

Soul-searching in the 911 Speedster

19/11/2020 Tom Gädtke has made a name for himself in the world of classic Porsche models. Known on social media as @onassisporsches, the 40-year-old describes himself as a hobby mechanic and drives a Porsche 356. Can the 911 Speedster (991) turn the head of a committed classic car fan?

People who know me know that my passion is for old cars: classic Porsche models in particular. Yet here I am: at the foot of the Großglockner mountain range in Austria, standing next to a 911 Speedster from the 991 series, complete with Heritage package. I'm surrounded by a group of "other" 911 cars, most of them from the air-cooled model years.

My 356 from 1961 is in good condition, but is tuned uncompromisingly for engine speed and is equipped with gear ratios that are nearly 60 years old. The very idea of driving hundreds of kilometres over fast mountain stages, as is planned for the next few days, and doing so without damage, is – to put it mildly – optimistic. Luckily, I have a different set of wheels for the job ...

Tom Gädtke and his 356

The Porsche 911 Speedster: a purist driving machine

When it comes to the 911 Speedster, my excited expectations are neither based on experiences or comparisons: new vehicles are, as the words suggest, new to me. At first look, I'm reassured. The ignition lock is on the left, the Porsche logo is present, there is the classic H-pattern gearshift. These are things I'm familiar with. The Speedster has six gears, compared to my own four, but the three pedals are the same and the accelerator sits at a slight and familiar angle. The Speedster does not have much else, other than a steering wheel with a button for the horn – and that's it. It's just how I like it and means no scrabbling around if you have to react quickly. So far the 911 appears to be a textbook driving machine.

The plan for the next 48 hours is as follows: around 800 kilometres of mountain roads and passes in a group of more than 25 cars all wearing the 911 badge. They date from 1965 to 2019 and some are modified. The route – much of it winding and twisting at altitude – features no traffic lights and only one planned stop. There will be narrow sections and plenty of braking and revs. The latter worries me the least – if there's one thing this engine can do, it is deliver revs. What I hope to find out is whether the Speedster is the perfect car for such a trip in spite of, or perhaps even because of, its light weight philosophy ...

An early start to the Großglockner High Alpine Road

The alarm clock was set very early, so we find ourselves standing at the toll station at the foot of the Großglockner mountain at 05:15 on the dot. Before the line of 911 cars are a handful of bikers who had obviously got up even earlier than us. There are also a few cyclists, presumably hoping to make the most of the cool early morning temperatures to climb as high as possible before the sun rises and warms the air. At 05:30 the traffic light turns green. Ticket bought, car full of leaflets, seat position adjusted, low gear selected: let the games begin!

Can the Speedster impress?

Anyone who has ever driven our chosen route up to an altitude of just under 2,500 metres will remember it well. For those who have not yet had the pleasure, just know that a combination of motorway tarmac and giant uphill slalom is what awaits you. In some sections, the challenging route is a tight slalom that would suit the Alpine skier Alberto Tomba, while in other parts it becomes a real Super G. Here, where the engine can sometimes rev above the magic 4,000 rpm line, is where pure pleasure can be experienced.

I'm grateful, happy and satisfied all at once, because our plan of being at the summit before sunrise works out. It feels a bit like an early-morning run with the prospect of a shower and good coffee in your favourite beach house. Only we're in the mountains, where it's cooler and much clearer. While our cars tick happily nearby, cooling in the mountain air, a group of campers who have stayed overnight clutch coffee cups; the steam from them rising in whisps and slowly dissipating into the frigid atmosphere.

I enjoy the moment, because I have just completed my first mountain stages in a "super sports car". While our journey has only just begun, I'm impressed with the Speedster – it ticks all the boxes for me, personally, and feels just as intuitive as the first smartphone. But I already suspect that it will be the end of the trip before I truly understand what this car has triggered deep down inside me.

The Speedster quickly becomes part of the group

After completing the early-morning sprint to the summit, it's a question of waiting for the darkness to recede – and then it happens: the unique moment that fascinates people all over the world as the sky turns golden and the shadows draw silhouettes. As the sun rises, the Speedster, with its roof closed, is bathed in light against an endless blue horizon. The moment feels simply fantastic.

The weather is picture-perfect and the mood among the drivers is high: all the vehicles have shown themselves to be willing and the Speedster has quickly been adopted as a new member of the gang. Maybe it's even more than that: maybe it's even become assimilated. With the very sculpted white nose, it's clear this is not an off-the-shelf model and this makes it a topic of conversation among enthusiasts in the more creative Porsche hemisphere. Everyone asks what it is like – and I try to stay neutral.

In my heart of hearts I still adore the old Porsche cars. However, by this point in my Speedster journey, a feeling is beginning to build inside me that I had not expected before I started out on the tour. It is a strange feeling that I haven't known before. Despite not being under any time or deadline pressure, I want to press on. I want to drive this car!

At the end of what proves to be a long day I feel really happy. As twilight descends, we meander through long valleys surrounded by mountains, covering the final few kilometres to our evening destination in cruise mode with the top down.

On to Porsche Italia – into the Dolomites

After a short but restful night's sleep – we had a lot to talk about the evening before – the breakfast lounge of our overnight accommodation slowly starts to fill up. There is a new destination today: the Three Peaks in the Dolomites. Porsche Italia, here we come. The piston rings of the odd participant are definitely wider than the rings around their eyes, and the morning engine maintenance starts with a fresh slug from the oil can for the old cars. I'm familiar with all these aspects, as a hobby mechanic

myself.

The Speedster proved its qualities on the first day, because the car was really put through its paces, but that doesn't seem to worry it. On the contrary: it stands waiting as if to say "was that it?". So we stop delaying and set off in the direction of Italy and with the prospect of exploring completely new ground.

Here, the roads seem to follow the surrounding topography even more closely, as they twist even more than the previous day. It's great fun because, in addition to the beautiful countryside, I also experience the incredible steering precision of the Speedster. The braking and turn-in points can only be recognised at the last minute, due to the interplay of light and shadows. The convoy moves quickly and the Speedster does its job perfectly. There is not a single moment where I feel that the car is not made for this interplay of throttle, brake and steering.

The Carabinieri show their respect

Not far from Cortina D´Ampezzo, we drop anchor at a typically Italian restaurant, complete with a view of the Three Peaks. For a while I have a feeling of la dolce vita, because when you're enjoying an Italian doppio espresso macchiato looking at a collection of cars such as the one before me, you really become aware of what a privilege being invited on such an event is.

The local Carabinieri are also enjoying life and, perhaps predictably, are keen to chat about cars. We enjoy a friendly exchange with the local custodians of the law, discussing some of the exotic vehicles they have in their own garages. When conversation moves to the Speedster, it receives a respectable thumbs-up and plenty of congratulatory remarks: "well-done!", "bene!" they cry.

After the last "Arrivederci", we begin our return journey. Our entourage drives past rock walls, or through tunnels hewn into the mountain sides, and back towards Austria. The echo from the engines fills all of our ears: the small air-cooled engines sound hoarse, while the larger ones produce a loud bass volume. The four-litre naturally-aspirated offering in the Speedster sings in its own class, with an unrivalled sound when the engine starts to spin between 4,200 and 4,500 rpm.

A vehicle with the same soul as its forebears

While I could share many more of my discoveries from this trip, the one I will end with is this: I had not expected that a sports car manufacturer would, today, be willing and able to build a modern vehicle that feels like a classic car at heart: a car that is unfiltered, honest, with soul.

Hardly any other model has shaped a style in the such a way as the original Speedster did when it was introduced in the 1950s. Few others can claim to have established their own categories with a simple, reduced, no frills ethos. It's easy-going, smart and yet still a sports car through and through.

Stunning in every situation, a machine that works perfectly while tricking us into forgetting anything we've ever come to expect in terms of comfort and gadgets, the 991 Speedster is simply the best car that I have ever driven.

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