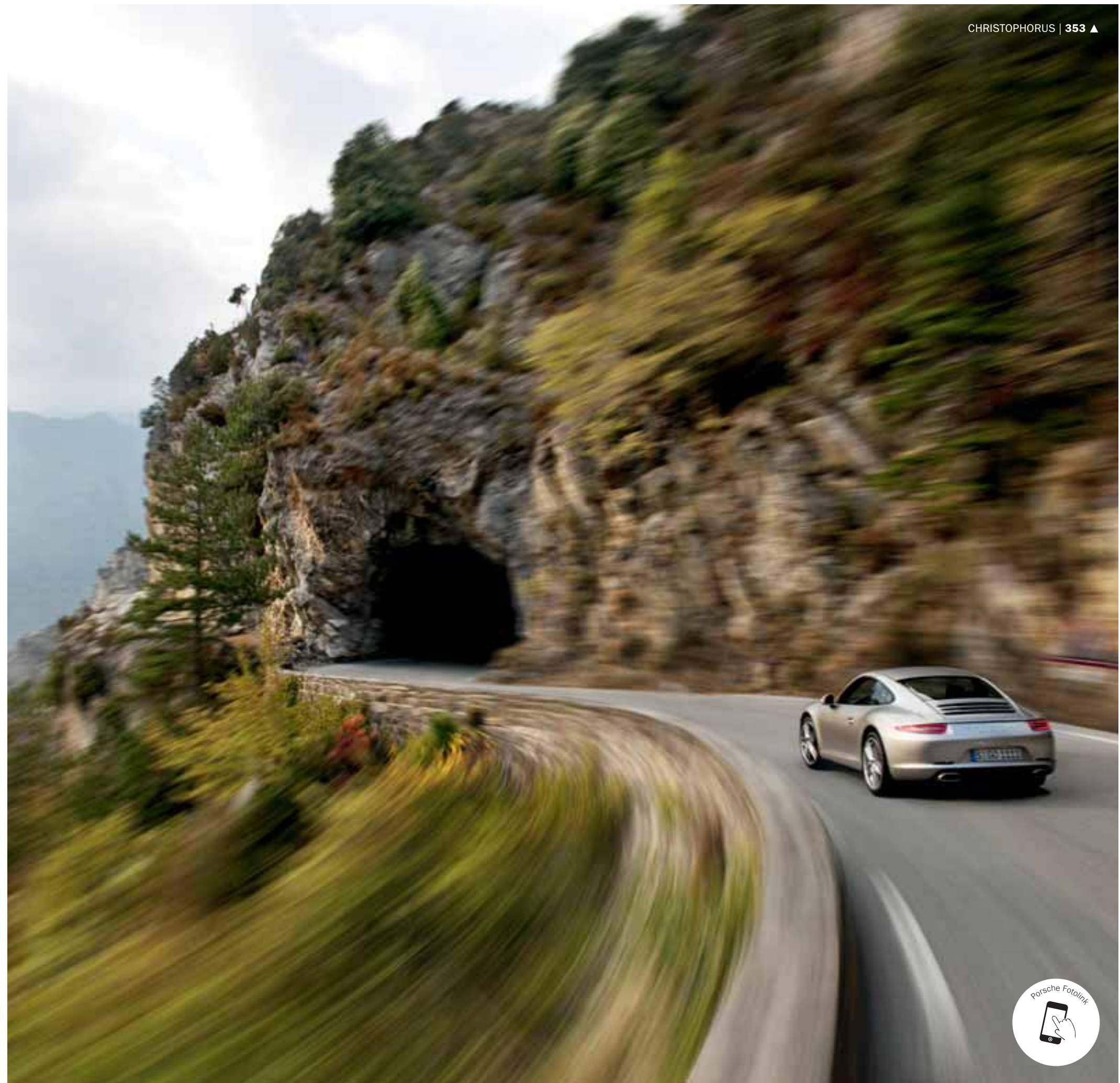


KING OF THE ROAD

Racing legend Walter Röhrl warms to the new 911 as he takes us along on the key stage of the Monte Carlo Rally. The Col de Turini gives driver and car a chance to shine.

By David Staretz
Photos by Bernd Kammerer



KING OF THE ROAD

*Tunnel of love:
A new take on speed
within the limits
of Monegasque law.*

Climb Mount Everest with Reinhold Messner, go to a red-carpet event with Karl Lagerfeld or Angelina Jolie, have dinner with Paul Bocuse, play 18 holes with Tiger Woods ... those scenarios all sound pretty special. But I can add one that's even more exciting (i.e., faster): a trip up the Col de Turini in the new 911 with Walter Röhrl. The Col de Turini is a pass in the Massif du Mercantour in the French Maritime Alps. But it's much more than just a geographical location—it elicits a wealth of associations for racing buffs.

No one could tell more authentically about this special leg of the Monte Carlo Rally than Röhrl, who won the rally four times. "Up to 30,000 people would be waiting for us up at the top of the pass. You would come speeding up over the last hump toward the pass and suddenly you'd be blinded by a wall of camera flashes. And the next second, you'd go hurtling down the next side again on icy roads." In the so-called Night of Turini—also known as the "Night of the Long Knives" due to the strong high-beam lights cutting through the night—in which race-car drivers have to navigate the Turini up to three times, the pressure on the lead driver is enormous. With his hungry opponents breathing down his neck, there are still around 700 or 800 kilometers (430 to 500 miles) between him and victory. "Starting into a curve a tiny fraction of a second too late or a little swerve causing your tail to hit one of the countless stone markers along the road was all it took to ruin your chances of winning," says Röhrl.

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As if to illustrate the risky nature of the venture, he allows the tail of the new 911 to cut out, but never too far, in order to build traction for the next straight stretch ahead, which inevitably leads toward a knee-high wall of stone behind which mountainside takes a steep plunge, opening up stunning vistas of the landscape below.

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Walter is calm and focused as he pilots the hurtling 911 and gives his expert assessment of its advantages. "As soon as you pick up a little speed, you feel the improved directional stability provided by the wider wheelbase. Those ten centimeters [3.93 inches] make a world of difference. We once extended the wheelbase of one of our race cars by one and one-half centimeters [0.6 inches], and everyone was amazed at how different the overall feeling was. It's incredible. And to make sure that doesn't lead to less agility in curves, the track has been widened. That means less understeering, and it actually hugs the curves even better—an enormous advantage, especially when it's raining." The switchback curves of the Col de Turini and the nearby Col de Braus are the ultimate test for a car's cornering ability. And indeed, we note that despite the possibly record-breaking speeds at which we round the curves, the electronic chassis control of the 911 never comes into play once.

For the record: "Let's not kid ourselves: there are a lot of great sports cars out there today. They're serious competition, but when you take the entire spectrum into consideration, that's usually it. That's where Porsche's big strength lies—in the balancing act between super sports car and suitability for daily use. The new 911 has taken that even further. The car has become more comfortable and easier to handle and has become a lot faster, too, even on the racetrack. It's just as much fun to drive with snow tires or when you have luggage in the back. I can take it out for a spin on the track one day, and I don't even need to change the position of the seat when I make a run to the bakery to get fresh rolls the next morning."





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Our conquest of the Maritime Alps in the new 911 proceeds in stages. And since this is not a rally, we can take the time to stop and smell the roses, so to speak—just this once.



It's always a pleasure to watch Walter in action, his economical movements, the finesse with which he shifts the gears. He handles the 911 as skillfully as a jockey handling a thoroughbred horse. The car seems focused, responding with alacrity to each minute movement of the steering wheel, gas pedal, and brakes. "The car has also become stiffer, even though it's 45 kilograms [99 pounds] lighter, which is a lot. The engineers managed to save a lot of weight thanks to the intelligent material mix featuring high-tensile steel combined with aluminum," he says.

We talk about the problems involved in moving in three dimensions. "It's always easier to drive fast going uphill. If you make a mistake, the energy is dissipated more quickly. There's a hell of a lot less room for error when you're going downhill. And psychologically speaking, it's just more difficult to drive downhill because you easily get sucked in by this hypnotic downward pull."

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When Walter Röhrl won, it wouldn't be by just a few seconds: he used to leave his opponents in the dust. "There were certain things where I was dead set on being the best. One of them was the longest stage in the rally, because I knew that mentally I was by far the best prepared. The other was going downhill—because that's what proves who has the best feel, regardless of engine performance. I even used to have people

take interim times at the top of the pass, just for my own satisfaction. One time Sandro Munari reached the top in his Lancia forty-eight seconds before I did in my Fiat—and by the finish line I had a two-second lead over him.”

I ask Walter what year he thinks our “civilian” Porsche 911 could have competed in the rally racing field (with minor modifications) with a realistic stab at winning. He ponders the question for a long time and excludes “pothole rallies” like the Acropolis Rally before saying that an asphalt rally in 1980 (the year he first won in Monte Carlo) would be a good match. “But riding to victory wasn’t nearly as comfortable then as driving a 911 today,” he says. And since we’re talking so openly, I ask him if he has anything to criticize about the new 911. “Well,” he says, “I really do miss the handbrake. For me, a handbrake is essential. But I guess the young engineers nowadays don’t see it that way.”

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Walter points out the window and we leave the world of Porsche for a moment as he shares his memories: “The

WALTER HANDLES
THE CAR AS SKILL-
FULLY AS A JOCKEY.
HANDLING A THOR-
OUGH-BRED HORSE.



first stage on the last night of the rally began right here, at Col de la Madone. I was always in the lead when we got here, and everyone would be talking about me winning—prematurely, of course. You just need to skid a few feet too far—and before you know it, it’s all over. I was always really wired at this point in the race. In 1982, for example, I was driving a rear-engine Opel, and Hannu Mikkola was behind me in his Audi Quattro. Ferdinand Piëch was there, and all day he had been talking about how Audi was going to increase the boost and really go in for the kill. And then I managed to get 27 seconds on Hannu in the stage. Afterwards he said to me, “I’m not going to launch any more attacks. There’s no point.”

Gazing at a dip in the road, Walter goes on to recount another incident from his racing days. “In 1973 this was the last challenge we faced; it was dark and we were driving it in the opposite direction. After 7 kilometers [about 4.5 miles], in the switchback curve before you reach Sainte-Agnès, the half-axis of my Commodore gave out on me after 7,000 racing kilometers [4,350 miles]—12 kilometers [7.5 miles] before the finish line. That was not good at all.”

Walter Röhrh has always been a perfectionist: “I would pay careful attention to what our ‘scouts’ reported on the driving conditions further up and would always try to alternate between race driving and rally driving, depending on the nature of the road. I used to tell the scouts, ‘If you say there’s a stretch of asphalt 20 yards before the bend, then I’ll keep my foot on the gas pedal till the bitter end.’ And it always worked, too.”

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Before we pull up in front of the Trois Vallées, located at 1,600 meters (5,250 feet)—it’s one of the few hotel/restaurants near the summit—we ask Walter to give one final statement on the new Porsche 911. “It’s not just that the whole car is sleeker, more elegant, and more dynamic overall; it also has the technology to back up the impression. It’s more of a sports car than ever—it turns into the curves better; it’s more stable going straight ahead. The balancing act between the requirements of daily use and the requirements of a sports car has just become even more impressive. And the sound of the sports exhaust system! When you switch to

ACCORDING TO THE
KING OF THE ROAD,
IT’S ALWAYS EASIER
TO DRIVE FAST
GOING UPHILL.



Sport Mode, the electronic seven-speed direct shift gearbox will double-declutch when shifting down, producing a roar worthy of a race car.”

What could we add to that? Looks like the new Porsche 911 has just opened a new chapter in the history of the Col de Turini. ▲

911 CARRERA (TYPE 991)

Engine: Six-cylinder boxer
Displacement: 3,436 cc
Power: 350 hp (257 kW)
Maximum torque: 390 Nm at 5,600 rpm
0-100 km/h: 4.8 (4.6*) sec.
Top track speed: 289 (287*) km/h (180/178* mph)
CO₂ emissions: 212 (194*) g/km
Fuel consumption
City: 12.8 (11.2*) l/100 km
Highway: 6.8 (6.5*) l/100 km
Combined: 9.0 (8.2*) l/100 km
** with Porsche double-clutch transmission (PDK)*

911 CARRERA S (TYPE 991)

Engine: Six-cylinder boxer
Displacement: 3,800 cc
Power: 400 hp (294 kW)
Maximum torque: 440 Nm at 5,600 rpm
0-100 km/h: 4.5 (4.3*) sec.
Top track speed: 304 (302*) km/h (189/188* mph)
CO₂ emissions: 224 (205*) g/km
Fuel consumption
City: 13.8 (12.2*) l/100 km
Highway: 7.1 (6.7*) l/100 km
Combined: 9.5 (8.7*) l/100 km
** with Porsche double-clutch transmission (PDK)*



Extending the wheelbase by ten centimeters (3.93 inches) has made a world of difference. The track has also been widened a bit to ensure that doesn’t mean less agility in curves.