

CLASSIC DRIVER

A Techno Classic: Porsche's 959

Lead

The Porsche 959 offered a fascinating glimpse into the future of the automobile. And, despite its innovative, firecracker performance, a well-maintained 959 still commands the legendary reliability of the Zuffenhausen marque.

The late 1980s saw a veritable arms race, as one manufacturer after another tried to outdo its rivals in a bid for technological supremacy. All-wheel steering, four-wheel drive, modern electronics and complex turbocharged engines: all featured in carmakers' catalogues of the time.

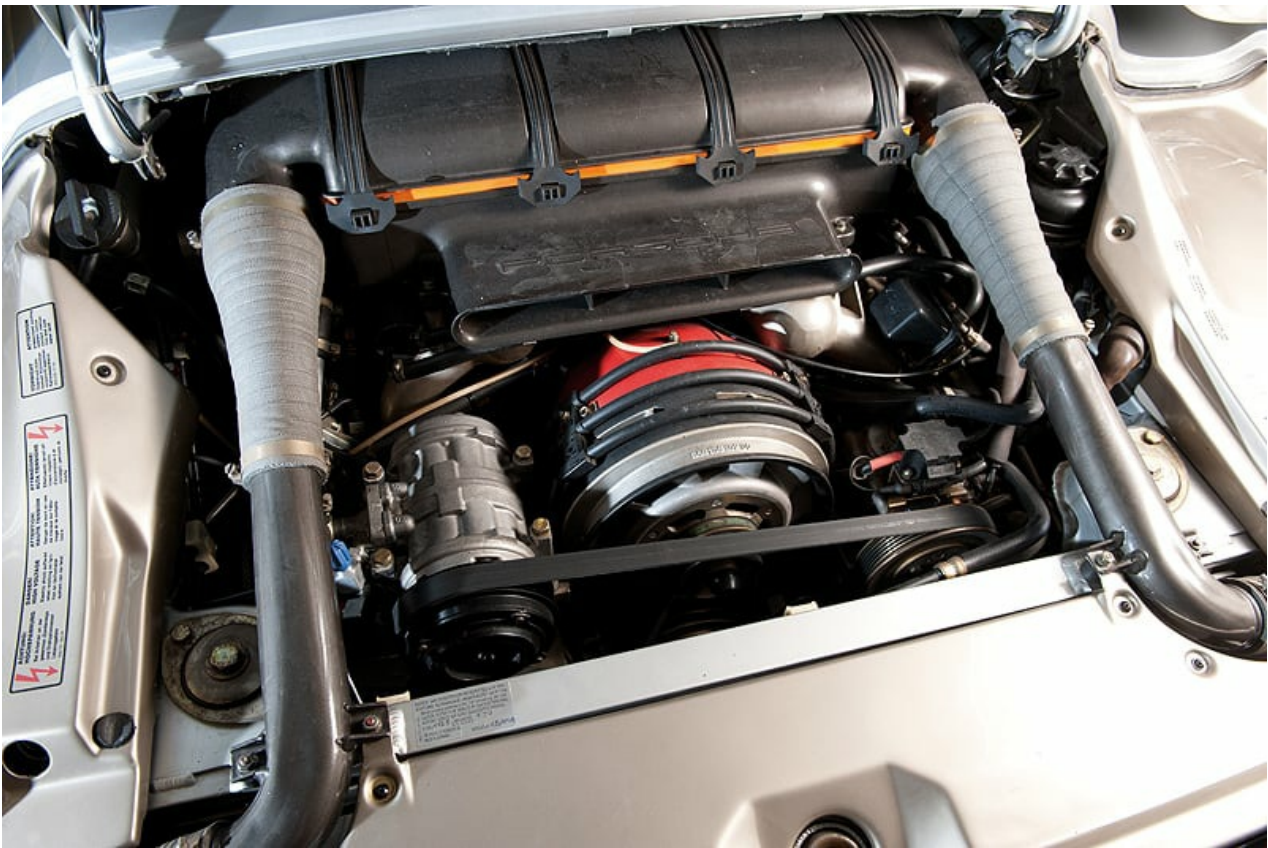
None were more complex and expensive than the outstanding 959, a 4WD car created by the homologation process for racing and rallying, where a minimum of 200 examples were required to be built. After an entry at Le Mans and wins on the Paris-Dakar Rally in 1984 and 1986, it was decided to take the road car side of the project seriously, with lessons learnt on the dunes and deserts finding their way into a fully productionised car.





A complex system of electronic sensors governed the various differentials to ensure that optimum traction was delivered at all times. Powering the new car was a 450bhp version of the turbocharged flat six, with up to 50 per cent of the torque available at the front wheels. Apart from a three-position rotary switch, used to select a setting depending on whether the road was wet, dry or icy, the driver could rely on the car's electronic black box to automatically vector torque to exactly the right wheel at the right time.





For the first time in a production Porsche, the engine featured four-valve, water-cooled cylinder heads. As a result, 450bhp was available at 6900rpm and the tractability of the motor was boosted by the turbochargers placed sequentially in series. The high-tech suspension allowed the driver to raise or lower the car depending on road conditions. As with all race-derived Porsches, weight saving was important, and the 996 sported hollow alloy wheels with an integrated tyre-pressure monitoring system.



Owners and road testers alike loved the new car. Its ride was super-smooth, yet it could run at a comfortable 320km/h on the Autobahn. Using the engine to the maximum, and making full use of the car's clever 4WD system, an experienced driver could drop the clutch at 7,000rpm and sprint from zero to 100km/h in 3.7 seconds. A further 9.6 seconds later and the car would be running at 200km/h.

Such drastic driving is rare today, with most 959s carefully looked after in private collections. This example, to be offered by RM Auctions at its 31 October, London sale, is a rare 'Komfort' model from 1988 with just 651 kilometres on the clock from new. It is generally reported that Porsche spent \$100m on the project – losing money on every car built. RM's example is estimated at a far more reasonable £260,000 - £290,000.

Photos: Simon Clay ©2012 Courtesy of RM Auctions

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