

I'm on the east side of the San Francisco Bay. The sun, like most of the community's residents, has not yet risen. The quiet suburb is homogeneous, with each lot featuring a beige house with a leased mid-size SUV in the driveway. This neighborhood could go unnoticed anywhere in America, a nondescript array of streets packed tightly with three to five nuclear family members residing in each. The roads wind in on each other, pouring me out into the cul de sac at the end of the avenue when I see the shape of the thing that drew me here.

A distinctly latter 1980s sports car design, Porsche's 944 Turbo (a.k.a. the Type 951) was just another wedge-and-angle coupe of its era, but in the 2019 automotive landscape, it stands in stark juxtaposition. The black coupe shines in the crepuscular morning glow, reflecting the overhead street lighting with just the thinnest sheen of overnight dew. The paint retains its factory sheen, having been meticulously maintained by owner Dale Smith. Before I've even said a word, he's pressed the keys to his black beauty into my palm with a smile.

Smith bought this car not long ago because he needed a Porsche to drive while his air-cooled 911 underwent a lengthy full restoration. After scouring forums and online sellers, he found the 951 of his dreams just around the corner from home.

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

We drive a pair of 944 Turbos and remember what a blast they are to drive.

STORY BY BRAD BROWNELL  
PHOTOS BY KEIRON BERNDT

The paint is nearly showroom perfect, and Smith makes a point of wiping down the finish likely as often as you or I brush our teeth. The interior is even nicer still. It's a very clean example worthy of placement in the most prestigious of Porsche collections. At some point in the car's life, the "phone dial" wheels were refinished in a metallic gold that is quite fetching against the black-as-a-crow's-feather paint.

He wasn't content to keep his nice 951 completely stock, however, as he added a "300 Horsepower Kit" from Lindsey Racing in short order. The kit includes a 3.0 bar fuel pressure regulator, a dual port wastegate with a manual boost controller, a 4.0-inch exhaust system, and an ECU chip, and I can attest that it gave this 944 a real zest for life. With nearly 300 horses to the rear wheels in an otherwise stock 1987 944 Turbo, you get the feeling that this car is far more modern than might be indicated by its appearance.

Smith was lovestruck by the car from the first few miles of his test drive. His also-Porsche-obsessed down-the-street neighbor, Erik Lind, had come along with him to test the car for a second opinion. The car was given an all-clear assessment from both and cash changed hands. Smith told Lind to man the tiller on the trip home in his newly acquired black 951, and the 944 Turbo bug had claimed another victim. Lind knew he would need a Turbo transaxle car of his own.



As luck would have it, that same seller had a second 944 Turbo on hand, this one in white, that he called a “mechanic’s special” with a lot of miles he’d be willing to let go for real cheap. By the time they made the short trip back to their cul de sac, Lind was on the phone to let the seller know he wanted the white car, too. In one short afternoon test drive, two neighbors ended up with 944 Turbos.

Lind’s 951 was not nearly so nice as Smith’s. For one thing, it had at least four times the mileage with a non-functional odometer reading 350,000 miles. According to the paperwork that came with the car, that odometer stopped functioning in 2004, and it’s possible the car racked up close to half a million miles by the time it was retired. From 1986 when it was purchased through 2010, this car served as the daily driver of a San Francisco Bay Area traveling businessman who added a minimum of 200 miles to the total every single day.

Lind had to do a little more work to his newly acquired Turbo than his neighborly counterpart. The interior needed a refinish with a dash mat to cover the cracks common in Porsches of this era, and a set of fresh brown leather seat covers. Also needed were motor mounts, brakes, wheel bearings, dampers, shifter components, and a wholesale replacement of the audio

components. Out of compassion for the high-mile engine, a standard timing belt and water pump service were undertaken. Various rubber seals and trim bits, including a nice period-correct D&W three-spoke steering wheel, were also installed.

Like his horsepower-crazy neighbor, Lind was also not content to leave his high-mileage 944 stock. Keeping his transaxle car a bit more budget friendly, he invested in a pre-owned chip tune, a 3.0 turbo-back exhaust, and a custom cold-air intake for a light power increase. He’s not particularly concerned with a horsepower number, and as such has not bothered to run the car on a dyno, but it feels a good bit stronger than the stock 220 horsepower number.

These two cars are, in some ways polar opposites, and in others oddly the same. They’re clearly siblings, but in the way that Luke and Leia Skywalker were separated shortly after birth and raised by two different families. Smith’s black car was raised as royalty, given every bit of encouragement and privilege it needed to be successful, and only under his tutelage did it turn a bit rebellious later in life. Lind’s car was pushed into a life of servitude as a field hand on his uncle’s farm, but just when things looked most dire it had adventure injected into its life again.

*Aegre parsimonia apparatus bellis miscere suis, semper Medusa pessimus divinus circumgrediet ossifragi. Pompeii fortiter fermentet plane adfabilis suis. Ossifragi neglegenter circumgrediet saburre. Gulosus syrtes agnascor matrimonii, ut pessimus quinquennalis suis plane frugaliter insectat adlaudabilis apparatus \ Pompeii celeriter conubium santet perspicax ossifragi, iam Medusa neglegenter amputat quinquennalis saburre, etiam plane bellus fidu*

In the end, both cars are products of the way they were treated, and yet it’s almost like it was their destiny to come together over 30 years later to lead a one-neighborhood turbocharged rebellion.

### Behind the Wheel

Climbing aboard the black example, my eye is immediately drawn to the giant knob installed below the radio. It takes every ounce of my being to not reach down and crank it all the way to the right. In talking with Smith, he’s had the boost turned up that high before, and the engine didn’t complain, but he also wants it to last a long time and that much forced air might shorten the service life of

important components like piston rings. The logic center of my brain prevails in this argument, and the boost stays at about three quarters. We’re not pulling at the full 300 horses, but it still feels strong enough to get us all into trouble.

Smith’s L041 Black-painted monster spits, surges, and bucks like it’s begging you to take it faster. Occasionally it will spit flame, and it squawks angrily in protest at every release of the throttle pedal. Building several magnitudes more pressure than atmospheric, the stock turbo whistles shrilly in the process of shoving more air into the cylinders. As soon as you pull back on the loud pedal, however, it all vents to the atmosphere in a loud shout. It’s an

entertaining series of noises that begs you to tip into the throttle and suddenly jump out of it again over and over.

With Smith still beside me in the passenger’s seat, we spent the better part of the morning grinning like idiots as we tested and found the limits of what this 944 chassis was capable of. With giant wind turbines slowly turning overhead we carved deftly through the hills of northern California. With an overzealous throttle foot, it wasn’t difficult or particularly time consuming to suck down a tank of petroleum-based combustion stimulant. I forced myself to get out of the driver’s seat and hand Mr. Smith his keys back before I caught the ire of the local constabulary.

As consolation for walking away from the brute with a boost knob, I climbed aboard the car that had enough miles on its chassis to have driven around the Earth more than twenty times. As I walked over to the Alpinweiss-hued car, I was prepared for a disappointment by comparison. Having started in the better of the two cars, I figured the latter would feel more loose and rattly, not quite held together as well. I’d been fooling myself.

This 951 feels nearly as good as it must have on its first day back in 1986. The Germans know how to assemble a sports car so it lasts, that’s for sure. Open up the door, and it still has that signature German ‘chonk’ sound. It’s a sound that





Aegre parsimonia apparatus bel-  
lis miscere suis, semper Medusa  
pessimus divinus insectat  
adlaudabilis apparatus Pompeii  
celeriter conubium santet perspi-  
cax ossifragi, iam Medusa negle-  
genter amputat quinquennalis  
saburre, etiam plane bellus fidu

telegraphs quality. Not everything is roses, though, as the pop-up headlights will occasionally refuse to...well...pop up. Lind assures me that if you turn the car off and on again, the problem clears itself up for a while. There are a few minor issues with fit and finish, but the hatch glass refuses to rattle over the most serious bumps, and that's a rarity among 944s.

While the power delivery and driving experience are not nearly quite as heady in the white car, it's still quite potent in this perfectly balanced chassis. Between a factory fresh 951 and Smith's wild turbo monster, call this the Goldilocks happy medium of the bunch. Ripping up those same roads in this car is remarkably different for how similar the two are. Say the overworked Luke Skywalker example is down 30 horsepower, give or take, so it loses out a bit in acceleration. But, Lind has fitted his car with a tire that has a bit more dry surface grip than Smith's car, and that

more than makes up for the straight line speed loss by adding in the ability to carry more speed through the corners.

This one doesn't feel overpowered like Smith's does, like catching a fist full of boost at the wrong time could upset that car. Lind's is more forgiving and compliant in the middle of the corner simply by dint of more grip from the tires. In as-driven testing, I'd be hard pressed to give an outright speed victory to either of these cars, as they are quite closely matched. For driving enjoyment, however, I'll take the keys to the white machine every time.

Porsche's 944 has long been revered for its handling prowess, with an exquisite front-to-rear balance ratio and some of the greatest steering characteristics of any car Germany has ever produced. Because the car, and by extension the driver, sits so low to the ground, and the car features high sills and a center tunnel, it contributes to a feeling of melding driver with

car. Every motion of the car is directly communicated to your feet, hands, and tailbone. When it moves, you move with it. With enough time learning its motions, the drive becomes something between a balancing act and a ballroom Viennese.

Porsche has not built anything like the 944 Turbo since its tenure ended in the early 1990s. It is absolutely an unrepeatable effort in today's ever more luxury oriented Porsche dealerships. There is an old adage that Porsche's marketing people always drove 911s, while the engineers preferred the simplicity and inherently perfect balance of the 944. This duo certainly feels like the sort of cars engineers would drive, especially German engineers. Precision is on the menu, and when you're in the driver's seat, it's all you can eat.

### The Verdict

For acolytes to the altar of the transaxle Porsche, there is hardly a better deity than the 944 Turbo. The gentle hiss of the turbo is the injection of interesting that 2.5-liter inline four needs to sound great. The weight is imperceptibly higher, while nearly every component of the car has been improved in strength and purpose for the task. Where the early 944s were simply hodge-podge Volkswagen suspension components attached to a box-flared 924 chassis with half of a 928 V8 under the hood, these later Turbo models perfected the formula.

After a day driving these two, I can see why these two neighbors were afflicted by a passion for driving them within minutes of getting behind the wheel. Whether an overpowered as-new car like Smith's or a slightly warmed-over half-million-mile example like Lind's, the 944 Turbo remains as incredible as it has always been. Properly fun to drive, and for the time being, a great value. ■

### SPECS 1986 944 Turbo (951)

	STOCK / MODIFIED
Drive	Rear-wheel drive
Layout	Front-engine
Wheelbase	94.5 inches
Engine	2.5-liter turbo inline-4
Transmission	5-speed manual
Horsepower	220 hp / 270 hp (est.)
Torque	243 lb-ft / 300 lb-ft (est.)
Weight	2,822 lbs
Power-to-Weight	12.8 lbs/hp / 10.45 lbs/hp
0-60 mph	6.1 sec. / 5.8 sec.
Top Speed	152 mph / 160 mph
Base Price in '86	\$29,500 (\$68,067 today)

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Torque	243 lb-ft / 330 lb-ft
Weight	2,822 lbs
Power-to-Weight	12.8 lbs/hp / 9.4 lbs/hp
0-60 mph	6.1 sec. / 5.2 sec.
Top Speed	152 mph / 165 mph
Base Price in '87	\$33,250 (\$75,615 today)