

ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTE

With its new 997 GT3 RS, Porsche has built one of its greatest ever road cars.
Story: Andrew Frankel Photography: Antony Fraser



It is one thing not to trust the car you're driving...
but it is quite another to reach a point with a car
where you're not sure you can trust yourself

A strange thing happened to me when driving the new 911 GT3 RS. Without needing to at all, I pulled over to the side of the road where some colleagues had assembled, stopped the car and got out. But this was no moment of uncharacteristic generosity; on the contrary, it was an act of the purest selfishness. Truth is I didn't want to drive it any more – I didn't even want to travel in it. I handed the keys to my eager co-pilot who'd been waiting for me to return and told him the car was his to do as he pleased. I was going to go for a little walk.

It's been over 15 years since I last felt like that. I'd just driven a prototype McLaren F1 over the North Yorkshire moors and to this day, I've never been more glad to step from an undamaged car and hand the responsibility to someone else. It is one thing not to trust the car you're driving – in a motoring journalist's life, it is a reasonably frequent occurrence – but it is quite another to reach a point with a car where you're not sure you can trust yourself. And the moment that realisation dawns is the moment you park it and walk away. That's if you have any sense remaining.

My preparations for meeting the GT3 RS were dominated by just four words uttered by its

creator, Andreas Preuninger, when I went to Stuttgart last year to drive the GT3. Standing at the side of road, gobsmacked by what his latest toy could do, I'd asked about the forthcoming RS. He said: "No more kindergarten car," but short of divulging its specification, which he was never going to do, there was nothing more to say. The new GT3 RS would make the old one look like a child's toy. And implausible though it seemed, I felt inclined not to doubt him.

What you need to know now is that Preuninger and his colleagues in Porsche's motorsport department have delivered on their promise in spectacular style. The GT3 RS is not a GT3 with a sharper focus, it is something else again, and people will be talking about it not for years, but for generations.

It all started with a complaint. Quite a few complaints if I understand the anecdotal, off-the-record evidence. They were aimed at the previous GT3 RS and suggested that, wonderful though it was, it was insufficiently distinct from the GT3 to justify the extra investment required. Never let it be said that Porsche doesn't listen to its customers.

To begin with, a gesture was needed, something to signal that this RS was different. And where better to find one than underneath





Simply by raising the power of the 3.8-litre flat-six motor from 435hp to 450hp has a significance far beyond another 15hp

the new carbon-fibre reinforced engine cover? Simply by raising the power of the 3.8-litre flat-six motor from 435hp to 450hp has a significance far beyond another 15hp – this was Porsche putting statistical clear air between GT3 and RS in a way it had never done before.

And of course there was nothing simple about it at all. That engine cover feeds air into intakes that are conical rather than cylindrical like those belonging to the GT3, and rams it into inlet manifolds specially shortened and tuned for power rather than torque. At the other end, the entire exhaust system is made from titanium and the diameter of the exhausts themselves is widened by 5mm. Porsche has managed to maintain peak torque at 317lb ft, but now requires 6750rpm on the clock before it will deliver it, some 500rpm more than the GT3.

Finally, the whole unit was placed upon the active engine mounts which are available on the GT3, but only as an option.

Next up came the flywheel, where the GT3 dual mass item was dumped in favour of a single mass unit weighing 8kg less. Then, the gearbox. As ever, there is no PDK option – not least because this is still the old indirect injection flat-six motor that can trace its roots straight back to the days of the GT1 race programme, and not the modern direct injection unit now used on all other 911s, Caymans and Boxsters. Shorter ratios were deemed desirable, so gears one to five were dropped by a huge 11 per cent, while sixth was shortened by a still significant five per cent.

Powertrain dealt with, the team turned its attention to the chassis. It has been standard for some time to use the wide-body version of the

911 for the RS and this one is no different, measuring 44mm extra across the back, 30mm of which are included in the rear track. But for the first time the front track has been expanded too, by 12mm and wider wheels and tyres have been fitted to help provide a more equitable distribution of grip between the front and rear axles. More grip was also added by the wind, a completely new front and rear aero pack being responsible for 170kg of downforce at 186mph. And when Porsche talks downforce it's not referring to a reduction in lift as some do – it means positive downforce after all lift has already been removed.

The suspension was also completely rethought, using split rear wishbones to allow even greater scope for tuning, different adjustable roll bars front and rear and while the



Until now, in my opinion, the three finest 911s ever built are the '73 RS, the 993 RS and the current GT3

springs are carried over, an entirely different damper strategy has been evolved, to cater for the fact that most GT3 RS' will spend at least a proportion of their lives on race tracks. Finally, this is the first RS to be fitted with both traction and stability control. Both can be turned off or, if preferred, the car can run with traction control alone. Needless to say the stability control was setup for work on the track.

But still there was work to do, not least in shaving even more weight from the GT3's already sylph-like figure. With 8kg coming from the flywheel and 6kg from the titanium exhausts, a further three kilos were liberated by replacing the rear glass with Perspex and one more by fitting lightweight door panels without an armrest or storage box. The engine cover is also 1.3kg lighter than before and further diets are available on the options list. You don't have to have air conditioning, which alone weighs 12kg, or even a radio and its attendant speakers. Another 10kg can be saved by replacing the standard seats and their thorax airbags with snake-hipped carbon buckets and, having sat in them, you probably would even at the cost of £3064. Porsche will even replace the bi-xenon headlamps and their washer systems with standard halogen units which won't let you see as well at night but will pare a further 6kg from the kerb weight of your RS. And are you really going to go that far and leave the standard steel brakes on the car? If it's serious track work you'll be doing, then PCCB carbon ceramic brakes would seem a must as they'll last damn near as long as the car and save you 20kg of unsprung mass. All in all, Porsche quotes a kerb weight of 1370kg, some 25kg less than the GT3 and about the same as a diesel-powered Ford Focus.

The car you see here is one of just two press GT3 RS' in existence at the moment. I picked it up at Nice airport and, with only a short day in which to discover its delights and sadly no provision for any track time, headed for the hills.

The differences between it and the GT3 are instantly apparent, but (at least at first) for none

of the right reasons. Until now, in my opinion, the three finest 911s ever built are the '73 RS, the 993 RS and the current GT3. And it's not just because they're so good to drive, it's also because they are so usable. In its era, each was a perfectly plausible every day car, and if you believe that your enjoyment of a car can be quantified by how much fun it is to drive times by how often you feel inclined to drive it, these three are inviolate.

But the GT3 RS is not. Its ride is uncomfortably stiff at times, its cabin like a cave where echoes bounce off every wall – that Perspex rear screen may be very light, but it plays havoc with the internal acoustics. Meanwhile the bantam weight flywheel makes the car far too easy to stall in tight manoeuvres. But as soon as the traffic clears and it's time to go to work, you hunker down in your carbon sliver of a seat and start to motor properly.

Does the GT3 RS explode into a frenzy of automotive savagery? Does it make you think today will be like no other? No. It makes you think what great value a standard GT3 (cheaper by some £19,277) is. Although there's more power and less weight, the differences add up to a single tenth of a second off the 0-62mph time and to appreciate that you'd need either the world's most sensitive backside, or both cars and some timing equipment. For sure the RS will be three times as scarce in the UK (only about 100 of the previous generation found their way over here) and those badges alone will make them coveted in a way no mere GT3 ever was, but in terms of the driving experience, I struggled to see the value.

Indeed it takes time. One of the very best things about a GT3 is that so long as you have the right road (or, ideally, track), it will keep no secrets from you. Even driven at six or seven tenths it is a wondrous and rewarding machine. The RS is not like that. It's not at home to six, seven or even eight tenths. In fact you're not going to earn its attention unless you're at least up around the nine mark, though ten or 11 is

Only then, when you could drive safe in the knowledge that nothing could be coming the other way, did the RS reveal its true character

even more to its way of thinking, which is a little tricky within the confines of the public road.

But here, and for once, we were helped by the weather. A recce the previous day had identified a mountain road covered in snow and ice at the top meaning no-one was using it at all, leaving its warmer and relatively dry lower stretches as our own private playground.

Only then, when you could drive safe in the knowledge that nothing could be coming the other way, did the RS reveal its true character. And here's the thing: contrary to my every

expectation, at those kinds of efforts it's actually easier to drive than a GT3. You have to build up to it, but eventually you find a zone when, suddenly, it all starts to make sense. The Michelin Cup tyres are pretty unimpressive even in the dry when they're cold, but get some heat into them and there's nothing road-legal you'd rather have dressing your wheels, even on damp surfaces. Similarly, the unyielding, uncooperative suspension comes alive when given some work to do. The RS is uncannily stable and accurate through quick curves, thanks in no small part to

that wing pack and even the engine, when kept between peak torque at 6750rpm and peak revs at 8500rpm, seems to have a sharpness and hunger I don't recall from the GT3. Even the pedal positioning, which infuriatingly makes heel-and-toe downshifts all but impossible at moderate efforts, makes sense if you're squashing the brakes flat rather than lightly stabbing at them.

What strikes most, though, is the car's balance. A GT3 is a gloriously expressive machine, not only capable of, but on the limit, inherently

inclined to, exhibit quite large slip angles at both ends. It tends to want to understeer into corners and oversteer out of them in traditional 911 fashion. But the RS is much more self-contained and has a substantially more equitable allocation of grip front to rear. There's massive bite at the front, making it go where you point it like no other 911 in history. It's also fabulously sensitive to throttle angle; there's no need for big gestures to deal with big handling conditions, like having to lift just to get the nose to turn back into the apex - you simply fine-

To look at it has the appearance of a regular 3.8 flat-six, but beneath all the plastic and plumbing awaits 450hp



2010 911 GT3 RS

Engine: Six horizontally-opposed cylinders, water-cooled, Porsche Active Drivetrain Mounts (PADM)

Bore x Stroke: 102.7mm x 76.4mm

Capacity: 3797cc

Cylinder head: Four overhead camshafts, four valves per cylinder, VarioCam

Compression ratio: 12.2:1

Max power: 450hp @ 7900rpm

Max torque: 317lb ft @ 6750rpm

Max engine speed: 8500rpm

Power to weight: 329hp per tonne

Ignition & Injection: DME engine management

TRANSMISSION

Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, limited-slip differential

SUSPENSION

Front: MacPherson strut, coil springs, PASM

Rear: MacPherson strut, coil springs PASM

BRAKES

Front: Six-piston callipers, 380mm cross-drilled and ventilated disc, ABS, PSM

Rear: Four-piston callipers, 350mm cross-drilled and inner ventilated, ABS, PSM

WHEELS & TYRES

Front: 9Jx19, 245/35ZR19

Rear: 12Jx19, 325/30ZR19

MEASUREMENTS

Weight: 1370kg

Length: 4460mm

Width: 1852mm

Height: 1280mm

Track (front and rear): 1509/1554mm

PERFORMANCE

Max speed: 192mph

0-62mph: 4.0 seconds (claimed)

HOW MUCH

List price: £104,841 (on sale: May 2010)

tune your line all the way through the corner with minute adjustments of the accelerator. Of course it will do lurid skids if you want, but they need more provoking than you'd think.

So you continue, driving harder and harder, finding out more and more about the car until, with very little warning, you cross into that other world where you start to find out things about yourself. And even on a closed road, that is the time to slow down, not wanting to slow down, I did the only other safe thing I could think of – gave the car to someone else. There

wasn't a moment that day when the GT3 RS gave the slightest cause for concern: on the contrary, it was so reassuring, so within itself at all times I suspect it had even more to give than that.

But that last piece of the puzzle will have to wait for a race track to fall finally into place. If you are to drive this car to its full potential there's no doubt you need not only to know nothing's coming the other way, but the exact topography of each corner – where to brake, turn and accelerate. Don't let the number plates fool you: this is a track car, as extreme a road-going

Don't let the number plates fool you: this is a track car, as extreme a road-going 911 as the 964 RS just with another 200hp and a mercifully better ride

911 as the 964 RS just with another 200hp and a mercifully better ride. If you want proof, it lies in its ability to lap the Nürburgring in the same time as the Carrera GT managed just six years ago, despite that car being based on a stillborn Le Mans prototype and using a 5.7-litre V10 engine with over 600hp. I shouldn't be complaining that the RS is compromised to use as a road car. I should be marvelling that it's possible at all.

If you'd asked whether the GT3 or GT3 RS was the better of the first generation of 997-based road and track 911s, I'd have been clear that

because the GT3 did almost everything the RS could but for a chunk less money, it was the preferable car. But now that comparison seems scarcely relevant.

I will always adore the GT3 because you can do so much with it, and were it my money, that's what I'd have. But the GT3 RS is as Preuninger promised, and almost a breed apart. So if I was looking for such a car to use predominately on the track, I'd have to find the extra to buy the RS. And knowing what I know now, there is simply no substitute ◊

