

MULTI-PURPOSE VEHICLE

There is only one way to get a fix on the new 911 GT3 and see where the improvements have been made over the previous model: "Hello, is that the Nürburgring?"

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The car park at the Nordschleife's public entrance is, predictably, rammed to bursting. As spring ushers in summer, the Eifel Mountains look spectacular: there isn't a cloud in the sky and in half an hour the world's finest toll road will be open for business.

There is no other car park like it. Just about every dribble-worthy supercar brand is represented: a black 360 Challenge Stradale sits yards from a yellow Gallardo with the most grotesque additional rear wing imaginable. But for Porsche-people the display borders on the pornographic. A Carrera GT, dozens of lightweights and RS versions of both 964 and 993 variants. There's even a real, and I mean one-hundred-per-cent-kosher 2.8 RSR. The alpha-omega of all low-mass Porschers. But even the ivory white '73 car, the one with a set of 11-inch rear Fuchs worth more than most hatchbacks, is being passed over by the obsessive, grazing audience that always populates this place. There is a red 997 GT3 holed up in the corner. And people are swarming all over it. I'm figuring this is the first time a production version has rocked up for evening laps. I can't get close to the bloody thing. Which is frustrating, because I drove it here.

Predictable story? I know, I know. But work with me here people, you're lent a GT3 for a couple of days (usual clinical Porsche communication: just pick the car up at 9am and drop it back the following day) and you want to make amends for the feeble test the car endured at the official launch in Italy. And so you begin by dismissing the Nürburgring because it's just so obvious: irrefutable evidence of complete editorial blandness. So you concoct a route through the Austrian Alps: mountain passes, beautiful photography, artistic values. Heidi in a thong.

And then you get a grip. Art can go bone itself as far as the new GT3 is concerned. We need to take it fast on the road, and we need to take it fast on the track. There are miles of de-restricted autobahn north of Zuffenhausen, the Ring is three and half hours away from the factory gates on the same bearing. Identify a more comprehensive test of this car's purported skill-set, and I'll apologise for the predicament of this story. But for now, hear some more about this amazing vehicle.

I collect the car on a muggy Tuesday morning. I've had three hours' sleep, parts of my body are perspiring that have never oozed liquid before now and, to coin Withnail himself, there is a

bastard behind my left eye. The GT3 should possess a dangerous, extra-marital magnetism. But I'm just knackered and the thought of driving it for hours is disturbing – largely because collecting cars from *Werk Eins* is one of life's better experiences and I want to savour every moment.

Two hours later, I feel no worse. What a car this is. Preened and skimmed for track use, riding on Michelin Pilot Sport Cups and yet entirely useable on the motorway. And so fast. Not different-league to the previous car, but a touch more invigorating below three figures and then a good deal faster into bigger numbers because it's so much more slippery. Guards red, bi-xenon bulbs ablaze, the GT3 munches its way through traffic, cruises at 170mph without strain (at which speed directional stability is a good fifty per cent better than the old car) and you can even hear the wireless. Just.

And on the A-road between the multi-lane and the circuit the car is perfectly judged. But then so it should be given that this is the route on which the development cars were driven. Damping is firm but comfortable, again the car tracks much more predictably than the MkII 996 version, and you notice that the rear axle is immune from that bucking motion that so



characterised its predecessor through long, sweeping curves.

I wish this car had those bucket seats. That's all I can think as my torso snaps right-left-right through the Hatztenbach at the beginning of the lap. I'm conscious of one worrying fact: the standard sports seats are so incapable of holding my frame that I'm gripping the wheel slightly as a brace. Not good form. In fact potentially lethal. So we slow a touch and attempt to wiggle down between the apologetic side bolsters. This improves matters slightly, but the truth is this: the 1.4-G that this car will pull on its new, sticky rubber is entirely incompatible with the standard seats.

Jumping in and nailing a lap here after a winter away is a fool's game. Each year there are small, apparently innocent modifications to the surface and kerbs that need scouting before

they're taken at speed. However, usually what happens is you try to be responsible and survey the relief, and duly find yourself finishing the lap at nine tenths.

But in the 997 GT3 it wasn't like that. Dare I admit it, I wasn't quite sure about the way it went about its business on those first two laps. The steering, though fine for weight and speed, has lost a tiny-but-crucial something with a switch to the new variable assistance rack from the standard car. And this, in conjunction with the Cup tyres creates a barrier to full confidence in the turns.

Anyone who has made the switch from street rubber to track day tyres will know that dreamy sensation you have when you first get to really lean on that soft, slick tread pattern. The way you feel the extra lateral load through the seat and the steering wheel. The way, especially in

the old GT3, and in conjunction with a few suspension tweaks, all understeer just evaporates. The way you can pitch the car into a turn with so much more speed. Well I was expecting the same from this car, and at first it just wasn't there. There was more push from the front axle than expected: I just wasn't that confident of either placing it accurately or carrying big speeds into corners.

This is where the GT3, like its predecessor on factory settings, needs the slightest leap of faith. Part of this is to become properly acquainted with the steering rack, which although lacking some jiggle and conversational qualities, is still very accurate when you get used to it. But the main problem didn't dawn on me until I'd sat and thought about the situation for a few minutes. The 997 GT3 is the first road car I've driven around the 'Ring that made me

uncomfortable with its speed: I just couldn't reconcile the speedometer registering 158mph into the Fox-Hole with inertia reel seatbelts and no roll-cage. I have raced far slower cars around here with full seam-welded cages, extinguisher systems and wearing a Hans device. With the 997 GT3, you just have to forget the speedometer, carve the line and use the tyres.

Then it begins to astonish. Don't be fooled by Porsche's conservative estimate of a 7min 40sec lap time around here (Walter has yet to set a time for the GT3), or for that matter get drawn into a slanging match about how much of this car's performance advantage over a lap is down to the tyres. What matters is how much more accessible the lap time is in the new car, and most of the applause can be directed at the new rear suspension geometry. Whereas, on a very fast lap, its predecessor always felt like it was on

the verge of a life-altering shunt, this car is quite the opposite. It allows you to work up to its limit without the feeling that the rear-end will be deflected by some seemingly harmless camber. So mid-corner it is far superior, because it deals with bumps.

Disappointments? Well, given that the motor has a new set of lightweight internals, and is 35bhp stronger, it doesn't feel much quicker on the circuit, and the gear ratios don't quite work through the Hatztenbach either: you're stuck between second and third. And that short-shift gearshift still vexes me: after a dozen laps I'd taught myself to use it properly, but couldn't help but feel it needed too much effort and that the marketing department had more to do with its existence than the engineers. The shift-light is set too low for circuit use, the pedal

New GT3 feels at home on the Nürburgring – so it should, that's where its engineers developed it. It's on the road that the big improvements can be detected



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box isn't the cleverest on the road, but once the middle pedal lengthens with brake temperature the throttle pedal becomes a convenient roll away. On the subject of brakes: we all know that the 911 is a get-it-done-in-a-straight-line machine, but that factoid is even more necessary here. The stoppers (PCCB ceramics on this car) are fantastic, they just don't fade, but to me there seems to be appreciably more rear bias than before, so get greedy and that back axle will come round to meet you.

There are two damper modes in the 997 GT3, soft and hard. Advice from the project leader Andreas Preuninger is simple: keep it

in soft on bumpy circuits and only use the harder setting on smooth raceways. Unsurprisingly, he's spot on. The car is too stiff on the firm setting here: it gets deflected, is too sensitive to kerbs and feels nervous. There are other gizmos as well: the Sport button gives more exhaust and induction noise – which is completely pointless when you're wearing a lid – and releases an extra 15lb ft of torque. Why this isn't available in normal mode is anyone's guess.

I also took the liberty of driving with the traction control on and the car set to Sport mode – thereby allowing extra slip. And you know what? I didn't even notice it was there. Equally, it rained during that evening session,

and anyone unconvinced of the system's value needs to experience this car's wet-weather performance. Porsche insists that in anything short of a lake, this new Cup tyre outperforms the old car's road-rubber, and the reality more than supports the claim. In the hands of anyone less than Walter himself, the 997 GT3 would be 20 seconds faster round here on a drizzly visit.

Being a public day it wasn't possible to verify absolute lap times, but even in heavy traffic and with Bergwerk reduced to 50km/h for Armco repairs – thus ruining the drag up the hill – the Racelogic DriftBox recorded 8min 27sec from leaving the barriers to halfway down the back

straight. There was nothing faster on the circuit that day, or the next.

And so on the way back to Stuttgart two aspects of the 997 GT3's performance needed consideration. The first is how it works as a replacement to the last version. In track terms it is certainly superior – the new tyre is superb – but the fact remains that the ultimate performance potential isn't much ahead of the 996. The power-to-weight ratios are similar, and were you to change the suspension slightly and fit decent rubber to the old car it would be damned near as quick.

But to criticise the 997 for not being dozens of seconds quicker over a lap of the 'Ring than its

predecessor is childish in the extreme. The 996 GT3 was, and is, a very fast track car. To palpably exceed its performance will require something very powerful. Like the forthcoming GT2, which should be terrifyingly fast around here. The addictive appeal of the new GT3 car isn't necessarily how impressive it is in certain specific tasks, rather just how many things it does so well. The GT3 is a car you could use every day. A car to cruise, abuse and commute in. And then without a spanner in sight, it's something that will instantly drop almost anything, at most circuits. I appreciate the simplicity of the GT3. It's one golf club for an entire round. If Leatherman did sports cars, they'd do them like this •

WHAT'S IT TO BE, GT3 OR TURBO?

Launched them within a gnat's wing of each other, didn't they? Clearly Stuttgart is of the bus school of thought when it comes to releasing long-awaited high performance 911s. Nothing for years, then suddenly both appear at Geneva and each is launched to the media within a month of the other. You now know that both are excellent in their intended roles, both move the rear-engined 911 concept yet further down the line of progress that many felt should have been eradicated years ago.

Parity with the new arrivals and respective opinions on the merits of the 996 versions of these cars has not been replicated though. The status quo has shifted. And anyone in the market for a lumpy piece of special 911 should take note here. These two cars occupy logical, worthwhile places in the model range, but to lump preconceived notions of their competences on them based on what their predecessors did would be a mistake. It could even lead to some people ordering the wrong car.

And to those ends, the GT3 is the more surprising package of the two. Such a statement needs qualification, because it mustn't demean the Turbo's obvious talents, but the truth is this: the old Turbo was a far more complete car in its intended role than the GT3. So much is an objective fact: many people, including me, love the MkII GT3, but it never quite fulfilled the white-collar racer qualities it promised. It needed too much fettling to release its full potential on the road and such tweaks compromised its appeal as a road car.

So has the GT3 turned the tables on the omnipotent Turbo? You know what, having covered serious mileage in both new cars, I'm beginning to think it has. Approach it logically, and the new GT3 is a monumental achievement because it takes each of the skills in which the old car somehow fell short of outright excellence, and improves on them. I can't emphasise enough how difficult it is to create a car that will lap the Nordschleife in the wet and the dry the way this car does, and then to prove comfortable and reassuring on the autobahn just hours later. Single discipline excellence is there for even the least talented manufacturers because it dictated some manner of sacrifice in another area. But comprehensive, all-round showings like the

GT3's are something rare. Something to cherish.

But hang on. If we're judging these cars in relation to their predecessors then the pitch is pockmarked and chronically uneven. Asking a team of engineers, even one as talented as the bunch charged with the new Turbo, to palpably improve on the car it replaces is a task of such magnitude you wonder about the sanity of anyone willing to take it on. But take it on they did, and improve it they have. Just not by the same margin as witnessed in its cheaper, two-wheel drive relative.

There are subtleties at work here. Barriers to GT3 ownership were naturally greater than those for Turbo ownership because the car had fewer seats, was less usable and was slower. You either had to be a committed track-day user or turbo-sceptic to have a 996 GT3 over the Turbo. To carry those assumptions on to these cars is a mistake. There are people out there who find their 996 Turbo a touch too sterile, but they don't want to live without some kind of traction control device. People who would happily live with a jangling ride and bucket seats, but feel sat-nav and a built-in telephone constitute the essential tools for conducting their affairs in the UK.

So the GT3 has emphatically widened its appeal. It is everyday usable for those interested in the process of driving. Salient point that: want a no-nonsense device and it will grate. In basic specification it is the same money as a Carrera drizzled with some options (as most seem to be).

But it isn't for everyone. And that's why a small voice in my head always wants me to nudge people towards the Turbo. It's so crushingly brilliant at most things, so lovingly optimised into its role as the only everyday supercar ever made. And yet the 997 Turbo is sometimes aloof. It doesn't make much noise and even though those wonderful new turbochargers spool with seemingly no time delay, there's a softness to the engine that some might not warm to. Perhaps there's a clue in their respective engine development: the GT3 has an exotic set of internals to enable it to rev well beyond 8000rpm. The Turbo does without titanium rods and all that jazz. Tellingly, the Turbo's compression ratio has dropped from 9.4:1 to 9.0:1, whereas the GT3's is up from 11.7:1 to 12.0:1. The GT3's engine is something to savour, covet and giggle

about. The Turbo's is more an industrial powerhouse. You have unbridled admiration for what it does, but don't – or at least I didn't – find any great mechanical satisfaction in the way it goes about its business.

If the Turbo has a trump card then it will be best displayed on a damp November evening in unfamiliar surroundings. The all-wheel drive chassis finds grip where Newton's laws suggest it shouldn't and traction from slower turns will leave most cars, certainly including any GT3s that might have strayed into the area, for dead. It also has the benefit of a full electronic stability system (PSM) as opposed to the GT3's much simpler traction control. Worth remembering that: back a GT3 into a turn too fast and all you'll hear is the ECU saying "Sorry pal, not my problem this one". In German, naturally.

One thing Porsche was surprisingly coy about on the launch was the UHP (ultra high performance) tyre available on the Turbo. This superb, useable Cup tyre developed for the GT3 is also available for the Turbo, and that makes for an interesting crossover in the appeal of both cars. No doubt why they weren't shouting about such things. But a Turbo with sticky rubber – not that any of us has tried one yet – could be something pretty special. And a Turbo with sticky rubber, a rear cage and a pair of buckets would start to make a mockery of my claim that the GT3 is the more surprising car of the two. But then such a Turbo would be well beyond £100k and that's a lot of moolah for a posh Beetle. And anyone thinking of tricking their Turbo up to this kind of track-renegade specification should remember the shots of the very GT2-looking car doing the rounds at the moment.

But the GT2, and for that matter the forthcoming GT3 RS, will each have a narrower focus and therefore shouldn't figure in this discussion. And so my advice is this: to everyday drivers who value comfort and refinement, take a Turbo. Using it against UK traffic is like sending Kevin Pietersen into bat on the village green. It's a superhero of a car. But to anyone else with reasonably high-octane aspirations who thought the last GT3 was just too much hassle, give the new car a try. All told, it's nearly £20,000 cheaper, it has a broader appeal and it might re-ignite your fascination for old-school, rear-driven Porsches.

