



A MONTH AT THE WHEEL:

PORSCHE 944 S2



The 944 S2 may be the best entry into Porsche ownership, but 13 years after the last one rolled off the lines, are they still up to the job of daily driving? **Words: Nik Bruce Photography: Max Earey**

Picking up a 944 S2 as your first Porsche is something of a no-brain decision these days, especially if you're working to a fairly limited budget.

It has to be said, if you've got between £5000 and £10,000 burning a hole in your pocket, no other Porsche on the market right now offers the same blend of practicality, reliability or sheer driver appeal for the money than the S2. Alright, if we were to be honest with ourselves, we'd all prefer to have a 911 sit on our driveway. But if you're spending less than ten large, all you're going to get is a smoky old SC with more filler than steel in its hide.

But while the 944 may not have the looks or kudos of the air-cooled icon, it easily keeps up with the 911 in the performance stakes. Well, on paper at least.

Launched in 1989 as the last of the normally-aspirated 944s, the S2 sported a 2990cc 16v four-pot unit that churned out a healthy 211bhp and 207lb ft of grunt. Despite weighing in at a relatively portly 1310kilos, the S2 still managed to drag itself from standstill to 62mph in just 6.9 seconds before tramping on to a 149mph top whack. In comparison, the last of the SCs had just 204bhp and 189lb ft of twist to its name, but because it weighs 100 kilos less than the S2 it still manages to dispatch the all-important sprint to 60 in just under seven seconds before topping out at 146mph.

So, by the skin of a gnat's tooth, the 944 manages to edge the 911 out in terms of outright performance. But academic performance figures isn't all the front-runner has to offer, in the real world it's also pleasingly cheap to run and insure.

If you're a 30-year-old living in Kent with full no-claims bonus and a clean license, you can insure a 944 S2 for a smidge over £600, if you stick with the usual suspects in the industry that is. Hunt around a bit for

a classic or limited mileage policy though, and you can easily knock another £100 off the bill.

Servicing is reasonable too. Specialist Cars of Malton will knock out a 6000-mile service for £204 and a 12,000 miler for £321. If you have to change the timing belts (see page 112), you'll be looking at spending the best part of £300, but the belts only need to be changed once every four years or 48,000 miles – so it isn't a major headache. And barring total catastrophe, that's all the outlay you'll really need to worry about.

Pick up a decent example and fuel economy should still average out around the 30- to 32mpg mark, providing you don't spend all your time in the car driving like you stole it. So, in stark contrast to our experience of living with the 928 GT, you won't blow your drinking money on the 944. Which is good.

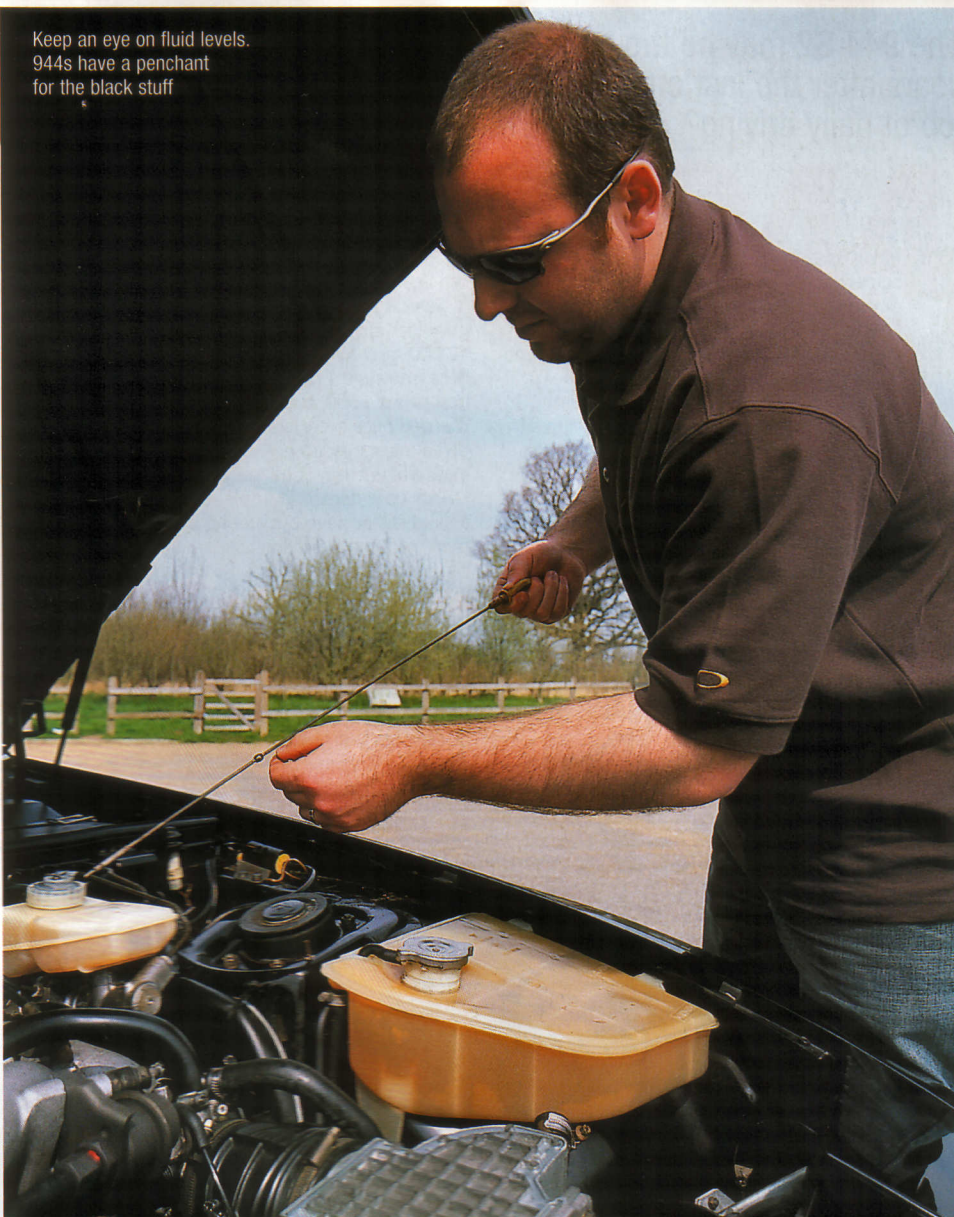
It's not hard to see why so many motoring hacks have readily extolled the S2's virtues during the past 15 years it's been with us. But then the average road test only lasts a few days, or a week at best, and doesn't really uncover the reality of what it's like to live with a particular example. Which is exactly what you need to know before you buy a car, especially one that's getting on a bit. So, let's find out just how good the S2 is to live with on a day-to-day basis.

I must admit, the day I picked the car up, the prospect of doing the 300-odd mile slog from Malton back to Sevenoaks in a 944 didn't appeal. In fact, after a 4am start and a long day shooting this month's *Buying Guide* at neighbouring specialist Autoclassica, a 944 was just about the last car on earth that I wanted for the trip home. What I needed was big, fat, comfortable heated seats, cruise control, a nice stereo and lots of lazy grunt to shove me all the way back to chez Bruce with the least amount of input from yours truly. What I needed was a Cayenne



Tonka-toy tuff, the 944 interior will last a lifetime looked after. Makes clocking it easy though

Keep an eye on fluid levels. 944s have a penchant for the black stuff



Turbo. What I had in front of me was a 14-year-old, rev-happy 944 S2.

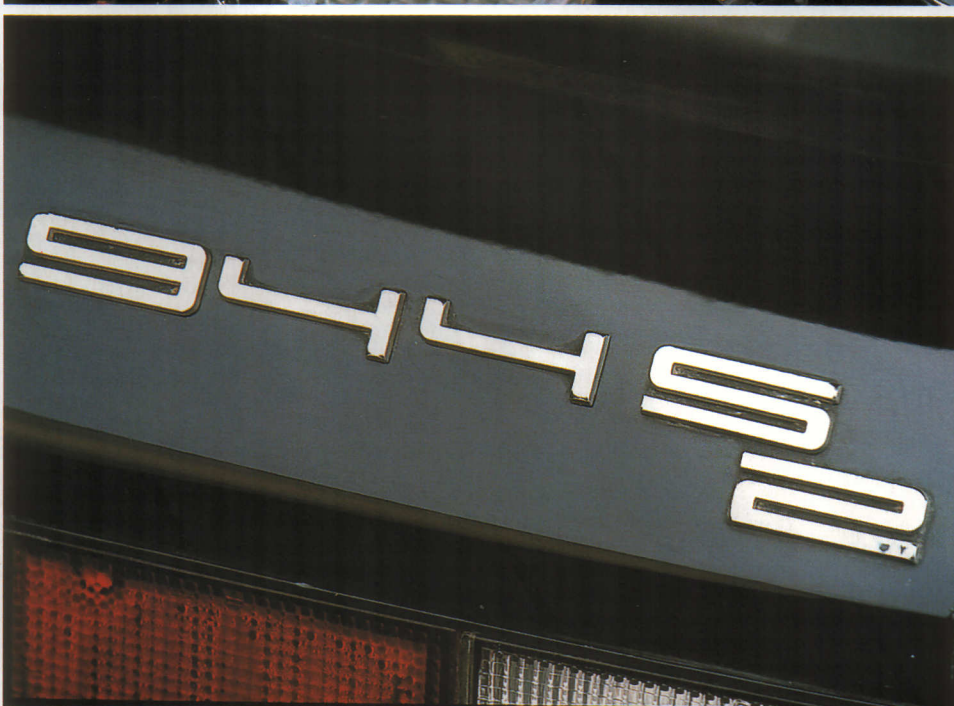
In fairness, the car I was presented with was an absolute stunner: just 77,000 miles on the clock, full service history with hardly a mark on its ridiculously glossy black coachwork. Inside, the 944 was just as nice. The black and grey chequered fabric spotless, while all the controls looked and felt as tight and solid as the day the car rolled off the lines at Zuffenhausen. If I ever needed proof of just how well a 944 can wear, if it's looked after properly, this is it.

After finally sussing out how to disable the infernal bloody alarm, I manage to get the S2 started at the first time of asking – the charismatically gruff four-banger barking mutedly into life before settling down to a fairly uninspiring grumble. The 944 has a lot of things going for it; sadly, its soundtrack isn't one of them. Although on the motorway the lack of aural excitement is no bad thing.

Despite my initial reservations, the 944 proved itself to be fairly civilised on the hack back down the A1. The bucket seats are comfortable enough to allow you to tackle long stints behind the wheel without fear of developing sciatica, and the chassis is supple enough to soak up road imperfections before they become tiresome. Indeed, only two-and-a-half hours into the four-hour journey did I feel like stopping for a breather. Unfortunately, once I did pull into services to grab a sandwich to chew on the way down the road, getting going again proved to be a little more problematic than I'd have liked. At first I thought that I just hadn't disarmed the alarm properly, but after waiting what seemed like an eternity for it to reset itself I tried again and got nothing. The starter motor churned and churned, but still the four-pot refused to catch. A couple more attempts and a ploughman's baguette later and finally the 16-valve lump sparked into life. Although it was the first time that the S2 failed to start for me, it unfortunately wasn't to be the last.

Irritatingly enough, 944s are notorious for having their DME relays fail on them as age and exposure to moisture take their toll on the contacts. But annoying as it is, sorting the problem is a simple matter of coughing up £15 for a new relay and plugging it into the fusebox. Or, amusingly enough, just dropping the original unit on the floor until it decides to work again.

Back on the road, and an empty stretch of black top allows me to pick up the pace and see how the S2 copes. At cruising speeds, the 944 is far from



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Although 944s aren't known to have a particular Achilles heel, they are getting old and could swiftly turn what you thought was your dream car into an expensive nightmare. Which means you need to have your wits about you when inspecting a prospective buy.

Crash damage should be your main concern, so check the shut lines, look for continuity in the paintwork and signs of overspray in the boot and engine spaces. Pay particular attention to the roof; if you spot a depression – especially around the corners of the sunroof – it's certain that the car has taken a huge impact. Walk away.

Being galvanised, 944s are largely immune to rust. However, as it's aged, tinworm has been shown to creep in around the window rubbers and sunroof seals where it pools and seeps through into the cabin.

As long as the timing belts and tensioners have been replaced every four years or 48,000 miles, there's no reason why the S2's four-banger won't keep going if serviced properly. When buying, be sure that the owner can prove that the belts have been changed recently. If you take his word for it and the belts fail, you could need a new engine. That would be £2000 all up to you, sir. If the belts haven't been done, knock the seller down by £300 to have them done yourself.

Oils leaks are fairly common, although usually not

ideal. Fifth gear is shorter than you'd like for motorway work, and keeps the engine boiling around the 3800rpm mark at 80mph, which is a little busier than you'd like. The S2 really could have used an overdrive sixth. Of course, the benefit of shorter gearing is having instant access to all 211bhp. A flex of the right boot is all that it takes to squirt past traffic, which means you don't have to constantly stir the 'box just to make decent progress.

Although wind roar isn't too much of a headache below 100mph, above it the noise can be quite intrusive and tiring. But thankfully it doesn't get exponentially worse the faster you go.

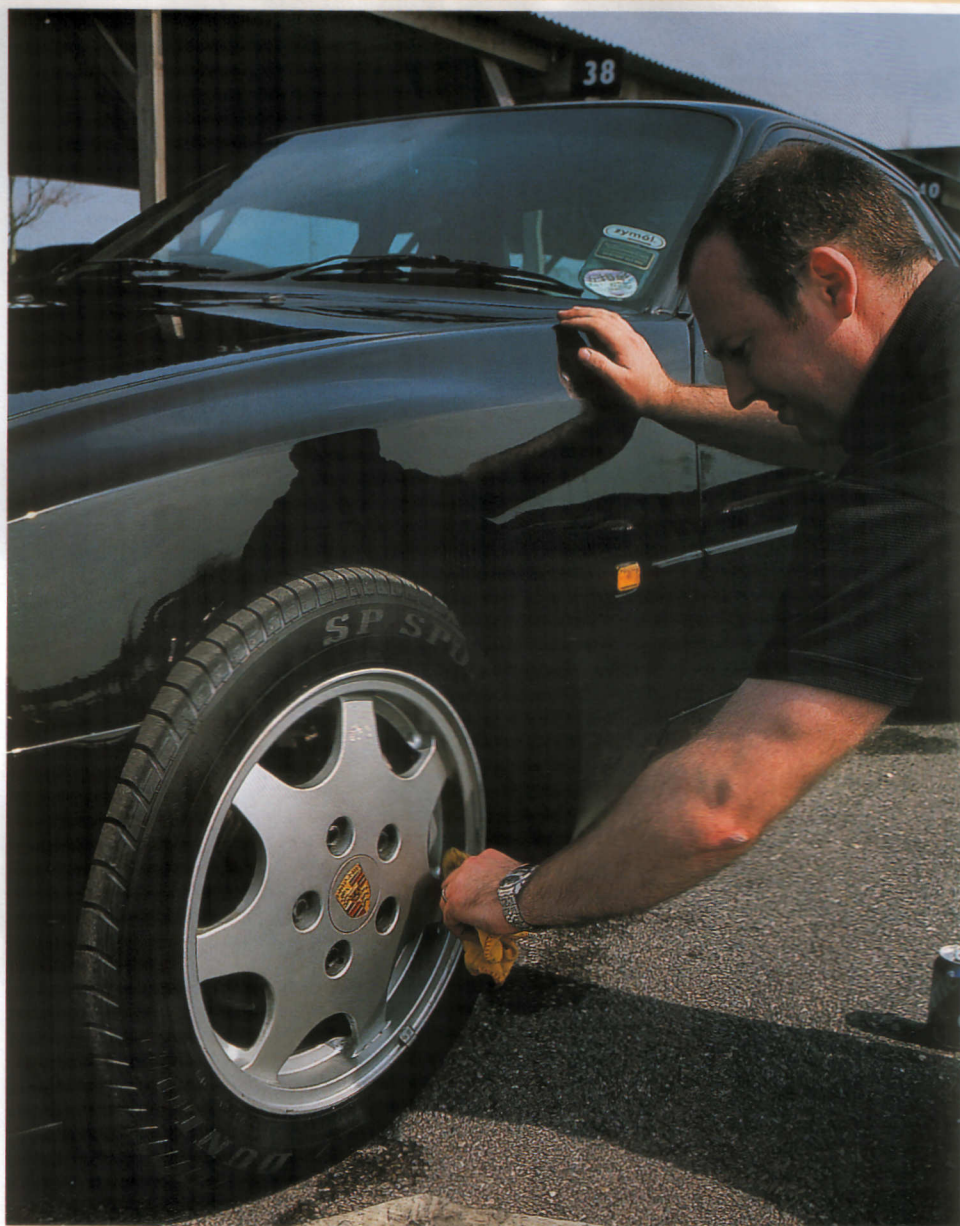
Even straying into 'straight to jail' speeds, the S2 feels utterly composed. The steering doesn't fidget or provide unnecessary feedback, and once loaded up, the chassis feels planted enough to give you the confidence to take fast sweepers without backing off. It doesn't exactly make for the perfect GT, but the S2 takes fast motorway work in its stride. And it isn't that thirsty either, sipping down just over half the contents of its 80-litre tank.

In town, where it shamefully spent the majority of its month-long tenure, the S2 proved to be just a civilised as it was on the open road – the clutch is light enough not to become a chore in stop/start traffic, and the same goes for the power steering, which makes negotiating supermarket car parks a doddle.

But while it takes on the roll of daily hack with aplomb, its lack of boot space means you might be pushed to run a 944 as your only car. Alright, so the 135-litre boot will easily swallow the weekly shopping, but that's about it to be honest. You can forget about venturing anywhere near a DIY or furniture store in the 944 – unless a pot plant or two is all you're after. And if you've got kids, the pushchair will need to be left at home. Which is ironic really, because there isn't much room in the back seats for anything other than small children.

The 944 really does stretch its two+two credibility a little too far. And while a hapless mate might be able to endure being folded up in the back seat for the five-minute trip back from the pub, any longer would constitute a cruel and unusual torture. But still, if you wanted a car to cart flatpack furniture and mates around, you'd buy a Golf and not a 944.

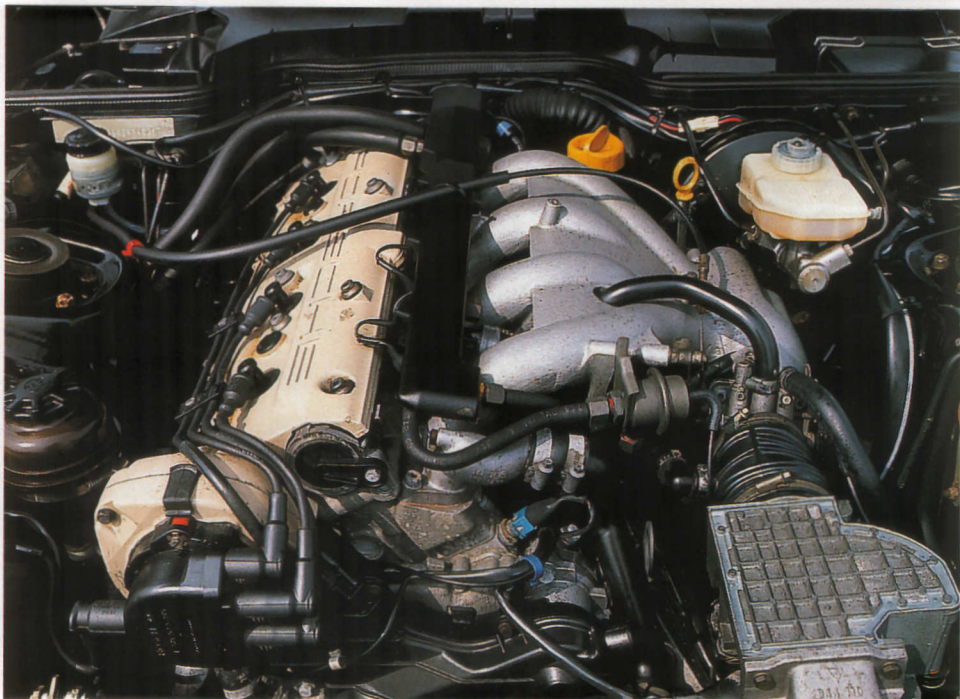
Of course, despite any compromises you'd make, the S2 more than makes up for when introduced to its natural habitat: the back road. With its front-



particularly serious. The main sources are the cam-, crank-, and balance shaft seals, plus the oil cooler and oil pressure sender. Check for signs of cross-contamination between the coolant and oil supplies in the header tank and oil filler cap.

If for some reason the car doesn't start when hot, the DME relay will be on its way out. It's an irritating, but not particularly serious problem. Most 944s suffer from it, and replacement relays only cost £15 or so to replace.

Transmissions are solid, but pinion bearings do wear – listen for a whine that varies with speed. Replacing the clutch means removing the gearbox, so make sure it's light and easy to use. Aside from that, it's plain sailing.





engined, rear-drive layout, the 944 makes the perfect tool to cut down twisty B-roads. It's benign at the limit, and quick to tell you when you've overstepped the bounds. The S2 really is a rewarding car to drive on the ragged edge. It doesn't have a staggering amount of power to offer, and is all the more accessible as a result – there's a lot of satisfaction to be had from wringing out every last drop of performance and keeping the four-banger on the boil. And the S2 is only too happy to oblige.

That said, the five speed gearbox doesn't like to be rushed on the way up. And the pedals aren't quite as well placed as you'd want for easy heel-and-toe down shifts. But a few miles into your blat and you soon learn to drive around its idiosyncrasies.

Unless you've got a conveniently wet and empty roundabout to hand, sideways hooliganism takes a fair degree of commitment. But once you've got the back end to break loose, the LSD makes sure that the slide is progressive and predictable.

Over the month, the S2 proved itself to be massive amounts of fun, living up to its reputation for being practical, dependable and rewarding to drive. Niggles? Yes, but nothing out of the ordinary: the sticky boot solenoid was a nuisance, and the hot start problem infuriating, however neither would be a problem to have sorted out. Compared to modern kit, the 944 does occasionally feel its age, as the headlights aren't brilliant and there's nowhere you can leave a bottle of water without it ending up in the deepest, darkest recesses of a footwell. And because 944s have a penchant for the black stuff, you really need to keep an eye on the levels – it's not unheard of for them to go through about 800ml per 1000 miles. But aside from that, it was all plain sailing.

The S2 really is a great all-rounder. It does everything you want it to – or at least everything you could expect a two+two sports coupé to do – they're cheap to buy, cheap to run and cheap to insure. I'm not sure that you could expect anything more for under £10,000. If you want an easy intro into Porsche ownership, this is as good as it gets.

CONTACT:

Specialist Cars of Malton (07000 911993)
for the loan of this 944 S2, which is for sale.

On B-roads is
where the 944
felt most at home



PORSCHE 944 S2 CABRIOLET

Paul Chare puts his swanky new 18-inch wheels through their paces on his favourite roads. But will he like the results?

After last month's wheel fitting exploits (18-inch Sport Design items), the last four weeks have been spent evaluating their performance. First off, a full geometry check was carried out by OPC Solihull, where I also asked them to make any adjustments necessary. Paul – the technician who carried out the work – had once owned a 944 so I was pleased to know that any necessary adjustments were carried out by someone who had owned and lived with a car similar to mine.

I have used OPCs for geometry setups before and been very happy with the result. If you have never tried this before then I can assure you the 'before and after' experience is something else. You get sharper handling characteristics and a new confidence in your car. My life was made even easier as the 944 was collected from my office then delivered back all washed and vacuumed and ready to go!

The first thing I noticed was that the ride is really quite harsh – but remember I was running 16-inch wheels before with a much taller tyre to absorb some of the lumps and bumps. Feedback through the steering has an all-new dimension – I now know when I've

run over an ant! And tram-lining is something I thought I was used to but the larger wheels with the lower profile tyres are affected in a greater way by the road surface – we seem to follow the smallest of cracks these days. I guess that is something I will become accustomed to and I need to learn to keep my hands firmly on the steering wheel.

Scuttle-shake is something that you learn to live with in a cabriolet and the 944 is no exception. The 18-inch wheels do not seem to have made a difference in this department which pleased me – I don't know why I should have, but I expected more scuttle-shake if anything.

The turn-in has an all-new character that gives a great driving experience but most noticeable is the ability to carry speed through corners. It's one thing knowing a road well, but having confidence in your car and its setup is another.

During the following week and in the interest of giving a fair trial, I ran a couple of my favourite local roads in Warwickshire. A bunch of A-roads that I have driven for 20 years and thankfully have not yet been ruined with cameras and speed humps and other

irritations that slow you down. Having now spent a fair amount of time behind the wheel of the 944 with the new setup I was pretty confident in the car. Combine that confidence with roads I have driven hundreds of times and I guess its fair to say that I am suitably impressed with the overall handling of my 944.

Some years ago I would have used the built-in stopwatch (after all it was built-in to the car for a purpose!) to see if I could drive my all time favourite road at least as quick, if not quicker than my previous best. However that is something that I gave up in the interest of keeping my car and me in one piece!

Bottom line is I am very happy with the handling and the improved looks of the car.

Paul Chare

PORSCHE 944 S2 CABRIOLET

Total mileage: 63,774

Mileage this month: 479

Cost this month: £149.23

