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BUYING A 944

THE COMPLETE GUIDE



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959 VS 992

An equal match three decades on?



944

Values may have increased in recent years, but the 944 is still within reach. Here is what to look out for on naturally aspirated and forced induction models

Words **Dan Bevis** Photography **Porsche & GT Porsche**

The genesis of the 944 is convoluted and serpentine, and it all begins with a mooted joint project between Porsche and Volkswagen. The front-engined, water-cooled 924 of 1976 was originally a product of the VW-Porsche merger team set up to develop the 1969 914. When the idea to sell the 924 as a VW, Porsche or Audi in various different markets didn't bear fruit, Porsche purchased the designs outright, continued development, and pushed it to market with an Audi-derived 2.0-litre engine.

The model drew praise and criticism in equal measure – some loved its poise and tactility, others felt that the humble origins of certain parts did much to dilute the brand – and Porsche sought to mollify the naysayers in 1979 with the 924 Turbo. This was a capable but arguably prohibitively expensive car, although rather than abandon the whole idea Porsche soldiered on and evolved the model into the 944 – a sturdier-looking prospect featuring a new all-alloy 2.5-litre four-cylinder engine which, to an extent, can be viewed as the

5.0-litre V8 from the 928 that's simply been chopped in half. (Although naturally it's a bit more complex than that.)

The 944 featured wider arches, akin to the homologation-special 924 Carrera GT, along with a fresh new interior and thoroughly revised suspension and braking systems. Any ill-advised criticisms levelled at the 924 for 'not being a proper Porsche' were rendered wholly redundant by this radical evolution of the breed. And it was a bona fide success too – production ran from 1982-91, with a grand total of 163,192 examples being sold. Those who grumbled that Porsches should always be rear-engined and air-cooled were silenced pretty quickly. Over the course of its nine-year production run, five distinct variants of the 944 were produced. The original was the simply named 944, which offered 158bhp from its 2.5-litre motor. It boasted a superbly equal balance of weight distribution thanks to its transaxle layout, and the factory-quoted 130mph top speed was modest – contemporary testers posted rather higher figures.

In 1985 the 944 got a minor facelift, with a new dashboard and door cards, along with a bigger sump, upgraded alternator and assorted detail tweaks. In 1988 ABS and airbags arrived, and the following year the engine's displacement was increased to 2.7-litres, raising power to 163bhp.

Above Production ran from 1982-91, with a grand total of 163,192 examples being sold

Right 944's have a superb equal balance of weight distribution thanks to a transaxle layout



THOSE WHO GRUMBLED THAT PORSCHEs SHOULD ALWAYS BE REAR-ENGINEd AND AIR-COOLED WERE SILENCED PRETTY QUICKLY



The 944 S was introduced in 1987, the dual-overhead-cam 16v variant providing 187bhp and a healthy acceleration increase. The S had uprated springs and thicker anti-roll bars, along with revised gearing and the option of an LSD.

The 944 S2 came along in 1989, building on the S platform with a 3.0-litre version of the DOHC 16v motor. Power was up, the gearing was again revised, and a cabriolet version was offered.

For the 1985 model year Porsche developed the 944 Turbo, with a turbocharged and intercooled version of the original 2.5 motor. Due

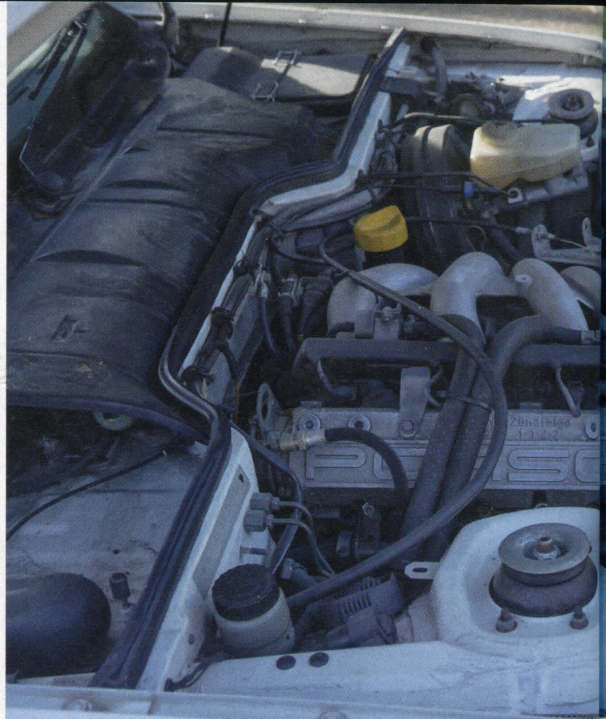
to an interesting quirk of physics, it managed to produce identical power with or without a catalytic converter (on paper, at least), and the body featured improved aero including an integrated front bumper. The gearbox was stronger, the wheels were bigger and the brakes behind were beefed up to suit.

The fifth distinct variant was the 944 Turbo S, released in '88. This had a bigger turbo and revised mapping to free up 247bhp; it also had adjustable Koni dampers, hollow anti-roll bars, firmer bushes, and rolled arches to accommodate wider tyres. »

ENGINES

944 engines are proven to be generally very robust, provided they've been looked after properly. For this reason, it's far more important to base this element of your purchase decision on service history than mileage – a low-miler that's been neglected will serve up far more heartache than an enthusiast-owned high-miler which has always been cherished and properly serviced. "The first question to ask is when it was last serviced," says Nash Hunter of The 944 Centre. "It's important to check when the cambelt was last changed, along with the water pump and balance shaft belt. These cars thrive on regular and correct maintenance; the motors are strong, but poorly maintained examples can wear through big end bearings and so on – it's always best to buy an example with clear evidence of having been looked after."

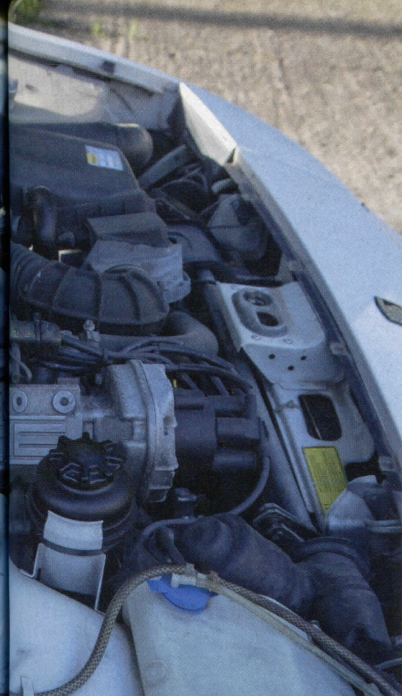
Oil leaks aren't hugely common, but given the age of these cars you shouldn't be too surprised to find weeping gaskets, because that's just what seals can do. If the rear main seal is leaking then that's quite an involved job to remedy as it necessitates taking the clutch out, but if the sump gasket is leaking that's only a couple of hours' work to remedy, and oil leaks from the



HEIGHT CHECK

It is worth noting if you are over six-feet tall later model 944s are more accommodating compared to early examples, while the 2.7 S2 and Turbo make for better long distance cruisers.





Below The 944 Turbo was introduced in 1985, with a turbocharged version of the original 2.5 motor

front end are simple to put right.

"It's a smooth engine, with lots of low-down torque and plenty of power to have fun with," says Nash. "Make sure you can start the car up from cold, if you can – there shouldn't be any smoke on start-up, and if you're looking at a Turbo model be sure that there's no smoke on boost or when you lift off."

The turbocharged engines are commonly held to be as reliable as the naturally-aspirated units; the turbos themselves aren't especially prone to histrionics, and again it's all about proper maintenance. It's worth noting with the 16-valve engines that the cam chain tensioner pads are prone to failure – this can lead to total engine failure with bent valves and all sorts of maladies, so it's a good belt-and-braces area to address; this doesn't apply to the 8-valve engines, just the motors in the S and S2.

"With turbo models, there shouldn't be any hesitation in the power delivery," says Nash. "I wouldn't describe the boost as smooth, as such – it's a 1980s car, and it behaves like it; there's sufficient power to push you back in your seat, and what you should feel is a clean application of aggressive power. And remember, with all 944 engines, maintenance is key!"



TRANSMISSION

944 transmissions are, for the most part, pretty rock solid. They're not especially prone to any major dramas – although, being the age these cars are, there are naturally going to be a few things which may require attention. The operation of the gearshift has quite a long throw, but it should be relatively precise, with no undue slack. If it feels like you're stirring a bowl of porridge, it'll most likely be the linkage bushings that require renewal, which isn't a deal-breaker of a task. The 944 Centre highly recommends the short-shift kit from www.only944.com – this is something they fit to all of their own cars and projects, as it gives the shift a far more modern feel.

The rubber donuts on the clutch friction plate can fail, so it's good to check through the history to see whether this has been remedied at any point in the car's recent past. A whining from the rear box can signify worn bearings, and any hesitation in the shift action can be attributed to a worn clutch. Speaking of which, there should be no change in sound when the clutch is depressed; any metallic frictional noises here will be down to the throw-out bearing.

Most 944s were originally supplied with an open diff, although an LSD was an option and you'll find limited slip differentials on later Turbos as standard. Again, it's a robust unit and shouldn't make any worrying noises. A Quaife LSD is a desirable upgrade for any 944, which makes for a more entertaining steer – you'll be looking at around £1,000 plus fitting, so that's something for the committed enthusiast.

As with any car of this age, gearbox seals can leak, but this is a very simple thing to sort.





BODY

Compared to many of their 1980s contemporaries, Porsche 944s are usually pretty good at resisting rust – although this is always influenced by myriad factors, of course... and what's particularly important to know is that they're rather good at hiding what rust they may have. "The sills tend to rot from the inside outwards," Nash explains. "Bubbles on the lower rear quarters are a giveaway that there's corrosion happening beneath the surface. A good way to check is to open the door, and you'll find a vent in the door shut – look inside this with an endoscope if you have one, or you can just do it by eye, and this will give you a gauge as to how badly gone it is in there."

Regular applications of Waxoyl are the key to keeping things solid; The 944 Centre offers this

as a winter service, and if you find evidence in the car's history of this work having been done, that's a very reassuring thing.

Front wing bottoms can also be prone to rust, as can the lower rear quarters. It's the same issue at both ends – there's a lip beneath which harbours dirt and stones and suchlike, allowing moisture to collect. These are very accessible spots though, and not hard to repair. The jacking points are worth checking too – there are three on each side, but there's no guarantee that previous owners will have used them correctly so there's always potential for issues. And while it's by no means common, it's worth checking the windscreen surround for corrosion, which can bubble up beneath the rubber seal, and around the anchor holes where the boot shuts.

BUBBLES ON LOWER REAR QUARTERS ARE A GIVEAWAY THAT THERE'S CORROSION HAPPENING BENEATH

WHAT TO PAY

For a really nice example of a 944 Turbo, you'll be looking at somewhere in the region of £40,000. A clean low-mileage S2 will be around £20,000, with £14,000 bagging a very tidy example of an early square-dash car. If you're looking for a solid and usable car with a bit of a to-do list, it'll be about £6,000-7,000 for a Turbo or S2, or £3,000-4,000 for an early 944. And if you're feeling brave, projects start at around the £2,000 mark.

INTERIOR

"There are two types of seats you'll find in 944s – standard, and Sport," says Nash. "They both tend to wear on the lumbar, and seats trimmed in vinyl and cloth can separate along the seams, but it's all easy to repair."

Cars from late-1985 onward had a cool digital clock in the dash which likes to stop working, but the repair kit is £35 and it's an easy job. Gear gaiters wear as it's a high-utility area, and the stitching often comes loose on the steering wheel. Interestingly, most trim pieces are still available directly from Porsche, and they're not heinously expensive either. Even dash-tops can be replaced, which is good to know as they are prone to cracking. The square dash in earlier cars is particularly susceptible to sun damage, and a replacement is in the region of €1,000; oval dashes in later cars may also crack, but it's less common. All

the dials should be working fine, the instrumentation is generally reliable. Some of the switchgear can present issues, but again it's just due to age and it's all replaceable. It's also rare to find a car in which the springs in the boot luggage blind haven't failed, they all do that. Another easy fix.

"If you're over six-feet tall, you probably don't want an early 944," Nash suggests. "The later models are a bit more accommodating in their interior configuration! I always take a note of how tall a customer is when they're looking for a 944 – you don't want a taller buyer getting into an early car and being put off the idea, as the late models will be far more suitable. And there really is a 944 for everyone: early cars are a bit firmer, more of a sporty fast-road or track proposition, while the mid-era cars – the 2.7 S2 and Turbo – are more refined cruisers."

Above Parts availability from Porsche is excellent, even for smaller interior trim pieces

Right Turbocharged engines have proven to be as durable as naturally aspirated counterparts



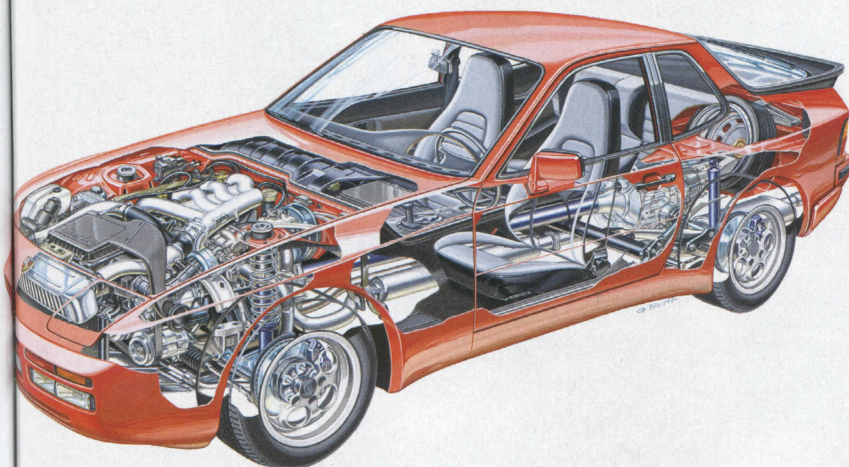
CHASSIS

There are no troubling issues to report with the brakes. The only real problem, as is the case with many cars, is that the nature of having steel sliders inside aluminium calipers may lead to a metallurgic reaction over time which can jam the pads into position – but it's not difficult to rebuild the calipers. 944s aren't heavy on brakes, they don't tend to warp the discs, and when it comes time to replace discs and pads you'll find them readily available and reasonably priced.

ABS was available on models from 1988 onwards, and this is a reliable system which shouldn't throw up any issues.

Cars equipped with power-steering can be prone to leaks; a whine under full lock while the car's stationary might indicate a PAS leak or potentially a pump issue, although the latter needn't be anything to worry about as rebuild kits are available. The PAS fluid cooler has a tendency to rust along the corners of its bends, which can lead to substantial fluid leaks – but again, it's all easily repairable. UJs and ball-joints may be worn, as with any car; simple fixes once

ABS WAS AVAILABLE ON MODELS FROM 1988 ONWARDS, AND SHOULDN'T THROW UP ANY ISSUES



more so nothing to panic about. "These cars do like to hug the cambers through corners, it's just a characteristic of their handling," says Nash. "They all do it. As long as the car brakes straight and true, no worries. And one thing to particularly look out for when viewing these cars is the quality and condition of the tyres: a matching set of quality rubber is a sign that a car has been looked after by someone who's spending money in the right places. If you find a set of mismatched tyres from unpronounceable budget brands, the likelihood is that they will have skimped elsewhere too. You don't want to buy a car that's been maintained on a shoestring."

THE SPECIALISTS

Porsche Spares UK Ltd

www.wooliesworkshop.co.uk
01676 532346

As the name suggests, this is a UK-based supplier of spares for Porsches – specifically the transaxle cars (924, 944, 968) as well as the 911, 928, Boxster, Cayenne, and even 914. The list of parts available on the website is huge and near-exhaustive, including basically everything you could desire in terms of braking components, suspension, transmission, electrics, fuelling, exhaust, lighting, interior trim, wheels and tyres, and service parts. But it's not just supplying spares through the post that's offered by Porsche Spares UK – the team also has a full workshop facility, providing servicing, paint and body repairs, engine work, diagnostics, and restoration work ranging from light restorations to full nut-and-bolt rebuilds. In terms of servicing, a major service including all belts, tensioners, fluids and filters will cost £499.99, with an extra £240 to add a new

water pump to the service. Minor services start at £199, with transmission fluid changes starting at £99.

Augment Automotive

www.augmentautomotive.co.uk
01452 831710

Augment Automotive was originally set up specifically to address issues with tuning and maintenance for the 944, in particular the Type 951 944 Turbo. The primary need identified was to offer an upgraded alternative to the engine management system, and the bespoke solution here is named AugTronic: this ECU was designed from the ground up to improve the 944, and is a plug-and-play unit that's fully live-mappable with data-logging and optional Bluetooth interface. Augment Automotive isn't just about the software, however; the company sells a variety of upgrades including performance camshafts, gearbox oil coolers, and uprated injectors. The company is also set up to offer quality body repairs and

paintwork, rolling road tuning, engine rebuilds, and even selling complete 944s.

The 944 Centre

www.retrorestorer.co.uk
01608 610944

Based in Banbury, Oxfordshire, this is a family-run business specialising in transaxle Porsches. Owner Nash Hunter has had all manner of Porsches, from 911s to 928s and beyond, and feels that the 944 is very much the sweet spot in terms of handling, balance, and outright fun. As well as buying, selling and collecting 944s, The 944 Centre also offers a broad range of services to maintain, repair and restore these cars – everything from basic servicing to full engine rebuilds can be carried out in-house, along with welding and body repair work and even full resprays. With the company dating back to 2005 and following an evolutionary stream of improvements to tooling and facilities, this is very much a one-stop-shop for 944s.

THANKS

PIE Performance for the loan of its Alpine White 1986 Porsche 944 Lux 2.5. Currently advertised for £9495, more details can be found via the website

www.pieperformance.co.uk

