

Sitting on a Porsche

THE MORE YOU PAY for a car, the less reliable it will be.

And it's not just cars either. My old Casio watch used to be second perfect, week in and week out, but the Breitling that's replaced it sheds nine seconds a day and sometimes stops completely in the night.

My £8 Zippo is capable of lighting cigarettes in a hurricane but the Dunhill I take out on posh frock nights refuses to ignite if someone on the other side of the room is waving their arms around a bit.

I have an Umberto Ginocchietti jacket which has worn through at the elbows in less than a year, yet my Lee Cooper jeans are unburstable.

And so it goes on. I read about a woman the other day who has enjoyed 120,000 trouble free miles in her Daihatsu Charade, yet the new McLaren, which costs more than half a million pounds, broke down on its first ever journalistic road test.

Prince Charles suffered the ultimate ignominy the other day when his brand new £150,000 Aston Martin Virage Volante conked out, rather conspicuously, on the Cromwell Road.

We may all drool over a Ferrari but if you used one every day, its engine would go out of tune and then break altogether. You would grow to hate the steering which is more stubborn than a dog which doesn't want to go to the vet's, and the gearbox, which is heavier than a washing machine.

But this is part of the appeal. You've got to be some kind of triangular torsoed he-man to drive a Ferrari, and you have to be rich enough to have another car for the other six days in a week. You only take the Ferrari out on special occasions - that's what makes it special.

Jeremy Clarkson

If you have a car that you can use every day, it will be an everyday car; humdrum, and tedious. Unless it's a Porsche.

Porsches are unique as they, like no other cars made, blend quality with sophisticated get up and go. And I have to say that some of them, these days, are pretty good value for money.

The 968 Club Sport does not have much in the way of creature comforts but you find me a more invigorating coupe for less than £30,000. And all you lot at the back with your Mazdas and your Toyotas can put your hands down now. They are not in the same league.

The 911 too is something of a bargain. I recently spent the weekend with an egg yellow Carrera convertible which can haul itself from 0 to 60 in five point something seconds. It sounded great. Yobs spat at it. Taxi drivers asked if I'd swap. And yet it costs a mere £59,000 which is £20,000 less than the equivalent Ferrari.

Now, I'm no great fan of the 911. It's 31 years old and in some ways, you can tell. The dash was put together during a game at a children's tea party, and a blindfold was involved. And I reckon the new suspension is a triumph of engineering skill over a flawed design. That engine simply shouldn't be where it is.

Furthermore, the latest version, which was launched six months ago, has a pair of headlights which make the whole car look like a startled rabbit. And it's just too easy to drive; the steering's too light, the clutch is no harder to depress than a member of EXIT and changing gear is no harder than stirring soup. The end result is a car that just doesn't feel special enough even if you have just gone round a corner at 150mph and all the girls in the street are trying to leave their phone numbers under the windscreen wipers.

Me, I've always preferred the Porsche 928, the Big Daddy. At £73,000, it is reassuringly expensive and it is capable of achieving speeds far in excess of what is practically possible.

It also has a proper engine where engines should be - at the front. Lift the bonnet and you are greeted with the sight of a huge 5.4 litre, quad cam, 32 valve monster which sends 350 brake horsepower to the back wheels through a rear mounted five speed manual gearbox. Or, in my case, a four speed automatic. This is all good beefcake stuff.

And when you climb inside, it gets better. Whereas most cars have measly pieces of wood which aren't big enough to make a

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pencil, this has two dirty great slabs, like upended coffee tables, on each door. And the massive, swooping dash is just delightful.

There are, of course, plenty of toys but it's what controls them all that I love - knobs the size of ice-cream cones. To turn the lights on, you grab a great fistful of rubberised plastic and give it a big old twist. Perhaps that's why there's no CD player - too fiddly, too high tech: not beefy enough. I'm surprised it doesn't have an eight track.

So far then, it's like motorised rock music: big, honest, down to earth and heavy. That body - a familiar sight now that it's been around for seventeen years - is just enormous; so wide that parking meter bays are too narrow by 18 inches, and long too.

Sitting inside, you feel cocooned so you find yourself trying to squeeze into spaces that turn out to be five feet smaller than necessary. It's a good job that bumperless front end is damage resistant because you just can't see it, or the back, or the sides. The last time I drove a 928, I crashed it, and driving this new one, I can see why - you can't see where its enormous body stops.

Happily, the engine is powerful enough to make light of the resultant weight. Prod the loud pedal, and immediately, the rear wheels chirp and lose traction, only being brought back into line by the various silicon chips. A green light comes on to tell the driver when the traction control computer has just kept him out of a hedge.

The first time I went out for a spin, I dived into a small gap on the Wandsworth Bridge roundabout and such was the almighty leap forward, I couldn't help whooping out loud.

I've driven faster, more nimble cars but what I love about the 928 is its old-fashioned muscle.

Fair enough, the ride is far too hard and the steering could do with a bit more 'feel', but when you put your foot down and that raucous engine begins to sing its good ol' V8 song, you tend to forget about the various shortcomings.

Who cares about the microscopic boot or the joke rear seats. The back may well sing tenor but the front sings baritone.

And though £73,000 is a lot of money, it's important to remember that this is half what Aston Martin charge for the similar, though even more brutal, Vantage and £60,000 less than a Ferrari 512TR.

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With that in mind, I began to formulate a pretty good case for the German equivalent of Giant Haystacks, until I remembered the Corvette. Here is another 2 + 2 coupe with a big V8, a hard ride, and prodigious power which is now available with right hand drive for £45,000.

There's no doubt the Porsche is built to higher standards than the Chevrolet and that, curiously enough, is where my argument falls flat on its face.

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