

Winter wonderland

05/01/2016 The vast terrain of northern Finland is the perfect place to try out a Porsche in winter. Together with a professional racing driver, we explore the area around the Porsche Driving Center in Levi.

The action near the horizon is shrouded in veils of snow. Every time the Cayenne S swerves, it nearly vanishes in a cloud of powder raised by the spiked tires as they kiss the icy surface. Weaving in and out of curtains of tiny crystals sparkling in Finland's low afternoon sunlight, the sporty SUV might be mistaken for an Arctic fox with its radiant white winter coat. "It's like a cloud of powdered sugar up there," says Klaus Bachler in amazement. A 24-year-old Austrian racing driver, Bachler is an instructor for the Porsche Driving Experience Winter in Finland during the off-season. And he is thrilled by a video that shows him drifting on one of the four forest tracks on the training grounds.

And the light! This is what entices so many fans of far northern latitudes up here beyond the Arctic Circle, to the Finnish part of Lapland. They marvel at the rosy and lavender hues of sunrise, the blazing light of midday, and the golden radiance of early afternoon. At night they hope to witness the aurora borealis in all its spectral glory, as arcs of green light flicker across the cloudless skies.

The high position of the seats affords a great view

Here at the Porsche Driving Center, Bachler and his eight fellow instructors begin their day at 6:30 a.m. Outside it is still pitch black, and a bracing 25 or 30 degrees Celsius below zero. On the 20-minute drive to the training grounds, we can already appreciate the winter features of the Cayenne S, like its three-stage heated seats. The high position of the seats also affords a great view of Lapland's roads.

Covered with ice and lined with snow banks, they are poorly illuminated at this time of year. The wintry conditions as such are no cause for concern in this imposing SUV with driver assist systems including the Advanced Offroad Technology Package, Porsche Stability Management (PSM), and Hill Descent Control, which can be activated for gradients of 12 percent or more.

Reindeer, elk, and huskies

The Cayenne S remains precisely on track as a robust all-terrain vehicle should, turning smoothly into tight curves trailed by fountains of powder. Its suspension calmly cushions the bumps in the road. And it never loses its grip on the slippery surface, not even if you have to hit the brakes for a snowmobile that suddenly swooshes out of the trees and across the road. The Cayenne moves forward in sure and commanding form. In fact, the exceptionally secure yet sporty handling of this car might make you think that its real home is here, in this icy winter wonderland with reindeer, elk, and huskies, not to mention with the Sami themselves and their saunas.

Our instructor gives us tips for tricky situations, such as if the rear tires do happen to skid on a patch of ice. "In that case you should brake and turn into the skid—in other words, away from the direction you want to go—carefully, not excitedly, until the car gets back on course," says Bachler. The position of the seat is also important. "You should have both hands on the wheel, which should be positioned so that you can easily lay your wrist on top of it. And you shouldn't have to fully extend your leg when pushing the brake pedal firmly."

Endorphins are already flowing as the day begins with a briefing

By eight in the morning, an array of Porsche models stands ready to go in the two spacious garages with heated floors at the edge of the Driving Experience training grounds. Divided into two sections, the grounds cover an area roughly equivalent to 80 soccer fields. Shortly before nine, as the sun begins to rise, the students arrive by bus. Their eyes shine when they see the fleet of cars awaiting them: the 911 Turbo S, Cayman GTS, Macan Turbo, Panamera Turbo S and GTS, 911 GT3 Cup, 918 Spyder, and Cayenne S. Endorphins are already flowing as the day begins with a briefing.

These Porsche winter drivers in training—some of whom have come all the way from southeast Asia—will be honing their skills in a series of different courses until darkness falls around four in the

afternoon, interrupted only by pit stops for culinary treats in cozy lounges. They will do their laps, try out different Porsche models, and master a sequence of increasingly challenging exercises. And then, eagerly awaited by everyone, comes the chance to drift—with engines hissing and loose snow spraying in every direction on the icy tracks.

Thrilling beyond words!

On these vast grounds meticulously prepared with water for weeks beforehand, virtually nothing can go wrong. If drivers miss the odd curve, spin like a top, and land in a snow bank, they are simply pulled right back out—for which the powerful Cayenne S doubles superbly as a tow truck, by the way. Thrilling beyond words!

Bachler spends a lot of one-on-one time with each member of his group, explaining, correcting, and giving pointers. He makes the exercises look like child's play. What's his secret? "It's all about finding the right balance between accelerating, braking, and steering," he says with a smile. It helps to know your car well, he adds. To really understand, for example, that the front-mounted engine and resulting weight distribution of the Cayenne S affect how the car responds. Because the engine makes the front part of the SUV comparatively heavy, the rear already has to be turning sideways well before the curve in order for the driver to control the drift. "Of course, that only applies here on the training grounds," says Bachler, who warns strictly against trying out this technique on the road.

"Reindeer meat is not really my thing"

At regular intervals the instructors get a few hours of free time. Bachler often takes the opportunity to do weight and endurance training at a fitness studio in Sirkka. The village's colorful wooden houses line the road along Levi, Finland's largest and most famous ski resort. A fan of outdoor activities in his native Austria, Bachler also enjoys cross-country skiing and snowmobiling in Lapland. And the local cuisine? "Reindeer meat is not really my thing," he admits, "but the salmon is superb."

We climb into the Cayenne S and head back up the hill to the Panorama Hotel. A hush is in the air. Night has fallen; the air is cold and dry. Lining the semicircular driveway at the hotel, white Porsche flags flap in the icy wind. And just beyond, a world of silence—still and serene.

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