

SEVEN UP

SIXTY YEARS AFTER PORSCHE LANDED ON OUR SHORES, WE GET A TIME-LAPSE LOOK AT THE COMPANY'S EVOLUTION BY DRIVING SEVEN PORSCHEs—ONE FROM EACH DECADE—IN A SINGLE DAY.


f erdinand Porsche was responsible for some of the most groundbreaking cars of the early twentieth century—from the V-16-powered Auto Union grand prix car to the Volkswagen Beetle—and by 1948, he and his son Ferry

figured it was time to put their name to some of them. Two years later, in late 1950, legendary auto importer Max Hoffman introduced Porsche to America, hawking the 356 out of his Manhattan showroom. Shortly thereafter, Hoffman persuaded Porsche that Americans would buy a stripped-down, racier version of the 356. That was the Speedster, and it cemented Porsche's reputation as a builder of primo sports cars.

According to my calculations, 1950 was sixty years ago. Matrimonial tradition suggests that a sixtieth anniversary be celebrated with diamonds, but automotive tradition says that a sixtieth anniversary demands a test drive in one vehicle from each decade. Or at least, I say it does. Whatever gives me the chance to drive a bunch of old Porsches, OK?

If you were going to drive a Porsche from each decade, which ones would you choose? From the '50s, you'd want a Speedster. The '60s saw both the final evolution of the 356 and the introduction of the 911, so that one could go either way. With all due respect to the 914, I'd rather drive a 911 from the '70s. In the '80s and '90s, I'd want to see how the 911 stacked up against its would-be successor, the 928. Then you need a Boxster and, to take us into the current decade, some kind of new Porsche. Lots of tasty options there.

This kind of ambitious project might be impossible with some brands—I think the only way I'd get my hands on a 1950s Ferrari would be if I imitated the valets in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. But Porsche people actually drive their old cars, and, amazingly enough, a number of owners were willing to let me behind the wheel. Ultimately, we assembled quite a cast: a 1958 Speedster, a 1965 356C, a 1973 911T Targa, a 1987 911 Cabriolet, a 1990 928GT, and a 2004 Boxster. Representing today's Porsche: the fantastic and generally misunderstood Boxster Spyder (it's not actually more expensive than a typical Boxster S, I tell you). We convened in one of the leafier environs of Boston, and I set out to time-travel through sixty years of Porsche evolution in a single day.

 BY EZRA DYER
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ABOVE: THE SPEEDSTER'S TIDY DIMENSIONS AND MODEST 1.6-LITER ENGINE SPEAK TO A BYGONE ERA IN SPORTS CARS. BELOW: THE 356C IS MORE REFINED THAN THE SPEEDSTER (A ROOF AND WINDOWS HELP), BUT THE BIGGEST REVELATION FOR US WAS ITS DISC BRAKES.

1958 356 SPEEDSTER

↑ **"THIS IS A STRIPPER,"** SAYS TOM TATE, owner of the black '58 Speedster. "No windows. Minimal heat. Drum brakes." I guess you can tell a car is minimalist when the driver arrives wearing a half-helmet and goggles.

Cars from the 1950s seem to fall into two basic camps: small, agile, and slow, or powerful, ponderous, and colossal. The Speedster clearly belongs in the first group. "All pushrod 356s from 1957 on used a 1600-cc engine that made between 70 and 105 horsepower," Tate tells me. "But it only weighs about 1700 pounds. These cars all got about 30 mpg, back when nobody cared."

I strap in behind the wheel and Tate grabs shotgun. The passenger's seat is mounted higher than the driver's seat; Tate's head pokes up above the windshield. "Now I remember why I lowered the other seat," he says.

The transmission is all synchromesh, but gnashing gears remind me to be careful when shifting. Rev it up, pause a beat, then pull the shifter back into second gear. This car has open exhaust, and I'm a little surprised at how much commotion can be emitted from such a small car.

It's no 911 Turbo, but the Speedster easily keeps up with the manic Boston traffic. You can drive it like a modern car—at least, until you need to stop. The unassisted four-wheel drum brakes certainly add an element of excitement to the Speedster experience. While the steering wheel and shifter react to delicate inputs, the brakes demand a hearty shove to get things slowed down.

The fun thing about the Speedster is that it delivers on its essential recipe—an open-air rollick infused with a whiff of danger—without actually requiring you to go very fast. "The engine is screaming, the tires are barely hanging on, you're Fangio!" Tate says. "Then you look down and see you're going 44 mph."

1965 356C

➔ **CONSIDERING IT'S A VARIATION ON THE** same model, Jeff Leeds's 1965 356C puts out a completely different vibe than the Speedster. It's no Cadillac Coupe de Ville, but the '65 hardtop is a far more refined vehicle than its roofless cousin. The roof and windows are nice luxuries, but the biggest difference is mechanical: four-wheel disc brakes.

The 356 feels similar to the Speedster in

terms of power—maybe a tad slower, actually, on account of its added weight (about 300 pounds) and, on this car, muffled exhaust—but its brakes are thoroughly superior. And strong brakes are definitely an important asset in a car that exhibits, shall we say, a mild handling idiosyncrasy: terrifying lift-throttle oversteer.

In the Speedster, my distrust for the brakes precluded building much speed on the tree-lined test route. With the coupe, I'm confident enough to drive harder, braking in a straight line and then holding the throttle steady through a big downhill corner. I'm not going that fast—perhaps 40 mph on a curve rated for 30—but I keep my foot on the gas just in case. I find it hard to believe that the tail would come out at this pace, but I'm respecting the 356's reputation. Leeds, for his part, is silent. That is, until I've got the wheel straightened and the corner behind us.

"I was hoping you wouldn't lift," Leeds says. Apparently, my modest speed was still quick enough to have caused an impromptu adventure in oversteer. "It's a swing axle, so lifting changes the suspension geometry," he says. "Once you're used to it, you can use it to rotate into corners. But if you're not used to it..." Leeds just lets that sentence hang. It doesn't bear contemplating, really. But we both know there were quite a few 356 owners who didn't last long enough to buy a 911.



1973 911T TARGA

➔ **TOM FRISARDI'S 1973 911T TARGA** makes 140 hp and weighs 2380 pounds. Ponder that for a moment—once upon a time, the Porsche 911 had roughly the same power and weight as the new Ford Fiesta.

If you've never driven an air-cooled 911 (and I hadn't), the first thing you notice is the pedals. They're hinged at the bottom, so the arc of their travel is the opposite of what you expect. Some idiosyncrasies are endearing, but I think I'd have a hard time getting used to floor-hinged pedals. There's barely room down there for my feet as it is, so I have to angle my shoes sideways to get a firm stab at the pedals.

I remark to Frisardi that it feels like there's nowhere to put my left foot. "Well," he says, "on the Targa cars they welded in extra reinforcements to buttress that area, and that makes the footwell smaller." Between this car and the tiny 356s, I'm starting to get the sense that bygone decades were populated by a race of delicate woodland nymphs. Step into the freak tent, and come see the mighty giant who stands five foot eleven!

We get a clear stretch of road, and I give the 2.3-liter flat six some revs. It's not the night before Christmas, but the phrase "there arose such a clatter" springs to mind. A new Porsche six-cylinder feels like it would spin smoothly to centrifuge speeds; this air-cooled contraption sounds like it might fly apart at 5000 rpm. It's wonderful. Between the manual steering and the boisterous sound track, this is the sort of car you could drive all day at the speed limit and still have a great time.

Then again, it's also a 911, and thus calibrated to reward hard driving. For instance, the brakes don't feel exceptionally strong at low speeds, but Frisardi assures me that they get better the faster you go. "The brakes aren't power-assisted, but when the adrenaline's going, they feel great," he says. Who needs power assistance when you've got the power of fear?

1987 911 CABRIOLET

➔ **I CAN TOTALLY SEE MYSELF DRIVING THIS THING** home to Greenwich after spending my day hawking junk bonds on Wall Street. Buy! Sell! Coffee's for closers! (OK, wrong era.) I mean, does anything say '80s yuppie like a red 911 Cab?

Paul Tagliamonte bought this car twelve years ago with 7000 miles on it. Now it's got 16,884 miles on the clock. Basically, I'm getting an accurate facsimile of a new 911 test drive, circa 1987.

By that time, the 911's engine was up to 3.2 liters and 214 hp. But the behind-the-wheel experience is remarkably similar to the 1973 car. Driving these two models back-to-back, you can see how glacially the 911 evolved—and even then, the refinements were



TOP: IN THE MID-1970S, AMERICAN CARS WERE DEVOLVING INTO EMISSIONS-STRANGLERED YACHTS, BUT THE 911 MANAGED TO REMAIN FRISKY AND ENTERTAINING. ABOVE: THE '87 CABRIO FEELS VERY SIMILAR TO THE '73 TARGA, EVEN THOUGH IT'S MUCH MORE POWERFUL.

mainly mechanical. Legend has it that the styling changed so little over the years that the windshield from a 1964 911 will fit any model up to 1998.

It's been a while since I drove any car from the '80s, but I'm pretty sure power steering was a common feature by 1987. Not on the 911, though. Midway through a corner, I hit a seam in the pavement and am faintly amazed to feel the steering wheel twitch in my hands. Was that just... bump steer? Wow. The Lotus Elise has nothing on a vintage 911 for steering feel.

It's a sunny day, but I keep the top up. Tagliamonte says it's easy to lower the roof, but the two special wrenches sitting on the passenger seat hint otherwise. Even in 1987, you needed tools to put the top down? I'm beginning to understand why Porsche felt the need to develop the 928. By the '80s, the 911 exhibited some alarmingly anachronistic elements. Or charmingly anachronistic, depending on your perspective.

Tagliamonte points out that this car represents a different era,

not only for technology but for Porsche's manufacturing methods as well. "I'll tell you what I love," he says. "In 1987 they still did fine coachwork. It was artisan work. They were like the German versions of U.S. hot-rodgers—you poke around the car and see that they used really cool brackets and mounting methods and hardware. Everything was built to incredibly tight tolerances. It's very apparent that the car was handbuilt. The sheet-metal has hammer marks where they folded it over."

They literally don't build 'em like they used to. In the case of the 911, progress is at least a little bit bittersweet.



1990 928GT

DRIVING THE PORSCHE 928 is like glimpsing an alternate vision of Porsche's future. The 928, remember, was originally conceived to replace the 911. Obviously, that didn't happen. And when you're driving a 928, you can see why.

It's not that the 928 is a worse car than the 911. By most objective measures, it's actually a better car. It's simply aimed in a completely different direction.

Mark Scott, who bought this manual-transmission 928GT a year ago, hands me the keys. His ten-year-old daughter, Alexandra, climbs in back. Unlike in a 911, there's plenty of room back there. You can see what Porsche was thinking with this car: it's faster than a 911, more practical, more modern. When the 911 was running an air-cooled six, the 928GT was stuffed with a 32-valve, 326-hp, 5.0-liter V-8. Where the 911 had unassisted steering, the 928 had variable-effort power assist. And so on down the spec sheet.

That variable-assist steering varies from heavy to heavier, as if calibrated to dampen out all twitchiness at 150 mph and beyond. The shifter is fantastic—stubby lever, quick throws—but I find the

COMPARED WITH A CONTEMPORARY 911, THE 928 OFFERS A MORE SPACIOUS AND LUXURIOUS INTERIOR—AND A 5.0-LITER, 32-VALVE V-8.

dogleg first gear, down and left, a bit strange. Contemporary tests put the 928GT's 0-to-60-mph time in the mid-five-second range, but it probably would've been quicker without that awkward 1-2 shift. It feels quicker than that.

The big V-8 has so much torque that you'd never need to rev it too hard around town, but when you open it up, the 928 hurls its pointy prow down the road with an urgency that increases with the revs. It's got big top-end power, this engine—as well it should have, for a car that cost more than \$70,000 twenty years ago.

This car is high-tech luxury, a long-legged continent-crusher. With the 928, Porsche built a lightsaber, only to discover that people still liked their switchblades.

2004 BOXSTER

STEVE ROSS IS THE PRESIDENT of the Northeast chapter of the Porsche Club of America. The fact that the Porsche club prez owns a Boxster should tell you something about Porsche's once-controversial convertible. We sort of take the Boxster for granted now that it's been around for more than a dozen years, but it's an excellent used car. You don't buy a used Boxster to show off. You buy it because it's great to drive.

Ross's car is a base Boxster, not an S. "I drove them both, and honestly, I couldn't really tell the difference," Ross says. In 2004, the Boxster made 225 hp; the S put out 258. And I think I agree with Ross. Throttling his car down an on-ramp and running up through the gears, it feels plenty strong. It makes the signature flat-six honking howl. The steering is dead-on precise, and I know from prior Boxster experience that this car would be perfectly happy—

WE MAY TAKE THE BOXSTER FOR GRANTED, BUT DRIVING A 2004 MODEL REAFFIRMS THE INHERENT RIGHTNESS OF THE CONCEPT.



neutral and naturally composed—if it were on a track.

And track it Ross does. This is the rare modern convertible designed to pass muster at a road course. “The roll hoops pass the broomstick test,” Ross says, referring to the practice of running a broomstick from the windshield to the roll bar to make sure the driver’s helmet doesn’t become a prop rod for an overturned car. Ross’s Boxster even has a removable trailer hitch, which he uses to tow his track tires. How cool is that?

AUTOMOBILE MAGAZINE’S West Coast editor, Jason Cammisa, recently bought a used Boxster, and after driving this car, I’m tempted to run home and start trolling the classifieds. I need a reason not to. “I’ve heard that used Boxsters can be trouble, as far as reliability,” I say. “Well, I haven’t had any problems with mine,” he replies. Damn.

With the Boxster, Porsche finally figured out how to break the 911 habit while retaining the main ingredient that loyalists consider mandatory—a horizontally opposed engine somewhere behind your seat. The Boxster was a revelation: not a 911 but still a Porsche.

2011 BOXSTER SPYDER

SOME CARS ARE INTENTIONAL COLLECTIBLES, built in limited numbers and meant to be stashed away until they show up at a Bonhams auction thirty years out. The new 911 Speedster is like that. The Boxster Spyder is not—hey, they’ll build as many as we care to buy. But I suspect that the Spyder will become an unintentional collector’s item, one of those cars that’s misunderstood in its own time and fully appreciated only through the lens of history.

Because, on the face of it, the Boxster S makes far more sense. The S cedes very little performance to gain a lot of usability—power top, comfy seats, more forgiveness in the suspension. The Spyder, then, is a litmus test for your automotive priorities: are you willing to cram yourself into that fixed-rake, carbon-fiber mop-



THE BOXSTER SPYDER IS A VERY INTENSE PACKAGE. AND IT’S NOT JUST THE BEST BOXSTER, IT’S ONE OF THE BEST PORSCHEs EVER.

bucket of a seat and wrestle with that Ikea build-it-yourself roof merely to ditch 176 pounds in the name of Zen driving purity? I suspect that a fair percentage of Spyders will return to the dealer with a couple thousand miles on the odometer after the original owners concede defeat.

Most companies would have a pretty hard time drawing a comparison between anything from the ’50s and the cars they make now. But in spirit, it’s not hard to see the principles of the ’58 Speedster—and the ’73 Targa and ’87 911 Cab—alive and well in the Spyder: a raspy engine behind you, the sun overhead, light weight, direct controls. It was a fine formula sixty years ago. It still is today.

Back at the dawn of its U.S. introduction, Porsche played its own game, charging big money for cars that prioritized feel and agility over outright power. The Boxster Spyder sticks to the same recipe as the 356 Speedster—maybe it’s not the outright fastest thing you can buy for the money, but damn if it doesn’t feel great to have that wheel in your hands. **AM**

THE FIREMAN

The American who served as Porsche’s troubleshooter for the U.S. market.

Gene Langmesser, CEO of n2a Motors, a California-based retro coachbuilder, served as a project engineer for Porsche from 1988 to 1992. The Germans called him the Fireman, because he extinguished the small conflagrations that arise with any change to a design. And some of the challenges he faced were caused specifically by the U.S. market.

“The 993-series had wraparound taillights that worked fine in

**LANGMESSER ALONGSIDE
THE CORVETTE-BASED
n2a ANTEROS.**



Europe,” Langmesser says. “But when you drove the car someplace like Arizona, the combination of heat from the desert, the engine, and the taillight bulbs would cause the retaining clips to melt.” Which caused the taillamps to fall out. Langmesser redesigned the clips.

Other design challenges came down to cultural sensibilities and Langmesser’s role as an American in a German company. The 993’s windshield wipers, for instance. “The 993 windshield was so symmetrical that a single wiper could’ve cleared it with the exact pattern they required. That’s what I wanted to do. But the Porsche bosses viewed the single wiper as a Mercedes-Benz thing. They said something like, ‘People pay good money for a Porsche—this is not a Mercedes.’ So I gave it two wipers, but they’re mounted about two inches apart.” Thus was Porsche’s honor preserved.

Langmesser points out that Porsche’s engineering muscle still extends far beyond its own vehicles. Even one of America’s most star-spangled brands has some Porsche DNA in its lineup. “The Harley-Davidson V-Rod,” Langmesser says. “That’s a Porsche motor.”