

# Monkey Business

To some, the idea of modifying a Porsche great such as the Gen 1 997 GT3 is sacrilege, for other it's just the beginning to improving on perfection. Story: Richard Meaden Photography: Gus Gregory

It takes an individual with a particularly brassy neck to buy a very nice unmolested four-year old Gen 1 997 GT3 and promptly throw away the PASM suspension. Not, I hasten to add, to replace it with a more hardcore setup to suit dedicated track use, but to increase its compliance and bump-absorption qualities for enhanced point-to-point pace on real roads.

It's a bold and unconventional quest, but one that could clearly make for a fascinating car. But who's behind the project? Step forward Chris 'Monkey' Harris: motoring journalist (and former *GT Porsche* contributor), industry irritant, Porsche fanatic and, much to the detriment of his social skills, increasingly obsessive suspension nerd.

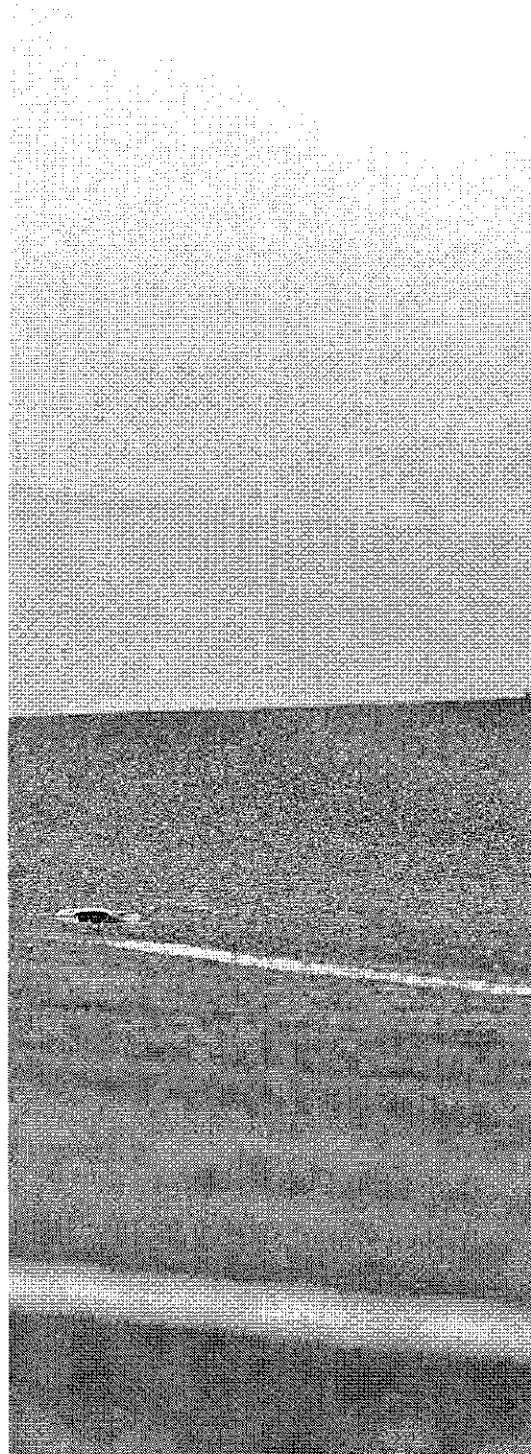
To understand Harris' motivation there are some things you need to know. First and foremost, he's a total 911 nut, with more road, race and paid-up ownership experience in a wider range of air and water-cooled 911s than any man not called Walter has any right to have. His green Tuthill-built ST homage, 'Kermit', remains perhaps the ultimate expression of his take on what makes the perfect 911. Kermit was a unique and extraordinary car, but the lessons learned working on its springs and dampers with WRC suspension guru Graham Gleeson were invaluable, sowing the seeds for this convention-challenging setup on a modern 911.

For those unfamiliar with Gleeson's work, he's

the man behind EXE-TC suspension, the Exeter-based company responsible for the suspension fitted to Sebastien Loeb's works Citroëns. As the Frenchman bagged no less than seven WRC Driver's Championship titles in record time, it's clear what Gleeson doesn't know about artful damping isn't worth knowing.

In the last few years, Harris and Gleeson have worked together on a race suspension package that has been fitted to a Gen 1 997 GT3 Cup car. Harris races with its co-owners Chris Cooper and Guy Spurr in the German VLN endurance series, held at the Nürburgring Nordschleife. The Team Parker racing-run car has enjoyed notable success, most recently taking an impressive 19th overall in the Nürburgring 24H in the face of fierce works-supported opposition.

According to Harris and his team-mates, a large part of this success is down to the uniquely compliant EXE-TC setup, which makes the car quick and confidence-inspiring, but far less physical and edgy to drive. In the ego-driven world of motorsport, it's common practice to boast about your car trying to kill you at every turn, and that only through God-like skill and vast testicular mass were you able to wrestle it to the finish. A racing car that's more comfortable, consistent and quick might be an inconvenient truth for your average gung-ho racer, but it's the gospel according to Harris and his VLN buddies.



Back to the Meoter grey GT3 road car. In addition to exploring a new direction for the damping, Harris decided he would also try and shave some weight from the car. As his was in non-Clubsport spec, that meant removing the heated comfort seats and dropping in a pair of carbon-back sports seats. He also fitted a full Akrapovic Evolution titanium exhaust system, the benefits of which have been well documented in previous editions of this magazine. Still, the figures are so impressive they more than bear repeating, those you need to pay most attention to being 10, 12, 17 and 8000.

The first pair of numbers are the gains in lb ft and bhp – both welcome and more than useful – while the third figure is the weight saving in kgs. Visualise it as a large bag of sand hanging off the rear bumper and you'll appreciate the benefits, both in power-to-weight and in minimising the ill-effects of all that weight swinging around like a pendulum. Sadly the last figure is the retail price in pounds sterling. That's a whole heap of cash and no mistake, but with a standard factory system retailing at £7k or thereabouts paying a £3k premium for the Akrapovic system's sensational quality, remarkable soundtrack and anorexic weight seems entirely reasonable when put through a Man Maths algorithm.

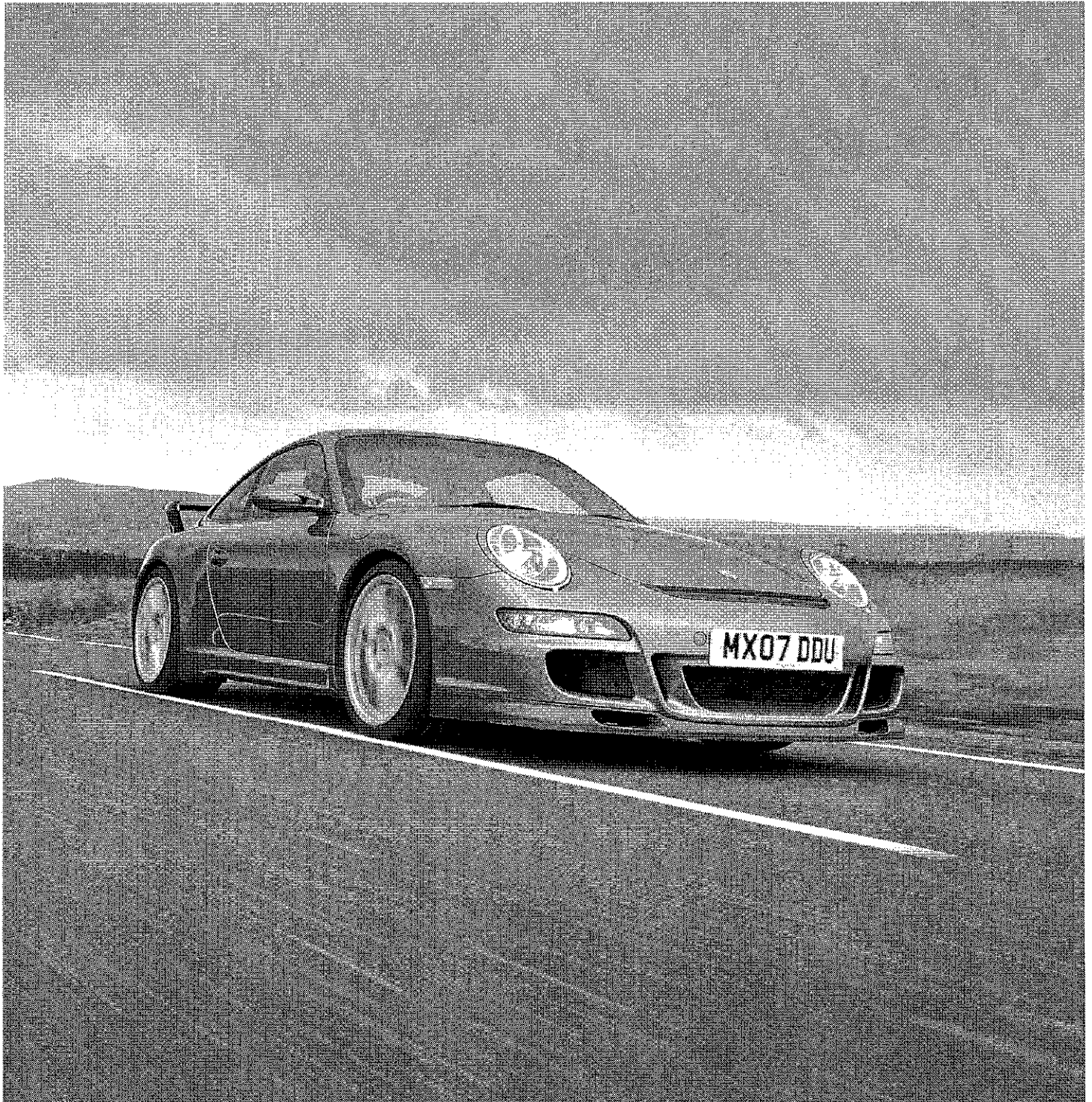
So we've established what Harris likes to drive, but where he drives is also a major influence on his preferred chassis setup. Living just a stone's

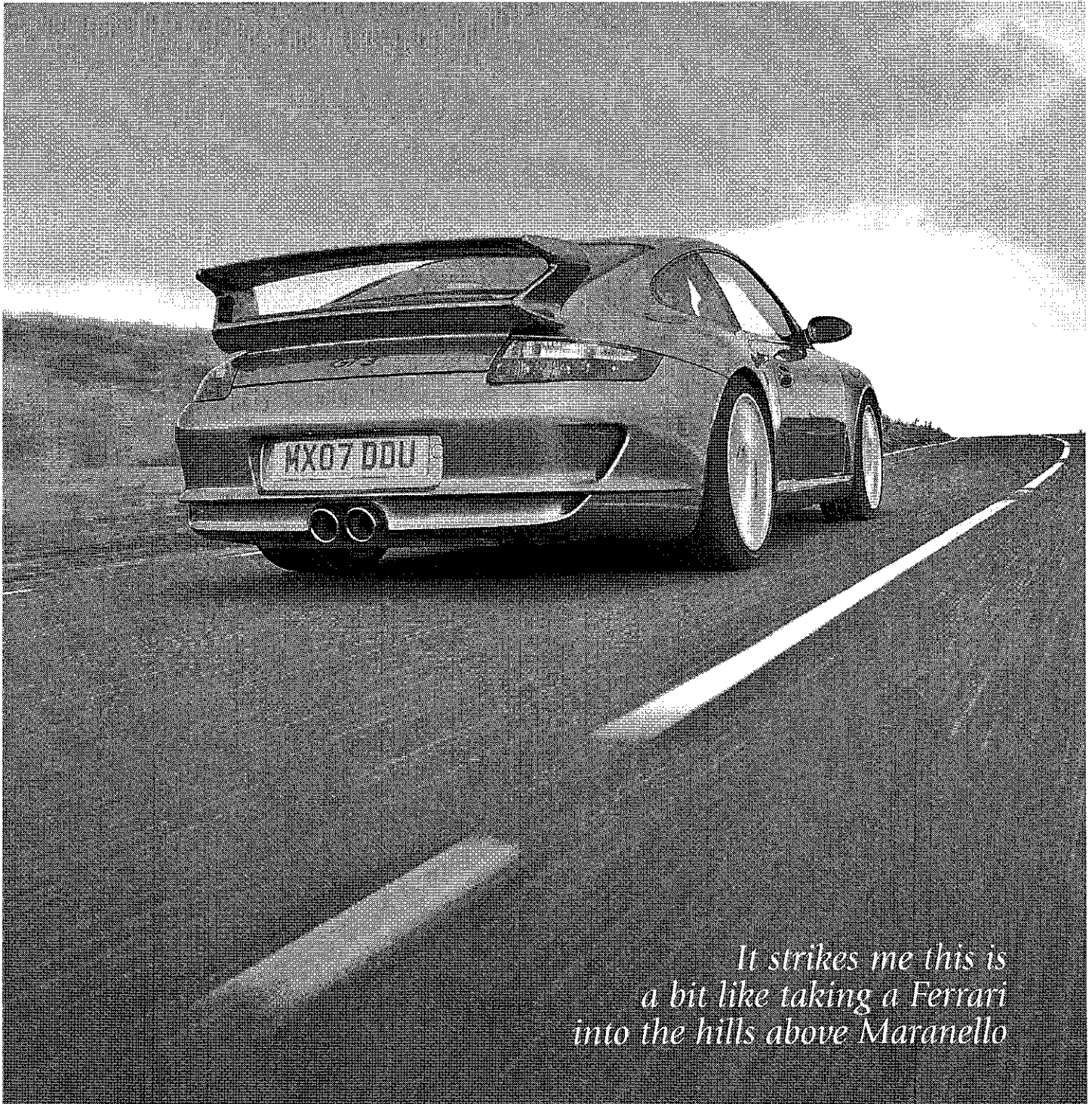


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throw from some of the best roads in South Wales he's fortunate to have a network of great, but extremely challenging A- and B-roads as his 'long way home' route. Some are smooth, but most are raggedy enough to undo all but the most supple setups and guarantee to expose the limitations in most multi-mode 'sport' suspension settings.

All of which got to him thinking that if he and Gleeson could take the basic suspension system from the GT3 Cup car and apply it to a road car, they might just be on to something special. That it would also be an enjoyable and educational process was also an incentive, but for Harris – who earns a crust from writing about the dynamic behaviour of manufacturer's cars – it also provided an opportunity for the poacher to turn gamekeeper: to create a car he thought was 'right', then see what other people thought. I am one of those people.

Having collected the car from Harris' house we make straight for Abergavenny, Crickhowell and Llangattock, home to some of his favourite tarmac. It strikes me this is a bit like taking a Ferrari into the hills above Maranello, but having driven these valley roads many times before in all manner of 911s, I know from experience that home advantage for the Harris GT3 is no bad thing for it brings with it the ability cope with the quickest, gnarliest tarmac you're ever likely to meet.

It's been a while since I've driven a 3.6-litre 997 GT3. No matter for the beauty of all GT model 911s is their straightforward simplicity so it doesn't take long to feel at-one with it. A stealthy shade of Meteor grey and an absence of scaffolding in the back make for a refreshingly discreet machine. Unexpectedly so, is the Akrapovic exhaust, which retains the switchable sport mode of the OE system to ensure neighbours and track day noise meters are kept happy with only a small penalty in terms of ultimate weight-saving versus the non-switchable megaphone system.

Before we leave Harris warns me that the solid uniball joints are "a bit noisy" at low speed compared to a regular car with rubber bushes. He's not wrong: as we rumble out of the village with the 3.6-litre Motorsport engine simmering away with pleasingly bassy intent there's an assortment of chatters, gentle donks and squeaks from the fully rose-jointed suspension as it flexes over the drain covers and patchy road repairs that pepper your average village street. There are some mild improvements to come in this area, but

losing the rubber bushing inevitably means you're going to hear the suspension going about its business at low speeds. There's no question it would be an instant deal-breaker for some people, but equally I'm sure others would enjoy the added sense of purpose. Personally I think it's a shame about the loss of refinement and noise isolation, but if the EXE-TC system delivers on Harris' promise then I suspect a few rattles will seem like a small price to pay.

Porsche's standard PASM dampers have always been great at smothering the rough and tumble of everyday driving conditions and the EXE-TC suspension has the same ability to round the edges off road imperfections. That said all things are relative. The GT3 puts a lot of rubber on the road so nothing can erase that sense of broad, low profile tyres shouldering their way across cambers and coarse surfaces. So, while the low speed ride is good by focussed 415bhp sports car standards it hasn't suddenly become a Jaguar XJ around town.

Of course, where compliance really counts – and where this GT3 really promises to deliver – is on roads that faithfully hug the terrain, ducking and diving, bucking and weaving across wide open countryside. At first you can't quite put your finger on what's different about this car, for ostensibly you know it remains a standard GT3. Strangely it's not the damping that immediately stands out, but the steering. It feels slightly lighter and freer, if that makes sense. There's no loss of connection and only the smallest reduction in steering effort, but there's a genuine sense that the weight, response and feedback is more consistent and linear whether you're nudging the car through a fast kink or peeling into a tight second gear hairpin. According to Harris, it's the result of less castor, the softer springs and far less friction in the entire suspension system.

It takes a few mean-looking drain gullies or a particularly savage crest or compression to begin to understand the depth of control the EXE-TC suspension offers. We've all done it: come steaming along a piece of road, spotted the offending crater or crest in the road, done what we can to wipe-off speed then simultaneously winced and braced for impact. All too often there's a skittish as some bit or other of protective underbelly scuffs the road, or a deep-rooted structural thump as you bruise the bumpstops. In Harris's grey machine you're left looking like a fool wearing remnants of the pre-emptive grimace mixed with a look of relief and bemusement as the car charges on regardless.



So you decide to test it, deliberately aiming at the kind of manholes or surface changes you'd normally skirt around. A few miles of this and you truly appreciate the brilliance of combining soft springs with super-controlled damping, for the relaxed rate of the spring doesn't impede the damper's ability to manage the absorption and dispersion of energy through the generous bump and rebound strokes. The result is uncannily serene progress across raggedy roads, much like an expert skier tackling a mogul field: knees working like the clappers while their head and torso remains poised and steady.

There's another trick up the Harris GT3's sleeve, and it's one that makes it a more useable, exploitable and enjoyable road car: it runs on Pilot Sports and not Pilot Sport Cups. That's not to say there's a marked reduction in mechanical grip, far from it, in fact, but there is a tangible sense of greater progression and a more seamless shift from grip to slip. Consequently, open corners become a playground where you can

really indulge in some quality hoonage, inducing yaw with less brutal provocation and revelling in the GT3's addictive ability to simultaneously slide and find terrific traction. Better still, when those threatening storm clouds decide to drench the roads, you've got a car that stays beneath you through deep standing water when Pilot Cups have you fully clenched and whimpering for your mother at 30mph.

There's no two ways about it, the Harris/EXE-TC GT3 suspension package is very special indeed. At £4950 (plus four hours fitting and alignment time) it's a significant investment, but there's perverse genius in turning the traditional suspension compromises of hardcore cars like the GT3 on their head. While there's no doubt PASM works well for most people, if you drive to extremes on road, track or both, you can and will find its limitations. Once you have experienced the sophistication of the EXE-TC setup you'll appreciate the gulf that lies between a good mass-produced, built-to-a-unit-price damper and

one that has WRC Championship-winning DNA.

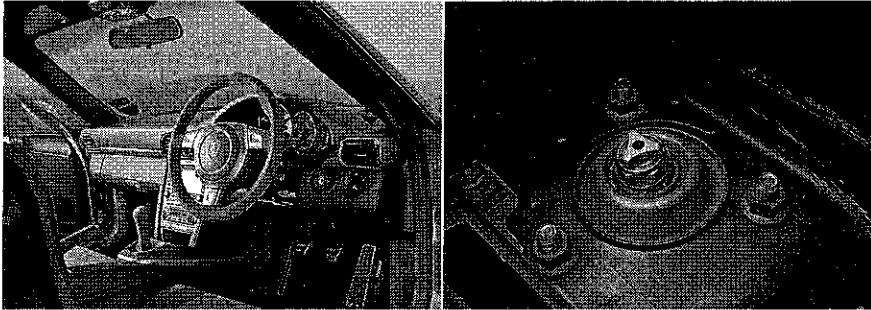
If I have one regret it's that I didn't have the opportunity to try the car in interim spec with the rubber bushes still fitted. As Harris freely admits the standard bushes are "probably best for most people on-road" although he does add the caveat that replacing the rubber for metal uniball bearings (£888 plus three hours fitting) brings "an absolute level of precision for purists". Where you think you sit on that scale and how big the difference in feel is between the standard bushing and solid bearings would ultimately decide whether you keep the OE levels of refinement or go the full monkey.

Either way, the commitment this car allows you to show on difficult roads would undoubtedly have a regular Gen 1 997 GT3 working very hard simply to stay on the ground. Moreover, thanks to the idiot-proof one-way adjusters (a more complex three-way adjustable kit is also available for £6495) you can quickly and easily tweak the damping to suit the more

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aggressive demands of a track day.

The last of the 3.6-litre GT3s was – perhaps unfairly – quickly overshadowed by the 3.8-litre model. Harris' thoughtful, subtle and devastatingly effective upgrades create a car for the true connoisseur and also serve as a timely reminder these Gen 1 997s remain formidable and fantastically desirable cars ◯

## CONTACT

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