

THE RECKONING

Porsche's new 911 GT3 RS has a lot to prove if it is to justify itself over the 997 GT3 superstar, so there was only one place we could go when thrown the keys...

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I dropped religious studies at 13, so I'm not sure if there was a parable about the man who fell into a bucket of nipples and came out sucking his thumb. But I recounted the saying with a biblical sense of frustration when Porsche phoned with news that we could have the use of a GT3 RS sometime towards the end of November. The reason being as follows.

Here was a new lightweight Porsche, one squarely aimed at the track-hacking elite and the launch strategy was as follows: a six-hour loan from the factory gates. I shall square this metaphorically for those who have yet to gauge my exasperation. Free evening with Heidi Klum,

but no touching. Free evening with Sophie Anderton, but no punching. Neither approaches the level of frustration created when you are offered a 997 GT3 RS under these circumstances.

Much as things may appear to the contrary, we do sometimes try to plan these jobs, so I opened my trusty Aral Deutschland map book (even their maps are better built than ours) and attempted to configure some kind of route. This strategy immediately hit upon a few snags. Firstly, there aren't that many great roads around Stuttgart. There are some, but at this time of year they provide some attractive furniture for photographic types – also known as leaves.

Secondly, the GT3 RS is no more a road car than Graham Norton is a wrestler. To drive it on the road, take it to some open A-road equivalent and declare your findings just doesn't make any sense to me. The people who will own this car just won't use it like that. Most will only use it on the road when they drive it to the next track day. A track: now there's a thought.

The nearest circuit to Stuttgart is Hockenheim. Research showed that this is not the type of place an English journalist can just rock up to and expect a few complementary laps. There was also the





The latest 911 Renn Sport takes high speed 'Bahn cruising in its stride, but is truly at home on the track. 3.6-litre engine features single-mass flywheel



possibility of persuading Porsche to let us hang around Weissach for an hour or so, but I was advised not to make such a request if I wanted to leave Zuffenhausen with four limbs. Which left one predictable destination: one which wouldn't fit with the time allowed. One which wouldn't ingratiate me to Porsche. But it was the only test of this car that I wanted to carry out. A drive to the Nürburgring. There are just a few public sessions left in October and the stars are shining on me because one of them happens to be the 16 October. From 1pm.

The GT3 RS is a fine machine in which to find yourself when you are in a terrible hurry. Press materials indicate that this is a genuine homologation exercise for the ACO, FIA GT and IMSA regulations and effectively legitimises the stunning RSR race car. But however advantageous the 34mm wider track and 10 per cent stiffer body may be over a standard GT3 on the circuit, there is

no denying that this track renegade clears traffic like Moses's right hand does small oceans. We collect the car at 10am and head north. The traffic is fine until we reach Mannheim and then we just sit and watch the clock tick towards the 1pm watershed as a thousand truck drivers dribble over the RS.

It does look quite spectacular this car. The visual step from 997 GT3 is more robust than it was between the previous 996 variants of both models. That's partly because the car happens to be painted blood orange and is therefore visible from space, but also because it uses the Carrera 4 bodysell. This brings the aforementioned torsional benefit but also an extra 44mm in bodywork width. This doesn't sound like much, but it gives the RS the type of added hip swagger a 2.8 RSR enjoys over a 2.7 RS. Couple this with a significant aerofoil perched atop the engine lid and black-work that extends to the wheels, front air intake and of course the mandatory door decals and you have an object that, were it a

member of the animal kingdom, would be classified under the genus 'sodding poisonous frog'. The message of such styling is unequivocal: don't ****ing mess with this.

The traffic north to Koblenz receives this message with gratifying dignity. I have never driven anything – not even numerous near-fluorescent Lamborghinis – that clears traffic as effectively. On derestricted sections we run as fast as the conditions allow, somewhere between 140mph and 170mph, and the tangerine paint serves its purpose brilliantly. Over a three-hour journey I reckon it persuades enough Golf drivers to delay overtaking until the RS has shot by to trim ten minutes off the journey time.

The motorway trip is actually a more instructive test of the RS than any cross-country thrash could be. When intensive lappery is on offer, people tend to purge themselves of the need to find extra bends and simply use the multi-lane. It's for this reason that I think the stock GT3 is such an exceptional car: it is

barely any less comfortable than a base Carrera on the drive to the circuit and will then annihilate almost everything when there. I had expected this shift to RS spec to significantly compromise those credentials the way the previous RS did, but nothing could be further from the truth. The PASM settings are slightly different for this car (for that read a touch stiffer) but it rides 50 per cent better than the 996 variant and loses most of the camber sensitivity.

Naturally there's heaps of road and suspension noise, and the single biggest contributing factor to this is the Perspex rear screen. But in light of its intended purpose, it's amazingly civilised. Although I have two gripes with the test car and both are solvable. The hi-fi needs to be more powerful for this type of work (you'll think I'm mad but you'll want to drown out everything else) and this car doesn't have air conditioning. I

can't understand these cars as unnecessary sweat-boxes: if the added speed associated with having a permanently sweaty back is so necessary, I'm certain a bit of driver tuition would more than compensate.

We get to the 'Ring just before 1pm, grab a couple of friendly, Audi-driving Brits to help us with some photography and get going. Time is tight, but as photographer Bramley takes some detail shots, I get my only chance to just stroll around the car and settle some issues that have been bothering me about it.

Like you, I was astonished when Porsche announced the list price. At £94,280 it's a full £14,740 dearer than the standard GT3, and that's before you've added the PCCB ceramic brakes fitted to this car. There is a strong possibility that most cars specced in the UK will be in to six figures. Which is a lot for a normally aspirated 911. The price difference might have been more digestible had the specification contained more differences over the standard GT3. People want to see tangible modifications and leaving the power and torque at 415bhp and 298lb ft respectively just doesn't excite that much enthusiasm. In fact it tends to make folk bicker.

Some of that negativity is justifiable, some of it misplaced. There is more to this car than the initial propaganda described. Porsche's claim

of a 20kg weight reduction for the RS doesn't sound like much, but given that it comes with a bodyshell that is both wider and ten per cent stiffer (a real bonus given the loads its tyres can generate) the number seems more impressive. Some will have wanted a dollop of added grunt to use as ammo for beating mere standard GT3 owners during pub arguments, but the reality of the situation is this: the 3600cc water-cooled flat-six has a specific output of 115bhp per litre and revs to 8400rpm. It is already in about as high a state of tune as can be expected of a road car engine, and the only way to extract more power would have been to compromise longevity. If I was offered 415bhp and a full warranty or 435bhp and six months' cover I would happily take the former. Besides, if 302bhp per tonne, an 8.5sec 0-100mph run and 192mph don't increase your pulse rate then might I suggest the forthcoming GT2. Or crack cocaine.

Just being in the presence of this thing softens hard-nosed opinion on its relative value. There's immense joy to be had just peering at the detail: the lattice of cage, the rear wing, the interesting chin-let that juts out from the front splitter. These coupled with the added girth bring a bespoke look and stance that makes the GT3 look a touch ordinary. I've seen them side-by-side and the RS is far meaner.

There are other mods worth noting. The engine may be the same, but a single mass flywheel saves an amazing 8kg. Think about how much 8kg is and then imagine what weight it assumes as it spins at 8400rpm. It's no wonder that the motor feels so much wappier than the standard car's, particularly in its ability to shed revs.

Suspension mods take up most of the headlines though. As already mentioned, the PASM has been re-calibrated to operate with the wider rear axle, but there are also a pair of split lower arms at the back. These bring greater camber adjustment and push the rear wheels a little further backwards resulting in a 5mm longer wheelbase. The design and manufacture of those alone is a costly business.

I had predicted that the biggest hurdle to having just a couple of laps before the need to head home would be getting enough temperature into the Michelins, but this was a misjudgment. The biggest problem was deflecting the hordes of people that surrounded the RS in the car park and getting it to the entry barrier. Porsche has serious worries about this rubber in winter condition, but I think that's being overcautious. The rears take no time to come good with all the available torque and engine heat. The fronts take longer, but by the time you're a quarter of the way into the lap, you can begin to push.



New GT3 RS is dressed in bespoke jewellery to differentiate it from the regular GT3. The body is stiffer and wider than the Carreras 4 item, wheelbase is 5mm longer. Interior is pure racer, but don't skimp on the air-con



SPECIFICATION – 997 GT3 RS

ENGINE

Power-unit: Six-cylinder aluminium boxer configuration; water-cooled; four-overhead cams, variable valve timing (VarioCam); sequential multi-point fuel injection; dry sump lubrication

Capacity: 3600cc

Bore x Stroke: 100mmx76.4mm

Compression ratio: 12.0:1

Max Power: 415bhp@7600rpm

Max Torque: 298lb ft@5500rpm

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission: 6-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

Final drive ratio: 3.44

SUSPENSION

Front: MacPherson struts, coil springs, gas pressure dampers (PASM)

Rear: Multi-link axle, individual track control arms, coil spring with gas pressure damper (PASM)

BRAKES

Front: 350mm cross-drilled and ventilated discs with six-piston aluminium calipers (PCCB optional)

Rear: 340mm cross-drilled and ventilated discs with four-piston aluminium calipers, Traction Control (PCCB optional)

WHEELS & TYRES

Front: 8.5Jx19-inch and 235/35ZR19 Michelin Pilot Sport Cup

Rear: 12Jx19-inch and 305/30ZR19 Michelin Pilot Sport Cup

DIMENSIONS

Length: 4460mm

Width: 1852mm

Height: 1280mm

Wheelbase: 2360mm

Track front/rear: 1497mm, 1558mm

PERFORMANCE

Max Speed: 192mph

0-62mph: 4.2 seconds (manufacturer's claims)

HOW MUCH?

Price: £94,280

On sale: Now

More info: www.porsche.com

In slower turns the RS doesn't feel much different to the standard car. The wider track doesn't bring any perceptible traction advantage and the steering feels identical. It's only as the speeds rise, and the car is pounded into rougher sections of the track that some differences do emerge. To say that you can feel the extra stiffness would be disingenuous – you'd need to drive them back-to-back to determine such a change – but the cumulative effect of the stiffer shell and uprated dampers is undeniable. The car feels even more secure and has more of that otherworldly damping quality I associate with the 993 RS. The type where your brain fails to reconcile the severity of the bump as it registered with your eyes, and the way the car actually dealt with the resulting impact. It never feels harsh or over-sprung; then again every body movement is tied down to a level that belies the slightly portly 1375kg kerb weight. The same can be said for the

car's agility: I'm certain you'd be much more aware of the mass at somewhere tight and intricate, but here it doesn't feel anything like as heavy as the number suggests.

High-speed, undulating turns best demonstrate the differences between the two cars though. I never found the 996 GT3s rearing cars to drive. It took me a while to come to terms with the slightly brutal style required to drive them fast, and also to reach the point of trust which the rear axle requires of you. It just moved about to an alarming degree. This 997 GT3 is quite different in the demands it makes of the driver: its improvement isn't quantified in simple empirical terms (it isn't that much quicker than the old GT3) but in the lack of terror required to extract the numbers. And I mean abject fear: I'm all for cars that ask serious questions of drivers, but at times the old GT3's rear suspension geometry caused grown men to soil themselves. And yes, I know this was partly sortable through some geometry

changes, but this is about stock factory equipment. Anyhow, the RS is just the next step on from this increase in stability and reassurance. Where the GT3 begins to yaw through the Flugplatz, the RS does at a higher speed: its aerodynamic and mechanical advantages are immediately felt.

Again, it reminds me of the 993 RS because it's actually quite a benign car to drive. It allows more erroneous inputs from the driver than the previous GT3 RS. And that isn't meant as a criticism: this remains a powerful rear-engined sports car and anyone wanting to see whether Porsche has managed to alter the laws of physics will discover that the tail still wags. Albeit at 120mph instead of 90mph. No, what this means is that you can more easily commit to corners with other traffic on the circuit, knowing that the chassis now sanctions a slight lift mid-corner as an acceptable manoeuvre.

The test car was running PCCB ceramic discs, and not having driven a car on steels, I can only

assume they contribute greatly to the excellent damping. Pedal feel is exemplary, and even though all the horror stories exist, I'd be tempted to have the car on these brakes. They just work so well.

Driving impressions are one thing though, lap times quite another, and Walter Röhrl was kind enough to relay some of his recent findings. The RS is four seconds faster around the Nordschleife than the standard car, giving the dissenting voices perhaps their strongest piece of ammunition to date. That's £14k for four measly seconds, and I don't have a simple answer for that equation.

An hour and a half after we arrived, all gear is thrown back into the car and we head back to Zuffenhausen. In an even bigger rush than before. Meaning the speeds grow a touch. To make it back in time will mean keeping the car above 160mph where possible and just letting the speedo needle go vertical at every opportunity when the



road clears. It does this more often than expected and after a few sustained forays into the 180s, we touch 190mph at which point the RS feels easily the most stable 911 I've driven at such speeds. Despite the added drag from the rear wing, it doesn't seem to accelerate any less impressively beyond 155mph either.

I don't think the is-it-worth-it conundrum will ever be completely resolved with the GT3 RS. There are cogent arguments either way, and yet as someone who would probably just take a white Clubsport GT3 and save the cash, I was pretty overawed by this car. It twangs some emotional strings the standard GT3 doesn't reach and I could imagine myself using the extra high-speed cornering stability on many events. But I'm an inherently mean person, so the thought of

spending £94,280 when I know what a spectacular job the base £79,540 GT3 does means that I could never bring myself to spend the extra.

That is not a definitive conclusion though. To dismiss the RS on objective grounds is a puerile exercise: it is aimed quite directly at a small percentage of an already niche market, and to those few people – once they've come to terms with only being offered a standard powertrain – it will prove an enthralling ownership proposition. In every area that matters, it provides a little more drama and is a touch more irresistible than the GT3. And when you reach such levels of excellence and exclusivity, the cost always appears unnecessarily punitive.

No, if I have reservations, it's that the RS lineage has reached a point, 36 years after it was

launched, where a car that offers no more passenger room than a 1973 2.7 RS weighs 1375kg. Taking into account crash regulations and the need for all manner of passive safety devices, you could say that Porsche has done remarkably well to keep the weight below 1500kg. To me, the Renn Sport philosophy is based on increased dynamic performance mainly through a low-mass philosophy. And despite its stunning performance, I'm left wondering what this car would be like if it weighed 1200kg.

But it doesn't and nor could it. So as things stand, I'm happy to celebrate the fact that Porsche still builds such cars, and I envy those able to indulge themselves in one. Because that's precisely what the new GT3 RS is, a wonderful indulgence ○

