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THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE:  
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944

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ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO...  
**PORSCHE 944**

Riding on the yuppie wave, the 944 became one of the most popular cars in Porsche's history. But did the fact its buyers were more concerned with the famous badge than the Stuttgart legend result in a poor relation to the Porsche family?



September 2005 will see the Cayman S make its public debut at the Frankfurt Motor Show, and the beginning of Porsche's strategy to plug the performance and price gap between its entry-level and flagship models.

Yet there is a certain sense of déjà vu about the whole strategy that can be traced back once again to the Frankfurt show, although this time we must don our red braces and return to September 1981.

With the 924 having proved a bit of a runaway success at the bottom end of the market, and the

new 928, along with the 911, sewing up the top end of the spectrum, it became clear there was a middle ground Porsche was missing out on.

And it was a middle ground that could be easily filled, what with the 924 being ripe for further development and a new four-cylinder Porsche engine having been in the pipeline for some time. And so it was that, just as they will be in a couple of months' time, the public was introduced to the new mid-range Porsche.

For Porsche, if the Cayman can find even half of the 944's success then it will be mission

achieved. In its favour the new car has a proven chassis and engine, along with an aggressive new suit of clothes. However, what the Cayman doesn't have is perhaps one of the primary reasons behind the 944's success: the rise of the yuppie. Whether nowadays you think it the best value Porsche money can buy or a cheap sports car trading on the Porsche badge there is no escaping the fact the 944 proved a runaway success for Porsche. The question is, was this because it was a true Porsche, or merely a car to capitalise on the yuppie generation?



## ENGINEERING RESULTS – THE 944 BREAKS COVER

That Porsche had been working on a four-cylinder engine to replace the 924's ageing Audi unit was no secret. While Porsche's engineers had successfully managed to retune the two-litre van-derived engine to be suitable for its new sports car application, the bottom line was that, Turbo aside, the 924 just wasn't up to speed with its Japanese rivals that, as their killer blow, were also often able to undercut the Stuttgart car on price.

Therefore it was decided a new engine would be built to fit into the 924's engine compartment, a requirement that regrettably ruled out the fitment of an in-line six. This engine would also be used in Porsche's all-new model line, the 944.

What Porsche's engineering boffins did have to work with though was the 928's V8 engine and all the technological advances that it brought with it. These meant that the big GT's aluminium-alloy cylinder block design could be largely carried over to the new engine, which would also benefit from the fitment of a pair of contra-rotating balancer shafts charged with ironing out the lack of refinement commonly associated with big four-pot engines.

For these early engines each cylinder was equipped with two valves driven by a single overhead camshaft and the whole shebang was orchestrated by a DME engine management system. Power of the eight-valve lump now sat at 163bhp at 5800rpm (143bhp at 5500rpm if you drove a Lambda-equipped US car), with

peak torque of 151lb ft (137lb ft for US cars) arriving at 3000rpm.

This engine made its debut in the 944 which, new engine aside, was largely a development of the 924 Turbo. This meant it used the Turbo's chassis and suspension, while the body incorporated the wider arches of the Carrera GT (now steel rather than fibreglass).

Porsche also spent a lot of time with its new car in the wind tunnel, which resulted in several detail improvements aimed at smoothing out the 944's aerodynamic flow, the drag coefficient of which was 0.35. Among these were the inclusion of a fibreglass front valance (with optional driving lights) and the relocating of the seams with the front wing to the side, rather than the front of the car. In short, the 944 successfully managed to cross the tricky boundary of using many of the 924's parts yet having the appearance of an almost completely new car. It also achieved Porsche's goal of creating a more upmarket car, the extra bulkiness and genuine Porsche engine managing to elevate the image of the 944 above its little brother.

The brakes too were taken from the Carrera

GT, which meant ventilated discs all round, but power steering wasn't offered as an option until 1983, and while there was a three-speed automatic transmission available, the five-speed manual 'box was by far the more popular option.

Other detail improvements that helped elevate the new car above the 924 included items such as gas struts to hold the bonnet open rather than the 924's simple rod support system, smaller and more stylish indicator repeaters, and a bigger rear wing.

Where the 944 originally failed to distinguish itself from the 924 was the interior, the new car using the same dated-looking square vented layout, albeit with ten per cent better ventilation and new yellow lettering on the dials. Aficionados may like the cowed dials of these early 'pre-oval dash' cars, but should be aware that the materials used in these dashboards were prone to cracking over time. These early cars also have their windcreens set back from the surrounds, the gap filled by a metal strip, like in the 924. Not a big issue to some perhaps, but something that owners of later 944s often find unsatisfactory.

## SPECIFICATION – 944 (1982-1987)

### ENGINE

**Power-unit:** 2497cc water-cooled, four-cylinder

**Power:** 163bhp at 5800rpm

**Torque:** 151lb ft at 3000rpm

### PERFORMANCE

**Max Speed:** 131mph

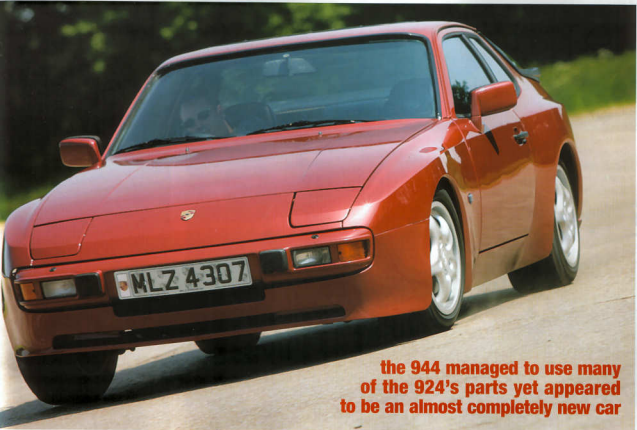
**0-60mph:** 8.4 seconds

**Weight:** 1180kg





New 2.5-litre engine was all Porsche and gave the muscular 944 the credibility that the 924 could never achieve



**the 944 managed to use many of the 924's parts yet appeared to be an almost completely new car**



## SPECIFICATION – 944 (1988-1989)

### ENGINE

**Power-plant:** 2681 cc water-cooled, four-cylinder

**Power:** 165bhp at 5800rpm

**Torque:** 166lb ft at 4200rpm

### PERFORMANCE

**Max Speed:** 136mph

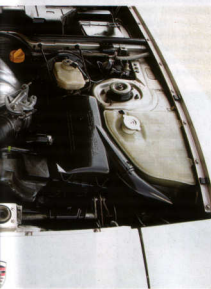
**0-60mph:** 8.4 seconds

**Weight:** 1260kg





Mid-life facelift saw the 944 gain a much more modern interior (below left), known as the 'oval dash'. This was not only an aesthetic improvement on the 924's design but also improved ventilation and gave the driver more space



### PLAYING AT THE OVAL – THE 944 GETS MODERN

Yet despite its sharp new suit and what could now rightly be described as a purely Porsche engine, any enthusiast knew that this car still had a lot to prove if it were to be regarded as a real Porsche. And there was no other way to find this out than to slip into the driver's seat and take the car by the scruff of the neck.

On the road the immediate impression was that the 944's engine had moved on leaps and bounds compared to the old and unrefined two-litre lump, while the ride had also moved up a league. Handling had always been a 924 strongpoint and that remained the case in the 944. Thread it through a series of bends and the car would demonstrate its agility, with steering precise and with enough feedback to let you know what was going on at the front wheels. The rear-wheel drive setup also meant that on a wet and twisty road the 944 could be made to arch its tail in a smile-inducing slide.

What did slightly blunt early cars' cruising ability was the driving position, which made it all but impossible for taller drivers to get comfortable. In the three years before Porsche set about updating its new car the company grew from strength to strength off the back of its new model. To illustrate just how successful the 944 was proving, in 1981, the year that the car was unveiled, Porsche's total production for all models, including the 911, stood at 28,000 cars. By 1985 total 944 production had exceeded 50,000 cars, thus providing a big cash injection for the company. So big in fact that it was largely as a result of the profits made from the 944 that Porsche could afford to upgrade its production facilities, moving all four-cylinder production to Zuffenhausen.

But before the new locale beckoned Porsche first needed to set about updating its coupe for the mid 1980s, the result of which was that all

cars built from September 1985 onwards would sport a new and arguably much-needed Ostle-designed dashboard, which would come to be known in Porsche circles as the 'oval dash'. This new dash, as debuted on the 944 Turbo, boasted a much clearer layout with simple white and red dials and a ventilation system Porsche claimed would increase airflow by 35 per cent. Unfortunately, this being a Porsche, the heater control was still a touch tricky to perfect, but this was a minor gripe in a vastly improved interior. Crucially for taller drivers the new interior featured a steering wheel that sat 18 millimetres higher than in the original 944, as well as a seat that was 30 millimetres lower, both of which made it a much more comfortable place for those vertically blessed.

Also taken from the new 944 Turbo were the front suspension arms, which helped to sharpen the front end, while incredibly, a passenger door mirror moved from being an option to a standard fit item – perhaps it was this that had caused the price of a new 944 to rise to more than £21,000...

The engine received subtle upgrades throughout its life, including revisions to camshaft belts that were proving a bit flimsy, and a revision of the DME electronic system on cars built from 1985 onwards. The final and biggest change arrived in the 944's final year of production when in 1989 capacity was increased to 2.7 litres, a change brought about thanks to the availability of the cylinder block from the 16-valve 944S. Despite the increase in capacity Porsche only managed to squeeze an extra couple of bhp from the four-cylinder engine, although the added 15lb ft of torque was welcome. Production of the standard 944 Lux ended in summer 1989, roughly the same time as the now outdated 924 vanished from the sales lists.



## SPECIFICATION – 944 TURBO

### ENGINE

**Power unit:** 2497cc water-cooled, four-cylinder, turbocharged  
**Power:** 220bhp at 5800rpm  
**Torque:** 243lb ft at 3500rpm

### PERFORMANCE

**Max Speed:** 152mph  
**0-100mph:** 6.3 seconds  
**Weight:** 1350kg



## BLOWING THE COMPETITION AWAY – THE 944 TURBO ARRIVES

The 944 Turbo hit the scene in 1985 and represented what was perhaps the most rounded Porsche model the company had ever built.

On to the 2.5-litre lump went a KKK K26 turbocharger complete with an air-to-air intercooler as on the 924 Carrera GT. With maximum boost set to 1.4bar the 944 Turbo kicked out 220bhp at 5800rpm and 243lb ft of torque at 3500rpm. Interestingly Porsche also claimed that this engine had made Turbo lag a thing of the past, and although not totally the case, it was a mark of the company's engineering prowess that the lag was still fairly minimal. The Turbo was also fitted with a knock sensor to

ensure it could run in all markets on standard unleaded petrol.

But it wasn't simply a case of strapping a turbo to the 944's engine and hoping for the best. A bigger oil pump was fitted along with an oil cooler mounted in the 944's nose to help keep engine temperatures in check, and the turbo itself was now mounted in the left-hand side of the engine bay, to distance it from the exhaust manifold.

The turbocharger itself was also of a new design that incorporated a water-cooled central bearing housing, while the addition of a small water pump controlled the temperature of the

turbo's housing for 30 seconds after the engine had been switched off.

The engine also boasted thicker cylinder walls, sodium-filled exhaust valves and ceramic exhaust port liners, all carried out with the aim of removing heat from the engine.

With the engine taken care of Porsche needed to address the rest of the car to ensure it coped with the extra power. In went a bigger clutch and a gearbox with revised ratios (the Turbo was only available with a manual 'box), while the ventilated Brembo brakes were enlarged both in diameter and thickness. After extensive testing Porsche decided to use pressed steel for the





944 Turbo moved front-engined Porsche performance into 911 territory. Nowadays it represents perhaps the best budget performance car money can buy



suspension arms rather than the cast alloy of the naturally aspirated cars and also fitted stiffer dampers and thicker anti-roll bars front and rear.

The Turbo also received slightly modified bodywork to signal its extra power. This included a new polyurethane and fibreglass front bumper and a new spoiler underneath the rear bumper, along with a bigger (and from 1990 onwards an arguably more attractive) rear spoiler design and the obligatory italicised 'turbo' badge.

The Turbo was also the first of the 944 models to debut the new oval dash and as you would expect from the top model in the 944 range, it boasted a ton of standard equipment

including electric windows, climate control and leather seats. Unique to the Turbo model was also a boost gauge.

If anything the Turbo was perhaps a touch too good, all but matching the 911 Carrera for power (220bhp versus 231bhp) and comprehensively beating it for torque (243lb ft plays 209lb ft), so it wasn't surprising to find that its performance statistics were all but identical. And at £25,311 the 944 Turbo also cost the same as a 911, and perhaps even more shocking than that, a hefty £8500 more than a standard 944.

In 1988 Porsche also launched the Turbo S, a

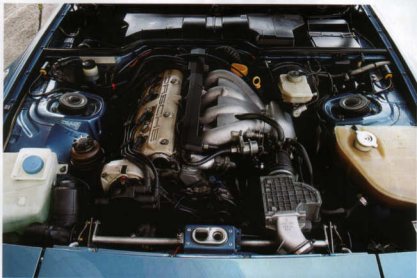
supposedly limited edition 250bhp model based on the Turbo Cup cars from the Porsche Turbo Cup racing series. This car boasted a limited-slip differential as standard (it had always been an option on the 944) and adjustable Koni suspension, along with brakes from the 928 S4 and new 16-inch alloy wheels.

The extra power was liberated by a bigger turbocharger and so good was the Turbo S's engine that it became standard fitment in the 944 Turbo from 1989 onwards, making these the most desirable cars to many. A limited run of 625 Turbo cabriolets was also produced for the 1991 model year, complete with the 250bhp engine.





S2 arguably the best of the 944 range, combining Turbo looks with a strong three-litre naturally aspirated powerplant



**with just 7561 cars built, the S is regarded as one of the rarest 944s**

### **ATTACKING THE ESSES – THE 16-VALVE 944S**

By fitting the 944's engine with four valves per cylinder Porsche was hoping to bridge the gap between the car in standard trim and the costly but massively fast Turbo model.

The first S appeared in 1986 complete with the 928S's double overhead camshaft head that fixed directly on to the block from the existing 944 engine. Also of note was that at 10.9:1, the 944S's compression ratio was the highest of any Porsche road car so far built. A second knock sensor was fitted to the S's engine to ensure that it could still be run on regular unleaded and for the 16-valve model the rev limit was increased from 6500 to 6800rpm.

However, reaction to the new car was disappointing, for apart from the new telephone

dial wheels there was nothing of note to distinguish it from the standard car. And while its engine now produced a respectable 190bhp and 170lb ft of torque, the results from behind the wheel were distinctly underwhelming. This was mainly due to the fact that much of this new-found power resided at the very top of the rev range, not peaking until 6000rpm, and maximum torque was similarly high at 4300rpm. Perhaps the 944S was suffering in comparison to the recently launched Turbo, or perhaps Porsche had made an uncharacteristic mistake. One thing is for sure; the S is widely regarded as the weakest model in the 944 line-up and with a total of just 7561 cars built, also one of the rarest.

The same couldn't be said of the S's successor though, the mighty S2. With capacity increased to 2990cc (the S2 used the bigger 2.7-litre block introduced on the standard car) Porsche's engineers had more opportunities to make the 16-valve setup work. And make it work they did. With 211bhp the S2 was still down on power compared to the Turbo but it was ultimately the sweeter car to drive, the extra cubic centimetres providing the 16-valve engine with the much-needed low-down and mid-range grunt it had been crying out for, whilst retaining the killer punch of a peaky top end. Also changed for the S2 was the inlet manifold and engine management system which helped the engine breathe more efficiently.



To distinguish the S2 from its lacklustre predecessor Porsche fitted the Turbo's more aggressive nose, along with its handsome rear wing and spoiler combo. The Turbo's brakes were also carried over, along with the option of an LSD.

In the S2 Porsche had produced a car that may not have outpunched the Turbo, but certainly outhandled it. For however good the forced-induction car was it couldn't match the smoothness of the S2's delivery and thus couldn't be balanced quite so well on the limit. Where the 944S had struggled against the competition the S2 shovelled them a clean pair of heels and, along with the 944 Turbo, today represents the best Porsche £5k to £10k of money can buy.

As with the later 968 Cabriolet, the American Sunroof Company was charged with producing a cabriolet version of the 944, to be debuted with the S2 engine. This would be Porsche's first front-engined convertible and it was no secret that ASC had numerous problems with chassis flex.

The result was that the finished car boasted stronger door pillars, extra crossmembers and

an undertray that caused it to weigh an additional 70 kilos over the coupé, but given that it looked so good and the S2's engine was so strong few cared. With the windscreen of the Cabriolet being more steeply raked than the coupé the profile of the car was subtly changed, updating the 944's look further and making it one of the most desirable cars in the model range.

## SPECIFICATION – 944 S2

### ENGINE

**Power-unit:** 2990cc water-cooled, four-cylinder

**Power:** 211bhp at 5800rpm

**Torque:** 207lb ft at 4200rpm

### PERFORMANCE

**Max Speed:** 149mph

**0-60mph:** 6.9 seconds

**Weight:** 1310kg

## A LASTING SUCCESS STORY?

There is no denying that the rise of the yuppie had played a large part in the 944's meteoric success. The car arrived at just the right time for Porsche to capitalise on a buoyant market and when this market collapsed sales suffered accordingly. However, in all of this Porsche didn't lose sight of its goals. It never built a car that wasn't in the spirit of the company and despite what 911 owners may try and tell you, this spirit doesn't revolve solely around rear-engined cars.

In each of its many guises right up until production ceased in 1991 the 944 represented a fundamentally very good car. Admittedly, some versions were better than others, but if you were

a buyer there was no doubt that what you were getting for your money was a real Porsche with a real Porsche engine.

And to the company's credit all of this was going on when there were some massive decisions being made within the boardrooms, chief of which focused around whether the 911 was going to live to see the 1990s. In the end the market thankfully dictated that it would, but it was largely thanks to the 944 that Porsche even had the option to keep its most famous and most loved car alive.

Fittingly, the 944 survived just long enough to see four-cylinder Porsche production move

entirely to Zuffenhausen in 1991, the first cars constructed by the workforce being the very last S2 coupés and Cabriolets.

Better equipped, faster and more handsome than the 924, and much cheaper than the 968, the 944 nowadays represents the most cost-effective way to get into Porsche ownership. Furthermore, in Turbo and S2 guises many will argue that it is the only Porsche you will ever need. The yuppie may have made the 944 a success, but it was Porsche that made it such a great car, and one that can be enjoyed today on a distinctly un-yuppie like budget. On which note, where's that copy of *AutoTrader*? ◻

**the 944 nowadays represents the most cost-effective way to get into Porsche ownership**



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