

THE BEST ROAD IN WORLD



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DARREN HEATH

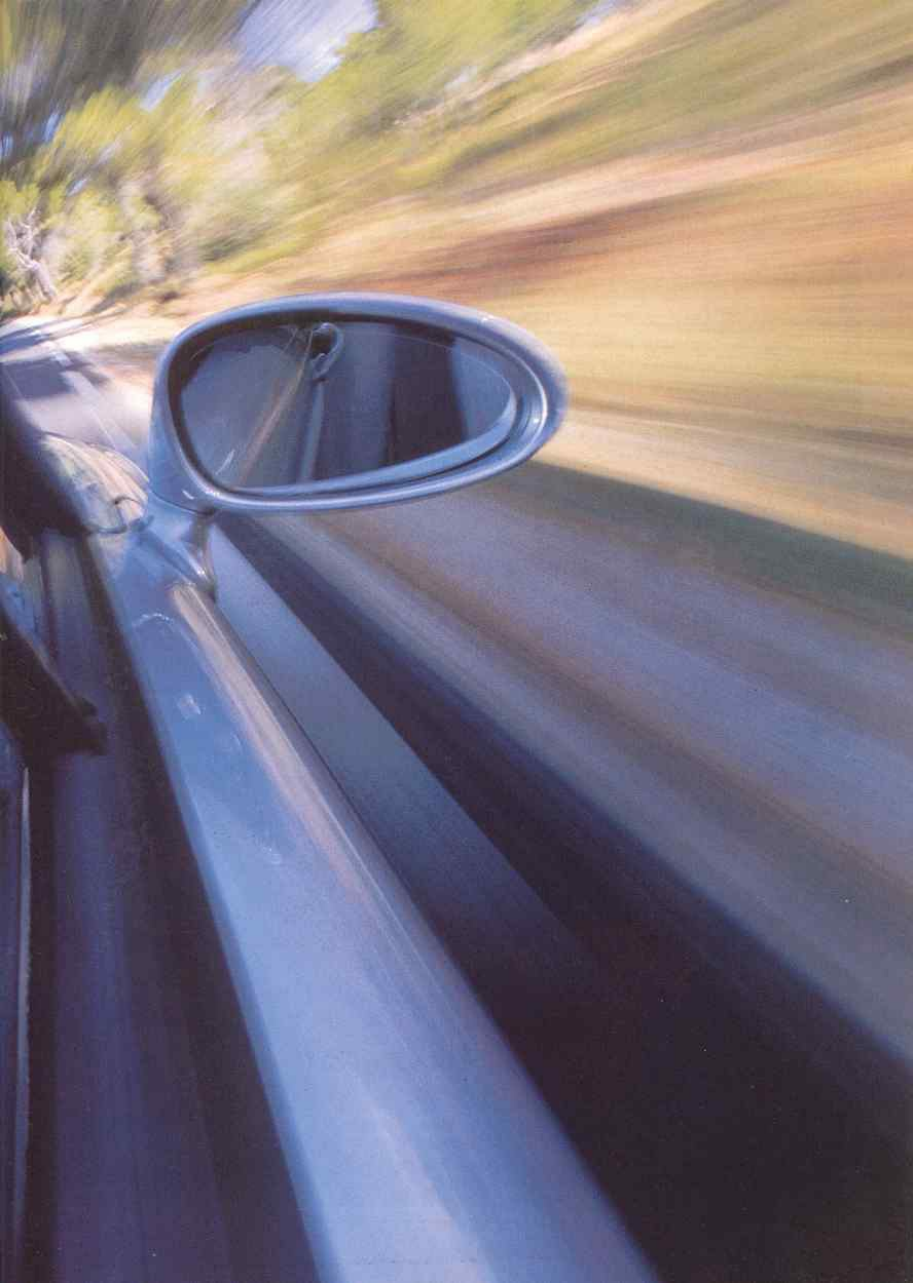
DRIVER'S THE

Forget Dartmoor and the Highlands of Scotland. If you want to know where the F1 drivers get their kicks, turn left out of the Paul Ricard circuit in France. **Colin Goodwin does just that ...**

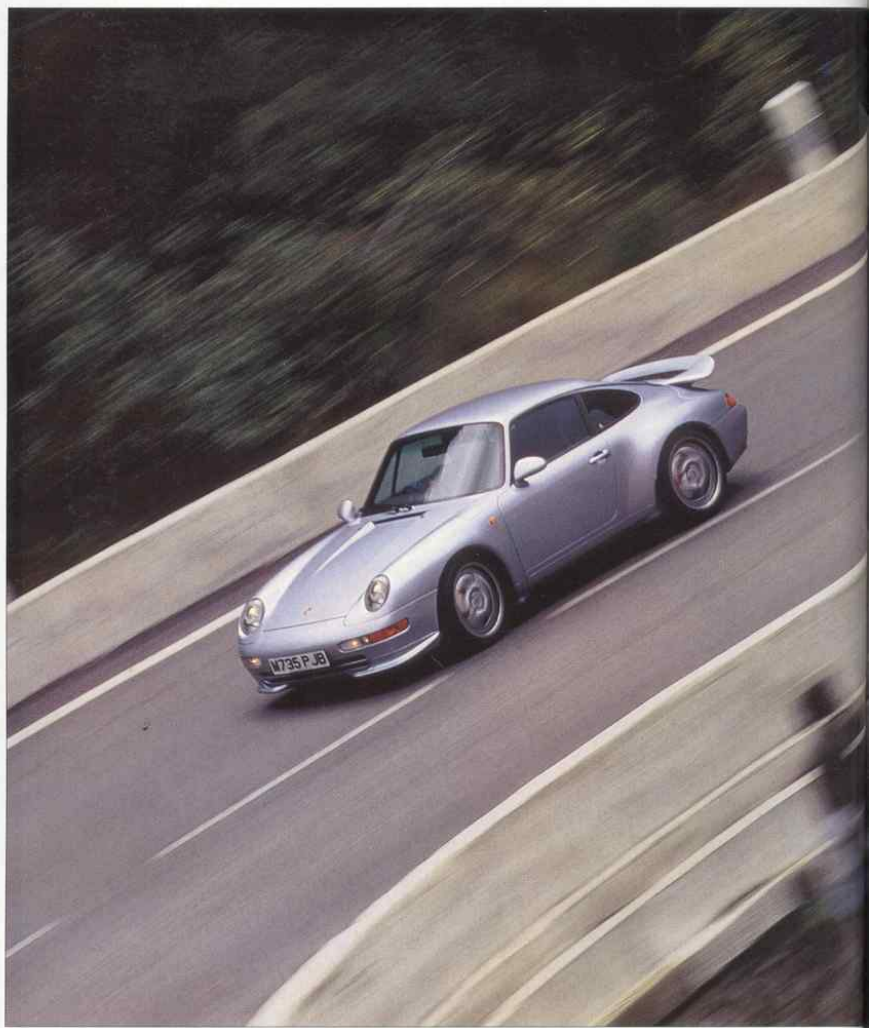




... in the new Porsche 911 Carrera RS



'THE 911 BARKS THROUGH THE GEARS TOWARDS A



DISAPPEARING LEFT-HANDER. THIS CAR IS QUICK'

DON'T TURN RIGHT, TURN LEFT. THAT'S what the F1 drivers tell you to do when you're leaving the circuit Paul Ricard in the south of France. Not because if you go left onto the N8 there's a shortcut to the Marseille autoroute, or because that way there's less traffic. They say go left because it puts you straight onto one of the most dramatic stretches of road in Europe. And when the Formula One jocks tell you that it's the best driving road they know, you'd better believe it.

Formula One snapper Darren Heath told us of this road. Of how he once got blown away by Damon Hill driving a rental car after a Williams test session at the circuit. Of how he raced another photographer (they had each hired a Peugeot 106) all the way down the four or so miles of this mountain road. Of how, on a dark note, a young lensman, during his first assignment, was being followed by Patrick Tambay (the ex-Ferrari/Renault/McLaren driver) when he left the road and was killed. And then there is Frank Williams, whose crippling accident happened on the N8.

Even today there is a fresh bunch of flowers tied to a chevron sign, a grim reminder that death is always riding in the back seat. Perhaps it is good, then, that the car we're driving does not have back seats. It doesn't have a lot of things, in fact, like much in the way of sound-deadening, electric windows, proper door handles or any other of the gadgets that one might take for granted in a £65,000 car.

It is a Porsche 911 RS. The business 911. The no-compromise 911 for those interested only in seeking ultimate driving pleasure, on or off the race track. And that makes it the perfect car for sampling this wonderful stretch of tarmac. Sure, there are more suitable cars for the 800-mile trip to the south of France (is it that distance? I was having too much fun at the time to notice or to care) and some may think that undertaking a round trip of almost 2000 miles simply to drive four is eccentric. But not for these four miles. And especially not if you cover them many times over.

The road is damp when, early in the morning, we arrive at Paul Ricard. And so are my palms as they lightly grip the RS's leather wheel. That's why I'm wearing racing gloves. Bit poncy I know, but better to suffer a few catcalls than miss last orders due to hands slipping off the wheel. Because if you do come off here, it's big. For much of the four miles you are clinging to the hillside, protected from a drop off the edge only by a short concrete wall. The good news is that on several stretches you can look across the valley and see what's coming the other way.

No wonder I am perspiring. I suspect that photographer Heath is, too, as we make our first trip down the road to the village of Le Bausset. I have already fallen in love with the RS. I knew that I would, for I loved its predecessor, too. That wonderful engine note, so flat, so strong. And not only does this motor have 300bhp, but it pushes a car that weighs 100kg less than a stock Carrera 2. On a downhill section of the autoroute north of Paris we saw an indicated 180mph.

But that's irrelevant now. Here we must follow the 911 rules: thou must not lift off mid-bend, thou must go slow in, hard out. And don't let anyone tell you that the latest 911 is foolproof: the engine is still in the back and physics is physics.

So we'll take it easy at first. Especially as I'm not very keen on going downhill fast and, of course, the surefire way to trash a 911 is to go too hard into a wet, downhill corner. The road surface is perfect and, by the look of it, pretty new. This is good, for although this latest RS is a fair bit softer than the last one, it is no feather bed.



The road left out of Paul Ricard is a never-ending flow of hairpins, rapid esses and switchbacks. Driven flat out it raises a sweat - which, claims Goodwin - is why he's wearing show-off gloves

Driving doesn't get much better than this: a great driving car and a road endorsed by the world's best drivers

'AND SO THIS FORMIDABLE ROAD WRIGGLES ON

Immediately after leaving the circuit we are in action. The 911 barks through the gears towards a disappearing left-hander. This car is quick, almost Turbo-quick. But even more dramatic is the way it slows down: hit the pedal at 62mph and you are stopped dead in 2.7 seconds. Just a stab brings our speed down from around 100mph to, say, 50 for this first corner. The concrete wall appears at my right shoulder as the Porsche plunges through the bend. It is good that I've had the long drive down here to get used to the Porsche, for although I've driven many 911s, it always takes me a while to re-adjust to its odd pedals. We don't want fumbling feet here.

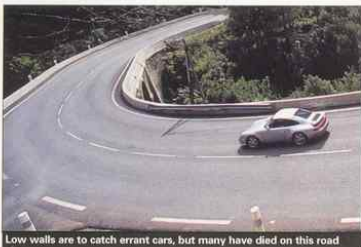
In no time a road sign appears showing a left turn and a sharp right. The 911 is such a compact car and so easy to see out of. The 3.8-litre flat-motor crackles as I hook third then second. The RS has a variable-length intake system, called Varioram, that moves the torque to where you need it most: you can hear the engine note change as the revs build and the intakes shorten to improve top-end thrust. This car sounds great, and all the better for its lack of sound insulation.

Suddenly, we have burst out onto a marvellous open section. You can see what's coming the other way and, to the right, you can look across the valley stretching away to the coast and the town of Bandol. There's nothing coming so we move over to the left to straighten out a couple of kinks and then it's hard on the brakes and into third for a gentle right, then a harder left and we're into a tree-lined section. The kerbs have three sides; not quite bevelled enough to be ridden over – it would shatter the RS's split-rims – but enough not to flip the car if you did mount them. And so this formidable road wriggles on downwards. Forget Sega, this is reality. It makes you feel alive, this sort of driving. Perhaps it is the knowledge that a big mistake would be your last mistake.

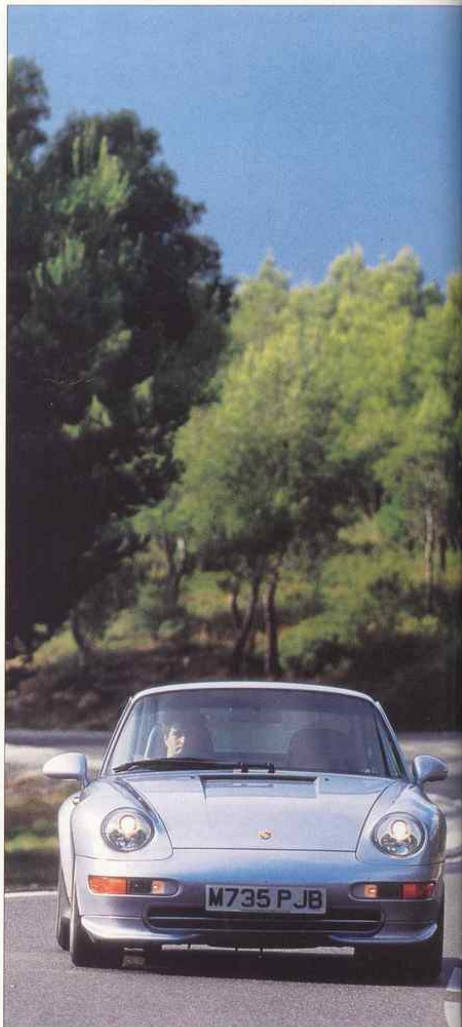
A diving right, a clutch of esses, a hairpin, a short climb and then more drops. As we go on I look for landmarks that will later serve as reference points. A few blinding minutes later we come to Le Beausset and the end of the run. We turn around and do the whole lot again in reverse order. The damp patches are fast disappearing as the Mediterranean sun strakes the hillside.

Uphill is more fun. The way that the RS puts its power down is incredible: it feels as though the 265/35 rear tyres are digging ruts in the tarmac as the rear of the car hunkers down. And then you are catapulted forwards in a rush of engine noise and adrenaline. We catch a Ducati rider who is also enjoying the N8 – and going for it, too. But he cannot match the Porsche's cornering and braking abilities and we stay with him. What a duet the flat-six and V-twin play! For once, I wish I was outside the car.

The RS is the most thrilling sports car I've ever driven. Even



Low walls are to catch errant cars, but many have died on this road



DOWNWARDS. FORGET SEGA, THIS IS REALITY²




Carrera RS has incredible grip, more go than standard car and more stop, too. It's the most entertaining 911 there is.

more so than the Ferrari F355, although I'd love to drive that car here, too. The Porsche seems so solid, the engine so unburstable, that you feel it would last forever, even at this level of punishment. They may have painted the wheels grey, but the brakes are no less effective than when I picked up the car, 1000 miles ago. And the more I career across this road, the more the RS's grip and ability astound me. I'd love to try this car on a race circuit where I could go completely crackers. I reckon it would be an incredible experience. That is what this car is for.

Some folk have got the RS wrong. A rip-off, they say: less kit than a standard 911 yet it costs £10,000 more. They don't realise how special this car is. It has thinner glass (excepting the windscreen) than standard, an aluminium bonnet, a beefed-up gearbox, a 200cc bigger engine with 28 extra horses and those amazing Turbo brakes. All these things cost money. And we haven't even mentioned the Varioram kit.

There is other fun to be had on this road, too, it seems, for there's a couple of hookers sitting in their cars outside the circuit. One is in a Ford Probe, which seems rather fitting. No, of course we didn't.

Heath is used to snapping flying Formula One cars so he's happy for me to keep thrashing past the lens at full grunt. The more times I blast along this road and the better I get to know it, the more I'm enjoying it. Which probably means it's time to turn in - while I'm still ahead. Besides, I still have the drive back to England to enjoy tomorrow.

We leave the Riviera on the Autoroute Du Soleil, but the thought of perhaps never driving this wonderful car again eventually tempts me away from the autoroute. Instead I take the road from Dijon to Reims. It is atrocious weather, very wet and not a little windy. Perfect. I love driving fast cars in the rain. You can never relax, never allow your concentration to wander. Especially in the RS, for it likes to wander a bit, too. Hit a couple of pot-holes, ride some tramline-ridges and you start thinking that the RS would be too much of a pain to live with: too nervous, too wearing. But then, minutes later, you come to a great bend and you take it right, feeling the back stick to the road as you blast out onto the straight. Or you get the tail sliding out on a particularly moist bit and you resist lifting off and do what you have to do in a 911 and keep your foot in, twirling the wheel to straighten yourself up. Or perhaps you have just despatched five sluggish cars up a steep hill and are marvelling at the RS's incredible sprinting powers. For me, just listening to the boxer engine at 6000rpm, and looking in the rear-view mirror at the swirling maelstrom of spray curling out from the rear of the car is enough. But it is the road from circuit Paul Ricard to Le Beausset that convinced me. 

PORSCHE 911 CARRERA RS

Price	£55,245	Rear suspension	Upper and lower control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Engine	3746cc 12-valve sohc flat-six	Brakes	Ventilated discs
Bore/stroke, mm	102.0/76.4	Tyres	F 225/40 SR18 R 265/35 SR18
Compression ratio	11.3 to one	Length/width/wheelbase	4245/1735/2284mm
Power	300bhp at 6500rpm	Weight	1270kg
Torque	261lb ft at 5400rpm	PERFORMANCE	
Specific output	80bhp per litre	Max speed, mph	172mph
Power-to-weight ratio	240bhp per tonne	0-60mph	4.8sec
Transmission	Six-speed manual	Fuel economy, mpg	23.7mpg
Front suspension	MacPherson struts, coil springs, lower wishbones, anti-roll bar		