BY KEVIN A. WILSON

Absolute POWER

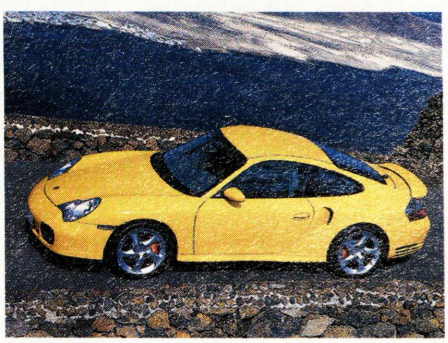
Try, go ahead, just try, to keep your nose clean in the 2001 Porsche Turbo

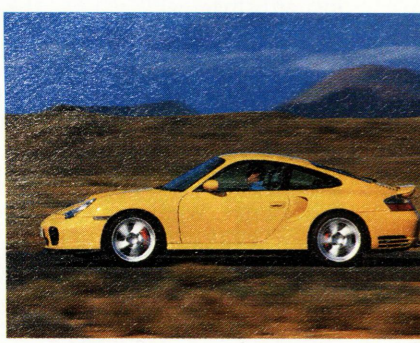
The mountain roads outside Seville are narrow, barely advanced beyond their origins as wagon trails. The road builders of Spain have covered these meager tracks in asphalt that's about one-and-a-half Porsche Turbos wide, which we must share with oncoming traffic. The fall-off-the-cliff side is marked off by massive concrete pillars and blocks, painted white for visibility. Along the drainage ditch adjacent to the rock wall of the mountainside, the edges of the pavement are broken away. These are things to be shy about with low-profile (295/30ZR-18) tires out back, Pirelli P Zeros subject to the sudden influx of 415 hp should the driver catch a whim.

We've just gotten behind the wheel, taking over from our co-driver at the top of a pass. On the downhill run, we chat about how the clever fellows in charge at Porsche seem to have selected the road, a short drive from the launch program's home base at Carmona, to keep our speeds down, forcing the notoriously rabid press corps to stay within reasonable limits in this machine, the new 2001 Porsche 996 Turbo, capable of 189 mph.

We've flown all the way from Detroit, after all, edgily anticipating the legendary fire-breathing Turbo, a balls-out screamer. The study of 25 years of Turbo history fills our heads with images of space-launch acceleration and tunnel-vision top speeds, not to mention lurid slides and surprise oversteer. Now, here we are in the belly of the beast, noodling along on this narrow road, all second and third gear work, and busy work at that.

On the brake, crank the wheel left for a hairpin that we can't quite see around until, oops, more brake, and adjust steering to leave room for the Spanish gentleman walking along the road





The upper wing extends at 75 mph and generates genuine downforce (not merely cancellation of lift) at that speed; there's a button to raise it manually. The navigation system seen in the center of the dashboard (opposite) is one of the few options, as is the Tiptronic S automatic whose shifter is also seen in that photo.

in his beret and baggy trousers, quick impression of a loaf of bread under his arm. Then back on the gas, squirt along a little straight that isn't so very straight and into third gear, back on the brake—there it is, that familiar and characteristic Porsche brake squeak—think about shifting down, decide not to bother. Crank the wheel hard right for another hairpin, back on the gas and come flowing out of the bend to the delicious swell of turbo-enhanced power, a feeling like no other but we've no time to let it build, to appreciate the seemingly endless wellspring of torque, before we're off the gas, picking an apex, back on the brake and again that squeak.

Slow bit of business, this.

The road opens and we get a moment for mental calibration. Let's see, second gear is good for 110 km/h or so, and that's, ah, 62 plus 6.2 is 68 mph, and we're deep into third. We're just cruising, really, waving the other Porsches past rather than risk holding them up in our reluctance to dash around blind bends without leaving a margin of safety, a margin we feel that we have in abundance. There's the standard all-wheel drive (as first applied to the Turbo in '95) and, way out there at the very limits of even excellent drivers' abilities, the Porsche Stability Management system stands ready to rescue us from over-exuberance. We haven't engaged it, yet. If someone's going to punt a Sevillian over the cliff, it won't be us.

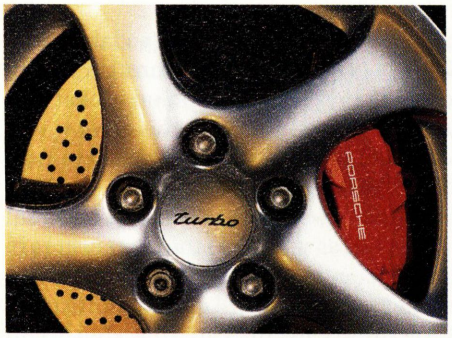
Slow road maybe, but still—even when driven in sane-citizen fashion—a fast car. Without breaking a sweat, we're going faster than we'd dare in almost any car you could name. We could get arrested without even trying.

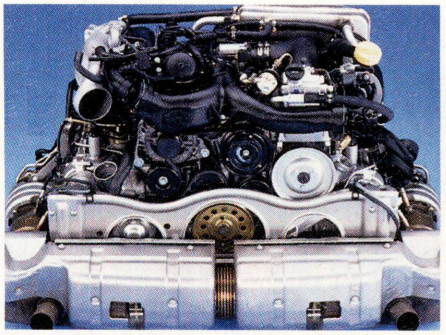
Following our cohorts we notice that from behind, especially, the new Turbo is one fine-looking machine, its body broadened from the 996 Carrera standard to accommodate a rear track that's wider by 40 millimeters (1.6 inch). The tail also sports air extraction vents on the lower quarter-panels and a wing that raises at 75 mph to create a bi-plane effect. The lower wing is attached to the decklid and resembles the original Carrera RS spoiler of 1973 (though at a less-oblique angle) while the upper section is pure race-car stuff.

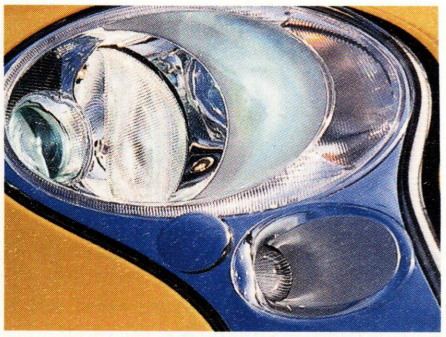
It's less evident in profile than was the whale tail of previous Turbos, but the wing generates genuine downforce on the rear axle at speed. From the side, the most evident distinction from the standard 911 are the vents in the quarter-panels just behind the doors, which feed air to the intercoolers, mounted low on either side near those extraction vents in the lower edge of the rear bumper. That it all serves to make the car look a bit like a cross between the 959 and the Le Mans-winning (1998) Porsche GT1 is a bonus.

The 3.6-liter liquid-cooled flat-six, heart of the beast, is also more akin to that in the GT1 than to the 3.4-liter that serves in your mere 996 with its "meager" 296 hp. Tracing its roots, too, to the 959 and even the mighty 962, the dry-sump crankcase was deemed a stronger foundation for the forced-induction model. On the top end, the new 3.6-liter is unlike its predecessor in that it sports a twin-cam arrangement with four valves per cylinder and VarioCam Plus variable cam timing.

The twin KKK turbos, one for each bank of three cylinders, generate a maximum boost of 12.32 psi (0.85 bar) over atmos-







pheric, which isn't a lot, allowing for 9.4:1 compression and decent off-boost performance. It all adds up to 415 hp at 6000 rpm, not a huge gain over the rating on the last Turbo S.

The pure output figure doesn't account, however, for the new mill's incredible flexibility and improved performance in the emissions and fuel-consumption realms. It qualifies as a low-emission vehicle in America and meets 2005 European emissions specs, while returning better than 20 mpg. So, it's a good citizen. A powerful good citizen.

Like the 993 twin Turbo, the 996 suffers none of the model's once notorious turbo lag. None. You can feel a step up in performance at about 2700 rpm, but it's more the sensation of the engine coming up on the cam than a pronounced no-boost-to-boost transition. It simply behaves like an engine with much greater displacement. With peak torque—413 lb-ft—available all the way from 2700 rpm to 4600 rpm, we were tempted to ask about the car's trailer-towing capacity.

Get stuck behind a slower car on a two-lane, see the oncoming traffic clear and squeeze on some throttle and, as the thought goes through your mind that maybe you should downshift, you realize it's too late—you're already past the slower car and moving back into the right lane. That quick. Think about it and it's done. Porsche engineers, being German engineers, have of course quantified this characteristic: Going from 80 km/h (49.6 mph) to 120 km/h (74.4 mph) takes five seconds. *In fifth gear!* Unless you've got a stopwatch ticking between your ears (a la Michael Schumacher), the driver's impression is nothing so precise. It is, instead, a sense of amazing, magical ability, of near omnipotence. You need to go around a Seat and two semis and the passing zone looks awfully short? Do it. No worries. You have the POWER. Try not to be too corrupt with it.

For all that, the Turbo remains supremely manageable. The forward thrust is never accompanied by that nervous twitch characteristic of early Turbos—could it be that the ill-behaved original back in 1974 really had only 260 hp? Pour a lot of power into the new car at a standstill—never a Carrera's forte, and a problem for every turbo, all-wheel-drive car we've ever driven—and it shudders for a brief moment as it sorts out which wheel is going to do how much work and then, wham, you're gone, on the way to 100 km/h (62.2 mph) in 4.2 seconds, and 100 mph in 9.2. Those are factory claims, almost certain to prove conservative.

The six-speed manual transmission shares only its shift lever with the C4. The shifter cables have been beefed up for this application, and it feels sharper, more precise and easier to shift quickly than *AutoWeek*'s long-term 911 Carrera, though the latter car does have 25,000 miles on it. The transmission has a new housing and a beefier first gear (same ratio as in the C4), with revamped gears and ratios in second through fifth. The new Turbo shares the latest C4's revised arrangement of the viscous coupling to the front axle.

For the first time in history, the Turbo is also offered with an automatic, the Porsche Tiptronic S. While the massive torque of the engine seems to mate well with the automatic, and while it will certainly help Porsche meet its 2500 cars/year sales target (the four-year run of the 993 Turbo, 1995-98, was 5987 cars), this is not the choice for those seeking the ultimate sporting experience—performance is degraded, with 0 to 100 km/h in 4.9 seconds and top speed of 185 mph. In shift-it-yourself mode (via two largish buttons on the steering wheel spokes), the Tiptronic still suffers from too-slow response to the driver's commands. A greater intrusion is the "we know better than you" thinking of the engineers who programmed it to shift sometimes even when the driver hasn't asked it to do so. It's not as sporting a proposition as the paddle-shifted manual gearbox in the Ferrari 355 F1. The Tiptronic Turbo had us thinking of the long-distance touring agility of the 928 more than of any rear-engine Porsche, ever. As the company's top-of-the-line car in the modern era, of course, the latest 911 range fulfills much the same mission as the 928 once did. But if you think the emphasis in the Turbo should remain on performance, get the six-speed.

The performance is not all just power. The brakes and suspension have had a working-over to deal with the increased pace. Compared with a standard C4, the ride height is lowered about a half-inch, the springs, shocks and antiroll bars are all firmer, and the rear suspension arms are the slightly longer ones from the GT3, which help keep the tires flat on the ground. Then there are the new 18-inch hollow-spoke alloys, eight inches wide up front and 11 inches in back, to accommodate the big meats, 225-40ZRs in front and the 295/30ZRs in the back. As in the C4, the difference between the 40-series front and 30-series rears still induces the all-wheel-drive system to perceive a little slip at the rear and divert a small amount of torque—5 percent—to the front wheels in normal driving. This means you never really feel a transition through the steering wheel, though if the rears really start slipping, as much as 40 percent of the power can go to the front wheels.

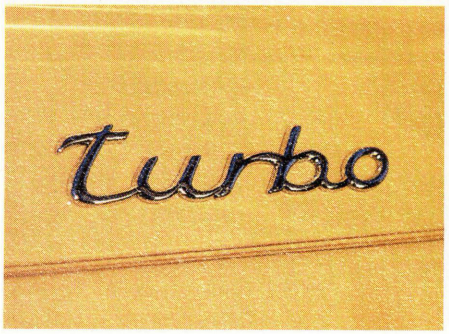
The low-profile tires make the ride sharp and jouncy over rough stuff, like Carmona's cobbled streets, but in most circumstances the ride is better than that of the previous 993 Turbo by a significant margin. At high speeds, a quick jounce can make the short car feel a little skittish, until you come to trust it and let it have its head a little. That nervous feeling in the pit of your stomach when you're told you'll be driving The Turbo is not your friend if it induces you to try to ride herd on every little body motion. Once you stop fussing with it, you find the handling is supremely neutral. There is a tendency to understeer if you're ham-fisted—and who isn't, from time to time?—and you can induce it to behave otherwise, changing the car's attitude with the gas pedal to step the tail out with power or lift-throttle weight transfer, but up to the 150 mph or so that was the quickest we could get on the drive route, you never feel as if the thing is going to turn around and bite you.

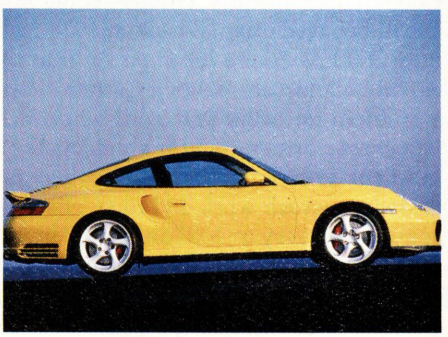
Turn off the PSM and you can waggle the tail about some, but as you do so torque transfers to the front axle and brings it all back into line. Yes, the laws of physics still apply, but if you're testing the limits in this car, you're either in an extreme emergency or you ought to be on a racetrack. If the PSM is turned off and the yaw angle is large, all you need do to reactivate PSM's magic assistance in directional stability is tap the brake pedal.

So your biggest worry on the road is other drivers who don't immediately understand that yours is the *uberauto*, that the Road King is coming through. Give them some time for a few more looks at the Turbo's nose, and they'll start moving over when they see it in the mirrors. Down low there are dual air inlets for the front brakes, and above them are bi-xenon headlamps—more distinctive than the 911's and the first to use gas-discharge bulbs for both the main and bright beams on a production car. For our money, the amoeba-like shape of the headlight glass is still too Boxster-esque, but then, if the 911 had come first and the Boxster later, would anyone think this look was "cheaper"? Certainly there's no mistaking the Turbo for either of its lesser stablemates. It would take a retooling of the front fender to change the light design more radically—no doubt an aftermarket opportunity.

Another might be the interior, which is much like that in a standard 911—not special except for having more leather and soft-touch surfaces on things like the knobs that help you aim the ventilation louvers. The instrument panel has been massaged, moving the digital speedo over by the small analog one at the left, leaving room for a digital display in the central rev counter. The display doubles as a multifunction trip computer and a boost gauge. If you have a lot of boost showing on that gauge, think "eyes front." Things happen in a hurry out there.

If someone or something does stray into your path, it's good to know the brakes are basically those of the 911 GT3. The red monobloc calipers grip cross-drilled, vented rotors 13 inches in diameter front and rear, the only difference being that the rear ones are only 1.1 inch thick while the harder-working fronts are 1.34 inch thick. ABS, of course, and PSM intervene early if





you're on a slippery surface to improve directional stability by managing each wheel independently. The brakes deliver great feel, easily modulated, and that standard-issue chirp—the same one you hear as a racing spectator at the track—that lets you know you're really in a Porsche.

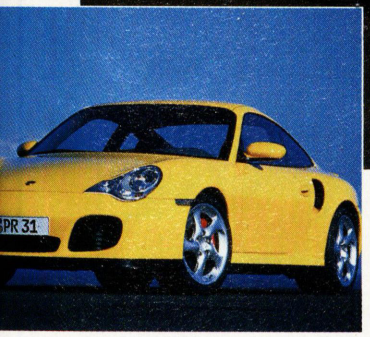
If superb brakes just aren't enough for you, though, this fall Porsche promises to make available Porsche Ceramic Composite Brakes, which are supposed to reduce the car's overall weight 44 pounds. That'd be 11 pounds of unsprung mass reduction per corner, the way we figure it, which ought to help the ride/handling mix plenty. Better still, PCCB promises full braking performance with less physical effort on the pedal, and improved wet-weather performance. We don't know, yet, how they sound. We believe the calipers will be yellow instead of red, for easy status-spotting. The corrosion-free ceramic rotors promise to last 300,000 kilometers (180,000 miles), which Porsche also refers to as "the life of the car." Pad life won't be quite as good, but estimates are that the composite metal linings will last twice as long as today's pads. The savings on brake jobs probably won't cover your buy-in cost, though. The ceramic brake option cost is not yet set, but if you think about it as the sticker price on a Corolla or Neon, you might not be far off. PCCB can be retrofit to cars purchased before the option is available.

Ah yes, purchase. When it gets here in May, the U.S. price is $111,000, lower than earlier estimates. Add $3,500 if you succumb to the easy commuting factor of the Tiptronic.

The 2001 Porsche Turbo makes rapid transit so easy that one is left to wonder if it isn't too perfect. If your primary joy in Porsche ownership is blasting around at a track day, cranking the steering wheel back and forth to control the oversteer, there are other machines wearing the Stuttgart crest that will do you better, frankly. Unless you're running a tight slalom in a parking lot, though, most of them will be slower when you measure progress by the clock.

If your mission is to get from here to there in the least amount of time with the least amount of fuss and with a wide margin of safety, we doubt there's another car made today that would be better suited than the new 996 Turbo. Porsche itself acknowledges as its prime competitor the more-powerful Ferrari Maranello, which is also more expensive, provides rear-drive only and is larger. The Italian car is a splendid machine, but if we absolutely had to be somewhere else in a hurry and had our choice, the valet could hang on to the Ferrari keys until we got back.

Fair notice to the world's other automakers, then. You've had two years now without any Porsche Turbo on the market. Two years during which the throne was empty and anyone could have claimed to make the world's best over-the-road machine. Time's up. Other cars might prove faster, or have characters that prove more expressive or more entertaining, certainly. The Turbo is back, though, and it is the standard against which all such comparisons will be made. Again. ■



The big front vents cool the brakes while the center one is for radiator intake; the vents in the rear quarter-panels are for the charge intercoolers. Like those on the previous Turbos, the new alloy wheels have hollow spokes to reduce weight. Bi-xenon headlamps are a first for any production car.