

Dissenting Opinion

THE 996 MAY BE ONE OF THE LEAST WIDELY LOVED 911s, BUT ONE PCA MEMBER HAS BEEN MORE THAN HAPPY WITH THIS 1999 CARRERA FOR 17 YEARS AND 92,000 MILES.

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DETRACTORS DECRIED ITS “flat” flanks, unusual headlights, and congenital similarity to the 1997 Boxster. Hand-wringers mourned the loss of the air-cooled flat six and whined about the complexity of an 18-button radio. But ask Alex Llorente about his first-generation water-cooled Carrera, and he is more upbeat.

“After one drive in the car, I knew I had to have it. I’ve owned this one longer than any of my other cars.”

Considering that his 996 Carrera has been in the family for 17 years and its odometer reflects 92,000 miles of trouble-free driving, his infatuation was no passing fancy.

Meeting Alex in the internet cafe at the 2015 Porsche Parade was pure chance and an unex-



pected delight. He sat alone at one of the tables, catching his breath and enjoying a refreshment, when I barged into his quiet space and asked if I could join him. “Of course. Have a seat. What have you been up to today?” asked Alex. Two strangers brought together by the same passion—Porsches.

It happened a lot during that week in French Lick.

We talked about our cars for an hour or so. When he mentioned that his 1999 Carrera was being featured in the 60 4 60 display, I wanted to know more. With the pall of IMS and

controversial styling hanging over those early 990s, I was eager to hear from an enthusiast who obviously held a dissenting opinion.

A member of PCA's First Settlers Region since 1972, Alex has owned his share of Porsches. Starting with a 914 that he regularly campaigned in SCCA's E Production class, he has driven just about every model that Porsche has produced. After his 914, which was a sentimental favorite, came a 1974 911. “That one was a rare bird—India Red with a blue leatherette interior, a four-speed transmission, and neither sunroof

nor radio,” remembers Alex.

The 911 was followed briefly by a 1978 930 Turbo, silver with a red interior. “My boss saw that car and immediately made me an offer I could not refuse...” A first-year 928, Mocha Black with a tan and Pasha Plaid interior, was the next Porsche parked in Alex's driveway. Recurring electrical gremlins precipitated a quick trade for a 1979 924. With half the cylinders but just as much fun, the 924 served Alex well until 1982, when an SC entered the picture.

“That SC was an awful paint-to-sample metallic green with cork



Above: Every detail of this 996 looks factory fresh. **Right:** The Carrera shows off its graceful curves on a boat launch at Lick Fork Lake, near the site of the 60th Parade in French Lick.



What they said

leather and striped velvet seat inserts,” says Alex. “It was originally ordered by the wife of a prominent local engineer. When the car arrived and she saw it, she refused to take it. The dealer sat on the car for three or four months. I took my 924 in for service, saw that green car, and jokingly said I would leave a check with my salesman for \$10,000 less than the asking price, and that he should call me when the manager was ready to sell it. Two months later, I received a phone call from the sales manager's receptionist. The manager was too upset to talk to me himself, telling me to come and get that blankety-blank car. He never wanted to see it again.”

Members of the Porsche family entourage added insult to injury when Alex showed the car in the 1981 Porsche Parade at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. “They stopped and pointed at the car jokingly and asked what color was

that? I smiled back at them and said, ‘Don’t laugh; you guys painted it.’ We all got a chuckle out of that, but they did check for the paint code.”

ALTHOUGH A BIT OLD-FASHIONED in some ways—Alex keeps a Rand McNally map book in his car and still writes personal checks rather than embracing online banking—he is not mired in old-school traditions. Alex has always preferred the latest Porsche offerings. He only buys new, and frequently first-year cars at that. When Porsche introduced the all-new, water-cooled 996, automotive journalists emoted ad nauseam.

Were they right?

Visiting his local Porsche dealership, Alex found two Ocean Blue Metallic Carreras on the showroom floor, a 993 and a 996. After several years without a Porsche, Alex was smitten by the new 911. The sales consultant suggested Alex drive the 996 first. There was no need to test

“Whipping this flat six’s 296 horses is particularly satisfying because the car’s suspension and brakes provide immense grip and stopping power.”

Car and Driver May 2001

“Half a morning in the 996 has irrevocably ruined the 993 for me. Shortcomings I was previously willing to dismiss need no longer be tolerated...now that the future has arrived, I’m glad I didn’t invest in the past because the 996 is the 911 to own.”

Excellence August 1998

“Driven back to back with last year’s air-cooled, wide-hipped 911 Carrera S, the 1999 surprised and impressed. The 1998 model was substantially noisier at all engine speeds, and its handling characteristics, as good as they are, proved far inferior to the new car’s.”

New York Times June 14, 1998

“The new guy can whip the old guy—no surprise—but there is a bit of awe in how easily it happens...Would I kick a 993 out of my garage? Not in this lifetime. Would I kill for a 996? Don’t get in my way. I need the speed.”

Panorama July 1998

“No matter how anyone felt about the (1999) Carrera’s new look, longer wheelbase, or upmarket luxury feature content, there’s little griping when it comes to the high level of pure driving enjoyment received in return. Fighting for the keys began immediately.”

Motor Trend August 2005 (reprint)



Above: Except for the audio switches and buttons, the interior is pure simplicity. **Opposite:** Alex Llorente and his 996 at speed.

both models—the first drive did it. “That 996 was the best Porsche I’d ever driven,” remarks Alex. Once again, he had a new Porsche in his garage. Besides driving his car, Alex enjoyed showing it. He won first place at the 1999 Deutsche Marque Concours at Woodland Plantation in Washington, D.C. and placed second in class at PCA’s 1999 Mont-Tremblant Porsche Parade. He also remembers showing his car at the 2003 Wesley Chapel PCA Parade, where storms made the downpours at French Lick this year look like light summer drizzle.

Although Alex’s main focus was on the concours, he did autocross his Carrera at a couple of Parades. One might conclude that because of his early SCCA experiences, Alex would have been more active in speed events—DEs and the like. But he isn’t, and there’s a reason for that.

FOR HIS 50TH BIRTHDAY, Alex was gifted a two-day course with the Porsche Driving Experience at Road Atlanta. PDE later morphed into the Porsche Sport Driving School around 2004, when the entire venue moved to Barber Motorsports Park just outside Birmingham, Alabama.

The basic concept was the same in 2003: One learned to drive new

Porsches as if one’s hair was on fire under the tutelage of highly qualified instructors—many of whom were world-renowned race car drivers. It sounds like a hoot, and quite frankly it is the most fun one can have with clothes on. Instructors watch, encourage, and teach. Attendees drive, listen, and practice.

Upon completion of the two-day course, most attendees relish a newfound confidence in their abilities. And at the end of the day, instructors get to strut their stuff a bit. David Murry—well known in racing circles for his wins with BMW, Ford, Nissan, and Porsche—was Alex’s instructor. “After David scared the silly out of me at the Porsche Driving Experience, I knew racing was not my cup of tea. Somehow, whistling past walls at 175 mph made me pucker more than chasing 356s and Datsun 310s in my youth.”

DURING HIS 17 YEARS OF 996 ownership, Alex has accumulated a number of funny stories involving the car. Like the time he was ticketed for impeding traffic.

“I was driving on I-85 through Gaffney, South Carolina to see my dad in Spartanburg, when I came across a series of large rolling hills,” begins Alex. “No one was around,

and I was eager to see just how fast I could go. Then I crested one of those hills and saw a South Carolina state trooper hiding under a railroad bridge.” He stomped on the brakes, paying scant attention to the semi he’d just passed. As soon as Alex reached the trooper’s hiding place, the trooper flipped on his lights and siren and roared after Alex.

“When the cop asked me if I knew why he pulled me over, I gave him my best deer-in-the-headlights look and said, ‘No sir, I was well under the speed limit so I don’t know.’” The trooper responded that he saw the Porsche crest the hill well north of triple digits but was more concerned with the huge 18-wheeler directly behind Alex—the one that locked its brakes up to keep from plowing over the top of the Carrera. In the confusion of blue smoke and screeching tires, the trooper failed to record the speed, but because he knew Alex was guilty of something,

he felt the only appropriate charge would be impeding traffic.

During Alex’s court appearance, the trooper proceeded to tell the judge all the sordid details. After Alex pleaded his side of it, the judge, in the truest spirit of Judge Chamberlain Haller in *My Cousin Vinny*, intoned, “Son, I don’t ever remember hearin’ about someone bein’ stopped for impedin’ traffic on an interstate while drivin’ a fancy *Porsh*. I don’t buy your story. You are guilty as

charged. And with that fine you’ll be payin’ will be the eternal embarrassment of gettin’ a ticket for drivin’ a Porsh too blasted slow. Now get outta my court!”

AS ONE MIGHT EXPECT OF a car owned and cared for by a Porsche fanatic and veteran PCA concours judge, this Ocean Blue Metallic Carrera is in gorgeous shape despite its 92,000 miles. But there are a couple of nicks and bruises that bear men-

tioning—the dent atop the left front fender and a pimple on the driver’s side of the hood.

Did something fall on that fender, Alex? Well no, *someone* fell on that fender. During a home remodeling project, a contractor was working in the crawl space above the garage. Alex had left his Carrera at home while he was on an out-of-state business trip. An emergency call from his wife Amy pulled Alex out of his meeting. The contractor



Right: Crowded into the engine compartment, this water-cooled flat six turned the Porsche world on its ear—in more ways than one.



had stepped where he should not have stepped, crashed between the studs and through insulation, wiring, and drywall on his way down, eventually striking a glancing blow to the Carrera's fender en route to the garage floor.

"I hate to admit that I asked about the car before I asked about the condition of the contractor," says Alex. "I couldn't get home fast enough to check on the car." As for the contractor? "Bruised, embarrassed, and...fired."

As for that bump on the hood? Alex went to start his car one morning only to find it had a dead battery. With the nearest Porsche dealer 35 miles away and a business meeting scheduled later that morning, he needed a replacement battery PDQ. An auto parts store two miles from his house carried a battery that the counter clerk claimed would work in the 996. Alex rushed over to buy the battery, returned home, installed it, and completed his trip with no issues. Two months later, he started the car, backed it out of the garage, and then realized he'd left some important papers on his desk. After shutting the car off, he went into his house, retrieved the papers, climbed back behind the wheel, turned the ignition key, and—*kaboom!*

"My first thought was, oh no, that dreaded IMS," recalls Alex. "I gave a quick look under the car, expecting a puddle of oil. To my surprise, the

only thing out of the ordinary was a strange sulfurous odor, like an exploded firecracker."

Alex walked around the car, looking for signs of a catastrophic calamity, but found nothing. Then he thought about the battery. And, sure enough, a puddle of clearish liquid was forming beneath the car. Alex carefully opened the hood and found the plastic battery cover askew, the battery itself blown apart, and a small steel bolt lying in the luggage well. Apparently the explosion had launched that bolt directly into the hood.

"I used several two-liter bottles to rinse off the area and spent the next several hours cleaning up the mess," says Alex. "I subsequently flat-bedded my Porsche to the dealer for a check of the electrical system and a new OEM battery. Thankfully, everything was okay, and I experienced no further pyrotechnics."

Seeking compensation, or at the least retribution, Alex complained to the auto parts store manager. But despite personal visits, numerous phone calls, and threatening letters, that store steadfastly declined any responsibility for the battery failure—citing cautionary phrases buried deep within the battery label's fine print. Frustrated but relieved that nothing terminal beset his Carrera, Alex came to accept the hood dent as part of his car's character.

So, is this Ocean Blue Metallic

996 Alex's last Porsche, or does he have his eye on something new? As a matter of fact, he soon will have a new Porsche—a 2016 GTS Club Coupe—in brilliant Club Blau. Alex was awarded the opportunity to buy one of the 60 limited-edition coupes and jumped at the chance. Will he keep his 996? After all, he treasures his history with this car and can personally vouch for its impeccable maintenance. No, he says, one Carrera is enough. As for the 996, it was Alex's goal to find a buyer who would appreciate the car as much as he did.

"It's been a great car since Day One," says Alex thoughtfully. "Wait, how about you? Are you in the market for a well-sorted Carrera?"

JUST BEFORE LABOR DAY, and a day or two shy of Alex's 65th birthday, the Club Coupe arrived. Unable to sell his beloved 996 privately, Alex sold it to his dealer, who quickly sold it one day later. What does Alex think of his new blue 991?

"Compared to the other Porsches I've owned, my Club Coupe is an F-22 Raptor," he says. "Well, maybe the 1,498-mph speed of the Raptor does exceed that of the Club Coupe, but what's a thousand plus miles per hour between friends?"

The car was recently invited to the Classics on the Green Concours in New Kent, Virginia, where it garnered a first-place award in the Late 911 category and provided a beautiful blue backdrop for selfies taken by Porsche admirers. And yes, there has already been a bit of weirdness to his ownership.

"The second day I owned the car, I pulled into the garage and closed the door—and immediately, I heard a *kaboom!*" explains Alex. "The spring on the garage door had broken. The coupe sustained no damage, but memories of exploding batteries came rushing back."

In other words, life with a Porsche is status quo in the Llorente household. And, if past is prologue, Alex will enjoy his new GTS Club Coupe for many years to come. ●

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