

NO SOFT OPTION

Any soft-window Targa is a relative rarity, but a 1968 911S soft-window Targa is the rarest of all. It's not the most obvious combination but, in retrospect, the marriage of fresh-air motoring and race-bred performance was far from being a soft option...

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Photos: Eric Crébessègues and Porsche Archiv



SOFT-WINDOW 911S TARGA



By the early 1960s, Porsche's 356 had begun to reach the limits of its development. Considering it had its beginnings in the VW Beetle, it was time to pass the baton to a newcomer, a model that would lead Porsche onwards into the 1970s, if not beyond.

Ferry Porsche had seen the writing on the wall as far back as 1956 and turned to his design team, led by his son Ferdinand 'Butzi' Porsche, aided by Erwin Kommenda among others, to draw up plans for a new car that was more spacious, more powerful and with better handling. The result was, of course, the 901-series Porsches, later to become the 911 as we know and love it.

First seen in January 1963, and launched at the Frankfurt show in September that year, the new model had a wheelbase of 2200mm, 110mm more than the 356, which immediately helped in terms of packaging. The new suspension, front and rear, gave rise to superior handling, while the new six-cylinder engine was...oh, not quite as powerful as many had hoped. In fact, at 130bhp, it was no better than the best of the outgoing 356s, the 2.0-litre Carrera 2 which, of course, had two less cylinders. Performance-wise, though, the new car impressed, with a 0-60mph time of around 8.5 seconds and a top speed of 130mph. There were few rival cars that could match such figures back then.

But as anyone who drives classic sports cars today will agree, enjoyment doesn't necessarily revolve solely around 'paper' figures – what's more important is the whole driving experience. In this respect, the early 911s excelled and many believed that Porsche had built the perfect car. Others, though, could see there was still room for improvement. Given a little more power to match the handling, surely the 911 would be unbeatable in racing and rallying?

And there was another thing that concerned potential customers: there was no talk of a convertible version of the new model. While the 356 had been in production, sales of soft-top models had been consistently high. Speedsters, Cabriolets and Roadsters were all as important a part of the 'team' as the coupé. Even in the last year of production, Cabriolets accounted for over 16 per cent of total 356 sales.

The lack of an open 911 in the line-up was a consequence of Butzi Porsche's personal taste. He felt that there had never been a good-looking soft-top based on a fastback design, especially one with a rear-mounted engine. The problem was that the engine location meant the hood and frame had to be stored away on top of the body, rather in the fashion of a pram hood (take a look at a VW Beetle Cabriolet to see what he meant). He was probably right, for when Porsche eventually offered a Cabriolet version of the 911 in the 1980s, it wasn't blessed with the most elegant of profiles.

But there was constant pressure from the marketing department to consider a convertible version of the 911, countered by pressure from the accounts department

not to spend any more money than was necessary on building a costly new model in parallel with the coupé. Especially, the bean counters argued, when the sales of an open '911 would surely be modest. Better was the idea of developing a model which shared as many of the coupé's body pressings as possible.

The simplest answer would have been to simply cut the roof off a coupé and strengthen the underside of the car to compensate – as was fairly much the case with the Beetle Cabriolet. However, it was clear that this would result in a bodysell that lacked sufficient torsional rigidity to cope with the stresses imposed by the more powerful new engine and the higher cornering speeds allowed by the superior suspension design.

Butzi's solution was as simple as it was controversial, at least in styling terms. His proposal was to add what amounted to a substantial roll-over hoop, tying the two sides of the body together just aft of the B-pillars. While many questioned the aesthetics of the design, Butzi argued that it killed two birds with one stone. On the one hand it would satisfy, he claimed, the demands of race organisations in the USA (odd, because few people would ever be likely to race

such a car in preference to a coupé) and, as the top was divided into two sections (the area above the driver and a separate rear window), it would also help to prevent the roof ballooning at speed.

As we mentioned in issue #28 ('The Targa Man', March/April 2015), the Targa name was the brainchild of Harald Wagner, a marketing expert at Porsche who later became the person to handle celebrity 'deals'. Wagner tells of how there had been much discussion about a name for the new model – as it was no simple Cabriolet or Roadster (or Speedster, for that matter), clearly none of those names would be suitable. Some suggested naming the car after a race track, and it was Wagner who came up with 'Targa Florio' in celebration of Porsche's victories in Sicily, the 'Florio' being dropped after further discussion.

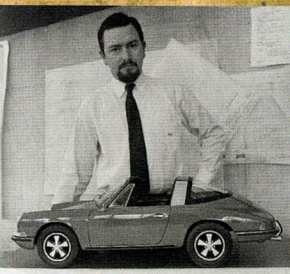
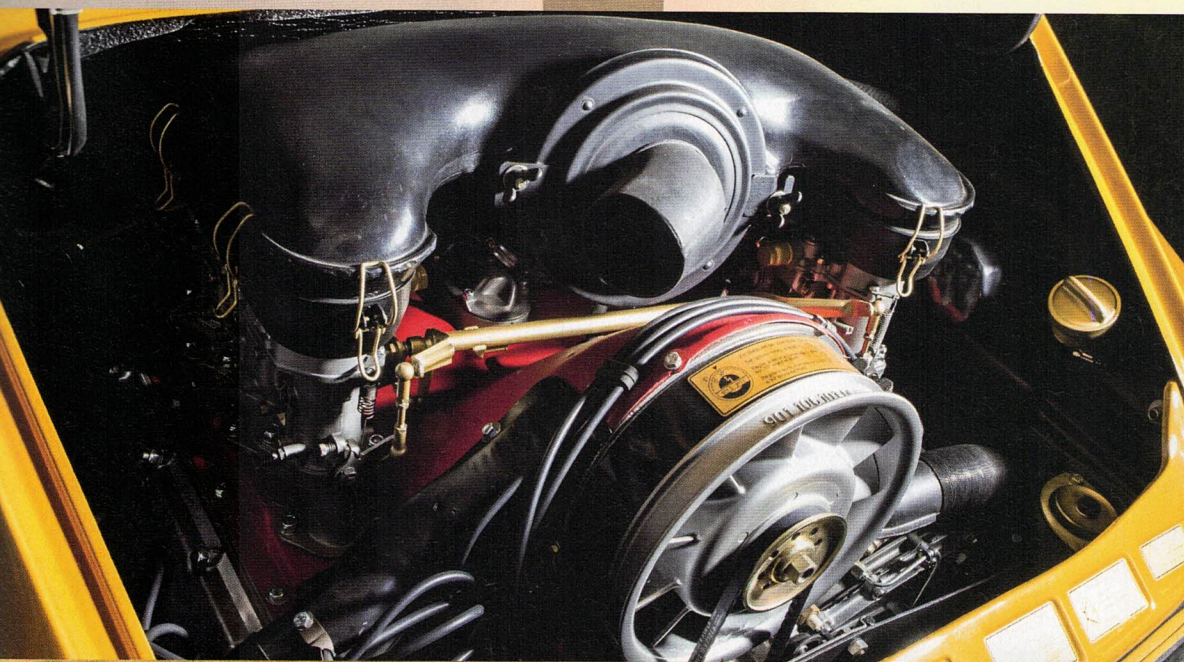
As for the trademark brushed stainless-steel cover to the Targa bar, Butzi Porsche took credit for that decision: 'That idea was mine', he said, 'I do think the roll-bar has a function and adds stiffness – which is why it should be a different colour from the car.' He had a point, and it became the trademark feature on the new model. However, if the Targa was to be considered a true convertible, then it would have

With the rear window unzipped and the Targa roof removed, this was as close to a full cabriolet as you could get. But plastic rear screen was not without its problems in cold weather

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911S engine puts out 160bhp, compared to 130bhp for other models. Butzi Porsche (left) was the father of the Targa, which went on display for the first time at the 1965 Frankfurt Auto Show. Early mock-up (above) looked ungainly





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to have a removable roof section, and preferably a removable rear window, to allow a through flow of air. Incorporating a zip-in plastic back window solved the latter design problem, but the roof section caused a deal of head scratching.

Initially, it was proposed that there should be two roofs supplied with each car, a rigid plastic moulding and a lightweight fabric alternative, offering emergency weather protection in the event of a sudden downpour of rain. Wind-tunnel tests soon showed that a fabric top would get sucked up and outwards at speed, resulting in an ungainly bulge above the driver’s head. The solution was to use a single folding roof section of rubberised fabric, with scissor-action supports which could be clipped into place.

‘I think it looks better than one first thinks – and could be better still. Believe me, we weighed every consideration when planning the Targa, and we have great hopes for it.’ Those were Butzi Porsche’s words in December 1966, ahead of the Targa going into production. It smacked of damning with faint praise and were hardly the words of someone who had 100 per cent confidence in the design.

Butzi’s concerns were shared by Porsche’s marketing department and dealers alike, both of which questioned the Targa’s styling. Initial orders were poor, and Porsche started out by building just seven Targas a day, compared to 55 coupés. But very soon demand began to outstrip supply, and production was stepped up to 10 per day simply to keep pace with the West German market. Here, sales of the Targa soon accounted for 40 per cent of volume.

Although it was quite an elegant solution to the problem of creating an open-top 911, the Targa was not without its faults. For one thing, it weighed some 50kg more than the equivalent coupé, and scuttle shake was a noticeable problem due to the loss of torsional strength (despite the roll-over hoop). The zip-in ‘soft’ rear window caused problems in markets with a more temperate climate, and the manual suggested owners didn’t try to install the rear window if the ambient air temperature was lower than 15°C. The problem was that the plastic rear window would contract and become brittle with the cold, making it virtually impossible to zip it back into place. The plastic also distorted vision to the rear. This shortcoming meant that the plastic rear window

would eventually be replaced by a solid glass ‘screen’ in January 1968. It was a far more practical design, although it meant that there was no longer a through-flow of air when the roof was removed. One major benefit was that the glass helped restore some of the rigidity lost in the Targa redesign.

By 1970, the Targa accounted for almost one third of all 911 sales, this figure rising to more than 40 per cent over the next few years. However, satisfying the domestic (and North American) markets meant that the Targa would not be offered in right-hand drive until the autumn of 1972, with deliveries to the UK arriving in February 1973.

You could be forgiven for thinking that there would be little demand for a more ‘sporting’ version of the Targa, but that was not the case. Porsche launched a 911S (for ‘Sport’, or ‘Special’, depending on who you asked) in the autumn of 1966. It featured a more powerful 2.0-litre engine, which produced 160bhp at 6600rpm – 23 per cent more than the original – thanks to larger intake (42mm) and exhaust (38mm) valves, forged pistons, increased compression (up from 9.0:1 to 9.8:1), cylinder heads with larger ports, nitrided con-rods and reprofiled camshafts, with more duration and overlap.

Weber 40DAS3C triple-chokes took the place of the former 40IDA3C type, with larger chokes (32mm instead of 30mm) and revised jetting. The result was an increase in top speed to over 140mph, and a decrease in the 0–62mph time of roughly half a second. The engine produced 132lb ft at 5200rpm.

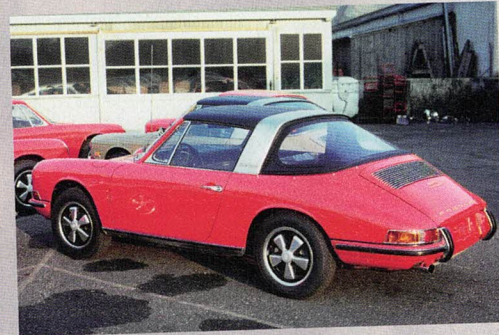
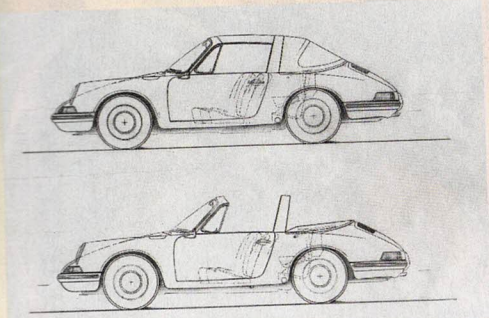
It’s not entirely clear how many ‘soft-window’ Targas were built, but by the time the car shown here was ordered in

The soft-window Targa bodyshell was not as torsionally rigid as the glass-window design, so pushing the 911S version hard caused body flex

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Woodrimmed steering wheel and a lack of headrests hark back to days when passenger safety wasn't the major concern it is today. You can almost hear the lawyers discussing their fees...



1968, the glass rear window was available as an option. One would naturally assume that someone ordering the higher-powered 'S' would a) opt for a coupé over a Targa and b), if he did want a Targa, prefer to put his money down on the improved 'solid' rear window version. A soft-window 911S Targa is a rarity, indeed.

Factory records suggest that 442 911S Targas were built in 1968, but what proportion of these were soft-windows is not clear. It is easy to suggest a split of 50/50 between soft- and glass-window versions, but how many of those wanting to exploit the added performance of the 911S would have really chosen the less rigid version?

This is only conjecture, of course, but we wouldn't be surprised if there were far fewer than 200 soft-window 911Ss built in 1968. The US market didn't get the 911S that year, and the Targa in any form wasn't available on the UK market until 1973, so a soft-window 'S' would have been a rarity even then. Now, how many survive? Targas rust worse than coupés, 911Ss probably got driven harder than other models... Could surviving examples of the soft-window 1968 'S' be the rarest of all early 911Ss? We'd love to know... **CP**

Thanks to RSC Automobile, Lauwe, Belgium for the 1968 911S Targa. Log onto www.rscautomobile.com

Drawings (above left) date back to 1964. Still plenty of details to sort out, including the windscreen surround. Porsche showed off a Targa 'S' in 1967 (above centre) and a year later showed this 911S soft-window Targa Sportomatic (above). Now that's rare!

