



THE REAL DEAL

After the hype and speculation comes the fact and the opinion. Is the new 911 GT3 any good?

Words: Chris Harris Photography: Antony Fraser

It's shameful to have to make such a disclosure, but we're coasting about on some clogged Italian A-road and all I can think about is the Nürburgring. For once this isn't fanciful escapism, more attempted objectivity. I'm driving the new GT3, something I've been waiting to do for months, but the traffic is smothering, almost asphyxiating the experience. Rarely does the reworked 3600cc opposed-motor get the chance to run beyond a modest crank speed, and after an hour the only sensible conclusions that can be drawn pertain to dawdling, low-speed ride and shift quality. So, whilst we're on the subject, the clutch is a good 30 per cent heavier than on a Carrera S, the travel is shorter, the Michelin Pilot Sport Cups somehow provide the type of ride comfort (with the suspension in non-sport mode) that strongly hints of everyday credentials. And the

shift? You know what, I'm undecided on the shift. It has a dramatically reduced throw (15 per cent shorter than on version 996, 22 per cent snappier than your cooking C2S) but it feels quite abrupt, a touch cod-racecar in the way many short-shift kits can. It's somehow out-of-sync with a car that otherwise appears to have as much everyday comfort as a regular Carrera.

But what you want to know, and I am desperate to discover, are the answers to two simple questions. What is the new GT3's intended role, and how well does it behave in those circumstances? And however fertile my imagination might be, I just can't imagine for one second that prospective GT3 owners intend to sit behind juggernauts somewhere in northern Italy with some Fiat dirtbox clamped to their rear bumper. On their way to a flat, featureless race circuit that goes by the name of Adria. So we

need to change the point of reference a touch and find a way of translating information gleaned here into something tangible. Which is how constructive dyslexia allows the sign to Adria to suddenly read Adenau, Punto Blu tolls become the familiar yellow barriers at the 'Ring, and I can begin to understand what it is Porsche has achieved with this car.

So what is the GT3, where does it fit in the pantheon of fast Porsches, how do the people who conceived it and nurtured it through those development months perceive its performance? Well, the messages are confusing at first. Before I saw or drove it, I was thinking road car. More mass, PCM module, phone – Christ, even heated seats if you want them – and an air of everydayness about it that would disenfranchise the hardened minority but embrace the less hedonistic among us.

Porsche might have nailed what it is most people will want from a car like this



And then I saw the car sitting outside the hotel for the first time, had a good nose around and felt less sure about that initial prognosis. That was partly down to the spec – this was a Clubsport model with full-bolts cage, carbon-backed buckets and harnesses. Not that it matters much to the static appraisal, but those of you waiting on UK delivery will also be keen to learn that the steering wheel was on the right-hand side of the cabin. No, what mattered to me was that the GT3 looked track-ready. Not the softer-touch I'd been expecting. Not the obvious road-optimised version to allow Porsche market-space and licence to introduce the RS variant that has already become the worst-kept secret of 2006.

The tyres did it. Call me narrow-minded, but when the the quasi-slick shoulders of a 305/30 ZR 19 Michelin Pilot Sport Cup are just visible underneath an arch brought down 30mm to meet them, I don't think road car. In white, with PCCB ceramic brakes and their yellow fists protruding to within millimetres of the new rims, working alongside that interior and that rubber it looked nothing less than a Perspex screen shy of an RS badge. Befuddled and wondering what Porsche intended to offer as an

incentive for a friskier version bar carbon body panels and an International A licence I went off to ask some questions.

I just wanted to know what they were trying to achieve with this car because the message from the spec sheet was a little confused. We're getting comfort and usability from the newly available luxu-widgets on a GT3, but we're also seeing a strong track message from the rubber. They gave me answers. They being predominantly Andreas Preuninger, general manager of High Performance Cars whose baby this is. The new GT3 had to be more of everything, working within requirements for future legislation and accepting that to develop a better road car would inherently compromise its ability on-track because comfort is code for extra mass.

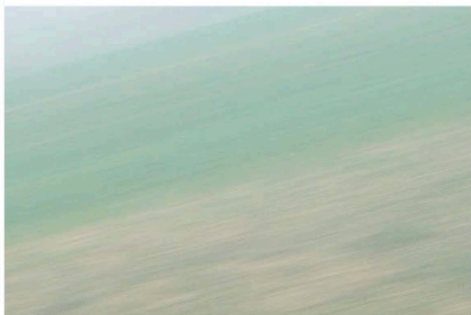
But the GT3 is a clever amalgam of the two and in many ways a much more surprising car because of this. I think Porsche might have nailed what it is most people will want from a car like this. Because even though I haven't had a chance to drive it to a European circuit, knock out a weekend's lappery before trekking back and – here's the *really* clever bit – use it to go to work on the Monday morning, that is what it

was born to do. As Preuninger continues to explain this new philosophy, it dawns on me that this is the car I really want to own because despite frequent protestations to the contrary, I am only an *occasional* track-day attendee, and I think the majority of us are. By that I mean a couple of Ring trips and perhaps five other events during the year. To have one car that will provide exciting, engrossing service on the road, but which will bang out nonchalant sub-eight-minute Nordschleife laps is a compelling prospect. Because much as I loved the old car, it just didn't quite cover both bases for me. Too lairy in street mode, but still hampered by street tyres on the circuit.

This is so much more than a Carrera with a couple of habaneros down its undercrackers. The GT3 is Porsche's robust rebuttal of all accusations of it becoming soft. It's a polite reverse-Winston to people who wage war against the Cayenne and swore never to look upon Zuffenhausen again when it launched the Boxster. This is Porsche not only reminding us what it can do, but demonstrating that such fantasy would never become reality without the revenues from those newer models. GT3 is payback.

New GT3's flat-six may share its capacity with the previous model but that's pretty much it. A 34bhp increase sees power climb up to 415bhp and the rev limit to 8,200rpm





First the motor. To reliably produce the 415bhp required of it in this car, Porsche has gone to remarkable lengths. Adding 34bhp – the type of percentage gain bandied about by most reprogramming firms – has resulted in the only carryover part being the crankcase. I'd need another five thousand words to come close to explaining the modifications, but some of the highlights are: redesigned pistons with pin diameter down by 1mm; total weight reduction when multiplied by six equals 30g; thinner con-rods save another 150g (they had to trim them to shave mass because the 996 already used titanium). The crank is a staggering 600g lighter and runs in eight bearings as before. Now collectively these changes seem to count for very little, but static mass assumes a different weight once it's being wanged about by an excitable owner: the upshot being that running 12.0:1 compression (996: 11.7) the dry-sumped flat six can rev to 8200rpm. Reliably. With 20,000-mile service intervals. If this motor represents today, then I don't see the point in caring about the future.

Now of course these aren't one-off development costs because the imminent Turbo is effectively a low-compression version of this donkey with a pair of trick variable-vane turbos bolted on to it (I'm sure that someone at Zuffenhausen will shin me for saying that). But there is so much going on under the skin of the GT3 that you start to question how on

earth it can fit within Wiedeking's must-make-profit mantra.

Take, for example, the front suspension assembly, brake disc, hub and wheel. This is the first high performance 911 to use PASM (Porsche Active Suspension Management), but the damping characteristics have been changed to suit this application with two fixed settings operated from a button in the cabin (Preuninger impishly refers to them as Sport and Supersport). Anyhow, the damper tube is identical to a stock Carrera's, but naturally the spring is bespoke to this car. The cast aluminium lower arm and upright are also unique to the GT3, as is the cast plate that meets the top mount. Each is an expensive modification, each smacks of something more than a need to make the GT3 an exceptional drive. And of course each is just a positive spin-off from Porsche's extensive homologation and single-marque racing activities. Annual production of 900 units does not require or allow such attention to detail. Factor in a few hundred Cup racers each year and a fistful of RSRs whenever they get round to launching the thing, and you trim your unit cost back to a point on the Excel spreadsheet where Herr Wiedeking says Ja Wohl.

And then there's the extravagant hub that holds the ceramic disc in place on PCCB-equipped cars. As if the benefits of reduced unsprung mass weren't already noticeable, this



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SPECIFICATION – 2006 911 (997) GT3

ENGINE

Power-unit: Flat-six, water-cooled

Capacity: 3600cc

Bore x stroke: 100mmx76.4mm

Compression ratio: 12.0:1

Max engine speed: 8400rpm

Power: 415bhp@7600rpm

Torque: 298lb ft@5500rpm

Transmission: Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, LSD

Weight: 1395kg

SUSPENSION

Front: MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll PASM

Rear: Multi-links, coil springs, anti-roll PASM

Track (F/R): 1486mm/1511mm

BRAKES

Front: 380mm Porsche Ceramic Composite Brakes,

cross-drilled and ventilated discs, six piston aluminium calipers, ABS

Rear: 380mm Porsche Ceramic Composite Brakes,

cross-drilled and ventilated discs, four-piston

aluminium calipers, ABS, Traction Control

WHEELS & TYRES

Front: 8.5x19" aluminium alloy with 235/35ZR19

Michelin Pilot Sport Cup

Rear: 12x19" aluminium alloy with 305/30ZR19

Michelin Pilot Sport Cup

PERFORMANCE

Max Speed: 192mph

0-62mph: 4.3 seconds (claimed)

HOW MUCH?

Cost: £79,540

On sale: 26 August 2006 (UK)

Grip from 12-inch-wide, 305-section rear tyres is phenomenal and has allowed Porsche to dial out some of the 911's natural understeer

item is now fashioned from cast aluminium as opposed to steel and saves an amazing 900g on each corner. The total saving over steel discs is 20kg. Go and find something that weighs 20kg, lift it and then ask yourself what kind of disastrous effect that would have on your damping. Given that they've done a season of Supercup on ceramics now, you'd have hoped that they've sorted the longevity issues too.

The result is a GT3 with real-world usability. A

car that weighs roughly the same as before (there is conflicting information on this, and I think we'll need to stick old and new on a set of bathroom scales to settle it in the summer) with air-con, sat-nav and a phone fitted. Those spitting violently at this page in light of such heresy might be placated to know that PCM and all its trickery adds a whopping 250g to the kerbweight of your GT3 over a standard Becker wireless set.

And so we've just endured the most

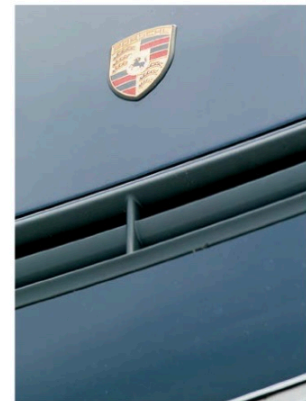
frustrating, yet typically Italian mid-morning drive. No space, untold lunacy and precious few chances to see what the GT3 can do. But tellingly, I've just clambered out having chatted to someone for nearly two hours. Okay, ours is the only non-Clubsport packaged car, but that just means we don't have a cage or the superb carbon buckets. Other than that I have just completed a menial, soporific trudge identical in hideousness to the ones we all have to

endure everyday. And I've done it in a GT3. And it felt little more fatiguing than it would have in a Carrera S.

The circuit is smooth, featureless and punctuated by irritating slow turns, but it is at least somewhere to test the three most intriguing aspects of the new GT3: that motor, that rubber, and the acceptability of inorganic suspension and steering. First impressions are simple but overpowering. The car has colossal mechanical

grip, and what they've achieved with the tyre in light of the way it behaves on the road is arguably the most impressive single facet of this car's performance. Preuninger doesn't have an exact lateral G figure from the skid-pan to hand but says that something in the order of 1.4g is what the car can achieve on this rubber. It's a revelation. Okay, I've driven many well-set-up 996s that grip just as hard, but none that were supple on a two-hour journey leading up to the event.

Understandably, the rubber needs temperature, and the car has been set up to understeer. But all the same adjustments as before are available, so the committed few can tinker to their heart's content. Traction is borderline silly with the car taking most of second gear with significant steering angle still in place. In fact the combination of revised 997 suspension geometry and 12-inch rear rims running 305 section Sport Cup tyres has





allowed Porsche to peel back some of the lock factor of the LSD. It now has a 28 per cent lock-up on power, but on the overrun it remains a high 40 per cent. Hey presto: less understeer than before, less aggression required to hook up that differential and ride every turn with the slightest drift.

The motor is just something else here. There are no appreciable steps in power along the way: the exhaust is festooned with clever valving to appease the sound police and maximise power and torque potential, and as usual Porsche has created the most beguiling intake yowl to amuse those inside. It just pulls from 1200rpm to the 8200rpm cut-out, at which point the mechanical smoothness of the engine makes the shift light that blinks a few moments earlier seem like the most conservative killjoy since someone

offered Norman Tebbit a crack pipe at a Tory Conference.

When an engine is this good, there are few ways of describing it adequately. All you need to know is that it does its job with superb efficiency and great charm. The headline numbers are helped by shorter gearing on ratios two to six, but even then the car never feels as explosive in the mid-range as an X50 996 Turbo, but then it's missing a bag of torque. Still, zero to 99mph in 8.7sec in a normally-aspirated 911 is quick enough for me. As is 192mph.

And PASM? Well, like every other aspect of this car we'll need to hoon it about in the UK

and around its home circuit to get the full gen, but this much is certain: on the hardest setting, the car is perfect for billiard-smooth, non-undulating circuits. We'll call it Bedford spec. But the chassis lads admit that the car is both more manageable and faster around the Nordschleife on the softer mapping. As a package it works supremely well, although I have to admit that prattling about with buttons is a pain. Pressing a button marked 'Sport' to release 25lb ft of torque each time you drive a car is patent nonsense and I'm not sure how sensible the traction control intervention is in this mode either. Just like Ferrari, Porsche has chosen to develop a traction control system for the GT3 (not a full stability programme) that allows extra slip in Sport mode. In fact Preuninger says that the car will virtually hold a slide on its own now, and despite being predictable and allowing the most subtle intervention, you have to worry about the potential for artificial-hero-factor. And the inevitable stacks that come with it. Still we should be delighted that in this day and age, you can clamber aboard your GT3, switch everything off and do your best. Or worst.

There's so much to talk about with this car, the rest is lost in a haze of enthusiasm. The buckets are a must, the aero management is both significant and helpful at speed, the brakes (380mm all round with PCCB, 350mm front and 340mm rear in steel) combine with the tyres to stunning effect. The driving position and cabin are spot on although the alcantara wheel covering wasn't the grippiest. And the steering does more of your Porsche jiggling than a stock Carrera, which was a surprise to the chassis team because all they did was plonk that car's rack into this one. It's identical, yet it feels quite superior.

Look, I have to stop somewhere and this might as well be the spot to do it. The car is mesmeric in its new-found spread of abilities and appeal. We didn't get to do everything we'd hoped, but then that leaves some space for a trip somewhere, sometime soon. Porsche has really done something here and left me to impart a couple of simple pieces of advice. If you're money's down on a 997 Turbo: try this, it might suit you better. If you do have one on order, lucky sod etc, go Clubsport with the spec and be patient because an e-mail's just pinged into my inbox stating UK deliveries 'from 26 August'. At £79,540 it's a car that has the absurd honour of being an unattainable dream to most, but still an abject bargain for what it offers ○

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