

CLASSIC DRIVER

2012 Detroit Auto Show Review

Lead

On an atypically sunny and warm January morning in Detroit, I knew from the moment I started the journey to the 2012 NAIAS that this show would not be the same as in recent years.

What had taken only an average amount of time to drive 20 miles took double that today. The roads, like the convention centre itself, were jam-packed. Even in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, you could tell where the masses were headed and the beat was palpable. We were ready to see what the manufacturers' reaction was to one of the most talked-about turnarounds in financial history.

Indeed, this was not the show of years past. Gone were the austere colours that the industry was trying to convince us to buy, because the economy was on the skids and we were told to "tone it down." We all knew those colours would be resale killers, but we bought into their mind control anyway. Metallic Brown didn't look good on a classic Jaguar E-type Roadster in the 60s. It didn't look great on a new model Audi R8 either.

Bring on the Kona Blue and Laguna Green Metallic. Gone also were the minimalist displays where "the car told the story." Unless you were wearing Black Out Glasses and Bose noise-cancelling headphones, you were on total sensory overload, trying to figure out if what you just heard was a high-speed chase between a BMW M5 and a Falcon F7 whizzing from your left ear to your right, or whether you'd just been transported into the driver's seat of a Bentley Continental GT V8 heading too fast round the M25.

I lost my balance more than once as I tried to figure out if the floor was moving, the walls were moving or if I was just part of Ford's interactive display while I saw myself on a gigantic 40ft projection screen.



Glitz and glamour aside, the cars did tell a positive story of the future of the automotive industry. At Mercedes-Benz, Dr. Dieter Zetsche proudly introduced the new, 2013-model SL550. The lighter, more rigid SL takes its lettering ('super lightweight') literally. The latest car's featherweight tubular frame and all-aluminium bodyshell weighs 242 pounds less than its steel predecessor.

"The result is perceptible and measurable," he proudly stated. The car is all class in the looks department. I have seen and driven many iterations of past-model SLs and this one is the most stunning by far. I can only imagine how the 429bhp V8, with its 7-speed Drive-Adaptive automatic transmission performs. Superb.



By no means ready to be upstaged, Porsche unveiled two all-new 911 Carrera Cabriolets, which also benefit from lightweight construction. Both pack Porsche's famous flat-six, but the simple '911 Carrera' has a 350bhp

3.4-litre, while the '911 Carrera S' has an additional 50bhp courtesy of its 3.8-litre powerplant.

Both come with seven-speed manual transmission as standard, and are not only gorgeous and handle like a dream, but are fuel-efficient, too. I am not sure one has much to do with the other, but it's nice to think you aren't burning petrol unnecessarily as you take your toy to the race track. Also new to the North American market is the Panamera GTS. With its unmistakable Porsche slanted bonnet, it looks like a four-wheeled rocket.



Travelling back, up the now less-crowded highway away from this year's NAIAS, the clouds started to roll over a greyer sky and the temperatures dipped back down to a more respectable winter level. My windows were up and the heat was on. I felt that the automotive industry, too, has navigated successfully through its own atypical days. The mood is high and the focus on efficiency - but not at the expense of design - is common to all manufacturers; the fun of owning and driving a new car is back. Sales are projected to rise even further this year from 2011's surprisingly strong showing. Which is welcome news for a wavering global economy.

We all love a good comeback story, so relax, sit back, and enjoy the ride.











Photos: HeadlineAuto, Newspress, Sven Jurisch

Gallery

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