

New Formula Lux

The 944 Turbo could be the best thing that's ever happened to the 944 Lux, as Brian Bennett explains

PORSCHE FANCIERS with accountants who only bead with sweat at the thought of a £18,234.02 944 Lux but foam at the mouth when the £25,311.59 944 turbo is mentioned can at least console themselves that to the *hoi polloi* the two look exactly alike.

Anyone settling for a £14,984.88 924S isn't so lucky because the lack of bulging wheelarches and bodyside protection mouldings is a dead giveaway.

All but smart-arse know-it-alls, though – who will cite the Turbo's one piece front bumper/spoiler, the rear under-bumper spoiler or the discreet 'turbo' badge – will regard the Lux with the same awe as the Turbo. Inside, where the poor deprived 924S person is stuck with the old-style facia and trim, the Lux is also just about pure Turbo. The only telling point is the Lux's totally superfluous mpg gauge set into the rev counter rather than a marginally more useful boost gauge.

Even under the skin there's little to tell them apart since the '86 model 944 Lux has blagged the revised front wishbones and rear semi-trailing arms developed for the Turbo as well as the larger (17.6 gallon), plastic fuel tank, different transaxle assembly mounting, boot-located battery and assorted engine modifications.

Unfortunately market research (supplied by Porsche) has determined that "Performance" is the crucial deciding factor for Porsche buyers, so with "Status/Image/Prestige" classed as a mere secondary consideration the Lux man will still, apparently, be yearning for a Turbo.

Making do with 163bhp rather than 220 and 151lb ft of torque rather than 243 shouldn't be too bitter a pill to swallow, however, considering the substantial price difference.

There's also the cheering fact that, by borrowing from the Turbo's development programme, the '86 944 Lux has had virtually all of its previous hang-ups sorted out – at a price of course.

Best of all is that by raising the steering wheel to a sensible height and slightly lowering the seat, Porsche have enabled 944 owners to indulge in enthusiastic wheel-twirling without getting their hands tangled up with their thighs. Together with the standard power assistance – something purists might regard as a retrograde step – it makes the 944 an altogether more enjoyable car to drive in the manner for which it was designed.

Changing the wiper pattern so that they work properly for right-hand drive isn't an insignificant move either, while the new interior at last provides the 944 with something appropriate to its price. More attractive and legible instrumentation, better heating and ventilation and rearranged switchgear mean the 944 is now more reminiscent of the 928 rather than the VW/Audi Coupé Porsche hijacked to produce the 924.

Outside the 944 Lux gets the 'telephone dial' alloy wheels common to the 924S and 944 Turbo and it benefits from fatter 195/65VR15 rubber. The Lux also has the flush-fitting front screen with integral radio aerial that was part of the Turbo's aerodynamic improvements package.

There is a reasonable level of standard equipment so that you now get an electrically adjustable and heated door mirror on the passenger's side as well as the driver's and useful items like headlamp washers, electric height adjustment for the driver's seat and a decent, and more sensibly located, stereo system.

Paying extra for items like central locking (£237.96) and cloth door panel inserts (£88.46) is a bit irksome on an

£18,000 plus car, however, and if you really go silly with the options list you'll end up with both an apoplectic accountant and a 944 Lux that's almost as expensive as a 944 Turbo. All you need is the two items above, forged alloy wheels with ulp, 205/55 and 225/50, tyres (£1,436.44), a limited slip diff (£529.48), a removable sunroof with electric tilt (£703.89), automatic full climate control (£1,187.28), leather seats (£1,279.47), sports seats with electric height adjustment (£532.25) and metallic paint (£443.52). If you start with the more expensive three-speed auto Lux, that lot does take you over the Turbo's price.

Looking too hard at the cost of Porsches is inevitably depressing and impossible to reconcile with the prices of most competitors. What Porsche's rivals lack of course is the ability to retain that high price on resale – just like buying a house, or a Mercedes-Benz for that matter, once you're on the bandwagon, you've got it made.

More tangible benefits are the superb dynamics and remarkable efficiency that Porsche's engineering and racing expertise bestows on the 944 Lux.

With an only marginal increase in weight and no change in engine output or transmission specification (ignore ill-informed reports you may read in the weekly motoring press), the 944's performance is unchanged in '86 model guise. That means a top speed of around 137mph and 0-60mph acceleration in about seven-and-a-half seconds, coupled to astonishing fuel economy that is difficult to force below 23mpg and more likely to average around 25/26mpg.

No other 137mph sports car provides its owner with such a clear ecological conscience.

The credit has to go to the 944's four-cylinder engine,

though it's a configuration that doesn't sound very exciting in a car of this price and also smacks somewhat of production expedience since it is effectively half a Porsche 928 V8 engine. Making four pots work as smoothly and more efficiently than most in-line sixes is no problem for Porsche's engineers, however – contra-rotating balancer shafts look after the smoothness while the TOP (Thermodynamically Optimised Porsche) combustion chamber and 10.6:1 compression ratio squeezes the utmost power out of 2.5 litres at the least cost in fuel.

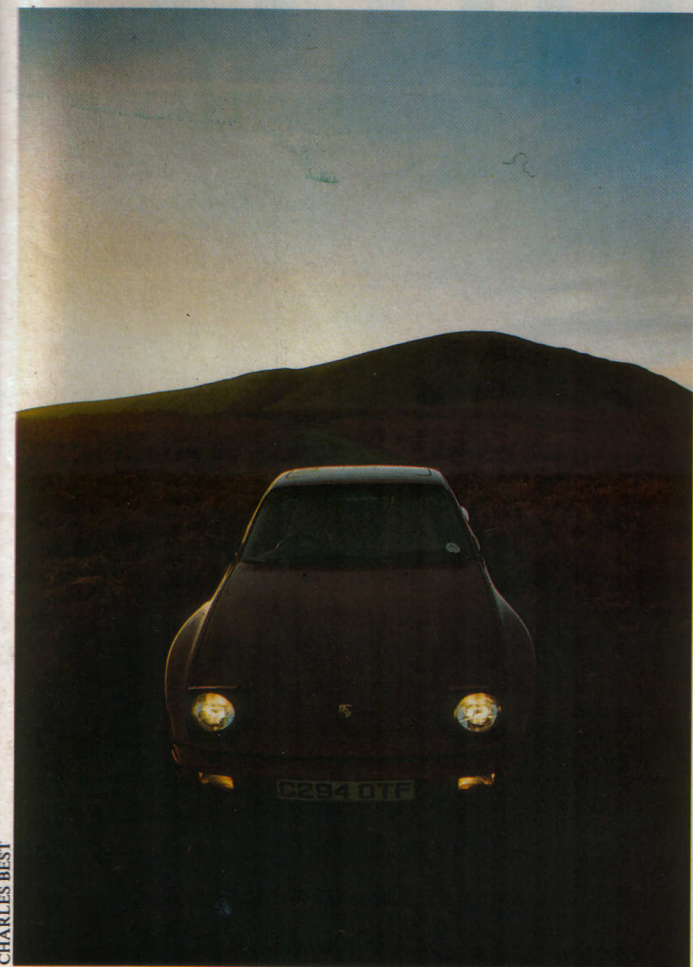
As far as the driver is concerned the result is pure Porsche too: instantaneous, squeaky-clean throttle response, a good wide spread of power and a beguiling eagerness to rev right up to the 6,500rpm limiter.

Putting this power to the best use is the responsibility of the transaxle layout Porsche chose to provide some of the tractive abilities of the rear-engined 911 without its handling shortcomings. The inherent drawback is that putting the gearbox at the back makes the linkage to the gear lever more tortuous than usual.

Somebody should have told Porsche's engineers that because there really isn't much to complain about with the 944's gearchange. It does feel more meaty and solid than some, and even a bit notchy, when trying to force it through very quickly but otherwise it's pleasantly smooth and positive and is matched to a reasonably weighted, progressive clutch.

The transaxle arrangement also helps to provide the 944 with the optimum 50/50 front/rear weight distribution and its well bred road manners. Adding the Turbo suspension modifications has polished the 944's responses still further, although the difference is pretty hard to detect.

There seems to be a reduced tendency to understeer now, though this could also be affected by the wider standard tyres and the reduced feel though the assisted steering. That steering is just about ideally weighted for a powered



Centre, above and below: The 944's interior has been almost completely revised and is now more in keeping with an £18,000 car. Instruments are clearer and classier.

system though, and apart from a slight deadness about the straight ahead position it responds just as accurately and positively as the unassisted set up.

What it lacks is the 'writhing' at the wheel that characterises Porsche unassisted steering as it moves in sympathy with the shape and texture of the road surface.

This is a small price to pay for the significantly smaller amount of muscle power it now takes to steer the 944; with the previous model parking and low speed manoeuvres were pretty hard work.

With the excellent brakes and surprisingly supple ride still retained, the 944 Lux is thus as dynamically capable as ever but has had some of its rough edges, like the heavy steering and cheap interior, smoothed out.

It is indisputable that the new interior is a vast improvement. Externally, the original 944 looked the business right

from the start, but inside it was more like a £6,000 hatchback than an expensive sports coupé.

The materials used and the overall design of the new fascia, similar in concept to that in the 928, makes it much more classy. The instruments are attractive and clearly marked, and all are visible through the upper section of the steering wheel. We have no complaints about the stalks, either.

However, the minor switchgear, consisting of a bank of rocker switches (the lights are operated by a rotary switch to the left of the steering column), is made worse, not better, by being moved ahead of the gear lever, and the lack of illumination makes it all too easy at night to open the tilting sunroof (if that option has been specified) when a quick wipe of the rear screen was required.

Also, perhaps in a misplaced obsession with symmetry, the switch that decides which door mirror is to be adjusted (the actual adjuster joystick is *still*

set in the driver's door, quite remote from the rocker switch) *still* operates fore/aft when logic suggests it should rock from side to side. Similarly the fog light switches should be in series rather than parallel, or at least have BMW-style 'braille' identification. The button which operates the trip reset looks, for no discernible reason, exactly like a vent adjuster.

These are little quibbles about what is generally a major improvement but it is surprising that with a clean sheet of paper, Porsche's renowned de-

signers couldn't have done just a shade better.

It would also have been nice if they could have done something with the lock on the rear hatch which is still awkward to operate with the key (there is an internal release beside the driver's right knee) because it is angled upwards and shielded by the rear spoiler.

Still it's pleasant to realise that even Porsche aren't perfect and these minor foibles certainly don't prevent the 944 Lux being comfortably the best car in its class.

