

Happy birthday, Hebe!

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24/08/2020 One of the most famous Porsche 911 GT3 RS ever built is celebrating its birthday. Guest writer Zaid Hamid, a photographer and freelance journalist from London, shares his longed-for experience with the beloved Porsche GB press car.

Close your eyes and picture your favourite stretch of road. Imagine it freckled with puddles of light that pierce softly through the trees and hedges that line the sides. Downshift for a bend, press your right foot to climb the hill and feel the power. I fell in love with driving as a 17-year-old, although back then I wasn't in a Porsche, but a Ford Focus.

Arriving home as a teenager to find a magazine filled with the latest supercars on my doorstep, was a portal to my teenage dreams. As I read, I would imagine the rough humdrum sounds of my driving instructor's hatchback were instead the iconic howls of a Mezger engine in a GT1 born for Le Mans. The car that was so often spread on the pages before me was a 997.2 GT3 RS finished in Slate Grey with gorgeous White Gold wheels and livery.

Ten years on and not much has changed: I still close my eyes and imagine my office chair is a carbon-backed bucket seat, and that I'm travelling down a road at speed. The difference now is that I know exactly what it's like to drive a GT3 RS on my favourite country road – because a very famous one is sat outside, and I have the keys.

Known by British journalists as "Hebe", a nickname derived from the car's registration plate, the GT3 RS that featured in my teenage dreams is now on my driveway. The car so often splashed across magazines, and which has starred in many TV shows and YouTube specials, sits in the care of Porsche GB.

The year 2020 is a landmark one for Porsche's GT department and it has been 20 years since the birth of the first GT3 – the 996 generation. A decade after that car launched, the 997.2 GT3 RS broke cover and it remains in high regard today. The 997 generation was the last to use the fabled Mezger engine. It would also be the last time that Porsche would put a manual into any RS model and, for these reasons, it left an impression on me. Imagine my excitement, then, when the opportunity to drive Hebe landed in my lap.

When new, the 997.2 GT3 RS won countless "car of the year" awards and to this day it is used to showcase the talent of Porsche's engineers. As modern classics go, few can match this car for focus, feel and desirability. Flicking back through copies of Evo magazine, TopGear and watching the likes of Chris Harris struggle to contain his excitement while sliding this very car on track, it cannot be denied that Hebe has earned legendary status. At a decade old, it displays its age in a delightful way. From the outside, signs of use are reflected in the rear plastic screen that has faded from clear to a milky fog and the infamous yellow brake callipers have lost their shine a little. Inside, the Alcantara on the handbrake has worn and the gear shifter and steering wheel have been replaced. The original gear knob sits in Porsche GB's head office, while the steering wheel was given to a former managing director as a leaving gift. Such is the status of Hebe.

"Hebe is saved for high days and really special occasions," says Rob Durrant, Senior Press Officer at Porsche GB. This is evident when you look back on events such as the millionth 911 drive that took place in Scotland in 2017. A handful of stars from the 911 back catalogue were united then in celebration of the millionth example to leave the production line. Hebe shone, as it did when it joined the launch of the latest (991.2) GT3 RS on the Isle of Man a year later.

On that occasion, seven RS models were assembled on the island for 12 journalists to experience, under the guidance of local Isle of Man TT legend, Mark Higgins. Given the choice of any car to drive himself, Higgins leapt on Hebe and didn't surrender the keys until the end of the event.

It is not difficult to see why. The 997.2 GT3 RS was never the most powerful car in its class – but it was the lightest, most nimble and arguably the most rewarding. In 2010 hydraulic steering was the norm, particulate filters had yet to be mandated and forced induction engines were rarely implemented in performance cars. This means the steering in Hebe is weighty, brimming with feedback and feels alive in my hands. The Mezger engine can be heard in all its glory as it zings towards the redline, which you

find yourself chasing as much for the sound as for the 444 hp and 430 Nm of torque. The 6-speed transmission is phenomenal.

The touch points and the weighting of the controls make driving Hebe such a memorable experience. The GT3 RS demands deliberate and firm inputs from the driver: this is not a car for the faint hearted. The clutch pedal tests the strength of the driver's left leg followed by a precise and powerful motion from the left shoulder and arm. Combined with the support and grip of the carbon-backed bucket seats, the driving experience is physically demanding and it is unforgettable. Following a 300 mile drive in a single day I was exhausted, but I was also enchanted by the bond I felt I'd formed with Hebe – a car I have yearned to drive for a decade.

A look inside the 911 GT3 RS

Then there are the sounds that the car makes. It is alive. The chunter of the flywheel, pinging of debris in the arches and the bassy boom that transforms into a hypnotic howl as the engine revolutions peak at 8,500rpm all add to the notion that this is not merely an inanimate mechanical object, but a living, breathing machine. There is a level of communication and intimacy that you earn from the car the harder you push it and the more you learn how it behaves. This is a car that leaves an impression after every outing. You go to bed thinking about the drive you had earlier in the day and you wake looking for an excuse to strap yourself into that bucket seat once more. There are no frills or distractions – the Porsche Communication Management system has been deleted, as has the air conditioning. In Hebe, you focus on what really matters.

This generation of GT3 RS will forever be hailed as one of the greatest sports cars to come out of Stuttgart. This specific example pays testament to the durability and magnificence that continues a decade and 32,000 hard miles on. Happy 10th birthday Hebe. May you be enjoyed for decades to come, just as Porsche intended.

Info

Text by Zaid Hamid

MEDIA ENQUIRIES



Julian B. Hoffmann

Managing Editor Porsche Newsroom
+49 (0) 170 / 911 2771
julian.hoffmann@porsche.de

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Path: Happy birthday, Hebe!/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: Zaid Hamid, 997.2 GT3 RS "Hebe", 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Guest author Zaid Hamid with the 911 GT3 RS

Path: Happy birthday, Hebe!/Images/img_4.jpg
Title: 997.2 GT3 RS "Hebe", 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: The famous press car is known by British journalists as “Hebe'', a name derived from the “HBY” letters of the registration

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