wheels in normal, dry conditions. Working through these modes, a greater percentage of the drive was sent to the front until you got to 'Traction', in which everything was locked 50:50 front/rear to let the car crawl out of a slippery spot. The system was designed to ensure a smooth shift from one mode to another on the move and many foolproof systems were built into the 959's electronics to stop drivers damaging the machine by their mistakes. To ensure a positive turn into corners, drive to the front was always reduced under braking.

An automatic/manual ride height control was fitted to the Comfort model but not to the Sport which sat permanently on the low setting. Further, to make it as light as possible, the Sport model did not include air conditioning, electric window lifters or electric seat adjustment. It also had less sound-proofing material. Accounts vary, but all these deletions from the specification produced a weight saving in the Sport model which was probably close to 100kg.

Driving

First of all, the performance must not be forgotten. Even by today's standards, the 959 remains a true supercar in terms of sheer speed. Engine response was superb, giving a smooth but mighty push in the back, especially from 4,000rpm up to the 7,500rpm rev limit. Speeds available in intermediate gears were 37, 64, 93, 127 and 161mph; and a 959 could get very close to 200mph on a level, straight road. It was also luxuriously comfortable and, when driven slowly, docile and easy to handle. **Zero to 60, 100 & 125 mph dispatched in only 3.7, 8.3 & 13.0 seconds respectively, plus a standing ¼ in 11.9 sec. A Carrera GT is quicker but only just!!**

Porsche's 959 remains an incredible machine to drive. You only have to drive any 911 Turbo of recent years to realise that later machinery, based on all that groundbreaking 959 technology, is actually more removed and less involving by a long way. The modern cars are easier and probably ultimately safer perhaps but not nearly as fun to drive. The car is phenomenal and is one of the earliest cars where on the limit you could clearly feel the complex traction control thinking for you at speed in a slippery corner. It worked like magic and was amazingly safe.

It was a similar story with the brakes. Incredibly powerful, they stopped the car safely in astonishingly short distances. The brakes are somewhat wooden but given that they are lifted directly from the racing 917, you get an idea of the car's huge performance reserves.

The 959 was a technical tour de force, way ahead of the game in its day, and that guarantees its status as one of the truly great classic cars of all time.

History of OJY 959

OJY959 (the UK registration number) has had an interesting selection of owners. Peter Grant, the late manager of Led Zeppelin, originally purchased the car. The car is one of a very small number of original UK cars and it is believed that no other production 959 was made this colour (weinröt was an exclusive 959 colour). Also the interior was a custom factory order, as Peter Grant preferred a rich tan leather to the three stripes that feature in most 959s. The last owner, before the current one, was none other than Rowan Atkinson, who is said to have bought it on a whim as it was the same colour as his McLaren F1. OJY959 has been the Zymol show car, still retaining a number of custom protective stickers and at the height of the supercar feeding frenzy at the end of the 1980's this car changed hands for £500,000. The car has also been featured in numerous articles.

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