

It's the head-to-head we've been waiting for: 997 GT3 v 997 GT3 RS. Round One has the pair coming out of their corners (sideways, naturally) to do battle on road.

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SECONDS

**OUT...**

Value is a term overused and rarely understood. Because value is relative. All too often people glibly draw upon the services of 'value' to explain why something is better than we might, at face value, have expected it to be. And value is a concept people are perpetually afraid to use with reference to expensive cars. The thinking is understandable: if a product is perceived as being expensive, then it cannot be good value simply because the majority of the population could never afford it. But, like I said, value is relative. In fact, it could be argued that underneath the frightening list prices of most modern premium consumer items lie more hidden bargains than at the budget end of the market.

No two cars have questioned my understanding of value more than the 997 GT3 and 997 GT3RS. As you can see, we have them together here for the first time, and we'll try to reach some definitive conclusions about these two cars from Porsche that, at a glance, appear to offer something very similar but with a sizeable £14,740 separating them. And should you be worried that this road-based exercise won't allow the RS to prove its worth, be aware that this is only the first installment of GT3 v RS, and that we will be taking them to the track in a coming issue.\*

So, if value is relative, and accepting that expensive cars have as much right to claim such status as any shopping trolley, then the 997 GT3 is not only one of the best value cars on sale, it is perhaps the performance bargain of the past two decades. I shall defend that statement with the following: please name another vehicle that can replicate its skills for less money?

Difficult, isn't it? The most common answers will range from a Ferrari 360 CS (too pricey, too fragile, not as fast, not every day useable), to a tricked-up 996 GT3 Mk2 (tune it to match the 997 on track, and you will be left with a severely compromised road car). But really, there is nothing like the new GT3. Its ability to combine the roles of daily road car and serious track weapon are as surprising now as they were a year ago. And, of course, given that we all expect Porsche to be able to knock out a masterpiece for the circuit at will, and knowing how disparate road and track disciplines are in chassis terms, it's the GT3's on-road behaviour that has come as such a surprise.

And then Porsche gave us the RS. It told us it was green or orange (how come I know someone with a white one then?). It also said it was based on the C4 bodyshell – which is slightly stiffer and wider, and that a single mass flywheel added some wap-wap to the motor,

and it would cost nearly £15k more than a normal GT3. Oh, and it would bung that rear wing in for free.

At the time of the RS announcement, I thought this was shaky ground: no more power; no bigger brakes; not much lighter; much more expensive. Then I drove it and the fears subsided. As is so often the case with these things, in reality, the GT3 RS was stunning in every way, and could more than justify its price relative to external competition. But while I loved that first RS I drove in Germany last October (see *GTPP* issue 51), there was a nagging feeling that were it my cash, a white Clubsport would have done me just as well. Cue another internalised debate on value.

Be in no doubt, parked next to its green friend, your common-or-garden GT3 does look like the schoolboy lock-forward packing down with the grown-ups. How 44mm of added hip width can have such a dramatic effect on a car's styling is something of a mystery, but combined with that lump of carbon fibre perched on the bootlid, the RS looks outrageous. Being painted Viper green and having GT3 RS scrawled down the side helps too.

The enthusiast in me wants desperately to leave the aesthetic description as that, but the truth is, if we're to fully understand what it is

Two 911 GT3s, two different animals. RS is more direct, responding quicker to steering inputs and benefits from a single-mass flywheel in its 3.6-litre flat-six





PCCB (left) is optional on both cars and adds to the weight-saving programme. RS is 20kg lighter than regular GT3 thanks to perspex rear window and carbon-fibre engine cover



that separates these two, we have to acknowledge just how special the green car looks. However much we might want to deny it, everyone has been seduced by a car's appearance and the RS's appeal in this respect is so compelling that should an owner justify his or her choice by simply stating that they couldn't resist spending the extra, then I'd congratulate them for their honesty. Then, out of earshot, curse them for their obvious wealth.

Study the full specification document released for Porsche's GT range and the only mechanical difference listed is a drag co-efficient raised from 0.29 (GT3) to 0.31 (RS). Otherwise they are identical. Of course, this doesn't take into account the revised lower rear suspension arms that push away from the shell at a different angle and release an extra 5mm of wheelbase.

Weight is reduced by 20kg through a Perspex

rear screen and carbon engine-lid, but then these savings could be replicated by driver dieting and hardly represent a huge change.

So we have to assume that the chassis department is where the RS will prove quite different to the base car. Sure enough, as we leave the last traces of Welsh civilisation behind and climb up onto the moors, it strikes me that the RS is behaving rather differently to the GT3.

Small changes in set up and specification can have pronounced effect on the road, and so it is here. The two share an identical steering column, and yet it's the RS that responds more quickly to steering inputs not because the front wheels move any differently, but because the rear axle follows its lead more immediately. And despite claiming no change in spring and damper rates, it's quite clear that the normal and sport settings for the electronic dampers

have been recalibrated for the RS. In 'normal' it feels no stiffer than the base car, but in 'sport' the car is much flatter, though curiously ride comfort isn't affected to anything like the degree I'd expected.

The greatest compliment I can pay the RS is to say that it feels quite un-911-like over these roads. You don't have to employ the same slow-in, fast-out approach needed in the GT3, and it's all very much down to that rear end. In any regular 911, and to a lesser extent the GT3, there's always a slight hiatus between aiming the front wheels at an apex and allowing the rear axle to take a set. You can chart the 911's progress through time in this respect alone: drive an early 911 in the wet and that gap appears to last for whole minutes and is exacerbated to trouser-wetting levels in the damp. But as the rear axle has become more



sophisticated and tyre technology has improved, so the laws of physics have been moulded to suit the Porsche. With the GT3 RS, in the dry, the gap is irrelevant. You turn, you go.

Roll stiffness plays a big part in this. The white car does feel quite different at first. That's partly because it has covered 9000 hard miles and its clutch has less flesh on it than Posh Spice's shins. It feels well used, or to use the latest euphemism, it feels as if it was recently 'Top-Geared'. But the dampers are working properly; the brakes and rubber are fresh.

Put the GT3 into the same sequence of corners and it does feel quite different. There isn't quite the same four-square feel about it, there's a small amount of roll from the rear axle even with the dampers in sport. Furthermore, it doesn't feel quite as well tied down as the RS – the nose bobs about more and despite having exactly the same size tyres, it doesn't generate the same



amount of traction from second-gear turns.

But let's take this exercise back to the original hypothesis: value. Even if an individual placed unnatural importance on road behaviour, there is no way the RS can justify the extra price. Their most important attribute is this freakish ability to be comfortable on the road – the reward for which must go to the two-stage dampers that work so well – and in this respect the basic car delivers virtually the same performance.

It also has one significant benefit. Just as those extra 44mm of bodywork have an unnaturally strong showroom-effect, the added girth is less welcome on the road. The RS is a large unit on UK B-roads, it takes up virtually all the road. You have to concentrate on its size, and that's something I've never really had to do in a 911 before. The GT3 seems much narrower by comparison, and I know we're dealing in millimetres here, but you can only

judge such things subjectively and I just didn't find myself thinking about the width of the white car. As something to use on the road, it's a serious consideration.

The single mass flywheel on the RS does have a slight effect: any throttle blips on down-changes have that extra edge of sharpness about them, although I'd hesitate to pick which was the faster of the two. In fact I don't need to, because part two of this encounter will have a full set of performance data included.\* Either way, they're both exceptionally quick and have at their disposal one of the greatest road car motors ever seen in general production. The drivetrain isn't flawless though: in Sport mode, both cars had an irritating exhaust boom at idle, and the short-shift gear change isn't the revolution Porsche thinks. It's just too aggressive and a longer throw would be welcome.

Nope, as a road car, the GT3 has its more



exotic relative covered. There is no question which is the more desirable – the RS is clearly that car – but I wanted to spend enough time with the two of them to discover whether the RS could justify the premium on-the-road, and the simple truth is it can't. However, on faster stretches, the RS hinted at a cornering ability beyond that of the GT3, and it will be fascinating to see how much quicker it will be on the circuit – and, of course, whether that advantage fits into those notions of value described earlier.

And even if I'm sure that in this discipline a GT3 Clubsport is the clever choice, I left in the white car and couldn't help but feel slightly deflated in the knowledge that someone else had the green number to drive home. Desirability is one of the great intangibles of car appreciation: we'll settle this later on the track.\* But for now, the base car has its nose in front. It's staggering value for money ◊

It's a close call on the road, with the GT3 – in Clubsport spec – just nudging ahead of the wild child RS. To be continued...\*



\* The track test of the GT3 and GT3 RS appeared in the August 2007 edition of *GT Purely Porsche*. To order your back issue visit: [www.gtpurelyporsche.com](http://www.gtpurelyporsche.com)