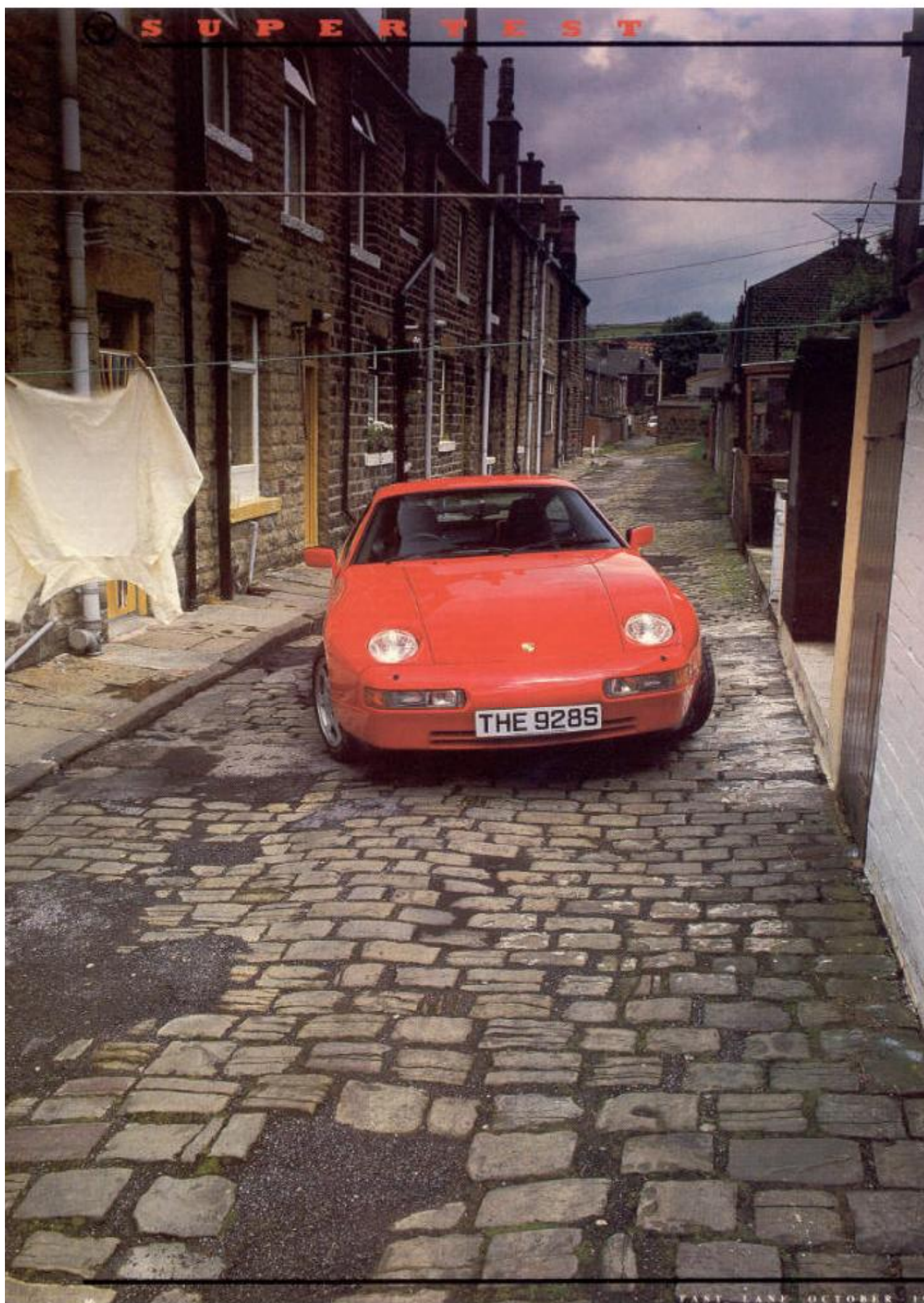


S U P E R T E S T





WUNDERBAR!

As it is, the Porsche 928S4 represents one of the world's finest touring cars. So why go to the trouble of producing a limited edition special? Russell Bulgin investigates





"Adding a Sport Equipment suffix to a Porsche is as nebulous as badging a few Ford Fiestas as Bravos"

THERE IS irony aplenty in the car which Porsche clumsily labels the 928S4 with Sport Equipment. Irony and a touch of desperation. For it seems that, with the yuppie dead and the Deutschmark committing fiscal suicide, a major thrust of Porsche's marketing strategy is to keep pumping out muscled-up, limited edition models.

And, make no mistake, adding a Sport Equipment suffix to a Porsche is as nebulous as



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badging a few Ford Fiestas as Bravos or Festivals or Dashes; they may as well be labelled *new! exciting! buy me!* with a catchall ferocity. This latest 928S4 is the second 1988 Porsche to have been smothered in the latest hi-tech gladrags.

The first was the 944 Turbo with Sport Equipment (*Fast Lane*, May), the pastel-pink rocket which upped the ante with a bigger turbo, stiffer sus-

pension, larger wheels and tyres, more capable brakes and a clutch of other, smaller changes. As a result the Porsche 944 Turbo moved from being simply very fast to a car that was very fast and endearingly responsive to drive. In short, then, the 944 Turbo could use a little sharpening to up its potential for down-the-road mayhem.

But the 928S4? Is there a better long-distance grand tourer than the standard production car? Do you, as you step out of a 928S4, automatically start to think that it might need a touch more power, a few centimetres more rubber on the road and a manual gearchange to make it still faster accelerating away from rest? No.

You leave a 928S4 secure in the knowledge that it always does the job well. You can cross Germany in a day or tootle down to the dry-cleaners with equal ease. There is an enormous capability built into the 928S4 - so much so that you tend to forget that this massive car is built just for two, with conceptual-joke rear seats and a luggage deck so shallow as to render it useless for more than a mildly grubby weekend away. Yet it is trustworthy, sturdy, not even particularly flamboyant - all these Volkswagen Golf descriptions - in everyday use, and when the mood strikes and the roads are clear it can continue to shock with the breadth of its usable performance.

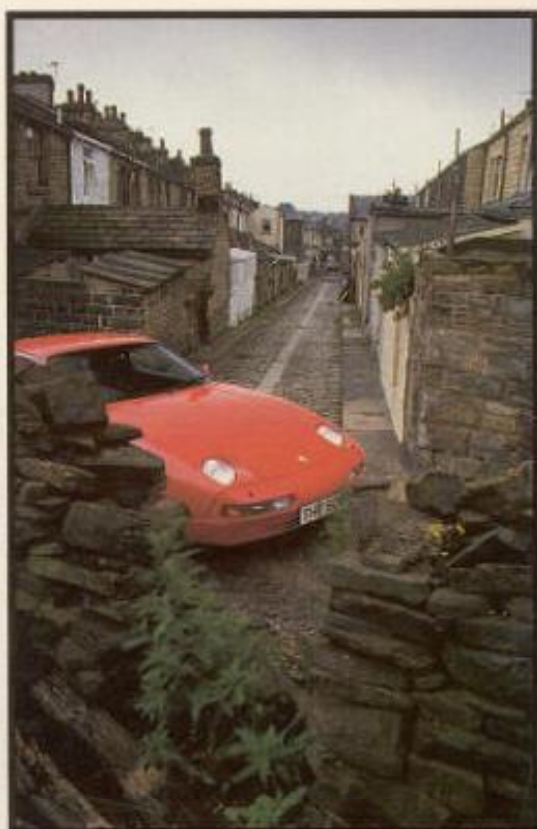
So Porsche decides to do a limited edition 928S4. It selects a theme; no, this won't be a glitzy 928S4 to entice video-rental entrepreneurs but a performance variant to satisfy those misbegotten souls who - may they rest easy in their beds - think that the 928S4 is a shade old fart in these days of the 959 and F40.

And this is where Porsche begins to get a trifle silly. Item one; install a close-ratio five speed transaxle with a numerically longer final drive and limited-slip differential. It

takes a couple of urban miles to see through this idea. You will start pottering around in first, second and third and progress will be stuttery and jerky; this gearshift, with a dog-leg first, is a particularly ugly thing to slide across the gate. First to second is laborious, and fourth to third disturbingly hit and miss. And then you will find yourself in the wrong gear at a set of traffic lights slipping to red and you will press the throttle at 800rpm in fifth and the car just drives. Softly and easily. And, later on, you will explore this further and discover that if, purely out of curiosity, you spool down to 500rpm in fifth and then brush the rightmost pedal, the Porsche, with a mechanical servility which is almost touching, will accelerate away in top gear with not a whisper of complaint.

Which means that, on an A-road, the 928S4 with Sport Equipment is a two-gear car. Fourth and fifth. Third, shunting across the H-gate, becomes just an inconvenience, especially as the clutch is a mite sharp. The standard 928S4 has a four-speed automatic; with the autobox you lose the sternum-bending engine braking as you slip from fifth to fourth, but the automatic is the more genteel, easier-to-live-with alternative. But, of course, automatics ain't macho and part of the 928S4SE's reason-to-be is that Porsche claims it lops 0.3sec from the 928S4's usual 5.9sec 0-60mph sprint. (That, of course, is the difference between bloody fast and exceedingly bloody fast and therefore of absolutely no relevance in ordinary driving.)

So the Porsche gets a five-speed manual 'box. And huge - one inch wider at each end - 8J x 16 front wheels with 9J x 16 rears in that gloriously smooth-faced spoke pattern first seen on the 944TSE. And Japanese tyres. You too? You didn't believe that Porsche would fit Japanese tyres, given that country's generic inability to understand what decent



Instrumentation is typically Porsche, ergonomically sound.



wet-road grip should be? Me neither. But the Porsche comes with 225/50 front and 245/45 rear Bridgestone RE71 unidirectionals and, of course, Bridgestone supplies the original equipment tyres for the epochal 959.

A brief digression is required here. When I was last at the old Nürburgring, the track was sealed off so that a group of Kremer-prepared road-going Porsches could run amok



for a week. This was a Bridgestone road tyre test; Bridgestone test at the Nürburgring for eight weeks a year. And the chief test driver, the guy who signs off Bridgestone's performance products, is John Nielsen, who, in another life, partners Martin Brundle in the Silk Cut Jaguar sportscar superteam.

So Bridgestone are serious. But, John, if you're reading this, next time you are at the

*Ring remember that it has no road markings. For the one thing that the rear RE7s don't like is to tag a white line under acceleration. The whole rear end of the car snakes and darts and comes across all obstreperous. That quirk is not what you expect in a car as thoroughly developed as the 928S4.

Neither is the constant hint of power oversteer. The usual 928S4 is easy-on-the-arms neutral; the SE has a dash of tail-happiness plumbed into its underpinnings. You are made aware of the fact that the rear end is just a fraction loose - it's not a gigantic handling snafu, more an everpresent reminder that more throttle is always an option to dampen the reassuring initial hint of understeer that marks the way the Porsche turns into a bend. In the tried-and-trusted 928S4 more power through a turn simply means greater exit speed - you need to be inconceivably gonzoid to even think about getting the tail out on the public highway. Yet the Bridgestones are predictable enough and, despite their greater width, seem quieter on tarmac surfaces than the narrower, standard rubber - on motorway concrete, however, they sing and hum with an off-key cheek.

As well as the new tyres, the Porsche 928S4SE gets 10 percent stiffer front springs, sport shock absorbers and 17mm wider rear track. The result is a ride that is firm but rarely ragged. Around town, amid the patchwork potholes, the Porsche's ride is positively chunky, but the pay-off is glorious high-speed stability and the ability to place the car on the road accurately. In other words, the beefed-up suspension is worth having; but taken in context with the subtle aroma of oversteer, the manly gearchange quality and largely unnecessary close-ratio box and you begin to get the feeling that this car is as simple-mindedly resolute as Charles Bronson; a fat-tyred meathead

with a big motor.

Which is unfair. The 4,927cc, all-alloy, 32-valve V8 is already one of the world's great engines - but in SE guise it gets even better. The changes are so small as to be practically invisible - higher profile cams, modified engine management unit and new exhaust with twin tailpipes - and leave the figures on the spec-sheet unchanged. This car, like any other S4, produces 320bhp at 6,000rpm and 311lb ft torque at 3,000 - but something wild comes on strong at 4,000rpm.

Smoothness is this engine's forte. Smoothness and a feeling of sheer unburstability. Apparently the SE has less torque than the standard alternative below 3,000rpm - you wouldn't notice - and then fattens out at around 4,000. Which means that this car is quick. Quick as in extremely fast indeed, quick as in stupendous. But docile. It dawdles around town, and the throttle action is friendly bordering on obsequious. But show it 3,500rpm and this size XXL country-croser obediently slims down to something the dimensions of a Midas and there is the most glorious bark from the engine and the horizon approaches very rapidly up to the rev cut-out at 6,750rpm. And, remember, this car will pull from 500rpm in fifth right the way up to the no-go zone without a mechanical grimace.

Fast Lane took the 928S4SE to the Millbrook speedbowl for quantitative performance testing. Mark Hales was behind the wheel. When you talk to him, you sense the feeling of awe that comes with running this car to the max. Top speed? A mean 163.5mph, a one-way best of 166mph, with a quarter-turn of lock on around the high-banked oval; on the straight and level, says Hales, 170mph, easy. His description of pushing towards three miles a minutes used adjectives like stable and composed; it felt, said Hales, like it would run at



Changes to the fabulous 32-valve V8 are minimal, but worthwhile. Smoothness its forte.

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PERFORMANCE

Maximum speed, mph	163.5										
Acceleration through gears, sec											
0-30mph	0-40mph	0-50mph	0-60mph	0-70mph	0-80mph	0-90mph	0-100mph	0-110mph	0-120mph	0-130mph	
2.1	3.0	4.1	5.3	6.8	8.5	10.3	12.7	15.4	18.6	23.2	
Acceleration in fourth, sec											
30-50mph	40-60mph	50-70mph	60-80mph	70-90mph	80-100mph	90-110mph	100-120mph				
4.6	4.4	4.2	4.2	4.4	4.6	5.2	6.1				
Acceleration in fifth, sec											
30-50mph	40-60mph	50-70mph	60-80mph	70-90mph	80-100mph	90-110mph	100-120mph				
6.2	6.2	6.4	6.3	6.2	6.7	7.3	7.7				

that blur-speed pace all day.

Acceleration? Better than claimed. The sprint to 60mph takes just 5.2sec, including hooking that dogleg first-second change; 100mph comes up in 12.7sec, with all the fourth gear 20mph increments up to 120mph taking around four seconds. This is as fast a car as *Fast Lane* has ever tested; as fast and as competent.

I spent a day driving the Porsche west from London, from south to mid-Wales and then down through the Midlands to beyond Oxford and home. Some 486 miles in eight-and-three-quarter hours on a route that – as even the most cursory glance at an atlas will tell you – lacks substantial motorway connections. An average speed of 55.5mph at 19.1mpg point-and-squirting just for fun – which is an impressive display of Porsche engine efficiency.

At the end of it all I was fresh enough. The 928S4SE features some simplification of its interior equipment – seat adjustment is by a combination of electrics and lever-yanking, whereas the base S4 is all electric – but it has air-conditioning and sports seats with side bolsters as fulsome as an elephant's shanks. The superb instrument binnacle and neat interior layout remains untouched; this is a good car for long-distance work.

But that irony remains. The irony of a close-ratio transmission in what is, effectively, a two-gear car, the fatter tyres and stiffer springs leading to more oversteer, not less, the irony – if that is what it is – of

Porsche applying the same marketing tactic on the 928S4 as on the 944T, when the 944T needs it and the 928S4 doesn't.

That's the rub. I think the 928S4 is about as good as a grand tourer gets. The impetus for the Sport Equipment model came, not from Germany but from Porsche GB; guys there thought that, perhaps the 928S4 was perceived as a touch soft, a shade on the plump and dainty side. Raunch, they said, was required. This is the result, for the British market at least; in Germany, there is a mode available called the Club Sport, which offers less sound proofing, the stripping out of various creature comforts even the fitment of a simpler lighter air conditioning unit. The result is a perceptibly slimmer 928S4 aimed at deal speedfreaks; the British SE model is more of a compromise: greater grunt with little reduction in comfort.

But would you buy a 928S4SE? I wouldn't – a standard 928S4SE costs £55,970, the straight S4 is a wonderful car at £54,826 and I could probably find a use for the difference. Or at least, I wouldn't normally. Except that Porsche have only imported 42 SEs which means that they have a rarity value and would therefore perhaps hold their value slightly better, so what the hell? But isn't that a true sign of the times? You buy this car not because it is the zenith of 928S4 performance but because it makes greater financial sense. Which is, of course, the ultimate irony.