

# ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 4  
JULY-AUGUST 2011

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# the four-door Porsche

the driver's door is still the most important

by Joe Sase

**W**e've heard so many strong opinions about the Porsche Panamera, we figured we'd start with those. Is this the most beautiful car we've ever seen? No. Some love it, some dislike it; we're somewhat ambivalent. Is it the most beautiful car *you've* ever seen? Could be.

Is it the fastest car we've driven? No, but it's pretty fast (and you can get a Panamera up to 67 percent more powerful than our test vehicle). Is it the most spacious four-door? Again, you can get moreso, but you can far more often get a lot less so. This is just fine. Is it comfortable for four? Oh, yes.

Is it technologically advanced? Yes, indeed. Our Panamera didn't have every feature you can order, but pretty much everything is available if you want it. Is lots of tech what you want in a Porsche? This sets the stage for an overall opinion of the car. It's not a two-seat sports car, nor is it intended to be. On a 911 or Boxster, if your prime directive is to hit the back roads and get lost for awhile, you may not even want nav. And you may not want killer audio, preferring the song of the engine. Less can be more. But on this slick urban and open 'bahn four-door? Sure. Tech is useful, it adds to the ambience, and it's certainly expected by the buyer.

Is it pricey? Compared to what? You can spend more on a Panamera than our example. Or you can spend a lot less on any number of four-doors, but you already know what you'd be missing. If you're proud of your brand, you're proud of the price.

All in all, do you want four doors and want a Porsche? That's a short list. If you mean four doors and a Porsche, but not an SUV, then here you go. And thus is born a product line expansion that indeed fills a particular niche—in fact, a *big* niche.

## defining a niche

What can compare? Some put this in the category of four-door coupes, such as the Mercedes-Benz CLS or the new Audi A7. Those are (or will be) more common sights on the road, though, and may be somewhat diminished, as it were, by similarities to their more common siblings. The Porsche Panamera, in an already rarified lineup, may compare better within the range from Jaguar's sedans to the Aston Martin Rapide.

Base specifications for engine, power, drive and pricing for the Panamera lineup overall fall like this:

	ENGINE	HP	DRIVE	\$ BASE
Panamera	.....6cyl	.....300hp	.....rear	.....\$74,400
Panamera 4	.....6cyl	.....300hp	.....AWD	.....78,900
Panamera S	.....V8	.....400hp	.....rear	.....89,800
Panamera 4S	.....V8	.....400hp	.....AWD	.....94,700
Panamera Turbo	.....V8	.....500hp	.....AWD	.....135,300

Our Panamera 4 (base price: \$78,900) stickered at just \$86,690, with a pretty basic list of options. This puts it between a CLS and a CLS AMG (\$71,300 or \$94,900), but well above the A7 base (\$59,250). The base price of the Aston four-door is just north of \$200k. The lower-stratum Jaguar XF ranges from a base of \$52,500 to \$79,600 for the quickest XFR. The Jaguar XJ ranges from \$72,700 to \$113,200. Overall, pricing for the Panamera range is closest to the Jaguar XJ range. And the XJ also evokes somewhat of a four-door coupe basis to some, while being less common on the roads than the competing German brands.

You can see where this is heading. The often dueling goals of affordability and distinction create

a sweet spot for the right four-door car. If you're set on owning the Porsche badge, you have several options in the range of Mercedes' CLS lineup. (Sister company Audi has kept their offering in a different stratum.) If you want to skim the top end, you can max out your Panamera and still beat the Aston Martin Rapide price considerably (though you will be sharing the roads with more brethren than that). If, on the other hand, beating others' price means being *higher*, in your circles, the Panamera Turbo has bragging rights above the top Jaguar.

Aston Martin and Jaguar are also good comparatives because they're well known for sports cars and roadsters, which don't detract from the presence of sedans in their lineups, nor vice versa.

The comparisons can be enough to induce raving madness, but that's really just where the fun begins, when shopping in this range.

## first impressions

We first saw the Porsche Panamera when several were flown in from Germany to Monterey to be displayed on the lawn during the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance two years ago. There's no question this car was big news, and it made a big splash there. Did it blow us away and we had to have one? Not really. Was it interesting, compelling and leaving us wanting to give it a try and learn more? Sure. Our first impression was a complete walk-around on the lawn, but our second impression was a surprise: while parked in a sparse outlying lot at the San Jose airport, waiting for an arriving party's flight, something flashed by on our left, and we saw the Panamera in motion, three-quarter right rear view... and it looked great.

## the right stuff

The V8 range starts with the Panamera S, boasting a 400-hp 4.8-liter engine and rear-wheel drive, with a 5.2-second 0-to-60 time. The Panamera 4S has the same engine, plus active all-wheel drive with traction management. Zero-to-60 time is 4.8 seconds. Both the S and AWD 4S models with V8 achieve 16/24 mpg. At the top of the lineup is the Panamera Turbo, which twin-turbocharges the 4.8L V8 to 500 hp and a 0-to-60 time of just 4 seconds—and this is with all-wheel drive and EPA figures of 15/23 mpg. No Panamera is subject to a gas guzzler tax. An optional Sport Chrono package with Launch Control can take 0.2 seconds off the acceleration time on any of the V8s—that's right, the Turbo can hit 60 in just 3.8 seconds.

For 2011, Porsche offers a newly-developed V6 powering the base Panamera and also our test all-wheel-drive Panamera 4. Coupled to the same seven-speed PDK double-clutch gearbox as the V8s (stated as the first such in a Gran Turismo), and also adding an Auto Start Stop function (shutting the engine down at stops), the V6 achieves 18/27 mpg city/highway (or 18/26 in the all-wheel-drive Panamera 4). The V6 also knocks 66 pounds off the car. Lightweight construction includes aluminum axles, doors, hood, front fenders and rear deck lid. Total weight of the base Panamera is just 3880 pounds, with a mere 132 pounds added for the AWD Panamera 4. All-wheel-drive models have a rear-wheel bias, for higher launch performance and more exciting cornering. A 90° structure in the V6 gives a lower center of gravity, and engine placement, back a bit, gives front-to-rear balance and handling on a par with the V8 models.

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The V6 engine has the same basic technologies as the V8: direct fuel injection, infinitely variable intake camshaft with variable valve lift (VarioCam Plus), on-demand oil pump, thermal-managed water cooling, variable intake manifold and integrated dry sump lubrication with two-stage oil extraction. An aluminum crankcase and cylinder heads, magnesium valve timing box and an extralight magnesium oil flow housing (on the rear-drive Panamera) all add to weight savings and fuel efficiency. Camshaft adjusters are aluminum, and aluminum bolts connect all magnesium components as well as the engine and transmission. The complete V6 engine with its PDK transmission weighs just 404 pounds.

The V6 Panameras can be quickly distinguished by matte black window surrounds, compared to chrome on the V8 models, as well as by single exhaust tips instead of duals, and black brake calipers behind 18-inch five-spoke wheels.

Hybrids will join the Panamera lineup in 2012.

### hop in, look around

When it comes to black paint, our Panamera's Basalt Black Metallic is a beauty. As soon as you open the door and see the seats, steering wheel and five-gauge instrument binnacle, you know you're getting into a Porsche. Standard keyless start uses a switch in Porsche's trademark lefthand position. It's an interesting feeling to know you're getting in a sedan at the same time, and it turns out not to be incongruous at all. And that's the magic of the Panamera. Some details are familiar from the 911 and Boxster, and some are different, yet somehow they all combine to make you feel at home.

Relatively low-mounted sport seats promise the driver and front passenger the direct road feel of a two-seater, while rear seats are high enough to give everyone a view of the road. Seat heating and ventilation are available in front or on all seats. The ventilation system—with three intensity levels—pulls moisture away from the body rather than blowing air toward the occupant. The Panamera has a choice of lightweight, energy-efficient cli-

mate control systems. Two-zone automatic air is standard. Four-zone automatic air is optional, but still uses just one compressor, for weight and energy efficiency. It was only April when we had this car, but we noted that it takes a long time to cool off this big cabin. More careful use of the multiple zones may mitigate this.

A shift indicator in the tach gives a visual match to the PRND pattern or to the PDK, rather than just letters or numbers. A center console with seven-inch touchscreen, another 4.8-inch screen within the primary instruments, and button/switch controls on the center console and a roof console group driver functions while avoiding hierarchical screen submenus that could wrap you around a tree in some cars. The center console controls are neatly echoed for back seat occupants, both in style and in offering them control over their own destiny. We found the console controls attractive and straightforward, despite their plentitude, noting them as the best executed of many we experience. For example, we set out to tackle the dual-zone air, given the complex and varied ways this is set up in so many vehicles, quickly finding a "mono" button that syncs it just like that.

Our car didn't have a backup camera (though we wished it did), but it did have a proximity sensor, emitting a pleasant and useful triple tone as we backed to park in an angled spot.

Ambient illumination subtly highlights key areas in the passenger compartment, controllable within a wide range of brightness. LED lighting in an available Rear Interior Lights Package illuminates storage compartments and footwells.

Our audio was a 585-watt Bose Surround Sound system (\$1440) with 14 speakers plus a 200-watt subwoofer and nine amplified channels, balanced to each seat. You can opt for the \$5690 Burmester 16-speaker, 16-channel, 1,000-watt system, rounded off by a 300-watt subwoofer, all engineered specifically to the Panamera's chassis and interior—and weighing just 26.5 pounds, complete. Porsche calls it the world's fastest concert hall.

The interior is spacious, with ample back legroom. This is a Porsche in its soul, and a great solo driver. But it's common enough for us to drive a four-door sedan and have it all to ourselves, without a thought to the space in the back other than maybe for an occasional bag of office supplies. The Panamera, though, is just begging for three more full-size people to come along. It has the size, it has the room, it has the comfort, it has the heft.

The trunk, with electric opening standard, presents 15.7 cubic feet (15.2 in the Turbo) that can handle four full-size suitcases, upright, and there is an available ski bag (\$405). Folding down the rear seats lets two occupants travel with a whopping 44.6 cu.ft. (or 44.1 in the Turbo). Try that in a 911. (And please forget we just invited three to join us. What a great touring package for a twosome.)

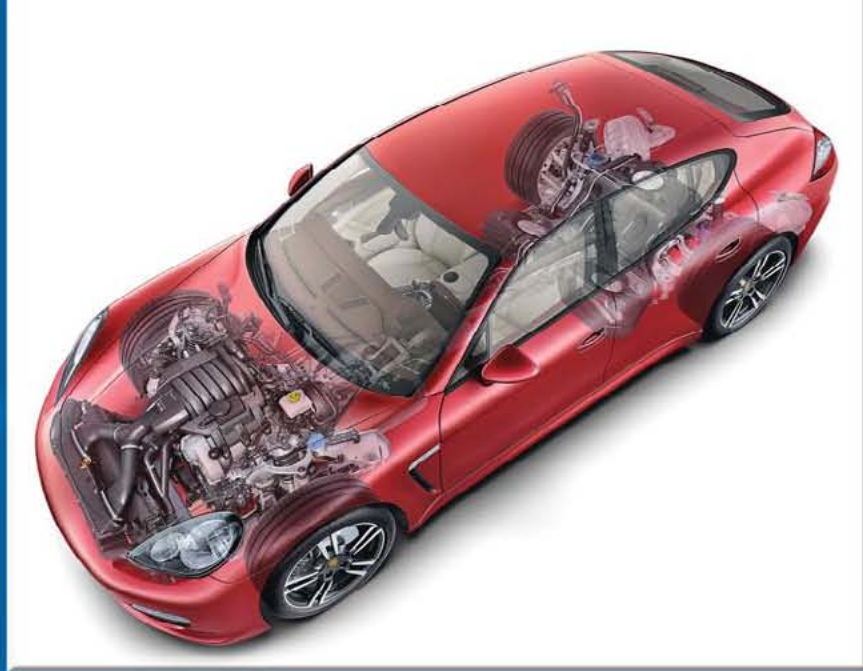
### pedal to the metal

The Panamera strikes a fine pose, even standing still. Its road-hugging height-to-width ratio, at 55.8 inches high and 76 inches wide, actually beats the 911 Carrera. A network of spoilers and air intakes enhance the stance, while providing prodigious engine and brake cooling.

In our first block or so of driving the suspension felt "like we hope there's a sport setting," feeling a bit firm but a bit plush, too, not quite firm enough. We were in luck. Porsche Active Suspension Management (PASM) is standard on all Panameras, infinitely adjusting damper forces to road conditions and the owner's driving style. All this, in turn, can be used in three ranges: Comfort, Sport or Sport Plus, using a button on the center console. A mode chosen when the car is off is retained upon restart (though we had issues with this).

Four models are equipped with steel springs, while the V8 Turbo has on-demand adaptive air suspension in each spring. Air suspension is an option on all models. To up the ante further, you can option the car with Dynamic Chassis Control and Torque

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Vectoring Plus, using braking force to control speed and yaw rate in cornering.

Our car didn't have those most advanced suspension options, but within a few blocks, we had noted that a right-angle surface street turn was like riding on rails. Its rear-emphasis all-wheel drive likely contributes, as does its variable-ratio rack and pinion steering, which despite being tied in to management electronics feels mechanically pure, a rarity anymore. For a performance car, it's a great daily driver: we noted this is one of the best cars we've ever taken a routine parking lot speed bump in, and its 39.3-foot turning circle feels very tight.

It was no big surprise to ourselves to prefer the Sport setting, and we figured we'd likely run in it all the time. In Comfort, we experienced a couple of shift lags and shifts too early in the power curve for our taste. Sport felt far better in terms of power curve and shift-mapping, and we were mostly happy with its treatment of suspension, steering and brakes, though we noticed some mild twitchiness in the steering in slower (40-50 mph surface street) sweeping corner turns.

### our distance drive

One of the perks of our week for the Panamera was that it coincided with the Copperstate 1000 road rally. On the last day of that event, we and other media were to drive north and join the drivers for lunch in the high country north of Payson. We reconnoitered at the Fort McDowell Casino on the Beeline Highway just outside Fountain Hills. (Our copilot, not an automotive writer, commented that this was her first time in a Porsche, but that, though a very nice car, it didn't really feel like what she expected in a Porsche.) For directions, we were given a segment of the Copperstate's route book and, since they were headed south from Flagstaff, simply told to follow it the other way.

That's where the fun began. We drove the distance up AZ 87—definitely one of our favorite highways and a perfect one for this car—through Payson and continuing north, then east when 260

split off. The distance in the route book indicated we had some 30-plus miles yet to go. As the Ponderosa forests began to thin out some, we were flagged down at a stretch of two-lane construction. The designated lunch hour was beginning, so we were getting restless. But in our rearview mirror, we could still see a red Mustang, a white Mopar and a silver Lexus SUV that were part of our press entourage. Okay. The flags lifted, and we resumed our drive. Time was getting tighter, so we squeezed out a bit more performance for awhile, easy to do in the Panamera. But as the terrain really opened up, and we felt we must be getting close to Holbrook, we pulled off to wait for the Mustang, Mopar and Lexus, to compare notes and assess the value of our map. Along came the red Mustang: oops, not our red Mustang. Ditto the white Mopar and the silver Lexus. What are the odds? There are no cell signals out there, so we resolved to turn around, ignore the mileage figure we had been given, and scrutinize the signage a lot more closely.

One thing we learned on that stretch is that the Panamera was such a fast and smooth 'bahn-burner, we had covered a lot more miles than we had even realized. The trip back was painfully far, as the lunch hour ticked away. We even did that one forbidden thing: stopped at one remote building for directions or at least good guesses. When we ultimately got to what just about had to be the correct turnoff, neither the name nor the number matched what was in the book. Apparently those are both different at the north end. Most everybody had finished lunch and headed south by the time we arrived, but we were able to mingle with those who remained. Our colleagues all had similar stories, each with their own distance wasted and version of giving up and turning around (and all including the futility of cellphones in that area).

Yes, we should have dug harder for an actual address of some sort for our forest destination. And yes, technology in the form of using the nav unit that was right under our noses would have been preferable in this instance to the get-lost-in-

a-sports-car method we hadn't intended but did achieve. So we emerged with a newfound respect for those technologies. The good news is that we did put on quite a few miles, covering an even wider, longer and more diverse stretch of highway than we otherwise would. The Panamera performed spectacularly on every mile.

### the market speaks

Some of our colleagues think this is the finest four-door sedan they've ever driven, and they've driven 'em all. How do we see it stack up? Bear in mind we're starting with a bar that has been set inherently high. In terms of style, in the greater realm of four-door cars, it's distinctive; in the realm of \$75-135k cars, it's more subjective. In terms of interior style, appointments and technologies, it's what you'd expect, though well executed. In terms of performance, in the greater realm, it does very well; among \$75k cars, it's okay (we'll have to try the Turbo to compare \$100k+ cars). In terms of handling, among \$75k cars or even in the greater realm, it's not jaw-dropping but more than okay. Our bottom line is that it's more than the sum of these parts. Because when all is said and done, it's a four-door Porsche GT cruiser, and it will stand out from the crowd. On the other hand, to the non-cognoscenti, it can be a bit of a sleeper in its four-door guise, though it can outperform the crowd. On our last day, we had a midsize SUV zoom up to tailgate us on the freeway, despite three other open lanes. What was he thinking? We nailed it and were gone, a nice last play in the Panamera.

The first Panamera was launched in the US in fall 2009. It sold out its original goal of 25,000 units for the first year of production by July 2010. In fact, the Panamera is now the number-one-selling vehicle in the whole Porsche lineup. The addition of the V6 models is only likely to increase demand for this desirable four-door Porsche. Hurry on down.

And we'll say it one more time: some of our colleagues think this is the finest four-door they've ever driven. ■

