

Porsche Panamera

Pacing the 2009 Rolex Monterey Historic Automobile Races

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For: The Wheel



Photo: George Fisher

One of the joys of my professional career, which came as a result of simply being in the right place at the right time, and knowing the right people (Bill Haener) - is driving the pace car for Steve Earle's Monterey Historic Races at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca. Over the years, we've been given Chrysler SRT's, modified Lexus sedans, Toyota Tundra's (don't laugh, they were pretty good!), Mazda's of several types, and this year....the Porsche Panamera. Porsche had planned this new product rollout very well, as they must have kept a covey of these cars hidden on the Long Beach docks, only to roll a bunch of them up to the Monterey peninsula for the world famous Concours week at Pebble and the more sporting events on track at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca. With this stealth approach, the car hit folks cold – almost no one had seen one in person before they arrived at the track. To say that the Panamera caused a stir is an understatement. People gravitated to this car like the Governor to new revenue. The first task was to gas up the pace car....and you guessed it – this took ten minutes of crawling through a crowded paddock, as hundreds of folks stopped in their tracks to get an angle to sneak their first view. Nearly unanimously we heard from onlookers..."It looks a LOT better than it did in the pictures!" The reaction is strongly positive. Now, we must admit that this Historics event had Porsche as a sponsor, and Porsche as the featured marque, so it would be irresponsible not to mention that this was probably a friendly crowd. But it wasn't just Porschephiles either. More on that later.

My two cents? In person, the car is pleasant, and from the front is undeniably a Porsche of the 911 family. They've done as good as could be expected to maintain roofline angles, while inserting a couple of feet of sheet metal amidships. And, let's just say that my comments would become politically incorrect if we got in to the "wide hip" section of the car. It's not bad....not the svelte lines of the Quattroporte, but not bad. Overall, you have to say the Porsche design hit at least a triple on the styling. But the car? Home run. Look out BMW 5 and 7, AMG, Audi S models, and even the Maserati. There have been a number of cars that have casually bragged that they are the "four door sports car." Well, the Panamera has created this new niche of a

niche. Bluntly put, it is one. Ironically, with production goals of 5000-6000, Porsche has modest or at least very realistic sales expectations. But if one really took a look at this possible segment buster/creator, the Panamera could steal sales from all of the above marques. And that is of the sedans. What if they get into the GT category territory? Yikes....All of those gorgeous coupes with faux back seats....now competing with a stretched 911 with a real back seat. Very, very interesting.

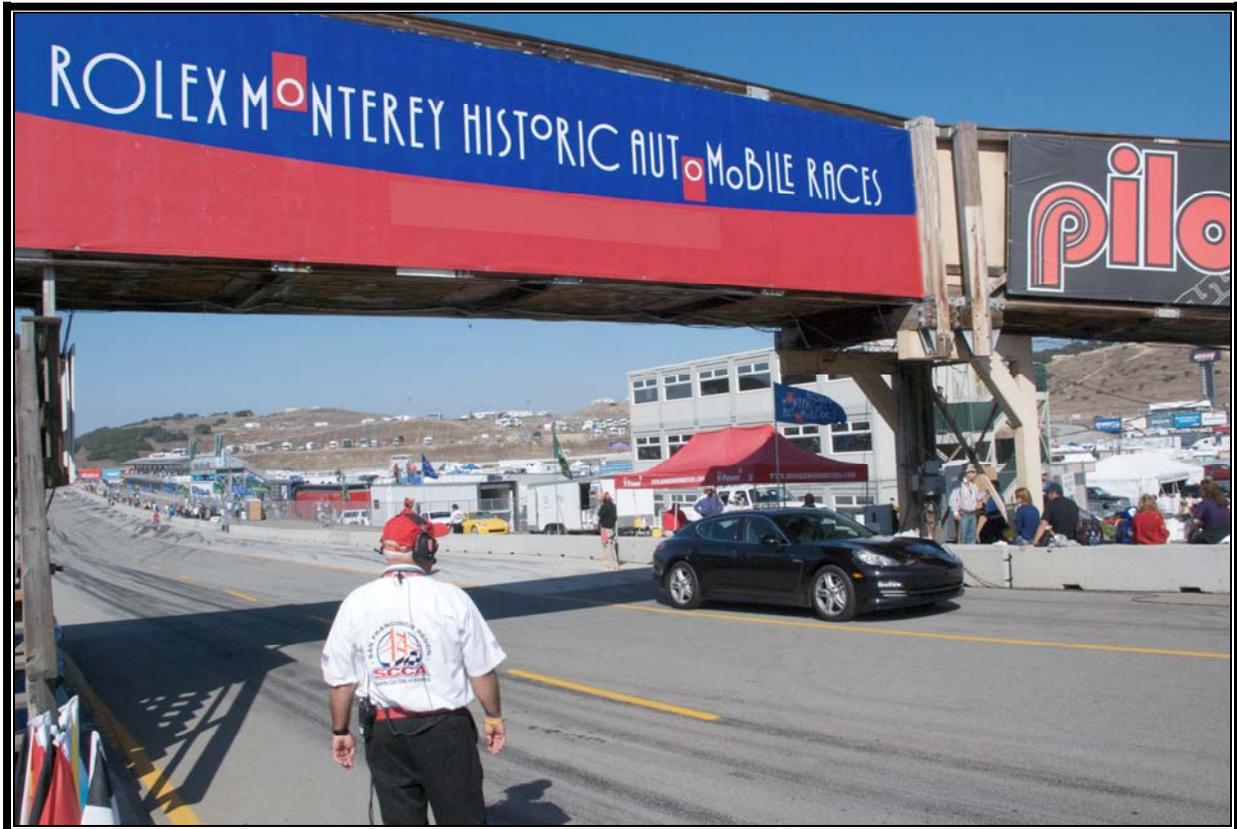


Photo: George Fisher

So – I can't always take a test car to the track, and your responses have all asked that I do this as often as possible. Sometimes it's a manufacturer limitation on a press fleet loan, and sometimes it's just no track time available in the window that I have the car. BUT – this was downright handy. What would be better for a test scenario than to have all three models of the Panamera; the 2S, 4S and Turbo, all rolled off of a transport AT Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca and driven directly to the pit lane. Speaking with the Porsche rep who arranged this somewhat aggressive break-in program, he spoke confidently, "We don't bring modified cars, put limitations on them, or supply any secret upgrades. These are cars right off the production line." Bravo – I think...they are really jumping out of the airplane with no parachute on this one...a lemon appears on Saturday in front of 30,000 sports car fans, and it could be disaster. But seriously, bravo to this approach. But I couldn't help but wonder about the 4 day weekend about to begin, especially with the three drivers who were to "bed brakes" and do press demo rides right out of the box. The Porsche All-stars. Out to the pit lane walk Hurley Haywood, David Donahue, and George Follmer. Double yikes. These guys are not shy and are really fast – ok – just skip the bedding of brakes or break-in period. Game on.

All three cars make it through a tough day of hot lap demos driven by pros with for international press. No issues with the new Panameras. At the end of the day, it's my turn to give each a run. But the drives are only 1-2 laps at a time and this is not enough to nail down the feel, get into a rhythm or push the car. And, I have three days ahead with lots of laps to do.

However, I will say that my choice for the pace car was clear after these "first impression" laps was the 2S base model. This car feels lighter and nimbler than the other two because it is. And the really compelling feature related to this nimbler (relatively) drive – turn in. The Panamera 2S has a crisp and instant turn-in that one would never expect of a 3800 lb. car. So – given the choice, we select the cognac metallic 2S to set the pace for the weekend ahead.



Photo: Daryl Witbeck

Saturday morning – the real pace car-ing is to begin soon – big crowd – amazing and priceless cars – we have to get it right. The 2S has a slow leak – left rear tire is at 10 lbs. No time to check for a screw or nail – just move it and grab the 4S as a substitute. Darn – I really liked the 2 wheel driver, but the 4S will have to do. This morning we give tons of VIP and guest rides and the car starts to become familiar. Initially, the 4S understeer bothered me. But given a few sessions – two things happened: we scrubbed the new Continental rubber in, and I got comfortable with some pretty basic weight transfer to turn the car. The best place to work on this was in T2, the Andretti Hairpin. Bring it in early for the first of two apexes, and while she is still nosed in, give the wheel a nudge and the ample back side rotates nicely....not feeling ample at all.

As the weekend progressed, I was able to bond with the Panamera while listening intently to our guest riders' reactions to the car. First, everyone that gets in already is impressed with the look and feel of the car. A very high-end consumer from Malibu exclaims from the back seat, "This is Mercedes quality." Another notes the striking design of the controls that flank the shifter. This is quite an array of shiny buttons in a geometric design. A prospect smugly notes, "They did that for the Maserati guys." OK, I'll buy that, as the interior is certainly not a traditional Spartan and understated German look. EVERYONE in the back seats is blown away by the leg and headroom. Porsche has dropped the level of the seat, given it a true bolstered bucket design, and it is VERY spacious for four adults. There is no middle seat in the rear, only a console with handy features uncharacteristic to Porsche (yes, the "C" word....cup holders).

Out on the track, the Panamera and I are getting better and better. While we've found the fade zone for the brakes while hot lapping with four adults, it takes only a couple of turns of more moderate braking to get the soft pedal back to an acceptable level. We must remember that this is a bone stock, brand new car....no Hawk Blue brake pads snuck into the calipers. The real test came when there were several incidents that required the Panamera to go onto a hot track and serve as Safety Car, working in tandem with the fantastic SCCA workers in managing on-track incidents. Especially pacing cars like the Can Am and Le Mans FIA cars, the Panamera just put its head down and motored – there is an art to carrying constant speed to keep these cars warmed up – I can't fry the brakes, so we have to be very smooth on acceleration and deceleration, and flow as much momentum through turns as possible. The Panamera responded nicely to this challenge and we got NO complaints about lugging or loading up these big block beasts.



Photo: Drew Phillips www.drewphillipsphotography.com

All Panameras have the PDK, double clutch gearbox as standard and a manual shift is not offered. And it is this feature, as presented in stock form that I must shout loudly to any prospect for the car: "Order the F1-style paddle shifter upgrade!!" In stock form, you get the PDK transmission which is great, but the standard push/pull shift levers are simply a major mistake. And I'm discovering now that I'm not the only reviewer that really dislikes these. The stock shift levers are placed exactly where the base of your thumbs rest on each side of the wheel - if you're using the HOD 9 and 3 o'clock hand position. And, Porsche apparently agrees with HOD on this, as they've given the Panamera a wonderful, Sparco type steering wheel with thumb rests right where we want them. But – the shift levers are TOO convenient!! You upshift if you sneeze and accidentally increase your grasp of the wheel with either hand. And the finger pull to downshift is just not intuitive. I know any owner would get accustomed to this eventually, but I drove this car a lot in a short time and concentrated a great deal, and finally just moved my hands out of the way of the levers and used the other manual shift mode with the shift knob in the console. The transmission is super quick with rev-matching on downshifts, but there were times when I, seeing where I was going and knowing what I wanted to do, and the Panamera not having these advantages – had to fake out the transmission in order to accomplish my goal. Entering T5, I had to slow more than I needed to in order for the trans to grab 3rd gear to get a pull uphill. And there were two spots where I had to just float the throttle off a bit to prevent an upshift which was just in the wrong place (turning up hill after T6).

Back to the ride that the Panamera was affording our VIP's and guests at the Historics – again – it was a home run and folks consistently raved about how the car felt on track, how much room there was, the awesome seats, and the CORKSCREW!! I got Steve Earle's own granddaughter to scream loudest as we released the steering and stood on it and just about launched the P-Car...we were getting thumbs ups from the fans, right along with the race cars....tons o fun.

OK, I busted Porsche for their standard PDK paddles...but man – you gotta try this launch control thing...what a hoot! In a 4200 lb car, with four adults, and 400 HP, you'd think that a drag style launch might be amusing, and maybe kinda fun. But what if you eliminated ALL wasted energy got ALL the HP and torque to the ground ALL at the same time, without ANY waste through wheel spin? Just get ready, because you're about to be stuffed in your sport seat and weigh about twice what you normally do – the Panamera coils like a rattlesnake and snaps off the line like a slingshot. Without any exception, the launch in this NON-turbo brought gasps, woos, screams and hollers from passengers all. This is an exciting new feeling from a car like this, and we ALL liked it, a lot. Hop in the turbo with 150 more horses and lb ft of torque, and you have a beast. Gobbling the asphalt whole, without one misstep – the turbo is just a bad, bad, boy off the line and then settles into a powerful pull that you know is not natural – its turbo-charged.



Photo: George Fisher

One final impression and side story: In the midst of the flurry of guests, the Porsche execs brought up a family; Dad, Mom, daughter and son. “Dave I’d like you to meet Chad McQueen, former Porsche racer and his family who are taking in the event.” After a double take – Chad shares his Dad Steve’s likeness quite a bit - I realized that this was a rare treat to chat at some length with a very informed consumer and fellow racer about the car. He’d been studying it already and was quite impressed. And the ride on track did it. He was blown away by the car’s power, stability, controlled body roll, even the brakes that it had left after being on track for four days.

As the weekend came to a close, we gave the Panameras back to the lovely Porsche marketing reps, seemingly no worse for the wear (well... brake pads and tires....not so much). All I know is they can take a pretty hard workout over a prolonged time, and still be a blast to drive and not complain one bit. Do I know how good the Panamera is at schlepping groceries? Well, it has a handy hatch, so you can carry plenty. But I wouldn’t buy any ice cream because any real driver of this car will take the long way home.