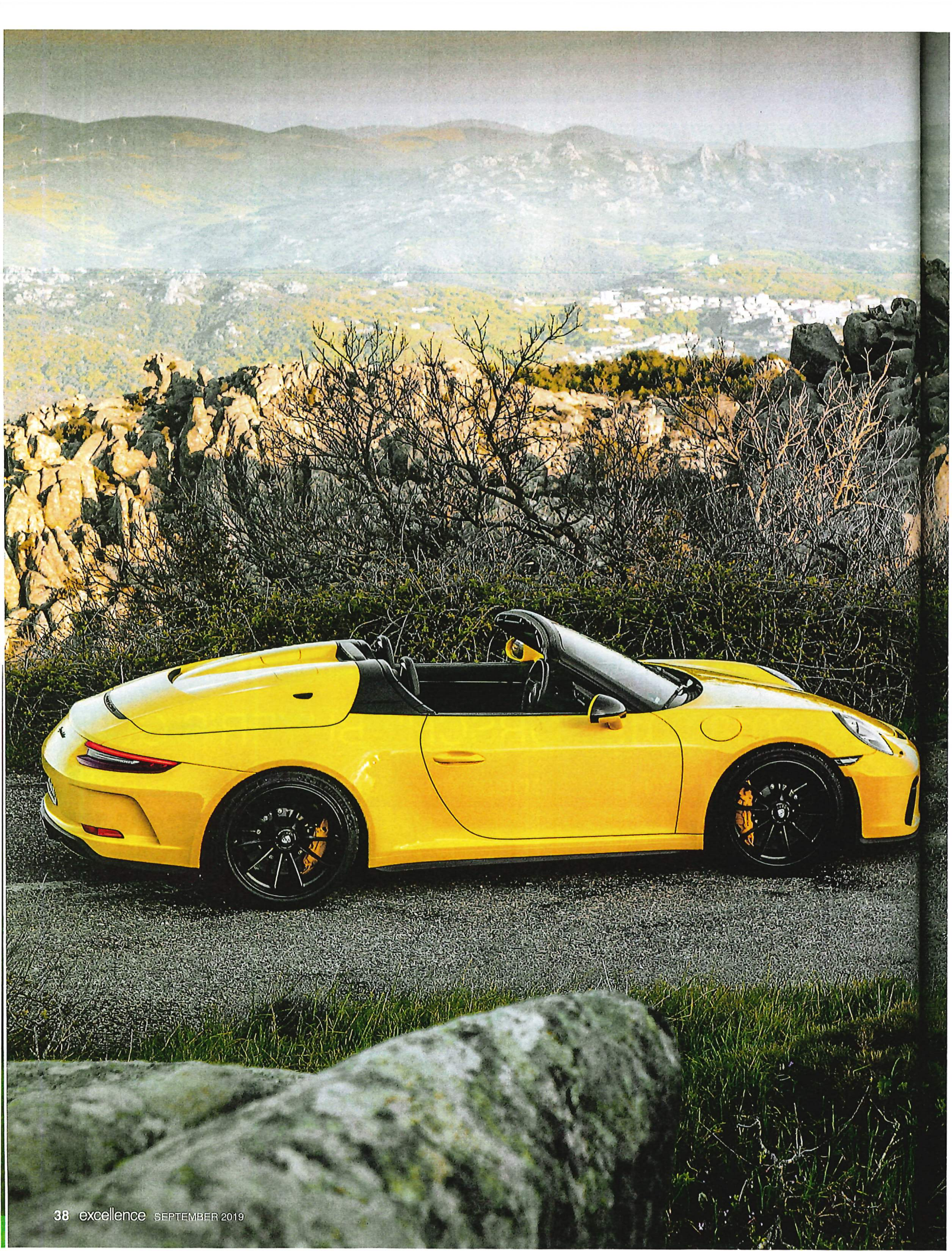






SUPER SPEEDSTER

Behind the wheel of Porsche's limited edition 991.2-gen Speedster.

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There may be a moment, while cruising topless in sixth gear along a seemingly harmless straightaway, that you might forget you're driving something special. Apart from a few stray scripted logos and the slight turbulence from the chopped windshield, the 2019 Porsche 911 Speedster reveals little of its soul from the sanctity of its fixed carbon fiber buckets. But toss it into a corner, fling it across the apex, and power out with a heavy dose of right pedal, and reality strikes in sharp focus: this is not your father's 911.

Though it shares a namesake with four earlier iterations, the new Speedster marks a radical departure from Porsche's minimalist strain of ragtop 911s. This time around, the Speedster reflects the quintessence of one man's fascination with sporting roadsters, coming equipped with the accumulation of decades of know-how (and a weighty MSRP of \$274,500 to support that specialness).

Andreas 'Andy' Preuninger, head of Porsche's track-focused GT line of cars, has been dreaming of building the equivalent of a 911 GT3 Cabriolet since Bill Clinton was in office. But it took nearly two decades for the puzzle pieces to come together. The classic Speedster visual markers are there: wide body, low windshield, double-bubble rear decklid. But beneath the skin is the fearsome endoskeleton of the GT3 Touring, track-ready DNA that reflects an evolution from the dark horse 911R model and ditches the massive downforce-producing rear wing of the standard GT3.

The prevailing theme here focuses on the sacred analog driving experience, specifically as it relates to a high-powered, naturally aspirated engine paired with a manual gearbox. Key to comprehending this philosophy is the presumption that automation and forced induction are becoming the future of the sports car—and, perhaps more crucially, the supercar,

and not necessarily with the end result of full and complete driver satisfaction. With the likes of Ferrari and Lamborghini having long abandoned manual gearboxes, the new Speedster's 911R-derived six-speed transmission plants a rebel flag on sports car soil. The not-so-subtle suggestion here is that user experience is still worth something in the face of ruthless, soulless efficiency.

At the heart (or actually, the tail) of the mechanical maelstrom is a free-breathing 4.0-liter flat-six producing 502 horsepower at a screaming 8,400 rpm, and 346 lb-ft at 6,250 rpm. Plucking the engine from the GT3 Touring might have been sufficient, but Preuninger, intent on lending the Speedster a little something extra, imbued it with individual throttle bodies from the GT3 R race car, a high-pressure injection system, and a lightweight exhaust. The hardware is not unlike a complication—the good kind, like you'd find in a mechanical watch. It lends the powerplant a greater sense of resolution and fineness to the ability to control when and where the right pedal contributes to the prodigious 9,000 rpm rev range.

Tucked beneath a rather elongated stretch of carbon fiber composite decklid, the powerplant operates under a bit more anonymity compared to the louvered tail of the GT3 Touring. Fire it up with the traditional left hand-operated key, and it also sounds a bit less raucous due to com-

The Speedster's weight savings are aided by lowered cowl top panels; familiar scripted Speedster logos can be found throughout.

pliance to Europe's new requirements for gas particulate filters. Because U.S.-spec models must produce the same levels of exhaust back pressure, an element in place of the filters creates the same effect. But you might be hard-pressed to linger on the sonic differences when, in the heat of the moment, the buried accelerator squishes you into your seat as the Speedster whooshes forward in first, second, third gears.

The drivetrain is one of those rare combinations in which the throttle, clutch, and shifter feel symphoniously pleasing as they interface together. Each action is precisely weighted and thoughtfully engineered. The throttle is easy to fine-tune and rev match; the clutch, progressive and intuitive to engage; the shifter, actuated by a shortened lever, moves into gear with a smooth, satisfying nudge. Like the engine, the transmission is no mass-produced, off-the-rack unit, but rather a 'box equipped with reinforced shift stops and one fewer forward gear which helps save 8.8 lbs over the

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seven-speed manual, and some 37.4 lbs compared to the dual-clutch PDK. Press the “Auto Blip” button on the center console, and the engine matches revs quickly and seamlessly during downshifts.

As much as these elements deliver an element of tactility for the driver, the Speedster’s ultimate mechanical feedback comes in the form of massive, luscious g-forces, the kinds that belie the droptop’s suggestively leisurely appearance while pressing your jowls firmly against your larynx. Sure, it’s sleek and low-slung, but the Speedster cloaks its track-ready bits rather effectively. Commit to mashing the right pedal, and the steady wallop of force reminds you that this steady escalation of smooth, controllable power is what separates naturally aspirated engines from their forced induction counterparts, which sometimes have a slightly elastic relationship between throttle input and engine speed. But here’s the rub: as much as the Speedster’s acceleration (and yes, carbon ceramic enabled deceleration)





Familiar elements include fixed carbon bucket seats and 20-inch center-lock wheels, but the Speedster's rear view is entirely unique.



2019 911 (991.2) Speedster

Drive	Rear-wheel drive
Layout	Rear-engine
Wheelbase	96.7 inches
Engine	4.0-liter flat-six
Transmission	6-speed manual
Horsepower	502 hp
Torque	346 lb-ft
Weight	3,230 lbs
Power-to-Weight	6.4 lbs/hp
0-60 mph	3.8 seconds
Top Speed	192 mph
Base MSRP	\$274,500

may seem like high points in the driver experience, they're actually not the peak in this instance. The *pièce de résistance* comes when you corner.

Perhaps the surprise arrives because the Speedster rides over irregular surfaces with surprising smoothness. You'd expect a sharp handling sports car to ride harshly, but the Speedster avoids that fate through diligent tuning. Though equipped with the same suspension hardware as the washboard-stiff GT3 Touring, this application is calibrated with softer damper valving and 5 mm (0.2 in.) more ride height. By retaining the same committed foundation but removing some its edge, the Speedster feels more accommodating and comfortable over the bumpy bits, yet still manages to corner with crisp feedback and outstanding body control.

Preuninger is bullish on the Speedster's road-bound mission. "We felt the need for speed because we are motorsports guys, so it has all the right components," he says. "But this is not a track car. This is a car to enjoy on the weekends on a long winding road." Fair enough.

The location for our drive has taken that consideration heavily into account, as our time with the new Speedster was curated on the stunningly natural volcanic island of Sardinia off the western coast of Italy. The roads that crisscross the countryside here are a dreamy combination higher speed hairpins peppered by tight, technical corners—a smorgasbord of varying radii and elevation changes.

As it turns out, the Speedster's chassis calibration feels perfectly in tune with these surroundings. There's just enough compliance to encourage high entry speeds without fear that the Michelin Pilot Sport Cup 2-clad 20-inch center-lock wheels will hop over uneven surfaces. Grip is so prodigious, in fact, that the more softly sprung Speedster manages to feel just as confidence inspiring as its more committed, track-intended stablemates would over super smooth tarmac.

Yes, there's incrementally less of a hewn-from-a-single-block-of-aluminum feeling to the chassis, even though this ragtop's A-pillars use different sheet metal with alternate weld patterns for added

rigidity. But there's also less imperious my-way-or-the-highway obstinacy, replaced with a flexibility that enables a full day of relatively stress-free driving, save the neck strain from the g-forces. The steering communicates with enough feedback to help you find the limits of adhesion all the more quickly, making it easy to find yourself performing high-speed shenanigans within a relatively short amount of time.

Interestingly (or, perhaps not so surprisingly), the Speedster, a performance car focused on the subjective pleasures of a row-it-yourself gearbox and a non-turbocharged engine, does not make any claims to outright, objective performance numbers. Zero to 60 mph comes in a quick, but not groundbreaking, 3.8 seconds; there are SUVs putting out more power, and for considerably less bankroll than this high-dollar two-seater. Instead, the Speedster's strengths pertain more to its gratifying seat of the pants sensations and delicacy of driver experience.

If you're obsessing over spec sheets and competitor price points, this open-air



model might be lost on you, especially if you're the type to grouse about having to pull over and manually fold the top down because it lacks a power-operated roof (not to mention a more thickly padded fabric top material, which would have added weight to the higher parts of the vehicle's center of gravity).

And yet, the Speedster's sacrifices are not all radical—after all, some of the most extreme Porsche ragtops in the past have eschewed weatherproofing for the sake of ultimate lightweighting, while the new model offers true insulation from the elements. And while many will undoubtedly opt for the fixed, one-size-does-not-fit-all carbon fiber bucket seats and the no-cost delete of air conditioning, those monk-like tactics are entirely optional; customers can also choose comfier, 18-way adjustable seats and ice cold A/C. Just don't think you can get away with having a computer make your gearchange selections, as all 1,948 Speedsters come equipped with the six-speed manual, like it or not.

As for the aforementioned sensation that the Speedster might not feel quite as

edgy or special when driven sedately, the concern is a valid one. After all, this is a nearly \$300,000 car for a limited audience whose performance-focused demeanor is intended to bring out the connoisseur in every enthusiast. Put simply, I entered the Speedster wondering if I would hesitate accessing the breadth of its performance envelope because of its preciousness, but ended up attempting to exploit every last drop of it. That speaks volumes to its capabilities, but also made me wonder how a supercar owner might feel when jumping from, say, a similarly priced McLaren 720S into a Speedster.

As the engine cools after a long, lusty day of high revs and tire scrubbing, the Speedster proves itself delightfully counterintuitive in its usability. Yes, the sky-high price will deter many, and it appears it might take some time for the 1,948-car production run to sell out. The number seems more like a hat tip to the year of Porsche's first road car production than it does a reflection of real-world demand for this modified sports

car (which just happens to be priced like a supercar).

Also inescapable is the reality that those seeking the quirks and charms of an exotic car may feel let down by the Speedster, for it adheres to Porsche's core values of high-speed functionality and usability than it does flash and theatre. Is the \$274,500 starting price a bit dear, all factors considered? Perhaps. But considering several past generations of Speedsters started considerably lower and now command similar dollar amounts, it's almost like Porsche got ahead of the market and leapfrogged inflation by preemptively boosting the cost of admission.

Nobody wants to obsess over dollars and cents when they could be soaking up the finer points of steering feel and handling balance, but such is the corner the Speedster has been painted into. The elephant in the room may be the MSRP, but once the cost is forgotten, the intangibles persist: a profoundly rewarding honey of an engine and a composed ride that becomes more endearing with each unfurling straight and every passing corner. ▀