



997

GOES TOURING

SharkWerks' new project will unlock exhilarating, streetable performance from Porsche's 997 GT3. Total 911 heads Stateside for an early drive

Written by **Lee Sibley** Photography by **Max Newman**

Gualala, northern California. Far away from the hubbub of The Golden State's major cities, and very far away from Stuttgart and the home of the sports car that this magazine is dedicated to, one could question what, indeed, has brought **Total 911** to this quiet, quaint pocket on Planet Earth? Allow me to explain.

Here, when travelling north, there's nothing but the Pacific Ocean to your left, tall Redwood trees to your right, and a ribbon-like strip of asphalt that wriggles on and on, dancing through the middle – not for mile after mile, but seemingly hour after hour.

Venture inland and the roads are even more twisty and enticing, of the sort that'll give you a solid workout of the arms, legs and brain, should you have the privilege of peddling a 911 along them at a half-decent pace. This is SharkWerks country: famous for

a fine fettling of Porsche sports cars, from quarter-mile-conquering 996 Turbos to king-of-the-canyon-964s, SharkWerks has featured numerous times in these pages over the years. Needless to say, we really do rate their work highly here at **Total 911**.

You should already know, therefore, that the company's chef d'oeuvre is its 4.1-litre conversions of 997 GT cars. For good reason, too – to this day, a certain Riviera blue 997.2 GT3 RS 4.1 remains the most engaging, enthralling, positively intoxicating drive I've ever had in a 911, a good nine years after that drive took place.

So, when Alex Ross at SharkWerks announced he's personally acquired a 997.2 GT3 and is using it as the basis for a new project, it didn't take long for us to fire a message over, cap in hand, asking for an opportunity to get behind the wheel. And that's why snapper Max and I are in town, buckled into the GT3, and giggling like adolescents as we give



chase to a trio of SharkWerks-tuned 997 GT cars swivelling through the bends ahead. They, like this GT3, have all been 'Sharkafied', yet while those GT3s are enjoying the mastery of being full-fat 4.1s, this one has only been lightly fettled at the time of writing, as SharkWerks begins its journey of touring and testing, before unleashing that special 4.1-litre magic.

The Porsche landscape has changed somewhat since SharkWerks began building out to 4.1-litres a full decade ago, with 997-generation GT3 RS base cars ever highly more sought after by collectors. That hasn't stopped Alex, James, Dan, Joan and the SharkWerks team, who have continued to build out factory 3.8 997 GT3 RSs and even 3.6-litre 997.1 GT3s to 4.1-litre specification, for a select few customers in Europe, Canada, Hong Kong and other US states. Porsche itself, meanwhile, has made 4.0 litres the customary displacement for its GT cars, also bringing to market a de-winged 'Touring' 991.2 GT3 in 2018, to widespread acclaim.

SharkWerks chases 'fun' rather than 'financial' and, with the 991 and 992 platforms not really hitting the spot for Alex and co, extending the 997 GT3 platform's breadth of capabilities in a similar way is the natural next step for a company intent on refining what it says is already a fantastic product. The goal here, then, is achieving high thrills between 30 and 90mph.

"It's a skunkworks project right now," Alex says over lunch a couple of hours later. "The plans for this car are to also outfit it with our 4.1 programme and short-gear stack. We are also exploring – though it's early days – a path similar to that of the factory 991.2 Touring.

"The ethos for this car is to make it a complete sleeper: removing the wing, a very subtle wheel change, as Forgeline GE1s look stock-like for example, and addressing the chassis to be more compliant and closer to the GTs, but with the Motorsport engine we love so much."

The idea is a sound one: modern 911 Q-cars have fascinated since the launch of the 2016 911 R, which paired a GT3 engine and manual gearbox (GT3s were PDK-only at the time) in a wide yet wingless body: To the everyman, it could well have been a Carrera.

The notion was expanded further by Porsche with the subsequent 991.2 GT3 Touring going wingless, while the 992-era has given enthusiasts another Touring (now with a choice of PDK or stick shift) and perhaps the ultimate Q-car: the S/T, which has an RS engine stuffed in the rear of its flat-backed body.

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LEFT The winding roads and dense woodland of NorCal echo with the noise of a 997.2 GT3 chasing a 4.1-litre 997.1 GT3

BELOW Editor Lee Sibley surveys the 997.2 GT3 with SharkWerks' co-founder, Alex Ross

That car has rounded off a seven-year period of real thirst among enthusiasts for a strictly road-oriented Porsche product with Motorsport componentry. And why not? For some 911 fans, the idea of a race track has simply never appealed.

Rewind 15 years though, and Porsche's GT department offering wasn't as three-dimensional as it is now. The GT3 and RS were unapologetically crafted as track cars with licence plates: a euphoric experience on the circuit then, but on the street, they're a committed drive.

Alex and the SharkWerks team are well on their way to changing that. Even without that magical 543hp, 4.1-litre powerplant in place, this 997.2 GT3's current setup is enticing enough. Its powertrain has had some light tuning: a 997 GT3 4.0 RS clutch and single mass flywheel has been deployed for sharper pick-up, and an uprated Guard LSD offers superior traction (and a little more longevity) on these tight, twisty roads. The GT3's soundtrack has been elevated too, with the company's own system giving a signature SharkWerks howl. Its chassis, meanwhile, features the company's customary RSS rear upper links and bump steer kit combined with Tractiv PASM-compatible coilovers, tuned with a DSC controller. It's a heady mix and, from behind the wheel, already feels like a 'GT3': its playful charm more apparent at legal speeds.

Ahead of me, Ralph is leading the way in his white 4.1-litre 997.1 GT3. The tall uprights of its Cup wing sway left and right as the 911 pivots effortlessly through the bends that snake feverishly through a dense woodland. Behind, there's a Martini- ☺

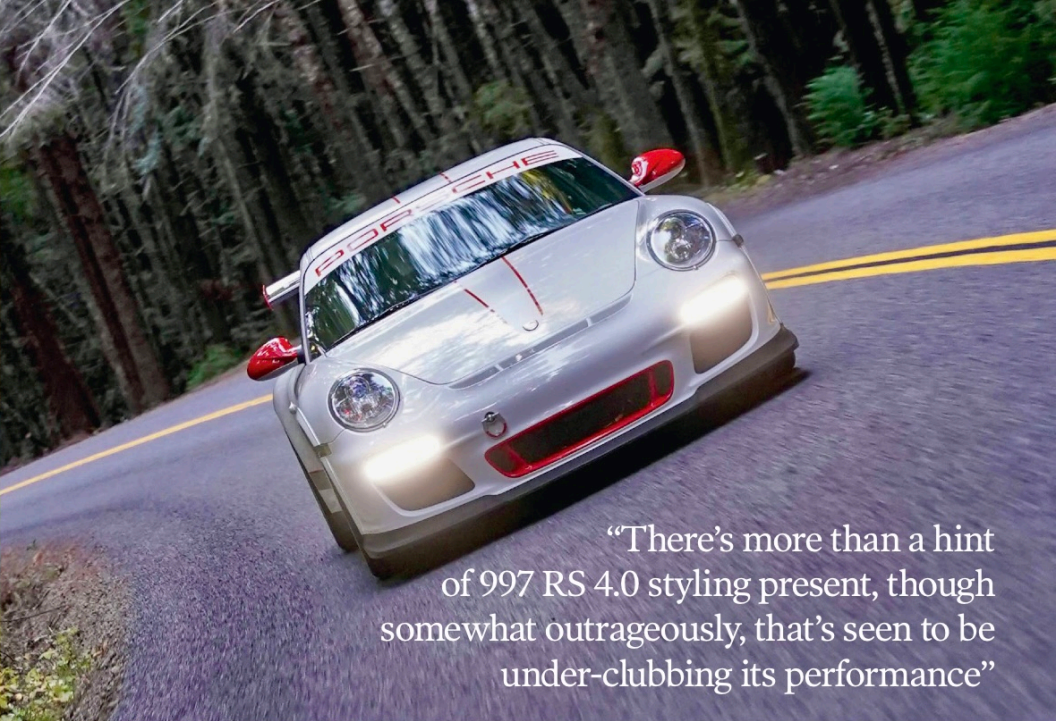




RIGHT Big-winged 4.1-litre 997s contrast against the svelte ducktail on Alex's skunkworks 997.2 GT3

BELOW Ready for round two...? T911 heads out in the 997.2 GT3 for more fun on NorCal's sun-dappled roads

FACING PAGE A recently finished 4.1-litre conversion enjoys some running-in miles



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livered 997i GT3, and a Carrara white 997.2 RS, which I can see clearly thanks to the removal of a fixed, factory wing on this 997.2 GT3. A Sport Classic-style ducktail sits in its place, its trailing edge visible from my interior mirror, now glinting in the bright sunlight as our road leaves the woods behind.

Who doesn't love a ducktail on a 911? It saves weight over the adjustable factory wing and, while it won't be doing the same job aerodynamically at higher speeds, at our targeted playground of 30-90mph the factory addenda would be superfluous.

So what's the result of this stage one fettling, as Alex puts it? It's certainly building on what is already a mighty setup from Porsche, and we can see why Alex and the SharkWerks team idolise the 997-generation so much. Its narrow body means road placement for a fast yet respectful line through the bends is easily found, with the era's hydraulically assisted steering gifting exemplary feel and weighting. Swiftly yet smoothly pushing the wheel through left and right turns, I'm reminded of just how accomplished this setup is. It really was a high watermark for Porsche 911 steering feel for many years (the subsequent 991-generation switched to electrically assisted steering, though it'd take until the following 992-generation for Porsche to truly perfect it).

Likewise, the six-speed manual shift is light years ahead of the messy seven-speed Porsche would introduce four years after this 997.2 GT3 was launched. The six's shifter has a lovely, crisp feel to

each throw, matched by a clutch pedal that makes heel-and-toe a real pleasure to execute. The ratios themselves feel a little long on NorCal's darting backtop, though that will, of course, be looked at once SharkWerks bring them closer together.

SharkWerks mods have only elevated the drive here, unlocking more of what we love about the 997 GT3. Throttle response, even at low rpms, is sharp (it'll be even more so with its incoming 4.1), and the top-end shriek emitted from the SharkWerks exhaust, in song with its three comrades, is best described as a religious experience.

Without a doubt though, this 997's genius lies in its chassis. The Tractiv suspension is brilliant: adjustable on the fly, there's a lovely suppleness to the





BELOW Sunset over the Pacific closes out a day driving some fine examples of Neunerfers that SharkWerks has taken to the next level



ride at low and medium speeds, the sophistication of its execution easily putting it on a par with a modern 992 GT3 equivalent.

Staying between second, third and fourth gears and following the contours of our spaghetti-like road, the 997.2 is moving around beneath me in a talkative, playful manner, pivoting sharply when called upon, and giving chase to the superior metal we're holding court with. Alex says the car currently is too soft, but with one eye on bumpy UK roads back home, I think the setup could be perfect as-is.

A GT3 this may be, but right here and on these roads, I wouldn't care if I never saw a track again. Goodness, just how great will this thing be with a 4.1 out back?

After one last stop in late afternoon, the opportunity to drive a full-fat GT3 RS 4.1 is presented. It takes but half a second to consider and accept. Being back behind the wheel of such

an engineering marvel is not lost on me, the genius of which could never be replicated by Porsche on a mass scale, such are the development costs and time required to achieve it. It's also a decent yardstick as to what we can expect from Alex's 997.2 GT3 Touring project in due course.

The example I'm sat in has recently completed its SharkWerks makeover and, with the blessing of its kind owner, I'm helping to stick a few running-in miles on the odo. Finished in white, with grey and red decals, there's more than a hint of 997 RS 4.0 styling present, though somewhat outrageously; that's seen to be under-clubbing its performance. Not for the marginal gain in displacement, but the fact a SharkWerks 4.1 has anywhere between 80 and 110Nm more torque than the halo RS 4.0 across its entire rev range. A few miles on, and glorious memories of nine years prior flood back. Never mind that iconic collectible from Weissach, a peak 997 is shark-shaped!

The reality of SharkWerks' GT3 RS 4.1 creation is just as good as I'd remembered. Supremely powerful right through to its 8,800rpm redline, there's a scarcely believable, buttery-smooth execution to the way power is delivered. Free-revving, needle zipping around the tacho, its engine feels every bit as strong as the 543bhp Alex tells me it's kicking out, and there's plenty of fizz in the mid-range, which is often something of a dead zone for GT3 and RSs in stock form.

Zippy, zingy, and downright sensational, the 4.1-litre flat six is best characterised by the seemingly impossible contrast of the brute force of its power delivery against the delicacy of its throttle response. A beautiful harmony of balance and brawn, the SharkWerks 4.1 is fast art. The prospect of it appearing in the back of a road-focused 997.2 GT3 is genuinely tantalising – we can't wait to come back to NorCal to experience the fascinating, finished article. **911**

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