

By Burge Hulett

Porsche people in Cloudccocooland are different from the rest of us. Maybe it's because the sun beats down on them most days, or maybe it's because Porsches are as common in Southern California as taxi cabs in Manhattan. Regardless of the reason, just about every Porsche seen in Lotus Land has some visible modification. Spiffy wheels with P7s wrapped around them aren't enough. Nor are fender flares or \$10,000 paint jobs. What gets heads spinning and eyeballs popping these days are Porsche 911 convertibles.

The factory started it with the 911 SC Cabriolet shown at the Frankfort and Geneva auto shows. Then a Santa Ana, Calif. converter named Solaire picked up a saw and went to work, before the anticipated factory cabriolets arrived in auto-trendy Southern California. Now, the factory cars are here, splendid with the convertible tops, and Solaire president Al Rowland is happy.

"We're gearing up our production line," he told *AutoWeek*, "we think the promotion behind the factory 911 SC Cabrio will really spark the Porsche convertible business, particularly in Southern California." He's no doubt right, as Porsches and convertibles are as coveted as 8-percent assumable mortgages among the Beverly Hills and Newport Beach set.

We spoke to a woman driving one of the advance Porsche convertibles, (others are due in showrooms in February) and asked if the car was really as much of an attention-getter as we had heard. She got a dreamy look behind her Porsche Design sunglasses as she replied,

"I haven't gotten this much attention in a car since my boyfriend and I spent a few hours in the back seat of my father's Buick after the senior prom—and that was 22 years ago. Being in this car with the top down makes me wish I were a kid again so I could spend my days cruising the beach towns." High praise for a car officially unavailable to members of the masses, with almost \$40,000 in their designer jeans for a car. Just who the Porsche convertible masses will be is open to some debate among those who usually know of such things, but everyone agrees the 911 SC Cabrio will be the "in" car where 308 Ferraris, 930s and 450 SLs are used to take kids to school. A representative of a large Porsche dealership told us his agency had six months of deposits for cabrios, and he didn't know how much the car would cost. "We've been quoting people between \$37,000 and \$40,000," he said, "So far most of our cabrio customers have been Porsche people. They saw pictures of the factory car at the European auto shows and now they want one."

All this bodes well for Porsche's U.S. distributor, Volkswagen of America, especially in the high Porsche volume Southern California market where 911s currently are selling 150 units ahead of this time last year. What the *avant garde* Porscophile will get for \$33,651, the price *AutoWeek* estimates for the base 911 SC Cabriolet, is instant automotive status, even in Southern California.

The last open Porsche to leave

Porsche 911 SC Cabrio

There's not a better way to get to know the Porsche 'family'

Stuttgart was the Convertible D, a roll-up window model based on the 356. Now, 17 years later, the 911 SC Cabriolet is essentially a Targa with the bar removed. The barless Targa is fitted with a tight-fitting canvas top stretched over a clever three-bow system that uses self-adjusting spring-loaded steel cables to ensure a tight fit. The system is 30 pounds lighter than the Targa one and is almost three decades better than the last Porsche with a folding top.

The old 356 Cabriolet would lift its top slightly, enough to let air whistle through the openings, at any speed more than 60 MPH or so. The new version is tight and free from wind noise at 100 MPH, thanks mainly to a 6-inch steel panel underneath the front of the cloth top. There is another six-inch steel bar over the plastic rear window, the result being that only about 50 percent of the top is unreinforced. This means the convertible top is essentially flutter free and a lot quieter than the old Porsche Cabrios.

Adding more to the Cabrio's wind sealing are one-piece frames over and at the rear of the side windows. Both are rubber stripped for wind sealing and we can report they work exceptionally well.

The 911's rear window is plastic and must be unzipped before the top is raised or lowered. It can be folded down, leaving the top up on days when a driver might want lots of air without direct sun.

Opening and closing the lid on Porsche's newest 911 variant is semi-simple. The drill is to fold down the rear window, find the two levers supplied with the car, insert them in the holes in the header bar and twist. That releases the header from the top of the windshield and it can now be folded back into the well behind the rear seats and secured with hooks for that purpose. Raising it is the same in reverse plus zipping in the rear window. Raising and lowering the top aren't particularly hard, although we think they could be easier. If a top lever is lost, the roof will stay. In our test car, the cost of having the top fit nice and tight was having to struggle a little when fastening it to the top of the windshield. The word is Porsche is working on a electric top which should take care of these minor convertible hassles.

Included in the Cabriolet package is a tailored boot to snap over the folded top. A tonneau cover is optional. Standard 2+2 seating remains with

the top up or down. The rest of the 911 SC Cabriolet is standard 911 SC, which means a refined vehicle that hasn't lost any of its distinctive characteristics throughout its long life. One of the memorable ones is the 911's sting in the tail provided by an honest 172bhp coming from Porsche's air-cooled, 3.0-liter, six-cylinder opposed engine. It will accelerate the cabrio from 0-to-60 miles per hour in less than seven seconds, according to the factory, and launch it to a terminal speed of around 140 MPH.

In addition to blistering performance, the 911 SC Cabriolet has all the creature comforts Porsche owners have come to expect from the factory. *AutoWeek's* early cabrio, the only one with a 1982 manufacturer's tag (the rest will be 1983s) was loaded with items making getting there as comfortable as possible. Included in the price are electric windows and mirrors, air conditioning and a heater that really works, along with typically form-fitting adjustable Porsche seats. One of the benefits of open-air motoring after the sun goes down in California is opening the heater ducts, feeding the feet and leaving the top down. Ditto with the air conditioner during the day.

While it appears obvious the factory 911 SC Cabriolet will be an instant success in Porsche's largest U.S. market, it isn't a car for everyone, what with the better part of \$40,000 to spend on a set of wheels.

Air-cooled engines are noisy, especially high-performance air-cooled engines, and 911s are not immune. When you cut a Porsche's insulated hard top off and replace it with uninsulated canvas you understandably increase interior noise. The cabrio is filled with sound with the top down, the rear window folded out or the top up. It's only a problem for those not enamored with engine noise and an even bigger one for those indifferent to the joys of open air motoring. The point is, if you want exposure to the elements, without an intimate mechanical feeling, you might prefer a convertible without an air-cooled engine.

The rest of the 911 SC Cabriolet is as you'd expect. It's a car put together like no other. Which is to say even companies that pride themselves on overall fit and finish, people like Rolls Royce, have nothing on a 911. The cabrio is in keeping with this 18-year tradition, and just about every detail has been executed flawlessly, al-

though there is one small exception.

At high speeds, with the top down, the cabrio's rear boot comes adrift. It won't come off, or at least didn't during our several days of test driving, but every time we'd check it, a couple of the side snaps had come undone.

It's something the guys from Solaire have perfected slightly better than Porsche. "I don't really know why our boot stays in place and theirs doesn't," said Solaire president Al Rowland. "We both use the same approach and our snaps are located in the same spots. Maybe the snaps we buy here are a little better than the ones the factory gets in Germany." It's truly a small point, since the factory boot comes adrift way above our national speed limit.

Since production numbers on the 911 SC Cabriolet will be limited — estimates are around 1,700 cars per year, which works out to a fraction more than five per Porsche+Audi dealer—demand will no doubt exceed supply, a happy situation for the factory, its dealers and people like Solaire's Al Rowland.

AutoWeek had the opportunity to listen to Rowland, who probably knows more about Porsche convertibles than anyone outside Stuttgart, as he checked out the factory cabrio for the first time. He was ecstatic, not so much because he hadn't expected a first-rate job, but more because he and his partner arrived at the same folding-top solutions as the factory engineers.

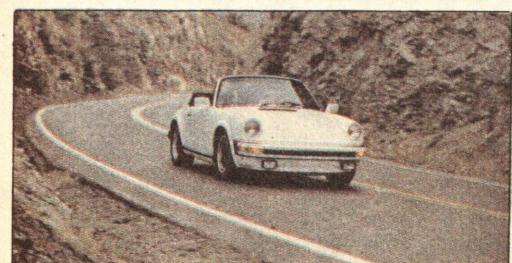
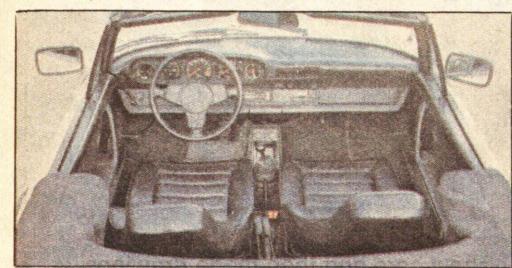
"We had some help," he said, "we enlarged photographs of the factory show cars and then made drawings for our own conversions from them. We also copied factory hardware as closely as possible." Side-by-side, it was impossible for *AutoWeek* to find a difference between the Solaire Porsche, one they call a Speedster 900, and the Stuttgarter.

The reason any mention of a non-factory convertible is appropriate in a story about a new factory model is we think many Porsche Targa owners will want to convert their cars to Cabriolets, particularly if the factory ones are in short supply. Also, if a Porsche owner has individualized a Targa with expensive wheels and tires, fender flares, steering wheel, aftermarket stereo and other expensive accessories, it doesn't make much sense to sell it and start over again with a new car just to end up with a convertible. Another solution to wind-in-the-wallet motoring is a converter like Solaire who will make a barless Targa for \$3,995.

Late-model Targas are so stiff in the chassis that neither Solaire nor the factory has to add any additional bracing when they remove the Targa bar. It's why 911s handle as well as they do and why the 911 SC Cabriolet is completely free of any noticeable chassis flex. It can be driven over the most uneven roads, even jumped by going fast over whoop-de-dos, and nothing rattles or clunks.

The 911 SC Cabriolet is sure to draw new owners into the already large American Porsche family, and based on our knowledge of 911s, and some expert opinions on the new convertible, we can't think of a better way to get acquainted.





Porsche 911SC Cabriolet

DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase (in.): 89.5
Length (in.): 168.9
Width (in.): 65.0
Height (in.): 51.6
Track, F/R (in.): 53.9/54.3
Curb weight (lbs.): 2,756
Fuel capacity (gal.): 21.0

POWERTRAIN:

Layout: rear-engine, rear-wheel drive
Engine type: horizontally-opposed six-cylinder
Displacement (cu. in./liters): 183.0/3.0
Compression ratio: 9.3:1
Horsepower @ RPM: 172 @ 5,500
Torque @ RPM (lbs. ft.): 175 @ 4,200
Fuel delivery: CIS fuel injection with oxygen sensor
0-60 (secs.): 6.9
Transmission type: five-speed

Gear ratios:

I 3.18:1
II 1.83:1
III 1.26:1
IV 1.00:1
V 0.82:1

Final drive ratio: 3.875:1

CHASSIS:

Suspension: front: ind. with MacPherson struts, longitudinal torsion bars

rear: ind. with semi-trailing arms, transverse torsion bars

Steering type: rack-and-pinion

Overall ratio: 17.78:1

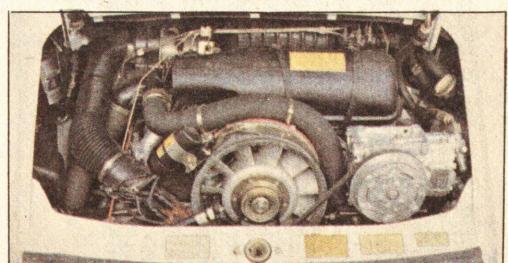
Turning circle (ft.): 34.0

Brake system: power-assisted discs

Wheels: 6Jx15 F; 215/60VR15 R

Tires: 185/70VR15 F; 215/60VR15 R

EPA fuel economy: 17 city/27 hwy.



Vic Huber photos