

959

The Porsche Supercar

Photos and Words by Michael C. Harley

The Porsche 959 has a history with more twists than our own Mulholland Highway.

Illegal on U.S. soil until recently, corporate miscalculations, government stonewalling, and clandestine importing operations pepper tales of the 959's past. No need to bore you with the minutia - the 959s on these pages are 50-state legal.

Thank Bruce Canepa, founder and owner of Canepa Designs. An accomplished race car driver, engineer, and businessman, Bruce hunts healthy mid-life 959s from all over the world. Once purchased, they are brought to his Scotts Valley facility where they are kissed with the fountain of youth and vitality. It's no simple process, mind you.

Manufactured from 1986 to 1988, the Porsche 959 did finally get "certified" in 2000 for limited street use - to stringent emission standards. Once the catalytic converters and miscellaneous smog equipment were bolted on, Bruce found the stock twin-turbo 2.85-liter four-valve flat-6 was down to about 350 horsepower (from an original 450). To make the car a viable threat in a Supercar arena crowded with cars like the Lamborghini Gallardo, Ford GT, and Ferrari's 430 and Enzo, something would have to change. Confidants at Porsche told Bruce Canepa that the engine,

transmission, and driveline were good for 600 horsepower - the new design objective.

To the untrained eye, the 959 appears to be a 911 Coupe with an aero kit. In theory, the timeless lines of the 911 have been retained. In reality, closer examination reveals it is a completely different animal. Unlike the 3.2-liter of the late-80's 911 era, the 959 boasts a sequential twin-turbo 2.85-liter four-valve flat-six. The block is oil-cooled, with water-cooled heads fed liquid by a front-mounted radiator.

The 959 is based on a highly modified, and reinforced 911 tub. Adapted for all-wheel-drive (the only driveline available on the 959), all steel body panels are replaced with Kevlar, fiberglass, and aluminum. Purposely sculpted to cheat the wind with a low .31 Cd., the zero-lift body has no rain gutters (an easy way to differentiate the "fakes" from a real 959).

At Canepa Design, the stock flat-six under the deck lid is retained. However, the fuel injection system (including injectors) is replaced with a modern EFI system with full engine management systems. A new alternator, main wiring harness, camshafts, and modern spark plugs follow. The original sequential turbochargers (one spools up

before the second) are replaced with a larger ball-bearing twin-turbo system that allows both to spool immediately. New stainless steel exhaust tubings, welded to the modified stock headers, flow hot gasses out new mufflers. The "6-speed" transmission (G-1-2-3-4-5), along with the incredibly advanced (even for today!) driveline with electronically programmable torque split is retained. Suspension, originally twin-shock at each corner with adjustable dampening and ride height, is replaced with a lighter system using custom titanium springs. The stock brakes, massive drilled rotors and aluminum calipers with anti-lock control, are retained. The 17-inch 959 magnesium wheels, custom designed for Dunlop run-flats in the 80's, are modified to accept modern performance tires, powder-coated in platinum-colored paint, and fitted with wider rubber.

Inside the cabin, a strikingly familiar place to a 911 owner, euro-spec gauges are replaced with U.S. delineations. The air-conditioning compressor and lines are upgraded, but R-12 is retained as the refrigerant. A new steering wheel completes the interior transformation. Tucked under Kevlar, the modified engine is



a sleeping bear. It now boasts an absurd 610 horsepower and 500 lb-ft of torque. By the clock, 0-60 mph is accomplished in just 3.2 seconds. Top speed is 215 mph.

Mechanically complete, Canepa Design brings the Porsche back to cosmetic perfection with seamless in-house craftsmanship. From supple leather to glossy paint, the Porsche 959 is as graceful as the day it rolled out the factory doors.

A ride in the Porsche 959, with Bruce behind the wheel, revealed spectacular characteristics.

Whether going to the grocery store or through the Corkscrew at Laguna Seca, the modern engine electronics, running fuel delivery systems infinitely more precise than the original, allow the 2.85-liter to be tractable from idle to redline. At idle, it sounds docile...

Slam the right pedal into the carpet, and the 3000-pound 959 launches like an F/A-18 off the USS Ronald Reagan. Under full boost of both turbochargers, the front tires rip at the pavement as the rear wheels struggle in their path. (Thoughtfully, the passengers are able to observe the mechanical violence through a dash-mounted gauge displaying front/rear

torque split – the needles spin wildly under acceleration.)

Even for someone accustomed to high-performance street vehicles - the acceleration is implausible. At full tilt, with a rather muted exhaust note, the feeling is similar to being pushed (um...rear-ended?) as the power seems to emanate from some other massive source. The thrust stupefies the senses.

Acceleration aside, the ride quality was excellent. The chassis, even though it is nearly twenty-years-old, is solid. No squeaks or rattles anywhere. We hit potholes, and the 959 just scooted over them as if they were minor road irregularities. We changed lanes, and the 'Bots Dots' were unnoticed. The shock dampening is perfect. On the corners, the 959 reacted like only a 911 can. Short wheelbase, wide track, and excellent visibility make this Supercar Porsche the ultimate canyon carver. Enter an off-ramp at 100 mph and bleed the speed in a hundred feet without drama. It is amazing.

At 70 mph, Bruce put the 959 into 5th (really 6th when you take into account the "G" gear) and lugged it at 1200 rpm. Then, he floored it. The 959 pulled without missing a beat. He dropped it back into 2nd (um, 3rd to

you and me) and floored it. The 959 took off like a sidewinder missile. So tractable!

Back in the garage, the 959 idles comfortably – keeping a perfect poker face with regards to the hidden capabilities. You could make it a daily driver. Some lucky few do. The price of the 959 at Canepa Design is a cool \$575,000 - and each car is sold as quickly as Bruce can find one to modify. A used Porsche 959, with the Canepa modifications, is worth even more on the secondary market.

Denied the rights to run free in the States at birth, Canepa Design has done flawless work to the 80's-era Porsche. With modern electronics, fuel systems, expert cosmetic work, and a nod from the Department of Transportation, the 959, the ultimate Porsche Supercar, is belatedly granted permission to run, and beat, exotics anew.

For more information contact Canepa Design at (831) 430-9940 or online at www.canepa.com