

# SO LONG FRIEND

A true legend should always be worthy of a proper send-off, which is why we've headed to South Wales for one last drive in the 997 GT3 as production draws to a close.

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A twitch of the curtain reveals a dull, drizzly sky. Nestled upon a withered branch of a tired silver birch are the garden's songbirds that reluctantly offer their morning greet. Usually at this unsightly hour my face would mirror the sky's gloomy mood; however, not even a hint of a frown resides upon my face. Perhaps there should though, as today we're to bid farewell to a very special Porsche – the 997 GT3. As we make the journey southbound around London's orbital to Porsche GB's Reading HQ, it dawns on me that today will be the crowning moment of my career to date. Teeming with the sort of excitement I haven't experienced since I first asked to stay up late, and where pushing micro-machines around the dining room floor was my idea of a road-test, I simply couldn't wait to get across the border, into Wales, and get behind the wheel of the outgoing GT3.

The Speed Yellow GT3 immediately catches the eye among the plethora of Stuttgart metal sitting in the car park. As I open the door and slide down into the low-slung, lightweight bucket seat, I take a moment to embrace the enviable day ahead of me.

Now, unless you've been hiding under a large rock for the past two years, there's little doubt you've been duly informed about the talents of the 997 GT3, however, this wouldn't be a proper send-off without revisiting why the GT3 is held in such high esteem. A favourite with the financially well-endowed track day-goer, and highly competent on all but the bumpiest of the UK's roads, the third generation GT3 is regarded as the best all-rounder yet. Its heritage obvious, its presence evoking, there's no doubt it deserves every bit of its prized reputation. The GT3 was conceived for the FIA sporting category of the time, and aside the GT3 RS and Carrera GT, it's

the closest Porsche offers to the race car for the road experience. However, unlike the stripped-out road-racers of 911s gone by, it's perfectly adept to deal with the stringent requirements of the modern world. It owes this ability, in part, to some of the creature comforts it's blessed with from the rest of the 911 range, but largely to the standard fitment of Porsche's Active Suspension Management (PASM). This system doesn't so much lend the car a Jekyll and Hyde personality, but it endows the GT3 with palatable touring credentials and when kerbs make way for Armco, at the touch of a button, the dampers stiffen in readiness for some serious hot laps. Be in no doubt though, the GT3 is every bit the road-going racer, and the overwhelming majority will indeed spend a good portion of their lives in their natural habitat, hurtling around race tracks.

In essence, the GT3 is derived from the same fundamental formula that has altered very little for over 40 years. Flat-six engine slung out over the back wheels, rear-wheel drive, familiar 911 styling. Though, if Darwin's Theory of Evolution needed a case study, the 911 should prove enough to make any creationist hold their tongue. It may have retained the same genetic building blocks, but in terms of driving dynamics it's taken a massive evolutionary leap forward. The current evolution of the species, the 997, shows how the age-old setup has been honed to near perfection, and in GT3 form it's an exquisitely polished weapon.

First – the engine. At a glance, you'd be forgiven for thinking the flat-six powerplant had been carried over pretty much untouched from the previous generation, but you'd be wrong. In fact, the 3600cc displacement is about the only thing the outgoing GT3 shares with its predecessor. Aside from the crankcase, everything was new. A six-cylinder, normally aspirated,

The nerve centre of the one, if not the most accomplished 911 to date. Clubsport model came with a half roll-cage. Recaro bucket seats were a further cost option, but we'd have both. After all, if you're going to be a bear...



firecracker of an engine that redlines at 8400rpm accompanied by a wall of wailing acoustics. It's a petrolhead's dream, and to hear a GT3 coming towards you at full chat will not fail to raise the hairs on the back of your neck, assuring you that it produces every one of its 115.3bhp per litre. The upshot of the thoroughly reworked, Le Mans-winning GT1 sourced engine is a headline-grabbing 415bhp produced at a scintillating 7600rpm, accompanied by 298lb ft torque at 5500rpm. All this from a normally aspirated engine with no forced induction trickery. With a kerb weight of 1395kg the GT3 is capable of 0-62mph in 4.3 seconds and a 193mph maximum.

Bury the throttle in any of the first three gears and you'd best be ready to snap through the cogs as you're met by a torrent of accelerative forces. By the time your eyes register the yellow change-up light on the dash it's too late, and you'll be bouncing off the engine's 8400rpm electronic limiter. That's what strikes you initially, how keen and willing this engine is, pulling with serious intent through all of its six ratios, and as the needle sweeps round to the higher increments of the rev range, the GT3 takes full advantage of its VarioCam induction system, punching a hole in the horizon. Yet it's just as docile as a Carrera around town, and although the clutch requires a relatively firm push, and the gearshift at less exciting speeds requires sturdy persuasion to slot home, the whole experience lets you know you're driving something special.

It's an odd thing, but had I seen the spec sheet before I set eyes upon the GT3 I may have been inclined to believe that the model was suffering something of an identity crisis. Laden with such creature comforts that you'd expect from the less focussed members of the Porsche family, such as Porsche Communication Management (PCM), and telephone module, even the option of heated seats, it would have left me in some doubt as to what this car was trying to be. If first impressions alone didn't sell it as the hardcore 911 choice, one close-up look at the semi-slick 305/30ZR Michelin Pilot Sport Cups tucked beneath the rear arches with barely a slither of daylight separating them, leads me strongly toward the GT3 being every bit the track-focussed racer. Since we're on the subject of options, let's just have a look at the ones on this Club Sport test car. To mention but a few: lightweight bucket seats, Xenon headlights, Porsche Ceramic Composite Brakes (PCCB), Porsche Communication Management (PCM), this press car is fully loaded, taking the base price from £80,600, to an eye-watering £94,792.

So it's got a few toys, but be under no illusions, the GT3 is no autobahn cruiser. This is a razor sharp, focussed racer, albeit one you could quite happily nip to the shops in. It says something about the GT3, that even when the RS came onto the scene commanding a near £15,000 premium over the standard car, in many eyes, it failed to justify its inflated price tag. On

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paper it made no obvious advances over the standard car and, on the road, the GT3 could more or less match the talents of the RS, and to all but the most talented of drivers, to exhaust the limits of the GT3's handling envelope on the public road was nigh-on impossible. What the standard car did offer, particularly in Clubsport spec, was pretty much the same on-road experience that the RS delivered, without any of the associated drawbacks of the price hike. Ultimately, the RS wins the wow-factor contest (its Turbo sourced bodyside and associated wider track helps turn the heads), is sharper still and as a track-going weapon, was the choice of the paddock.

So, here today, not even two years after its arrival, is the GT3 still something to shout about? My virginal experience confirms – Absolutely! Utterly absorbing, I find myself unhealthily gurning at the fix the GT3 provides the die-hard petrolhead. The morning's damp, drizzly sky has made way for a fine, sunny afternoon, that makes the Welsh scenery all the more spectacular. But once behind the wheel, all thoughts of the beautiful backdrops and striking Welsh countryside subside as the GT3 delivers a highly addictive dose of pure adrenaline. Along with the weather, my initial concerns over grip

implications from a 415bhp rear-driven car on what look to me like semi-cut slicks have all but dried up. Powering out of second gear corners, with some warmth in the tyres, the GT3 generates massive levels of grip and provides more assurance than you expect.

In the cabin, driver and machine amalgamate as one, that flat-six's spine-tingling symphony is matched by surges of acceleration, and each precise input and change in road surface can be felt through the Alcantara-trimmed steering wheel. From the outside the car bellows drivers' car, and once behind the wheel it dishes up driver involvement by the bucket load. Wedged in to the heavily-bolstered Recaro seat, there's no way I'm going anywhere, but even if the seats weren't this snug fitting you'd struggle to prize me out of the car while I'm having this much fun. PCCB (optional, but worth it) bring the GT3 back from three-figure speeds with no hint of fuss or hesitation. The gearshift is the only thing that feels overly engineered, perhaps a tad too short and heavy in its operation, but it's a minor niggle.

All in all, this is the most exciting time I've had behind the wheel of a car, let alone a modern Porsche. Verdict? I'm going out on a high as, quite rightly, is the 911 GT3.



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