

# A Rare Jewel

A 968 CABRIOLET IS UNCOMMON ENOUGH.  
HOW ABOUT ONE IN BLACK?

STORY BY **DAVID MATHEWS** PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ALAN ROSS**

**ONE INTERESTING PHENOMENON** within the Porsche community is that the least-expensive model in the hierarchy frequently becomes the most sought-after. The early Speedster, a leaky, bare-bones, hard-on-the-fanny cheapie, for example, has become the darling of Porsche enthusiasts. The inexpensive 914, which was a squarish, mid-engine targa that shared most of its guts with Volkswagen, now commands big bucks at Bring a Trailer. As for the four-cylinder transaxle cars, they've always played second fiddle to the rear-engine models. The fact is, popularity ebbs and flows, but quality is constant. Those who are savvy stay ahead of the curve. They recognize quality, see value, and buy low.



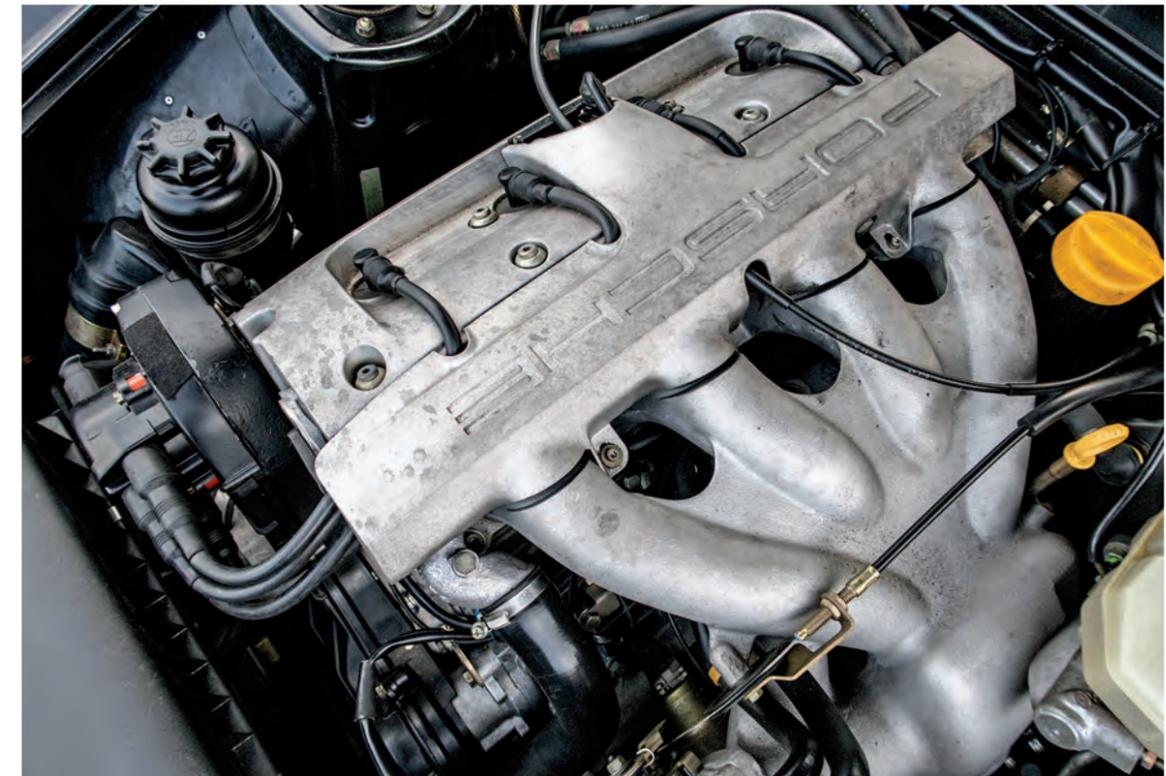


Orange Coast Region member Jeff Werner owns a black-over-black 968 six-speed Cabriolet, one of 306 produced for the U.S. market in the 1995 model year, and one of only 66 dressed in black. Werner purchased his 968 in June 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic from European Collectibles in Costa Mesa, California.

“I owned a 2002 Boxster S at that time and was actually looking to upgrade to a 911,” he said. “While searching online, I came across the European Collectibles’ website and was immediately attracted to

balance of the car,” Werner said. “It had a much different feel to it than my Boxster.” It was a one-owner, accident-free car that had been stored for a number of years. European Collectibles had a solid reputation. The car had been thoroughly inspected and maintenance updated. A new set of tires was included in the deal. The 968 checked all the boxes. Werner wrote the check.

Cabriolets destined for the U.S. were technically roadsters—two-seaters outfitted with a double glovebox/package tray unit where the rear seats



This 3.0-liter was the highest displacement, normally aspirated four-cylinder engine of the era. Just shy of 240 horsepower, the 968 could scoot from 0-60 mph in six seconds.

this 968. I wasn’t familiar with the model, but the styling and the color combination caught my eye.”

Moving to a four-cylinder, transaxle model required a 180-degree adjustment in Werner’s thinking. “Once I saw this car, I immediately started researching the model,” he said. “I watched YouTube videos and read everything I could get. I was fascinated by the evolution of the transaxle cars—the 924s, 944s, and the 968.”

Werner visited and later joined the PCA 968 Register, an online site that provided history and significant insight into the model. He quickly realized that this transaxle was not another wannabe, but instead a potent Porsche variant.

Werner acted quickly, making an appointment to see the car in person. He took a good friend and Porsche enthusiast with him to look over and drive the car. “What grabbed me was the nearly perfect

would typically be found. The reason for this is that Porsche did not want to go through the trouble of producing a U.S.-mandated three-point lap belt system for the rear passengers. As described on [968register.org](http://968register.org): “It should be noted that you can still locate the factory-installed rear seatbelt nuts in the floor of your U.S.-spec 968 cab if you are interested in the popular retrofit. Another interesting note, the 55 North American 968 cabs produced with the Canadian package retained their rear seats!”

Werner became a PCA member in 2009. An active participant, he joins in on the monthly breakfast meetings and driving tours. “I’m not much for rallies, but I do like to drive the car,” he said. And drive he did. After having his car checked out at the Porsche dealership in Irvine, California, Werner drove his 968 from San Juan Capistrano, California, to French Lick, Indiana, solo, nearly 2,100 miles,



Jeff Werner, a former Boxster owner, fell in love with his rare 968 Cabriolet and hasn't looked back.

to attend his very first PCA Parade in 2021. "The air-conditioning worked fine. The car ran great," he said. "I took the northern route through Las Vegas, Nevada, and Vail, Colorado."

Social events, tours, and the Concours d'Elegance filled his dance card at the French Lick Parade. Friendly, willing competitors coached Werner with his concours preparation. "This was my first concours," he said. "I had no experience. The people were just fantastic in offering help. Michael Grove, one of the Concours 101 presenters, spent 30 minutes pointing out and suggesting things. I was awarded Third Place in the Street Category (PP07). It was awesome. I just wish I would have become more involved with PCA earlier."

### LAST OF THE FOUR-CYLINDER TRANSAXLES

As the culmination of a breed that began in 1976 with the 924, the 968 was the most advanced four-cylinder transaxle Porsche produced. Although it retained a silhouette similar to the 924 and 944, the 968 was considerably more modern beneath its skin. Initially known as a 944 S3, the 968 was the last, and perhaps best, iteration of that genre.

Its 3.0-liter, 16-valve engine, now purely Porsche,

incorporated VarioCam variable-valve timing. It produced 236 horsepower at 6200 rpm, and 225 lb-ft of torque at 4100 rpm, which made it the most powerful normally aspirated four-cylinder engine of its time. A six-speed gearbox kept drivers favoring a manual transmission busier than they had been with the five-speed 944. Approximately 25% of U.S.-bound 968 Cabriolets were equipped with the new dual-mode Tiptronic automatic transmission for those preferring boulevard cruising to canyon carving.

Harm Lagaay, returning from BMW, led the restyling effort. Quoting Lagaay in *Porsche: Excellence Was Expected* (Volume Three, Chapter 48): "I was asked to do a new front to revive the 944. I was looking for some design cues, some links to familiar Porsches." The result? A front clip that bore striking similarity to the anticipated 993. And with its exposed, pop-up headlights, the 968 resembled its upscale sibling, the 928. "New-Generation" rear-view mirrors added to the sleek look. ABS and driver/front passenger airbags were standard.

Production moved from the VW-Audi facility in Neckarsulm to Porsche's factory in Zuffenhausen, not only to more Porscheify the transaxle, but also to reduce cost.

With all the fanfare Porsche could muster, the 968 made its debut at the 1991 Frankfurt Motor Show. Lights, cameras, balloons, and scantily clad models combined to promote this "new" Porsche. *Car and Driver* observed, "Who can blame the company for trying to wring out all the 'new' it can out of this front-engine, four-cylinder model?"

But for the most part, the sports car buying public was as enamored with the 968 as an 8-year-old boy confronted with a plate of creamed spinach. Some loved the car, of course. But not enough to dig into their wallets.

Hoping to infuse life and love into the model, Porsche introduced a more-potent, less-expensive version at the October 1992 Paris Motor Show. Like the 964 RS America, the 968 Club Sport (CS) jettisoned most of the standard model's creature comforts. Crank windows and manually adjusted mirrors replaced the electric versions. Automatic heater control, radio and antenna, the rear seat, and most noise-buffering insulation all were deleted. Without the standard electric-powered gizmos, a smaller, lighter battery was used. The front seats were switched to lightweight Recaro buckets with fireproof fabric upholstery and body-colored backs.



The interior is as elegant as it is simple. A six-speed transmission, combined with its 50/50 weight bias, makes the 968 a hoot to drive. "The 968 represents Porsche's front-engine transaxle sports car in its ultimate form," according to *Car and Driver*.

A three-spoke, nonairbag steering wheel replaced the standard four-spoke, airbag-equipped one. A single radiator cooling fan (instead of two) saved weight. Ditched was the more luxurious deep-pile carpeting in favor of skimpier stuff. Beneath its thinner skin, a tighter, lower suspension and 17-inch Cup wheels provided taut, crisp handling.

To satisfy the option-crazed 968 CS buyer, three packages were offered—the Comfort Pack, Security Pack, and the Sport Pack. The most highly favored was the Sport Pack (MO30), which included stiffer springs, shocks, antiroll bars, larger ventilated front



brakes, and a Torsen limited-slip differential.

The good news? The 968 Club Sport was awarded Best Car of 1993 by *Autocar & Motor Magazine*. The bad news? The CS was not offered in North America, a market Porsche sorely needed, because the model didn't meet DOT safety standards. Neither did the even-rarer 968 Turbo S, 15 of which were produced.

Was the 968 the sales success Porsche hoped for? Despite its numerous improvements and a price reduction from its predecessor, the 944 S2, results were mixed. Most enthusiasts who owned them loved them. But because of a stuttering start, the 968 was not the sales success Porsche hoped for. Stiff competition from the BMW E36 M3, the Nissan 300ZX Turbo, and the Mazda RX-7 squeezed that market segment. Production numbers did not meet forecasts, resulting in higher build cost per unit. Over its four-model-year lifespan, 10,231 units were built—6,304 coupes and 3,927 cabriolets. —DM



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