



739

PORSCHE

PANORAMA

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE PORSCHE CLUB OF AMERICA



Artful Dodger



THE 911R IS THE PUREST 911 OF ALL—
BUT IT'S ALSO RARE AND EXPENSIVE.
THE ALTERNATIVE IS TO RE-CREATE ONE,
WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT
EB MOTORSPORTS DID.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **ROBERT PLOTKIN**



I bought an early 911 and fell in with a cult of lightweights.

They worshipped the goddess of asceticism, holding their armrest-less elbows aloft for hours at a time, like the pose of a yogi. Without air-conditioning, they excreted toxins. Without podcasts, they explored thoughts. Without sound-deadening, it was impossible to be interrupted by anyone else's thoughts. ❖ They were the hardest of the hardcore, and sipped from a camaraderie distilled by trial and barreled in error. They slid adjusters across sway bars like Confucians at an abacus. They installed and removed seats, carbon hoods, carpeting, underbody sealant—back and forth across the fine line between buzzy and dead. ❖ The generalists of the message boards taunted us: “If you want to save 20 pounds, then go on a diet. Ha-ha.” They didn’t get us. Never would. They posted photos of carbon veneer. But we were looking for something deeper, something purer, something Newtonian. We wanted to fly as high as we could toward the sun. Admittedly, sometimes we came too close and fell to earth like Icarus, amid a meteor shower of gouged Lexan and harsh bushings. ❖ Last year at Luftgekühlt, it was easy to see the tribes. The “preservationists,” the “restomodders,” and the “patinas” encircled the cars they came to worship. The lightweights clustered around a lithe beauty with boyish hips and an ivory complexion spun from fiberglass-reinforced plastic: the 1967 911R—the lightest and most valuable 911 of all time.

FERDINAND PIËCH, WHO led the 911R project, ordered that the panels be replaced with Le Mans-grade composite, dropping the car's weight to 800 kilograms (1,764 pounds), or more than 500 pounds less than a 1967 911S. You could roll a BMW R69S motorcycle onto a 911R roof rack and together they would still weigh less than a Carrera RS Lightweight.

Porsche built four prototypes and 20 production 911Rs. Bruce Canepa is currently in the process of selling the fourth prototype for \$4.5 million, the yellow one that was stolen when almost new and recently found in a Marseille warehouse. I called him to ask why the 911R is the most expensive 911 of them all. “Because it's the best car ever made,” said Canepa. “This is a driver's car. When I go rolling into the corner a little too hot and have to countersteer and pick up the throttle; that's driv-

ing. It has throttle-controlled oversteer. It accelerates and stops easily because it's light. There can never be a better 911, because light is the answer to everything. Weight is the enemy.”

So why did Porsche build only 20 production cars if it was so awesome? Because it was so expensive—almost double the cost of a 911. It had the same composite bodywork and engine as the 906 Le Mans prototype. Same panels, same engine, same price.

Nowadays, a 1967 911S, one of the most desirable Porsches ever made, is worth about 10% of the auction buyer's premium on a 911R. If you want the purest 911 of all, you can high-five your AP exams, get accepted to Stanford, drop out to start a tech unicorn, and then buy one of those 24 original 911Rs. The alternative is to try to re-create one.



What would you do if your dad had a fiberglass company? Build surfboards? Well, Limeys don't surf, but they do squeal around Goodwood. So Mark and James Bates expanded EB Equipment into the production of 911 body panels.

Many people have an aversion to replicas, preferring to own a real 911E over a fake RS. But you have to look at these cars in a continuum. At the lowest end of the scale are the run-of-the-mill Speedster replicas that don't have a real base car underneath. Let's call them "copies." It gets better when it's a 1980s Carrera that's been back-dated to look like a 1973 RS; let's call those cars "clones." Then there are the real longhoods, where someone has bothered to build and install a 2.7 RS engine with mechanical injection; these we will call "replicas." But something like the EB 911R build, with almost every panel replaced, is on an altogether different level. Let's call it an "homage" in order to show it some respect—the same deference you would give to the greatest art forger in the world, who is so skilled he can fool an insurer from Lloyd's or an appraiser at Sotheby's.

I CALLED EB MOTORSPORTS. "Pardon me. Would you happen to have a white homage? Yes? May I come to England and drive the car it took three years to build?"

Upon their assent, I flew from Los Angeles to London and drove the sodden northbound motorway to Sheffield, the closest city to EB Motorsports. The city was known for its silversmithing in the 19th century, when the British Empire was at its most magnificent and sterling was the tableware of kings. I was there to see if the EB 911R was sterling or plate.

The next morning, I drove to EB's headquarters. Before me stood a large brick building and a forest of water tanks—fiberglass, colored, and translucent. As I drove through them, it was as if I were Superman, skimming the water tanks of Metropolis. EB Equipment was founded in the 1950s by Mr. Edward Bates, who developed a process for fiberglassing the tanks. This dignified, self-made man, who could be kind because he didn't have anything to prove, shook my hand.

If the tanks were the toast of the family business, then EB Motorsports was the butter, churned by Mr. Bates' sons, Mark and James. I was led into a room displaying titanium hubs, 908 throttle pedals, twin-spark

distributors, and 15x10 reproduction Fuchs. There was all sorts of billeted aluminum and titanium, lined up on shelves, mounted with gum to keep their alignment perfect. I walked among the parts, flexing their hinges, hefting their density, and then carefully replacing them on the display. I wanted pretty much all of it: the twin-sparking, the induction trumpets, the 934 endurance racing calipers designed for FIA compliance and gorgeousity.

A large man—six foot four, maybe 220 pounds—walked into the room and introduced himself. "Hi. I'm Mark Bates." Bates is a brilliant racer/engineer who is famous for oversteering around Goodwood in his 2.0-liter 911. He is one of the few

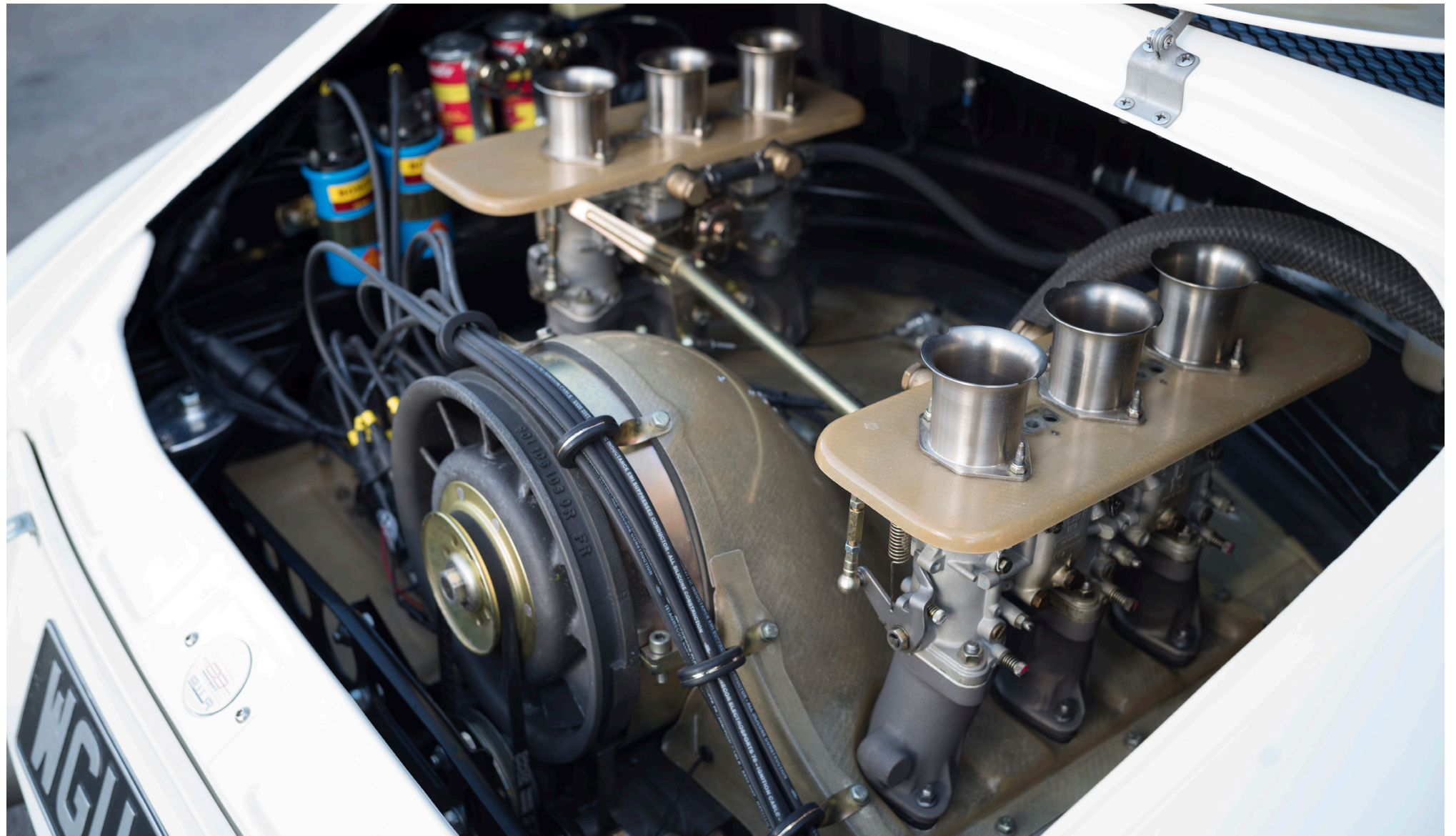


LET'S CALL IT AN "HOMAGE" IN ORDER TO SHOW IT SOME RESPECT—

THE SAME DEFERENCE YOU WOULD GIVE TO THE GREATEST ART FORGER

IN THE WORLD, WHO IS SO SKILLED HE CAN FOOL AN INSURER FROM

LLOYD'S OR AN APPRAISER AT SOTHEBY'S.



guys who can engineer a product, have it machined in his own factory, mount it onto his car, take it onto the track, and really see how it feels. He is his own development driver.

The EB 911R, which in the interest of brevity I'll call the 911R, sat in the middle of the room. So ethereal was its beauty that it seemed to float an inch above the floor, on a thin slip of mist, its contact patches uncompressed and pointy. It wasn't dainty. It was Spartan. They wore sandals and breastplates, fragile white skin exposed to sword and spear, protected only by agility, like the 911R.

I walked around, taking in the car's signature details: round tail-lights, door handles made from

yellowish plastic, sexy slatted quarter windows, indicator lights so delicate they can only be seen on a clear, moonless night. The overall effect was that of a sinewy athlete, one whose body was formed by trail running and swimming, not steroidal grunting.

At last, Bates cranks the 911R to life and says that he will warm it up. The idle is surprisingly deep and powerful. I open the passenger door with a thumb button, gripping the yellowish plastic handles. It opens without inertia and is stopped by a strap made from bridle leather. The inside of the door has a yellow fibrous texture. The door window is held aloft by another leather strap, secured with a peg. The straps give the interior a flagellant quality, like the Spartans whose masculinity was tested by the lash.

EB removed the headliner, visors, carpeting, and soundproofing and painted the interior black. This tricks the eye into seeing a virtually finished interior. The clock and fuel gauge have been removed from the instrument cluster, with thin manhole covers taking

their place. The dash is bespoke. Original 911R seats didn't have headrests, so EB installed seats from the 911 ST. The radio, heater controls, and glovebox door have been removed. Bates is especially proud of how they machined 20 tiny clips to hold the interior wiring, so it isn't visible through the gaping holes in the dash. He points to the peg for the leather window strap and the trip reset knob and says, "Titanium." Smiling knowingly, he inserts custom earplugs.

WE HEAD OUT onto the British road system, which seems more antagonistic every time I drive it. Congested, undersized roads have speed cameras, lumps, bumps, and more speed cameras. But it is also green, with air that smells of tilled soil and hay. And driving on the left side of the road has the frisson of danger.

Bates pulls over, and it is my turn. But I can't figure out how to open the door. Bates shows me how to pull out the small black knob. We switch seats and I am finally behind the wheel of a 1,800-pound 911. Well, not

The 911R borrowed its engine from the 904 race car. So the twin-spark 2.0-liter makes 220 hp and revs to 8200 rpm. That gives it the same power-to-weight ratio as a 997.1 GT3, which weighs twice as much.

I'M ON THE WRONG SIDE OF A RAINY ROAD.

I NOTICE THE NOISE AS MUCH AS AN AMBUSHED SOLDIER NOTICES THE VOLUME OF THE GUNFIRE.



really. With Bates and me on board, it is more like a 2,200-pound 911.

I slide the seat a foot forward, buckle the gangly harness, and look right, left, and then right again, visualizing a red double-decker recycling the 911R's plastic bodywork. I look down at the Tuthill dual-master-cylinder pedal box and depress the clutch. It feels like a street clutch. The EB short shifter maintains the feel of a 901 but is tighter, smoother, and judiciously shorter in throw as I move the dogleg box into first. My right foot finally moves to the EB 908 pedal, cast from an original and updated with titanium pins. It's the most beautiful pedal I've ever seen.

The 911R pulls away easily. Until I get up to speed and shift into second, I don't even notice how loud it is. It's a valuable car, probably \$350,000. One of one. Thousands of hours were spent manufacturing the parts and building the car. I'm on the wrong side of a rainy road. I notice the noise as much as an ambushed soldier notices the volume of the gunfire.

At low speed, the polyurethane bushings squeak and the dampers feel too stiff for the British roads. Bates de-

veloped the early 911 circuit dampers with EXE-TC Suspension, an English operation that also supplies Sébastien Loeb, Chris Harris, and Singer. The engine grumpily builds revs until the suspension begins to harmonize.

I was longing to get the engine on cam. I've never driven an early 911 with an 8200-rpm redline. But the engine is stumbling and Bates diagnoses a fouled spark plug. He tells me to drive it and clear it out. As I drive on, the engine improves until it's running along like an Olympian with a knee brace.

There's no bottom-end torque to mask your imperfections. It's not a lazy, leave-it-in-third-gear kind of engine. A good conductor doesn't try to make a soprano sing a baritone. That means keeping the revs high. A pin holds the throttle cable to the side of the accelerator. As I depress the throttle, it pulls the cable, which runs visibly down the length of the transmission tunnel and pulls open the carbs. I feel a tingle from the engine. So does the rest of the car, each piece resonating at its own frequency, undamped.

It doesn't feel gutless or sluggish off cam, just not up to task, like an eager beaver trying to build the Hoover

Dam. But as the tachometer passes 5000 rpm and then 6000, the engine changes character from beaver to Batman, and then from Batman to behemoth. As I pass 7000, I wouldn't be surprised to look in the rearview mirror and see the engine burst the seam welds and double in cubic capacity. A 911R on cam has about the same power-to-weight ratio as a 997.1 GT3. That's what happens when a 220-hp car weighs roughly half as much as a 410-hp car.

"What do you think of the controls?" asks Bates. My eyes go soft. Hands feel around the 360-millimeter steering wheel. "The narrow, rounded front tires make the steering twang. It's as if imperfections in the road bounce against the sweet spot of the contact patch. I feel like I'm holding a gut-strung racquet in my hands," I answer. And it's not just the steering. Bates is a driver and he built a driver's car, which means everything is taut and feelsome.

Those front contact patches shrink to pinpricks as I crest, as if the 911R were slipping through gravity's fingers. I have to brake deeply for the next corner and move the ball of my right foot to the brake pedal. There

isn't any slack with two master cylinders. The pedal is firm and moves only about two inches total, putting it perfectly in line with the silver, arching 908 pedal, which I blip for a downshift. The flywheel requires the slightest and briefest nudge to spin the engine another 800 rpm for the downshift. The road is wet and cold, but it is as if I can feel each rotor as it rubs against its caliper. EB machined a set of later 911S calipers to fit, which were matched to wider EB-machined Fuchs replicas wrapped with period-correct Dunlop Racing tires.

SO THE EB 911R is not an exact replica; and that's what Bates wanted. "We have restored a real 911R and have a library of material on the cars. But we wanted this car to be a showcase for everything EB makes: from the composite body panels, Lexan windows and headlight covers, engine tinware, hinges, and reproduction Fuchs. It also shows the services we can perform: the restoration, mechanical, and paint booth we have on site." I ask about his reference library and he says, "The best resource by far was the *911R* book published by TAG Motorsports."

I can barely hear him. It is like being inside a steel



You can identify a 911R by its small, round taillights, which have become something of a cliché—this decade’s ducktail.

drum being played by the British minister of roads. Bates and I take turns at the wheel. He applies some power oversteer out of a damp, uphill corner. On one short dip of a straight, I shift twice at redline and glance down at the speedometer, which is sweeping well past 200 kph, or 130 miles an hour.

Soon thereafter, I am back in my rental car, hundreds of dollars poorer, with a bubble-wrapped 908 accelera-

tor pedal in my luggage.

On the flight home, I fantasize about buying the car—and modifying it. And every single modification improves comfort and adds weight. Not a lot of weight, but probably a good 60 pounds of strategically placed Dynamat to dampen the vibrations and mute the noise, a little lightweight carpeting to go on top. And a Scart muffler. Call it a 911R Touring. Remember that in 1973,

when Porsche sold the RS, 1,308 out of 1,508 customers chose the touring option that added 220 pounds of comfort. I look at a 911R now like a Jewish grandmother. “Oy. You look so thin! Let me get you some kugel.”

In effect, the 911R was so extreme in its quest for lightness that it’s given me the freedom of moderation. So sometimes I’m a lightweight and sometimes I’m a heavyweight. That’s what happens when your ears

hurt. Bates would answer that ear plugs weigh less than a muffler and soundproofing. But that’s what an ascetic would say. I bet a lot of reporters who interviewed Gandhi spoke admiringly of his hunger strike, over lunch at the club. I guess that’s me. I might do some intermittent fasting, but it turns out I’m no Gandhi. Where does that leave me?

Tribeless, with one hell of a throttle pedal. 🍷

Vented quarter windows, a hinged engine lid, and leather window straps are all beautifully finished.

