

Die Hard 4

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With just 24 hours to experience Porsche's epic 4.0-litre GT3 RS swan song, who's got time to hang around at the world's premier endurance race?





I'VE JUST DRIVEN THE 24 HOURS OF LE MANS IN A FACTORY PORSCHE

HERE'S NO spraying of champagne, no manic screaming into the team radio and no lingering embraces from shrink-wrapped grid girls. But as I silence the mighty 4.0-litre flat-six for the last time, the cabin floods with exhaustion and exhilaration. I've just driven the 24 hours of Le Mans in a factory Porsche.

I've not won the driving talent lottery, nor have I raided the *Wheels*' piggy bank to buy myself a drive in the world's most prestigious endurance race. I'd better explain, then.

On April 28, inboxes pinged with news that Porsche was releasing a 4.0-litre, 368kW version of the GT3 RS as a finale to the 997 series 911. In the *Wheels* office, screen savers were changed and spec sheets absorbed. Then came the official video where Andreas Preuninger (head of Porsche's GT cars) suggested the RS 4.0 was the "all-time classic RS. It might be the best RS we have ever built." A huge call when the RS back catalogue includes greats like the 964 RS and the legendary 1973 2.7 RS.

Back in the *Wheels* office, the Mexican standoff began. Who would get to drive this car? As 2IC I could attempt to pull

rank on all but editor Bill Thomas. But he'd only recently returned from the launch of Lamborghini's Aventador and was unlikely to play the boss trump card again so soon. But I'd still need to convince Bill that I needed to fly halfway round the world for a \$410K car that'll find fewer than 10 homes in Australia. And with no international launch for the car, I needed a hook that would secure me a loan of this ultra-rare 911 (just 600 will be built).

Whatever the idea, I'd have the car for just 24 hours...

At 3pm on Saturday, June 11, the field for the 79th running of the French enduro thunders away in Le Mans. Meanwhile, 900km away in Stuttgart, our departure is rather more subdued. German-domiciled British shooter Tom Salt and I are handed the keys by a Zuffenhausen security guard. We punch Le Mans into Tom's portable sat-nav (along with nav, our RS also misses out on air-con) and hit the road on what promises to be a suitably epic sign-off drive to the Mezger motorsport engine. An engine which has powered all 996 and 997 GT3 and GT2 cars, plus propelled Porsche to its last outright win at Le Mans (1998).

The plan is to depart Porsche's Stuttgart

HQ and drive the 900km to Le Mans, watch a few laps, grab a burger and return to Stuttgart, hopefully by 3pm Sunday arvo, in time for the chequered flag – hence a 24 hours of Le Mans. Sleep, if it's required, will be in the fixed back race seats of the RS 4.0.

At Le Mans proper, eight 911s will compete in the GTE Pro and GTE Am classes. Victory in both classes would gift Porsche its 99th and 100th class victories to go with its 16 outright wins. This year's race also marks 60 years since Auguste Veuillet and Edmond Mouche won Porsche's first class cup (at its first attempt) in a 356 SL Coupe.

Firing on a twist of a key, the 4.0-litre's voice is gruff and deep at idle. Once warm, it ticks over at just 720rpm, yet it will soar to 8500rpm. The new engine shares its block, long-throw crank (stroke is up 4mm to 80.4), and titanium conrods with the track-only 4.0-litre 911 GT3 R and RSR. And while the heads are 'road' items, they are not interchangeable with those on the 3.8 RS. They've been redesigned for higher gas flow, and the valve timing is different. The inlet manifold has wider, shorter runners, and is a thinner casting; the air filters are motorsport-type conical items.

There is no end to ways in which you can highlight the brilliance of extracting 368kW



Vintage Reims

The Reims-Gueux circuit opened in 1926 and hosted a 12-hour sports car race from 1953-67 (there was no event in 1955 and '66). Ferrari won four times, Jaguar three. The circuit was shut due to financial troubles in 1972. Reims is the largest city in the Champagne region and is home to the renowned houses of Krug and Veuve Clicquot.





IT'S ALMOST V10-LIKE IN INTENSITY, BOTH IN SOUND AND PERFORMANCE

Clockwork

Over our 24 hours of Le Mans we covered 1807km at an average speed of 75km/h. Total driving time, minus all stops, was about 18 hours, resulting in an average driving speed of 100km/h. More impressively, the RS 4.0 averaged 13.3L/100km. Those 1807km represent 133 laps of the 13.629km Le Mans circuit. The winning #2 Audi R18 covered 355 laps or 4838km at an average of 202km/h.

4.0

(at 8250rpm) from a naturally-aspirated 4.0-litre six-cylinder engine. For a five percent capacity increase, the RS 4.0 produces 37kW, or 11 percent, more power than the 3.8-litre GT3 RS and seven percent more torque. Expressed another way, the 4.0 makes 92kW/litre and a staggering 115Nm/litre.

The ultimate RS matches the power outputs of the twin-turbo 911 and twin-turbo 4.8-litre V8 Cayenne. It's just 7kW shy of both the 5.0-litre supercharged Jaguar V8 and the naturally-aspirated 7.0-litre V8 that powered the short-lived HSV W427. With 460Nm, it can't match the torque outputs of these bigger and/or forced induction engines, but peak torque is on tap at 5750rpm – 1000rpm earlier than the 3.8 RS.

It's this spread of torque that really separates the two GT3 RS models. Porsche claims that the 4.0's fifth-gear 80-120km/h acceleration is 0.5sec faster than the 3.8 RS and a full second quicker than the regular GT3 model. I later devise my own flexibility test where sixth gear smoothly and rapidly accelerates us from 40km/h to more than 300.

You won't notice the extra power in first or the bottom of second gear. Porsche claims a 3.9sec dash to 100km/h for the 4.0, just a single tenth quicker than the 3.8. But into third and beyond, the 4.0-litre effect becomes apparent. It'll nail 160km/h in 7.9sec (up two tenths on the 3.8) and 200 in 11.9 (a three-tenth advantage).

Around the 21km performance-car playground near Nürburg, the 4.0 takes six

seconds out of the 3.8 to nail a 7:27 lap – faster even than the 5.7-litre V10 Carrera GT (7:28), making it the quickest atmo Porsche road car round the 'Ring and second only to the off-tap 456kW GT2 RS (7:17).

For non-car people these numbers look the very definition of the law of diminishing returns – an extra \$70K to go six seconds quicker round a racetrack you will never drive at. But for true car enthusiasts, this is a leap of Everest proportions.

At the top end, the RS 4.0 is gearing-limited to 310km/h, a number I see often on the digital speedo (in fact, highest indicated speed was 324 but we know the real speed to be 310, or maybe 312 with a bit of tyre expansion). The ferocity with which the boxer smacks the limiter in top suggests that, even with that monster wing, taller gearing would see 330km/h. True supercar stuff.

While gruff and grumbly at idle, the 4.0-litre smooths out by 2500rpm. It kicks hard at four grand and harder still at 6500rpm. Incredibly, there's no let-up over the final 2000rpm to redline. The accompanying yowl is manic, and while obviously a flat-six, there's a bigger, more complex note too. It's almost V10-like in intensity, both in sound and performance.

After 420km, we head for the first of four fuel stops. Meanwhile, in Le Mans, the #7 Peugeot 908 is leading the race outright, while the #74 Corvette and #57 Ferrari 430 lead the two classes 911s are contesting.

Unlike Le Mans, Porsche never tasted the local nectar in victory at the long-abandoned Reims circuit, but it's on our way, so we call in. Unfortunately, the local 'preservation' society has had the period sponsorship vividly repainted, and the ghostly ambience has vanished beneath the brushstrokes. The RS 4.0 wears some pretty loud warpaint over its standard Carrara White (black with the same stripe package is an option). Some hate the stripes but I think they add to the car's motorsport cred, as do the white wheels fitted to our example (black or silver alloys are options). And the 4.0 has the balls to back up the boast.

In stark white the body looks stretched over the 19-inch centre-lock alloys. Like the 3.8 RS, the 4.0's body is based on the 44mm-wider Carrera 4 shell. For the 4.0, the bonnet, front guards and rear wing are all carbonfibre. Andreas Preuninger explained that painted carbon is lighter than exposed carbon because it doesn't require the gel coat to get the production finish. Like the 3.8 RS, the 4.0 gets a Lexan rear screen, but it also uses the lightweight polymer for the rear side windows. The resulting 1280kg dry weight is just 70kg heavier than the race car, and the RS 4.0 has two seats, full dash and carpets. It's 1360kg ready to run, 10kg lighter than the 3.8. That's VW Golf-light but with 368kW.

The big rear wing produces so much downforce that small dive planes ('flics' in Porsche-speak) are fitted to the sides of the front bar to balance the load. Through

250km/h sweepers, the 4.0 is rock solid. At 80 metres per second, the 325/30ZR Michelin Pilot Cups explode over small bumps with all the noise of a percussion grenade, but the car does not deviate.

Darkness finally falls at 10:30pm, in a beautiful field of lavender south of Paris, and we're still two hours from Le Mans.

Chaos greets our eventual arrival. Thousands of families, with sleeping children in strollers or dads' arms, are calling it a day after nine hours of racing. Gendarmes are directing a traffic jam of supercars, scooters and very drunken spectators. The newness and rarity of the RS has cameras pointed our way, much to the obvious annoyance of a nearby Ferrari 458 owner who only gets some love after repeatedly spinning his Modena-built V8 past eight grand. After

900km in the RS 4.0, I wouldn't trade places with him for any amount of money.

To stay on schedule, we must leave Le Mans no later than 2am, so I watch a few laps from the Porsche Curves (where else) and head back to the car. Out on track, the race is led by #2 Audi R18, while the GTE Pro leader is #74 Corvette and the #70 Porsche 911 holds first place in GTE Am.

At a 4am pee stop south of Paris, through the fog of tiredness and the constant thrum of 3000rpm to maintain 130km/h, I remember that this story is for the speed issue. I consider asking the mingling truckers for some but who knows what my school-boy French would buy, so I settle for another can of Red Bull. I must book in for a dental check-up and kidney transplant.

The dark sky starts to colour with the



New Stuff

DIVE PLANES
Porsche calls them ‘flics’, an aero aid fitted to balance the downforce from the rear wing. The front end is still lively but turn-in grip is outstanding.

BRAKES
Iron brakes are standard but our 4.0 was fitted with optional carbon ceramic rotors – 380mm fronts clamped by six-piston calipers, 350mm rears with four-pistons.

SUSPENSION
Like GT2 RS, RS 4.0 features rose-jointed rear suspension with pre-loaded helper spring. With 15-degrees rear toe-in, RS 4.0 has two degrees more than 3.8.

WING
Carbonfibre rear wing produces 195kg of downforce at 310km/h. Car feels incredibly planted at this speed. Drag coefficient is 0.34 (0.1 higher than 3.8 RS).



RS 4.0 ON TOUR: THE SEINE AT DAWN (ABOVE), ARC DE TRIOMPHE (RIGHT), CARVING BACK ROADS NEAR WEISSACH (BELOW)



TO UNSTICK THIS CAR ON PUBLIC ROADS, YOU’D NEED TO BE UNHINGED

glow from the City of Lights and the approaching dawn. It’s 4:45am Sunday when we roll to a halt on the Champs-Élysées, but it could be 10pm. Party goers are still partying and traffic is hectic. For the hell of it, I manage a few Chevy Chase-style laps of the Arc de Triomphe among the taxis, calling it a day under the stern glances of the police in their Renault Megane waiting to enter the automotive melee. Dawn breaks while we shoot beside the Seine, and then Tom decides he wants a shot atop Montmartre overlooking the city. What follows is a slow-motion homage to Claude Lelouch’s *Rendezvous*. The streets narrow to alleys, and when they narrow again, possibly to footpaths, the sat-nav gives up. Tom alights to guide my three-point turns round corners. The local prostitutes are bemused, especially so when the ultra-stiff RS teeters on diagonal tyres as I make another tight turn.

We clear Paris by 7am, and with eight hours to cover 650km, it looks as if we’ll do it with ease. But I’d wanted to build in this buffer for photography and if we needed to sleep. Tom snatches minutes of sleep here and there (including one nap while I thunder down the autobahn at 310km/h), but I feel remarkably fresh. We both promised not to take risks and stop if we’re tired.

Yesterday was overcast and just 19 degrees, so the absence of air-con was noted but not missed. Today is 25, and we spend much of the late morning and early arvo driving directly into the sun. Sweat is pouring and pooling.

We cross into Germany north of Strasbourg at midday. Back in Le Mans, the #2 Audi leads by just 18 seconds, while the #73 and #50 Corvettes lead GTE Pro and GTE Am respectively.

We head to the hills above Stuttgart to Porsche’s hunting ground of Weissach. I corner progressively harder but can’t impart much attitude for the lens. There’s outrageous grip and poise from the front end and immense, superhuman traction from the rear. To unstick this car on public roads, you’d need to be unhinged. The steering, always a 911 high point, is sharp, accurate and laden with feedback. It’s one of motoring’s great joys. While not taking anything away from the brilliant steering, perhaps the highest praise I can heap upon the 4.0 engine is that finally we have a 911 in which the steering is not its greatest asset.

On the short trip down from the hills, I run the RS through to its 8500rpm redline in the first four gears. This engine and this car are addictive.

It’s just before 3pm when the security guard lifts the boom gate and gives me parking instructions. Meanwhile, in a classic Le Mans, in front of 249,500 spectators, the #2 Audi takes the outright victory, just 14sec ahead of the #9 Peugeot. Now with 10 outright wins in 13 years, Audi is closing in on Porsche’s record of 16. The #73 Corvette wins the GTE Pro class and the #50 Vette takes out GTE Am, a lap ahead of the #70 Porsche 911 GT3 RSR.

In the enveloping silence of the cabin, I recall Andreas Preuninger’s claim that this may be the greatest RS of all time. With personal RS experience stretching back only as far as the 993, I can’t confirm that claim. I will, however, say that the RS 4.0 is the best of the modern 911s and that it deserves its place in the pantheon of great Porsches. Dethroning the Ferrari 599 after a five-year reign, the RS 4.0 is the most accomplished car I’ve ever driven. **W**

Specs

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS 4.0
www.porsche.com.au
Body steel, 2 doors, 2 seats
Drivetrain rear engine (north-south), rear drive
Engine 3996cc flat-six, dohc, 24v
Power 368kW @ 8250rpm
Torque 460Nm @ 5750rpm
Transmission 6-speed manual
Size l/w/h 4460/1852/1280mm
Wheelbase 2355mm
Tyres 245/35ZR19 (f); 325/30ZR20 (r)
Weight 1360kg
0-100km/h 3.9sec (claimed)
Price \$409,100