

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## In pursuit of the ultimate Porsche 911 with Paul Stephens

### Lead

Born of a lifelong passion for cars, Paul Stephens has forged a reputation as one of the foremost Porsche specialists. We paid a visit to see its latest AutoArt restomod 911s and find out why Porsche is such a big part of Paul's life...

Few people can lay claim to having driven a Porsche 911 at over 100mph at the age of nine but Paul Stephens can. By that age, Stephens was already experienced behind the wheel – he learned to drive in a Land Rover on his family's farm when he was just six years old and, perhaps inevitably, had his first accident the following year.



"There was a local car club that used to hold autocross and sprint events on a disused airfield," he recalls, "and because it wasn't RAC affiliated, I started competing when I was eight." While he raced classic Minis and Ford Escorts (with considerable success, we might add), it was *that* drive in the Porsche 911 that clearly made a lasting impression. So much so, that he set a personal goal to own one by the time he was 21 – a goal he fulfilled.

A career dedicated to the world's most famous sports car seemed almost pre-destined. Stephens founded his eponymous business on the family farm in 1994, before moving to Mapelstead, Essex, in 2009. And while he initially specialised in the sales of British sports cars, it soon became clear that Porsche 911s were the way forward. It wasn't until 2002, however, when Stephens struck on a novel idea. "We'd done several Carrera 2.7 RS backdate conversions of 3.2s and SCs, which begged the question why not do something similar with the 964?"



"At that time, they cost around £8,000–10,000, but you needed to spend £10,000 to make them work so they weren't viable – nobody wanted them! We started thinking about making the 964 look more retro, as people loved the classic 911s but didn't necessarily want them to own or to drive." And so began the 'AutoArt' brand, dedicated to building later air-cooled Porsche 911s that combined timelessly retro aesthetics with modern performance and creature comforts.

Unlike today, when restomod air-cooled Porsche 911s have morphed into a global phenomenon, the concept – on a commercial level, at least – was very new in the early noughties. And it didn't come without its challenges. "People always told me that we couldn't do it to a 964 because nothing from the old cars fits. But I'm a good friend of the founders of Ginetta and because they build their own cars from scratch, they saw things differently and asked why we didn't just make the panels ourselves? So that's exactly what we did."



From the outset, Stephens was wary to link the cars to a brand, hence the AutoArt moniker. “From the beginning, we made distinct models in a range that people could relate to. This blue car, for example, is known as a 300R, the 300 denoting the horsepower and the ‘R’ denoting ‘Retro’. I didn’t want them to be replicas – of course, there were traits of the 2.7 RS, but the concept was to fuse that with the power of a 993 RS and the handling of a 964 RS.” Today, the ‘Series II’ range comprises the Touring, Classic Touring, and Clubsport, and just a handful of AutoArt cars are built each year.

Looking at the 300R, one of Stephens’ very first AutoArt prototypes, sitting next to the Series II Touring, it’s fair to say the quality has come on leaps and bounds. The Touring is a stunning car and quite unique in its character – the bespoke panels fit beautifully and there’s not a panel gap to be seen, while the unique Fuchs-style wheels sit proud in the swollen arches and draw your eye perhaps before anything else on the car. On the inside, plastic switches have been replaced with exquisitely milled aluminium pieces crafted in the UK. In fact, 99% of the fabrication on the AutoArt cars is done in-house or by local specialists, lending the German car a distinctly British feel and flavour.



Having driven and raced Porsche 911s for almost his entire life, Stephens has an inherent understanding of the car’s handling traits and thus was able to tailor the way his creations drove exactly to what they were designed to do. “Our thing has always been less is more – I used to race lightweight Caterhams and Ginettas and I knew how effective they could be. We begin everything by asking where we can remove weight.”

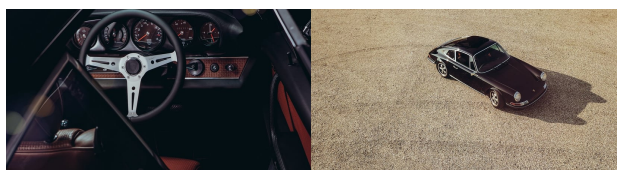
While the cars are adept on the track, on-the-road usability was always a driving force – “We had to make informed decisions re the balance of road and track performance, but what we always wanted was to make a car you could drive to the circuit, not the other way around.” Needless to say, the extent to which the exterior has been honed is matched beneath the surface.





Paul Stephens' pièce de résistance, however, is surely the new Classic Touring, which elevates the AutoArt concept to an entirely different level. At first glance, the car looks like a concours-quality classic 911, which is exactly what Stephens was going for – you'd never believe the car began life as a 3.2 Carrera. But peer a little closer and you'll notice each and every single detail has been tweaked. "With this car, we've faithfully reproduced the 911 S, but we've enhanced the details – there are modern lights behind those retro glass lenses, the shut lines are flawless, everything that was vinyl has been re-trimmed in leather, and everything that was plastic has been milled in aluminium."

The result is a car that looks very familiar to Porschephiles, but in reality is entirely different. These 'hidden delights', as Stephens calls them, make for a wonderfully tactile driving experience. And there are cleverly concealed creature comforts, such as the phone holder in the heating unit atop the dash. "With the Classic Touring, you get the distinct experience of driving a classic 911, but it's also a car you can rely on to start every time you want to drive it and enjoy on cross-continental road-trips without a hitch." Stephens also does original restorations with this obsessive attention to detail, in case you were wondering.



As we pore over the details of the AutoArt cars in various states of build – including the new special edition Le Mans Classic Clubsport – it's easy to overlook the fabulous selection of Porsches Stephens is offering for sale. As we walk around the showroom, Stephens' encyclopaedic knowledge of the cars is clear to see – this is a man who lives and breathes these cars. Let's be thankful to the generous chap who threw the nine-year-old Stephens the keys to a Porsche 911...

*Photos: Alex Lawrence for Classic Driver © 2018*

## Gallery









































































































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