

On Second Thought...

A few months (years?) back, I wrote an article about the then-new Targa, lamenting both the loss of the beloved basket handle roll bar, and the substantial price premium over the prior method in producing the moving glass monster which in many ways was little different from a sunroof coupe with a moon roof insert.

At the time I decided to give the new design a chance, as it appropriately addressed the two real issues associated with the earlier design concept of a removable roof panel. For those not familiar with the concept, remember that the original design, penned by Butzi Porsche, head of the design group which developed the beloved 901 cum 911 series Porsche, was originally a rigid rollover bar covered in stainless steel, with a folding removable roof and a zip out vinyl rear window. The folding roof was for a time rigidized, but always had reinforcing aluminum longitudinals which created amazing structural strength and safety in a crash, yet ease of operation and light weight, and the zip-out window was replaced with a rigidizing glass bubble which was at once beautiful, strong and functional. At the time it was the ONLY way to purchase an open 911, and from 1967 the only open PORSCHE, as the Cabrio was not introduced until the 1983 model year. Of course the 911 Coupe with sunroof was available, but to true open car aficionados (something like that), if you rolled down the windows, and couldn't swing your arm from the window edge on one side to the window edge on the other without hitting anything except air and birds, then you had something OTHER than an OPEN car. And ALL true SPORTS cars were OPEN. That was part of what made them babe magnets, or so we liked to convince ourselves, because we projected that part of the purpose was the "see and be seen" nature of such cars, far more than their relative velocity in any real driving sense. In fact, some open "sports cars" were so flexible as a result of the lack of upper body structure above swinging doors, as to make their usefulness in a competitive driving sense actually laughable.

Even my beloved Targa shares that trait, albeit only when considered relative to other Porsche coupes. Compared with most cars, even with the roof removed, my 911 will leave them in the dust and LOVES to be tossed, precisely because it IS so flexible. That is the reason Porsche shipped 911 Turbos from the factory as Targa and Cabrio for only three years; '87-89. They stopped through concern that the car's performance exceeded its rigidity, and they might get SUED by some moron who found out that you can't hook up an Allison P51 engine to a rubber band and then be surprised when you get covered in rubber shards. In fact, I USE that flexibility to consciously DRIVE OVER the low curbing at the "Bus Stop" chicane at Watkins Glen, as the body flexes enough that the tires hardly TOUCH the curbing, allowing me to so straighten the line there that NO PCA car has ever tracked through there and pulled away from me, no matter their racing rubber. It's the laws of physics. You know, the same ones which make me have to practically put on the four way flashers at the toe of the boot! And I LUST after one of those precious 930 Targas, so if you hear of one...

But I digress (Getting bored yet?)...

See, to me, terminal velocity and the chase thereof has never been more than a passing fantasy among the real experience of feeling God's joy as I have been safely cosseted beneath my stainless rollbar, but with the wind in my hair from uninterrupted blue sky carrying the smells of nature as I played the six speaker stereo at full volume out behind the rear wheels over a twisty back road. I have no idea how fast. It never mattered. I was at church, and the choir was singing. (If there is ANYONE at Porsche who reads this and doubts for one second that I make a better commercial for your cars than you can possibly buy, you need another dose of Valium! There is no POSSIBLE way PCNA can ever generate corporate goodwill value which can compare to that of the most poorly attended PCA meeting on the planet. If you REALLY want to sell people cars, try buying a few tickets to local club dinner meetings, autocrosses,

and the like, and give them to prospective customers. The Ayatollah should have had such religious followers!) But again, I digress...

We (actually, I, as you dear readers have probably decided this is about time to line the birdcage) was talking about the Targa, and the “new” one with the glass panel which opened into the underside of the fixed coupe-like rear window. I never quite got the idea of that, except perhaps that it allowed for cleaner exterior lines, rather than having some minivan-like slots along the top to handle a glass panel which went ABOVE the rear glass (backlight in British, which NEVER made any sense to me), but they at least would have prevented the further intrusion into an already pitifully small area of the rear “seats”. Again, however, I decided to let the new design have its chance to prove its stuff. By resolving the aforementioned two key issues; leakage and stowage of the roof panel in the reduced underhood capacity of the 964 and 993 generation 911s, the new Targa design had some potential advantages over the beloved basket handle. Not many, but some. Certainly not aesthetic.

Well, I guess it was one of those things. By going to the complicated new design, they made a less than full open car cost as much as a real full open Cabrio. They added insult to injury by putting a special, bone-ugly as they come, wheel with FAKE stupid rivets, like it was a modular, which made it cost that much more at no return in real benefit. Unfortunately, I am not privy to the sales charts, and being the user of statistics that I am, I doubt my interpretations wouldn't have others just as vehement as I saying the Targa became redundant in 1983 anyway. Balderdash. When in retrospect you justify a stupid decision on the basis that others recognize its stupidity, you should not merely be fired; you should be fired UPON! Reverse the decision!

But no. The new 996 will forever be without the lines which made the 911 so appealing to me in the first place. The basket handle which started in stainless steel, went through the flat black and monochromatic phases, and returned every time to the timeless elegance of SS save one, and is no more to be. One can only hope that Porsche does not further sully the regal name Targa by some afterbirth revival like the Caddy Eldorado or Chevy Malibu. See, while convenience is a prerequisite in a \$70K+ car today, and it is certainly NOT convenient to have to stop, open the hood, flip open both doors and jockey a roof into place at the first sign of a sprinkle, that was not the only way to stay out of the pouring rain. You could also do so except in a torrent merely by pushing harder on the loud pedal. The funny thing is, when you did, it suddenly didn't seem any more out of place to get soaked during your drive than it did to get soaked at a Baptist revival. It was part of the religious experience. You see, I knew what it was to drive a water-cooled Porsche LONG before they started putting that funny green fluid in the engine bay. And I mourn its passing terribly.

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