

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 1
JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2012

ARIZONA AUCTION PREVIEW
2012 PORSCHE CAYMAN R
2013 LEXUS GS 350, GS 450h
2012 JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE
ACTIVE LIFESTYLE VEHICLE OF THE YEAR
SEMA SHOW HIGHLIGHTS
ROUGH ROAD TRIP IN THE NISSAN XTERRA
GOODGUYS 14TH SOUTHWEST NATIONALS
CORONADO SPEED FEST SAN DIEGO
CITY CREEK CENTER SALT LAKE CITY
SEDONA DESTINATION LODGING

PORSCHE
CAYMAN R



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balance

PORSCHE'S MID-ENGINE LINEUP CONTINUES TO DEFINE ITS TURF

BY JOE SAGE



Generation after generation and decade after decade, to our taste, there are few things in the automotive world as pleasing to the eye as a Porsche 911 coupe. Nonetheless, some three-quarters of 911 sales in the US are of the cabriolet. In the late 1990s, the 911 was joined by the Porsche Boxster, with exceptional mid-engine handling and balance, but less power. To us the choice seemed easy: if you want a coupe, the 911 is a beauty; and if you want an open roadster, take the neutral poise of the mid-engined Boxster. Either one had sufficient power to enjoy its type of drive.

What complicated things was the introduction in 2006 of the Porsche Cayman, a new coupe that shared its layout with the Boxster. Two coupes, two open cars. Two rear-engined and two mid-engined cars. Suddenly, our original logic was up against more variables.

The 911, Boxster and Cayman share their showroom with front-engined SUVs. The Cayman and Boxster share a heritage of mid-engined Porsches from the 550 Spyder of the 1950s, to the 904 of the '60s, the VW-derived 914 of the '70s, the Carrera GT supercar and next the anticipated \$850,000-or-so 918 (which has already hit the track and show circuits as the 918 RSR hybrid racer), as well as an expected smaller version of the Boxster.

Since the rear-engined coupe and cabriolet cars both carry the 911 name, while the current mid-engined ones—Boxster and Cayman—carry completely different names, you could say mid-engine models outnumber the 911 in the lineup. Had they done a better job of foreseeing the coupe, that naming fluke might have never happened. With "Boxster" standing for a combination of the boxer engine and roadster configuration, the non-roadster car presented a branding challenge. It was christened "Cayman"—more similar to the unrelated Cayenne, arguably, than to the Boxster. But that's that, well established by now, though still vulnerable to a slip of the tongue.

CAYMAN, CAYMAN S

Though it took about three years for the Boxster S to join the base Boxster in the lineup, the Cayman S was released first, before the regular Cayman a little over a year later. The second-generation Cayman and Cayman S, introduced in 2009, have 2.9-liter and 3.4-liter flat sixes, putting out 265 and 320 horsepower, respectively (up 20 and 25, respectively, from the first generation).

CAYMAN R

The downside to introducing the S first is perhaps that the lineup dropped a tad in thrill factor next (a special edition or two notwithstanding). Time to amp it back up.

The Porsche Cayman R was introduced in late 2010 at the LA Auto Show and hit the showrooms during 2011 as a 2012 model. As the Cayman and Cayman S are hardtop cousins to the Boxster and Boxster S, the Cayman R is kin to the lightweight Boxster Spyder. It's tempting to think of the Boxster Spyer and the Cayman R as performance-tuned strippers, but removing weight is just part of the formula. Highly tuned sports suspension is added, along with more horsepower, and rather than going the plain-jane route, there are many design details added, including a hard-to-miss rear deck spoiler.

Glimming down

The primary goal in development of the Cayman R was weight reduction, which in and of itself would increase performance, agility and driving dynamics. When you order your Cayman R, you're paying for lightweight materials in many components, but you're saving some from the omission of various normally standard equipment. First to go were the A/C and the sound system. The absence of A/C would seriously limit use of any car

KEEP RIGHT >>

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE: Horizontally opposed 6-cyl 3.4L engine, 24-valve DOHC VarioCam Plus variable valve timing/lift, 2-stage resonance induction, hi-po manifolds, cylinder-specific anti-knock control.

Horsepower.....330 hp
Torque.....273 lb-ft

TRANSMISSION6-speed manual
SUSPENSION & TECH: McPherson strut with stabilizer bars front and rear, PSM (Porsche Stability Management), ABS, EDTC (Engine Drag Torque Control), ABD (Automatic Brake Differential), ASR (Anti Slip Regulation).

WHEELS-TIRES
Front wheels.....8.5Jx19 alloy
Front tires235/35ZR19
Rear wheels.....10Jx19 alloy
Rear tires265/35ZR19
Tire pressure monitoring system

BRAKES: Vented rotors with 4 piston calipers, 12.5" front, 11.8" rear.

MPG/EMISSIONS:
Fuel mileage city (EPA est)...19MPG
Fuel mileage hwy (EPA est)...27MPG
LEV II (Low Emission Vehicle)

Stainless steel exhaust system
SAFETY: Body shell hot dip galvanized both sides, high strength steel and Boron steel safety structures, aluminum front trunk lid. POSIP (Porsche Side Impact Protection) driver and front passenger airbags, thorax airbags in seats, head airbags in doors, front belt pre-tensioners and force limiters.

COMFORT & CONVENIENCE: 3-spoke height/telescope wheel, power rack and pinion variable steering, Porsche side stripes, fixed rear spoiler w contrasting color, halogen headlights w home feature, alarm, HomeLink®, cruise, multifunction trip computer, 2 power sockets.

BASE PRICE\$66,300

OPTIONS:
Peridot Metallic paint, black std leather, sports seats, fixed rear spoiler, rain sensor, Bluetooth®, PCM 3, floor mats:\$ 0
Auto dim mirrors.....690
PCM w navigation3455
Bi-xenon w cornering lights1560
Sound Package Plus w storage700
Automatic A/C1760
Sport Chrono Package Plus960
XM® Satellite receiver.....750
Universal audio interface345

EXCLUSIVE OPTIONS:
Wheels painted black\$1815

DESTINATION CHARGE950

TOTAL PRICE.....\$79,285



PERFORMANCE / PRICE

	CAYMAN R	CAYMAN S	CAYMAN
Engine (liters)	2.9	3.4	3.4
DFI	—	DFI	DFI
Horsepower	265	320	330
Torque (lb-ft)	221	273	273
0-to-60	manual 5.5	4.9	4.7
	PDK 5.2	4.8	4.4
Top mph	manual 165	172	175
	PDK 163	171	174
Weight (lb)	manual 2932	2976	2849
	PDK: add approx 55 pounds		
	\$51,900		
	PDK: \$55,320		
	\$62,100		
	PDK: \$65,520		
	\$66,300		
	PDK: \$69,960		



We checked the consumer build-your-own site to see what the options are on spoiler color. No dice. Even if you get a black car, then the wing (and side decals) will become silver. Not bad, but still too showy for a car whose essence should include a degree of stealth. But that's just us. You may love it. The front spoiler, given the lowered suspension, is a bigger challenge than most when navigating driveways, speedbumps or drainage troughs. We'd hate to scuff up that Peridot paint.

Speaking of the Peridot, despite it being a key promotional color for the car—something Porsche often charges dearly for—it's one of four standard (no-cost) paints. Another half dozen are \$710 upgrades, and a couple of specialized metallics can dazzle for \$3140.

The chart at left compares vitals of weight, power and price. To save you some calculation: the power-to-weight ratio of the Cayman R is 8.58 lb-per-hp for the 6-speed manual version, or 8.8 lb-per-hp for the PDK direct-shift dual-clutch 7-speed clutchless, no-pedal manual with automatic mode.

(Side note: convertibles generally weigh more than hardtops, due to mechanisms and to strengthening and stiffening needed in the body, without a top to hold it all together. The Boxster Spyder, however, actually weighs less than its Cayman R kin—2811 pounds vs 2849 for the coupe. The Spyder of course has no mechanism and barely a top at all, plus the well-developed structure the basic open Boxster already brought to the table.)

With lower top speed, more weight and a higher price for the privilege of PDK, we'd opt for the manual—our preference, anyway, and faster, lighter, cheaper. The PDK may be quicker to 60, but we'd rather spend a couple of tenths of a second shifting our own car.

SETTING SITUATED

Our first move when we received the car was to doublecheck whether that rear spoiler should retract—as it does on a normal Boxster or Cayman. But no. We did make that boy racer comment in our logbook, but we'd have to say that while writing this and looking at the photo at right, well, maybe it has grown on us. Looking at the photo at left, maybe not.

The primary instrument binnacle has no canopy, a treatment we've seen before in such models as the Boxster RS 60 Spyder Special Edition in 2008. It lets the sun shine on the instrument faces, but it's a good look and we like it. As you would expect in a car with weight-bearing luxuries stripped out, it has a fully manual seat. We're not lazy, and we'd probably only set ours once and let nobody else drive it. It takes some work to get it right, but that's a small price to pay for the prime mission.

Strap pulls inside the doors, in red—instead of door handles—are a cool look (unless you think it's sticking its tongue out at you), but they seem likely to not live as long as the rest of the car, and their open slots may let dirt, grime and moisture get inside the door.

The center console is body-colored, as is a narrow strip along the instrument panel, nice no-weight style points (that console treatment is evocative of the inexpensive and funky little Nissan Juke). The console comes up short on storage spots for sunglasses and phones, though a package shelf under the IP mitigates that some.

Though Porsche specifically points out the removal of the sound system to save weight, they then add it back

in: preparation for radio is a no-cost option on our sample, and the sound system was installed (\$700). Speaker grilles incorporated into the door panels have a subtle beehive pattern that's visible on the far door, but hidden at your elbow. Nice. It turns out we've also had an A/C unit added (\$1760). Thus it also turns out you can own this car in the Sonoran Desert and drive it year-round. Ours also adds nav (\$3455). But these add-backs are bringing it closer to Cayman S territory, other than weight-saving wheels (available other ways) and its distinctive spoilers and lowered chassis. As options bring it closer to the less expensive S in weight, the car costs more. You will want to spend some time comparing the S and the R, with and without various options and deletions, before you sign on the line.

WHEEL TIME

We distinctly remember falling in love with the Boxster's mid-engine handling within the first ten feet, back in 1997. We've had many Boxster miles since then and anticipated the same. The suspension and lightweight wheels of the Cayman R, however, are much more highly tuned and bring all the nuance of the surface right through the system and to the wheel. Road feel is generally a good thing, but it seemed surprisingly sensitive even on flat, smooth roads at lower speeds, at least at first. We perceived more feel—and pebble noise—from the rear wheels. Weight distribution is in the 45/55 range, so that may be a factor, but not a huge one.

But most of the time behind the wheel, the logbook shows we had little to say. Hand on the lever,

hand on the wheel, 330 horses in a relatively fly-weight chassis, and we just drove. And drove.

We didn't have the opportunity to take the car on a long road trip, but we could have. The cabin in the lightweight version is fundamentally as comfortable as in the full-luxury S. With each sweeping turn on the open road, or with each foray into the tight spots of town, the Cayman's mid-engine handling shines. And a long trip is actually one place the coupe can beat the roadster: top-down time is always welcome, but when hours turn to days and miles turn to states, at least on the Interstate among the semis, the closed coupe is a winner.

THE BALANCE THING

The concept of balance struck is in several ways with this car. First, there's the balance (or set of tradeoffs) between the 911 and Boxster/Cayman lineups (rear-engine vs mid-engine and open vs closed). Then there's the balancing act within the Cayman lineup itself, deciding whether you want more features or less weight, and within that decision, how exactly to option the car. You might also think about how you balance your luggage needs, as the 911 has just its front trunk, the Boxster has trunks front and rear, and the Cayman has even more volume: the same in the front and a spacious hatchback from the seats to the rear. You can balance your needs, and in the

Cayman you can balance your load. Ultimately, there is the balanced handling afforded by the mid-engine layout.

After all is said and done, we remain in our conundrum. For an open car, we would still ignore the high sales numbers of the 911 Cabriolet and snatch up a Boxster in a heartbeat, for the mid-engine. But for a coupe? Tough call. Fifteen years ago, we would have welcomed a Cayman, for mitigating the wild tail action of the 911, which would thrill some or send the unfamiliar into the ditch. But that's so well tamed now, it's less of a factor. And whereas Porsche originally kept the cost of the Boxster (and by implication, the later Cayman) as far from the 911 as they could, they have clearly moved closer together and can now overlap.

We went into our week thinking the 911 ruled, as a coupe. But by the end, we were at one with the Cayman while driving, plus we realized we kept pulling out the phone to take more snapshots of the car. It comes down to personal preferences on all counts, as well it should. Porsche has, as always, done their homework thoroughly, maintaining positioning and alternatives in an increasingly complex lineup. They also may not mind if we can't decide on just one: they know most of us have two- or three-car garages. After all, that's why they invented the Cayenne. ■

