

ALL BUSINESS

THE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR SPORTS SUV

By Joe Sage



When the Porsche Cayenne was a new idea almost ten years ago, many found it blasphemous. An SUV, from the makers of world class sports cars and only sports cars? That line of thought is now almost hard to imagine, given its success and ubiquity. For years running, if you love sports cars and want an SUV, you will put the Porsche Cayenne among your top few options. Or if you love SUVs and want performance, ditto. It turns out this performance SUV, rather than alienating either group, entices both groups.

Bringing customers to the brand are a surprisingly broad range of otherwise similar vehicles, within four iterations: the Porsche Cayenne, Cayenne S, Cayenne S Hybrid and Cayenne Turbo. Power ranges from 300 to 500 horsepower. Prices range from \$48,850 to \$108,750, base. Fuel economy ranges from 22 to 24 MPG.

Our tester was a 2012 Cayenne S, with a base price of \$65,000. But you can quickly forget about that base price. With add-ons, the total sticker was \$98,165. How did it get from there, to there? The biggest single item was a Premium Package Plus for \$11,650, which delivered a wide-ranging combination of driving electronics, air suspension with active management, dynamic bi-xenon headlights, heated seats and steering wheel, navigation, electric sunscreens and so on. (PPP is the top of three tiers of packaging starting at \$4540 for those who do not need it all.) Porsche rarely misses an opportunity to charge for paint (the only non-upcharge paints are black or white), and this fairly ordinary silver ran \$790. A two-tone black-blue leather package added \$4085. Bose audio added \$2160, money well spent, even if pricey. A number of other items ranged from \$600 to \$2400 or so each. Of note were the 21-inch black wheels, at \$6115.

Just for grins, we ran a Cayenne S build-your-own online, adding as little as possible (upsizing the wheels, adding color paint, adding the Bose unit and the lowest of the three packages, but ignoring a great many other offerings) and quickly topped \$77,000. For more grins, we built-our-own top-of-the-line Cayenne Turbo and took pretty much everything, topping \$180,000.

So, \$98,165 (before tax and registration) for our test Cayenne S? As with its base price, it turns out there's still plenty of headroom, if you want to run your own build even higher. Or there's still the base Cayenne, with a 300-hp V6, at \$52,825 if you just want to get your toe in the door and join the club as a social member.

The Cayenne S has a 400-hp V8. (The Turbo uses the same V8 with twin turbochargers to hit 500 hp, and the S Hybrid has its own smaller 380-hp V6 plus 47 hp from two electric motors. Cayenne, Cayenne S and Cayenne Turbo have active all-wheel drive, while the Hybrid has permanent AWD with a self-locking center differential.)

INSIDE AND OUT

Our first impressions were about the appearance: the silver paint, black wheels and black/blue-grey interior seemed dull to us, but maybe that's because we had acclimated to the yellow promotional photos before delivery. "Cayenne" sounds spicy, yellow looks spicy, but our greyscale version seemed not so, to our eye.

The Cayenne has a five-gauge cluster in traditional Porsche overlapping circular format, most of which are circular instruments—the first three are oil temp and pressure, speedo and tach, and then the fifth one is the



fuel gauge and water temp. The fourth instrument is a multipurpose display. As we first enter, it's showing a video screen that's nav-map-related, plus shows outside temp and the time. There are pages and pages in the manual about what this one screen can display.

In the center, just behind the shifter, is a half-barrel set of controls—a very elegant interface—for engaging 4WD or not, with mountain or highway icons; three push-buttons for Comfort, Normal and Sport suspension modes; and another controller for ride height. There are additional Sport drive options below that, traction-related. The two different Sport neighborhoods in the controls are explained thus, in the manual: "If you wish to use the characteristics of Sport mode and the Sport's exhaust system, and would like a more comfortable chassis setup, you can switch separately to Normal or Comfort mode." So you can opt for a bit of horsepower and power-augmenting exhaust boost in the one Sport setting that does not have to lock in the Sport suspension setting. Why you wouldn't want that, too, who knows. As it says in the manual, "your Porsche features a complex integrated system, made up of all control systems acting in power, transmission and in the chassis ... all control systems are networked, with the aim of combining the best possible driving performance with maximum safety. The following systems are involved, depending on equipment" ... and at this point a lengthy chart invokes Porsche Traction Management, Porsche Torque Vectoring, Porsche Stability Management, Air Suspension with Level Control and Height Adjustment, PASM (Porsche Active Suspension Management, which is shock absorber related) and PDCC (Porsche Driving and Chassis Control, an active chassis system to stabilize roll tendency).

The 4WD controller has four settings: on road with nothing engaged, off road with center differential operating, off road with the center differential locked, and off road with rear differential also locked. You push a rocker switch forward or back to get the system—as the manual says—"one step more suitable for off-road driving" or "one step more suitable for on-road driving." That's actually a straightforward way to communicate this straightforward process, and the controller confirms how you're set with one, two or three lights.

Window screens in the rear side windows are a pretty cool feature for Arizona. Their operation is also slick:

KEEP RIGHT >>





one pass makes the window come up, the second makes the screen come up; one pass down makes the screen come down, the second pass makes the window come down.

ON THE ROAD

One way the Cayenne achieves fuel mileage numbers above 20 MPG is via its 8-speed Tiptronic automatic with Auto Start Stop function. This feature, working its way through many brands, offers fuel savings by shutting the engine off at a stoplight and firing it back up when you're ready to go—a feature certainly more about fuel efficiency than about driver experience, but something we're going to increasingly get used to. It's still a little disquieting to sit at a red light in this \$100k performance vehicle waiting for it to stagger back to life, an effect that is quick, but noticeable. We learn—when we come to a stop and hear it shut off, and the tach and oil pressure quickly drop to zero—that we can feather the brake pedal in the slightest way, just enough to pre-restart for a better relaunch when the light turns green and you let off. Of course that works a bit against the reason the feature exists.

Two low-level suspension height adjustments are available for serious speeds you may never see. "Low Level 1" is intended for high speed driving at speeds from about 85 mph, with the vehicle automatically lowered about 22mm (.87"), then automatically raised back to normal as you drop below 65 mph. "Low Level 2" is for speeds of about 130 mph or more for more than 40 seconds, with the vehicle lowered by 32 mm (1.26"), then raised back when your speed drops below 105 mph. (If this is your kind of driving, you might want to check out the lowered, two-wheel-drive Cayenne GTS, 420hp, \$82,050 base, with a top track speed of 162 mph, although the Turbo is ten miles faster than that.)

The suspension is full of dazzling technical tricks, but we would be happy to have it built with the best solid, perfectly-tuned sport suspension, period. We noted, in

multiple settings, that on a few very routine surfaces—not speed bumps, not drainage troughs, just changing between concrete and asphalt—the ride could get suddenly squirrely. Many of the tech options are to accommodate those who seek luxury over sport, but even with both Sport settings turned on, we felt this at times.

ON THE HORIZON

Porsche is adding one more member to this family for 2013: the Cayenne Diesel, with a 240-hp, 3.0-liter V6 turbo diesel engine with SCR (selective catalytic reduction) technology and permanent all-wheel drive with self-locking center differential. This arrives in September with a base price of \$55,750 and highway fuel mileage of 29 MPG. Factor in the high torque of a diesel, and this one will be worth a look.

PULL OUT THE CHECKBOOK

The good news/bad news is hardly news. The good news is that if you want to have an SUV and wish it were a Porsche, here you go; or if you want to have a Porsche and wish it were an SUV, here you go. The bad news is the same, you could say, as of course there is some compromise in this combination. Compared with a sports car—a fair comparison the brand begs—the Cayenne is tall and heavy and, though extremely well mitigated, handles at least somewhat accordingly. Compared with other SUVs, this is a high performance, high-tech Porsche, but it is priced accordingly, less so if you can be happy with few options.

It's not an unreasonable combination, of course, and the competition makes that apparent—from the BMW X5, to Range Rover, the Audi Q7, and the whole Infiniti and Mercedes-Benz SUV lineups, in varying degrees.

Our time with the Cayenne S was limited. But we did sketch out one conclusion: that if you want a luxury, trick-outfitted SUV, and budget is not a concern—or perhaps you even actively want to achieve a high budget, just for show—this is a great vehicle for you. Then again if you're more of a sport driver, with \$100,000 to spend, it's possible you'd do just as well with a pre-ownend 911 plus a pre-owned Ford SUV you can drive like you stole it.

Ultimately, though, yes, of course you want one. ■

