

Price war

Is the 968 just a 944S2 with a makeover, or is the newer car really worth as much as twice the price of its predecessor?

Story by Philip Raby; photography by Michael Whitestone



944S2 and 968 Sport at a glance

	944S2	968
Engine capacity	2990cc	2990cc
Maximum power	211bhp at 6800rpm	240bhp at 6200rpm
Maximum torque	206lb/ft at 4000rpm*	225lb/ft at 4100rpm
Weight	1320kg	1345kg
0-62mph	6.9 seconds	6.5 seconds
Maximum speed	149mph	155mph



Market forces create some strange situations. Take the case of Porsche's 944S2 and 968. A late 944S2 could be just a few months older than an early 968, yet be worth as little as half the value of the newer car. It's a scenario that becomes even more bizarre when you realise that - at first sight, at least - the 968 is little more than a facelifted 944S2, and appears to offer few advantages.

But there's a good reason for this apparent inconsistency that makes a typical 968 worth around £12,000, while an equivalent 944S2 comes in at about £6000. It's simply that the 968 is rarer and more sought after.

During its three-year production life, from 1992 to 1995, just 12,778 968s of all types were built - and that's really not many in car-manufacturing terms. But well over 150,000 944s of all types were built between 1981 and 1991, and no fewer than 33,091 of those were the last - and best - S2 models, made from 1989 to 1991. So the 968 certainly wins in the Scarcity stakes.

But then rarity isn't everything. Many once commonplace everyday saloon cars are rare machines these days, but that alone doesn't in itself mean that any survivors have any monetary value - far from it. A car (usually) has to be desirable in its own right for someone to be willing to pay good money for it. And the fact of the matter is that the 968 is more desirable than the 944S2.

So just what is it about the 968 that makes it so much more desirable than a 944S2? Is it really the better of the two cars, or is it all hype? Would you be better advised saving your money and opting for the cheaper 944? In order to try to answer that question we're gathered together an example of each.

The 944S2 is a 1990 coupé in Linen Metallic (pale gold, basically) with 87,000 miles on the clock. In the other corner is a 1995 968 Sport in Midnight Blue with 48,000 miles under its belt. We're involving both cars' owners in the proceedings, and by a happy coincidence they're brothers.

Alex Cook from Bristol owns the 968, while Matthew, who lives in London, is the proud keeper of the 944.

Both have been passionate about Porsches since childhood, but it was Alex who started the ball rolling three years ago. 'I always wanted a Porsche, but I didn't know which one to buy. I fancied a 993 but couldn't afford one, so one Saturday I decided to get a 968, and bought one the following Tuesday,' he says with a smile.

But that's not the car he has with him today, he explains. 'It was a 1992 coupé in Guards Red. The car I have now was bought by a friend of mine at about the same time that I bought my first Porsche, and when I saw it I told him to let me know if he ever wanted to sell it. He did, and I bought it from him just six weeks ago.'

Matthew reckons his brother's first purchase wasn't the primary influence in him buying a 944. 'My boss had a 993, and that's what got me really hooked on Porsches,' he explains. 'When I was made redundant a couple of years ago I used some of the money to buy a 944S2. I wanted a Carrera 3.2, but because I have to park on the street in London I decided that one of those would be too much of a liability. Then I read the 944 buyers' guide in the October 2001 issue of 911 & Porsche World and decided that a 944 would probably suit me perfectly.'

Perhaps they're just being polite, but at first it's difficult to persuade either of the brothers to be critical of the other's Porsche. As our conversation develops, though, they both start to err towards the 968. 'I certainly wouldn't change my 944 for a 968,' begins Matthew. 'The two cars are really very similar, so a 968 is a lot more money for little gain. I'm envious of Alex's air-conditioning, though.' But even that remark is more an observation of the individual car's option list than an advantage of the 968. Air-con was available for the 944S2, although few UK cars had it.

Alex, perhaps not surprisingly, is rather more enthusiastic about his own car. 'I'd say that the 968 does everything ten per cent better than the 944 - handling, power, transmission. And it definitely looks better.' Matthew has to agree with this

fashion so typical of 944s and 968s – until you get used to it, you think the battery's on its way out. It's not, though, and the motor fires up and quickly settles into a smooth idle that belies its mere four cylinders – as with the 944 unit there are two contra-rotating balance shafts to help iron out the inherent imbalance of any large four-cylinder unit (as for the 944S2, the capacity is 2990cc).

In fact, the 968 has basically the same engine as the 944S2, albeit refined with, among other things, VarioCam valve timing to increase power from 211bhp at 5800rpm to 240bhp at 6200rpm. It's a very willing engine, too, with bags of torque from low revs coupled with an enthusiasm to rev right to the limit (with a satisfying exhaust note thrown in for good measure). This rare combination lets you drive the car either as if it's powered by a lazy, large-capacity unit, or rev the pants off it as you would a small-engined hot hatchback.

Choose the latter technique and you'll appreciate the six-speed gearbox, which makes driving a lot of fun. Even though sixth offers a similar overall gearing to the 944's fifth the ratios below are closer, so you can flick from gear to gear just for the fun of it. And you'll want to, as well – the action is quick and positive, albeit with rather a long throw.

On winding 'A'- and 'B'-roads the 968 really comes into its own as you choose just the right gear for a corner, and power out as only a well-balanced, rear-wheel-drive car will let you, while the Sport suspension fitted to this example gives near-flat cornering. The trade-off, though, is a very firm ride, and for which the Sport has often been criticised. But we don't find it uncomfortably hard, and could happily live with it on a day-to-day basis.

Having said that, as soon as we drive the 944S2 we appreciate the softer suspension – and not just for the improved ride-quality. The Sport's hard set-up is superb on smooth roads and racetracks, but hit a bump or pot-hole mid-corner and the car's knocked off line. There's no such problem with the 944, which has more compliant springing (as, indeed, does a standard, non-Sport 968).

The softer ride is also helped by the fact that the 944 has 16-inch wheels compared to the 968's 17-inch rims. The latter may look more sporty, but those relatively low-profile tyres do transmit more bumps and noise into the cabin. On the downside the older car's taller tyre sidewalls do complain during high-speed cornering, and on balance we'd suggest the 968 has the edge when it comes to handling.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the 944's engine isn't as noticeably different to that of the 968 as we'd thought it might be. The newer car is ultimately more powerful and freer-revving, but we're pleasantly surprised by the 944, and it actually feels more responsive at low revs (even though the 968 has a flatter torque curve on paper). In fact, it feels just as you'd expect a large-capacity normally aspirated engine – torquey and a little lazy. Which is good, because the five-speed gearbox doesn't encourage changes for the sake of it like the 968's does. It's OK, but is notchier and not as pleasant to use and, of course, has slightly bigger gaps between the intermediate ratios.





Rare treat

As the last of the 1980s sports cars, the 944S2 is a rare find. It's a car that's been around for a long time, but it's still going strong. It's a car that's been around for a long time, but it's still going strong.



Available in a variety of colors, the 944S2 is a car that's been around for a long time, but it's still going strong.

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Fancy a 968 – or a 944S2?

Then you need to see the comprehensive buyers' guide in our July 2004 issue (left). This includes all you need to know about this now relatively rare Porsche, and helps you choose a good one. The 944S2 last featured in a *911 & Porsche World* buyers' guide in the April 2004 issue. Both magazines are still available from our back-issues department for £4.95 each including UK postage, or for £4.21 each including UK postage to subscribers. To order either of the above – and other back issues – call 01737 814311, or else go to www.chpltd.com. See also page 120 in this edition. ■



Most obvious difference between 944 (left) and 966 (below) is in the two cars' pop-up headlamps. The 944's are hinged at the rear, and mounted in the black-plastic pods that first appeared in the 924 in the mid-1970s, but 968's hinge up from the front, rather like the 928's - and look all the better for it, too. Indeed, 968's styling is smoother all round



On the whole, though, the 944 doesn't feel all that different to the 968. Indeed, the only thing we really miss is that aforementioned steering wheel. The 944's rather unattractive four-spoke item does the job, certainly, but nothing more than that.

Swap steering wheels, then, and you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference between the cars simply by looking at their cabins. The 944 is finished in Linen – that pale-cream leather with matching carpets that seems to have been so popular in Porsches during the 1980s. It looks quite dated today, and can be a pain to keep clean, but the effect remains one of opulence and comfort.

The 968's interior, by contrast, is finished entirely in black, and has uninspiring fabric seats which were standard Sport fare (the non-Sport cars had leather seats). And since it's a Sport we're also treated to exactly the same

door panels as the 944 instead of the redesigned 968 items, and there's a 944-style digital clock in place of an analogue item. Oh, and when you're driving the 944 you soon come to appreciate that while the rectangular 'elephant ear' mirrors don't look so nice from outside they do offer a much better view than the smaller so-called teardrops.

So is the 968 the better car overall? Of course it is. In looks alone it wins hands down, while the power, handling and transmission are all improved to a worthwhile degree. But is it twice as good as a 944S2?

Well, no it isn't – not by any stretch of the imagination. Let's be practical here. You could easily bring a 944's suspension up to 968 Sport standard with uprated springs and dampers, and 17-inch (or even 18-inch) wheels. Power, too, can be massaged by various after-market tuning products, or you could opt for a 250bhp 944 Turbo. Throw in a three-spoke steering wheel and you'll have a car that will feel and drive very much like a 968, but still at a fraction of the cost.

What you won't get, of course, is the 968's

good looks, although you could equally easily fit that car's wheels, mirrors, door handles and rear spoiler to a 944. Choose a car in silver or a metallic dark blue and you'll be amazed at how far these little changes can go in updating the 944's appearance.

The bad news, though, is that even if you do all this to a 944S2 you'll make very little impact on the car's value. It pains us to say it, but the fact is that the 944 seems to be heading the way of the 924 before it – falling in value to such an extent that it's dropped off the scale of desirability, and fast becoming little more than just another old car, all too often driven by people without the resources or the inclination to maintain it correctly.

The 968, on the other hand, is rare enough, and has enough of a following, to have ensured its classic status in the Porsche world. Not even the most hardened Porsche snob will turn his – or her – nose up at a 968, as they quite probably would to a 944. But if you're not worried about that (and we're certainly not) and can't afford a 968, then you certainly don't need to feel short-changed if you buy a 944S2. It's a great car in its own right. It's just that the 968 is even better. ■

