

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: Porsche Panamera



This is what we've been waiting for... at last, a chance to drive the new Porsche Panamera, due to arrive on the market in September. This four-door sports car will be the focus of worldwide attention for many reasons. Will buyers be tempted despite the economic crisis? Is a four-seater GT the 'right' sort of model for Porsche? We had two days to make up our minds...

First the environmental debate, then the economic crisis and finally the will-they-won't-they takeover-or-merger talks between VW and Porsche. It's been a hectic – albeit successful – decade for Porsche, and the Panamera, intended to fill the gap between 911 and Cayenne, would have been a safer bet if it had reached the market two years earlier. But now...? It could see healthy sales which herald the start of an automotive upturn or, just as easily, crash and burn. The market waits with bated breath.





Instead of the more usual Mediterranean venues for an international press launch, Porsche picked Southern Bavaria. We left Munich airport and took to the motorway in the Panamera 4S, sitting low in the cockpit, viewing a vast array of buttons, switches and displays aesthetically arranged in a simple, spaceship design. Step firmly on the throttle and breathtaking acceleration sees the Panamera sweep forward with self-assured precision. But then, with Porsche, technical perfection is no surprise.



The surprise is in the expression of other drivers, unprepared for the sudden appearance of the Panamera's neat front in their rear-view mirrors. There is no time for honking and gesturing from our admirers, however. We merely glimpse a few open mouths in our peripheral vision... and then we're gone. What perhaps surprises them most, are the unusual physical dimensions of Porsche's new GT. The almost-five-metre length is normal enough, but it is only 1.41m high. Meanwhile, the bumper design is recognisably Porsche, along with the lack of a classic radiator grille, plus the pronounced shoulders and the strongly rounded tail – here are all the stylistic idioms which suggest 'Porsche'.



And yet, the combination of sports car and saloon is too new to be taken for granted. But is the car beautiful? From the first press pictures to be released, it was hard to judge whether the heavy body and pronounced tail could be called elegant. Now, after two days on the road, I can assure you it is. But more than simply beautiful is the car's overwhelmingly sensuous presence, comparable with, say, a Bugatti from the 1930s. This alone would tempt me to send a blank cheque to my nearest Porsche dealership... but there is more to come.





The Porsche Panamera aims to combine the marque's typical sportiness with the travel comforts of a Gran Turismo – in all four seats. The drivers sits almost as low as in a 911, while the high-set central console introduces a new, dramatic aspect to the interior. The seating position of the individual rear seats is more strongly tilted than in a saloon, and the rising shoulder line, as well as the rather small, trapezoidal back window, gives a 2+2 feel – only with more room for your head and (more particularly) legs. Even tall passengers are comfortable. That one can also accommodate 432 litres of luggage (or, with rear seats folded, 1250 litres), is close to a miracle.



Naturally, a combination of sportscar and saloon is always going to involve compromise; and exactly where

the line is drawn depends on the model chosen. Currently, there are three to pick from: the Panamera S (with its 4.8-litre V8 developing 400HP), the Panamera 4S (the same engine with all-wheel drive) and the Panamera Turbo. The two naturally aspirated engines are impressive enough but, on our second day, we let rip through zigzag curves and fast-flowing highways with the 500HP Turbo model. More important than the power, is the 770Nm of torque produced by the twin-turbo V8, enabling outlandish acceleration and, in Launch Control mode, taking just 4.2 seconds for the 0-62mph sprint. In all but the S model (rear-wheel drive with six-speed manual transmission), seven-speed Porsche Doppelkupplungsgetriebe (PDK) double-clutch transmission comes as standard, along with Porsche Traction Management (PTM).



Adaptive air suspension (standard on the Turbo) is an optional alternative to steel springs, giving the choice of three settings: Comfort, Sport and Sport Plus. It's up to the driver to decide on his preferred style of motoring that day. Since, however, the choice of which power plant can only be made once, we feel compelled to recommend investing in an extra 100BHP and going for the Turbo model... the driving pleasure is just too huge to ignore.





When you have all that turbo power, and the ability to reach 188mph, you also need to think about slowing to 0mph. This is where the optional carbon ceramic brakes come in. With them fitted, you can slow the Panamera Turbo from its top speed to zero in just seven seconds.



The top-of-the-range Turbo is, not surprisingly, thirsty. Combined fuel economy is a claimed 23.2mpg with emissions of 286g/km; and on our test drive, fuel consumption was considerably higher. It might come as some consolation to critics that Porsche intends, from 2010, to introduce a 300HP V6 model – as well as a hybrid. But then, there are never going to be huge numbers of Panameras on the road. When they arrive on the UK market in September, prices will start at £72,266 for the Panamera S, £77,269 for the 4S and £95,298 for the Turbo. Not cheap; but we believe the Panamera to be a true Porsche, and worth the price tag. How the market reacts is, of course, another matter.

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