The models that open the door to the world of Porsche

30/04/2021 Four cylinders, mid-engine: in 1969 the Porsche 914/4 was Porsche's introduction to the range, while today that honor sits with the 718 T. Half a century on, do elements of the 914 linger?

The Porsche 718 Cayman T is all kinds of things, but it's certainly no successor to the Porsche 914/4. For starters, it's a coupé while its ancestor was a Targa. Even their silhouettes are quite different. With all the love there is for the brand, for tradition, for everything that's just emerging – anyone with a keen pair of eyes can see at first glance that this is an impossible comparison.

But just because you look, doesn't mean you actually see the essential features. To do that, you need a little more. More than 30 years of love for classic cars, for example – the way Olaf Johannes Häner feels about them. This engineer is always a man of emotion, despite the tendency towards rationality that comes with his job. He's built up a tiny oasis for himself in a workshop in Horstmar in the Steinfurt district of Germany – a 1960s petrol station idyll where he keeps his small collection of classic cars: Volkswagen models first and foremost, but his heart belongs to Porsche in particular.

914/4 unites Porsche and Volkswagen

One of his favorite cars, unsurprisingly, is his bilious green Porsche 914/4: the model that unites both worlds. Designed at Porsche, using Volkswagen funding, powered by an engine from Wolfsburg and built at Karmann in Osnabrück, it hails from near to Häner's home in Paderborn, where he lives with his wife and two sons – both of whom share their father's enthusiasm for classic cars.

Today, however, we find Häner alone in his little empire as we bring along a guest – the Porsche 718 Cayman T. It's blue temptation on grey concrete, 300 hp instead of the 100 offered by the 914/4 2.0. At first, Olaf simply glances at it, but even just a quick look tells this true Porsche 914 fan more than just the color and design of the car. "If I were to buy a new Porsche today, this is exactly what I'd buy. It's purist, it has a manual transmission and it's mid-engined – all things that really captivate me. As far as I'm concerned, the shape is a real hit. Everything's just perfect, every line is ideal," he says. No sooner are the words out of his mouth than he's sat himself behind the wheel.

It's like the 718 T was made for him, even though there's not much in the interior of this car to impress a purist of his ilk. There are loops in the doors to replace the usual handles – but that's about it. The car generally comes with electric sports seats. The infotainment and navigation systems in the car aren't as simple as Häner was expecting, and they're nothing like those available in his 914. That said, the 718 T is supplied as new with a large central storage compartment in the center console instead of the Porsche Communication Management module. Customers who would rather have the entertainment system can order it at no extra cost.

As Porsche fans will know, the 'T' traditionally stands for 'Touring' in Porsche models and is synonymous with truly pure driving pleasure – something the 718 T offers in abundance. In general, the car comes equipped with sports suspension that is lowered by 20 millimeters, including adaptive dampers, the SportChrono package with Sport and Sport Plus modes and active transmission mounts. The Torque Vectoring System with mechanical limited slip differential, which distributes the power optimally between the two driven wheels, also comes as part of the T's standard range of products, as does the extremely responsive steering, which allows this mid-engined athlete to corner precisely, no matter how spirited the drive.

Technical equipment for driving pleasure

The conditions are ideal for converting the performance of the boxer engine into lateral dynamics. The 300 hp from the two-liter, four-cylinder turbo (with particulate filter) can easily cope with the 33 lbs of extra weight – compared to the basic Cayman – due to all of this technical equipment installed for driving pleasure by the development team. According to the data sheet, the 3,036-lb 718 T can sprint from a standing start to 60 mph in 4.8 seconds thanks to its power-to-weight ratio of 10.1 lb per hp. There's really no turbo lag to speak of. The 280-lb-ft of torque is available almost without delay as the turbocharger delivers a superb response.

The power is delivered by a crisply tuned manual six-speed transmission, which is fitted as standard. The shortened gear lever fits perfectly in the hand. The 718 T is of course instantly recognizable thanks to its corresponding lettering. The performance version of the Cayman 718 also features high-gloss, titanium grey, 20-inch Carrera S alloy wheels, agate grey exterior mirrors and a sports exhaust system with black chrome-plated, high-gloss twin tailpipes located centrally.

If this sounds good on paper, wait until you actually drive it. Take your Cayman from the North Cape to Gibraltar? Any time! And you'll love it … The fact that this car can do everything better than the Porsche 914/4 is a trivial point – it would be strange if no progress had been made in more than 50 years. But even if Häner does develop a soft spot for the new 718 ("Well, you could leave it here if you like. There's still a bit of room left in the workshop."), it wouldn't give him enough of a reason to get rid of his "Volks-Porsche".

It has been shortened to 'VoPo' in the newspapers since the car was launched. Back then, Huschke von Hanstein begged journalists to call it that. The car had nothing to do with the People's Police of East Germany, or Volkspolizei, which shared the same nickname. But despite his requests, the term ended up escaping into the wild: just another miscolored element in an unsightly mosaic. This fun little car, which Heinrich Nordhoff and Ferry Porsche shook hands on and developed entirely using funds from Volkswagen, became something of a bone of contention. Volkswagen tzar Nordhoff died. His successor, Kurt Lotz, didn't want to know anything about dodgy dealings, so he applied the thumbscrews: if we're paying for everything, we want to sell it as our car.

The 914 as a genuine Porsche

A long period of back and forth was followed by the founding of Volkswagen-Porsche-Vertriebsgesellschaft. In Germany, the 914 had to be sold as a VW-Porsche. Only the 914/6 and the 916 were given the Porsche logo. For Porsche, though, this was a good deal because they could suddenly benefit from the many new Audi dealerships set up by Volkswagen-Audi-NSU in the USA. So, from this point onwards, the 914 stood next to newly launched Audi models – and it was a Porsche. The VW was dropped but this is one of the reasons people on the Porsche scene in Germany are so mistrusting of the 914/4, even though the company itself recognized the 914 as a genuine Porsche.

Olaf Häner could never understand this debate. It was always clear to him – sooner or later, he'd own a Porsche 914. What's more, he acquired this one personally in California. He simply combined a family holiday with his search for one of these cars. The first owner wanted to part with his 914, which had only been repainted once. His daughters had learned to drive in it, but now this little green car was just left standing around. That was back in 2009: since then, the 914 has been part of Häner's fleet. The bumpers were originally black but the new owner has had them chrome-plated – destroying one in the process. So he bought a new one, paying an arm and a leg for it, and now he's happy with his little Targa.

The 100 hpnis plenty for the 914, which was built in 1974 and weighs 2,138 lbs. It reaches 60 mph in about 10.5 seconds, and it can do almost 125 mph ("well, a bit more actually"). And Häner doesn't really care that the engine was also used in the rather less popular "Nasenbär", the Volkswagen 411/412, and the Volkswagen bus. He loves the top-down driving, the crisp steering, the low ride height and the really enormous boot. So his way forward is clear. "Swap it? No way. But I wouldn't mind a 718 T as well. That'd be nice."

Info

Text first published in the magazine Porsche Klassik magazine, No.15.

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Image Sublines

Path: media/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: 718 Cayman T, 914, 2021, Porsche AG
Subline: Signal: the illuminated Aral logo points the way through the petrol station and into the party room behind. Olaf's workshop is the kind of place where you'd like to linger a while. There's room for the Porsche 718 as well, he reckons ...

Path: media/Images/img_3.jpg
Title: Olaf Häner, 718 Cayman T, 914, 2021, Porsche AG
Subline: From entry-level to next level? Above all, Olaf Häner appreciates the fun factor with his Porsche 914/4. The 300 PS Cayman with its agile rear axle translates the concept perfectly to our era, making it suitable for everyday use.

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