Safari Park

Tuthill Porsche's latest 911 SC project is a Safari-inspired road car built in exactly the same fashion as its rally cars...

Story: John Glynn Photography: Gus Gregory

My first trip to Africa was in November 2015, when I spent two weeks following the East African Safari Classic Rally as the Tuthill Porsche team photographer. Keeping up with the arduous schedule and trying not to look like the new boy amongst rally mechanics, who had seen it all before, was a bit of a challenge. But once it had been proven that a blue-skinned Irishman could survive in the African bush, the trip was a life-changing experience.

Our team was running eleven Porsche 911 Safari cars in the Safari Classic Rally, part of a field of sixty historic rally cars charging across Kenya and Tanzania on open public roads, with rarely a break in the relentless race to cover more than 2,000 miles in nine days of rallying.

At regular intervals on our trip through the continent, the calm of rural Africa would be broken by the clarion call of a flat-out Porsche engine. No one who has heard the wail of a flat-six travelling at flat chat across the African bush can ever forget it: that soul-stirring call is unique and engaging. The Porsche 911 was the lure which led me to Africa and it did not disappoint after I had arrived.

In one lunchtime alone, I watched a 911 drive into service with a flattened front end and a badly crushed roof, due to a high-speed barrel roll. As mechanics rushed to attend to the car, behind it came another that had driven more than sixty kilometres without one front wheel and the attached front suspension, after ripping the entire assembly off in a crash. Less than an hour later, both cars left service and rejoined the rally.

Safari 911s are survivors. Their precise specification has been honed and refined across more than three decades of long-distance rallying by Tuthills, but durability has not come at the expense of performance. The cars are tough, but they are also kept light. Their powerful, reliable engines generate more than enough grunt to win this event, and the clever drivetrains and suspension optimise how the power is put to the ground.

In the hands of a capable driver, these cars can and will win the Safari, as proven in 2011 and 2015 by two former world rally champions: Björn Waldegård and Stig Blomqvist respectively. Today, I am honoured to drive in their tyre tracks, as I enjoy the latest Safari 911 build to come from the Tuthill Porsche workshops.

The last time I drove a Tuthill Porsche Safari 911 was February 2015. The brand new car had been built for the Sydney-to-London marathon rally, but the owner decided to cancel his entry and sell the car on. Around the same time, the Tuthill Porsche team was preparing to test its all-new 997 R-GT rally car in Northern Ireland, ahead of the Circuit of Ireland Rally later that year.

With the East African Safari Classic Rally also coming later in 2015, the team felt that it might be worth bringing the Sydney-to-London car along, just in case its presence amongst many leading Irish rally drivers inspired a last-minute Safari entry. All that was needed was someone to drive it the 1,000 miles there and back. It didn't take long to find a suitable candidate.

It was a cold, damp February morning when I opened my garage door on two 911s. One was my orange 1976 911 Carrera 3.0 and parked alongside was the Sydney-to-London Porsche, finished in gleaming Grand Prix White. The hour was well before 5am and darkness still covered the country. Temperatures hovered just above freezing and I had 220 miles to dispense with before a 9:45 ferry at Holyhead. There was no time to lose.

Starting the 911 on that frozen February morning was not the most neighbour friendly activity. Temperatures often drop close to freezing overnight on Safari and fall well below freezing on many other marathon events, but when you crank

Dash and roll cage are finished in body colour (the roll cage front section was later trimmed in leather), extra styling touches, including the ducktail engine cover and front and rear nudge bars, were also added

Starting a full-blown Safari car in a peaceful village is guaranteed to affect one's Christmas card prospects

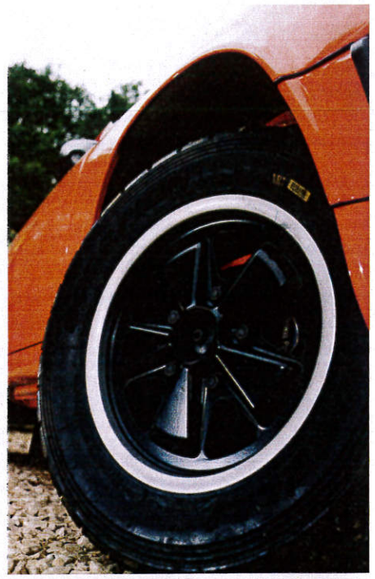
a barely silenced air-cooled 911 engine at 4am on a rally, you are doing it in a remote rally paddock, surrounded by fifty other cars all doing the same. Starting a full-blown Safari car in a peaceful Northamptonshire village, three hours before sunrise, is guaranteed to affect one's Christmas card prospects.

The trick to starting these cars is a couple of pumps on the throttle, then turn on the master switch and then flick the starter toggle, pumping the pedal as soon as it catches. Warm the engine up on a steady throttle for a short while until it idles, then pull it out of the garage, close the door, jump back in the car and, if it's 5am or earlier, get the heck out of there before next door's bedroom lights go on.

It took me a couple of tries to get the 911 to catch and then a couple more minutes for it to tick over happily on that freezing cold morning, by which time the whole village knew I was leaving. Pulling out of the driveway, the street lights rattled in the explosion of engine and gearbox noise. Great if you love a flat-six, not so great if you're more the 'cars should be seen and not heard' sort.

Out on the open road, we picked up some speed and the dials started to show some love. Tuthill Porsche Safari cars have an apparently standard dash layout in terms of where the dials are compared to a normal car, but, as Richard Tuthill points out in his column this month, there are hundreds of detail changes under the skin of a Tuthill-built 911 that are

Bodyshell had all the same prep as Tuthill's fully-fledged rally cars, it was the subject of hundreds of hours of fabrication work



The 911 is now equipped with a full rally-spec wiring harness, powering high-intensity driving lights in the door mirrors and a colour-coded light pod on the bonnet

Safari cars are built on an early 911 chassis with a 3.0-litre engine and gearbox

not entirely obvious until the car is put to the test properly.

Safari cars are built on an early 911 chassis with a 3.0-litre engine and gearbox. Said configuration is the optimum blend of power-to-weight permitted by the FIA's 911 rally homologation specifications, adherence to which is mandatory for entry on most historic rallies. This includes the East African Safari Classic, London to Cape Town and Morocco Historic rallies: three of the many marathon events frequented by these wicked 911s.

One of the requirements on any marathon rally is the use of two spare wheels. Tuthill cars achieve this by removing the standard fuel tank, and installing a custom-made tank with a crescent-shaped cut-out in the space across the bulkhead. Two heavily treaded gravel tyres on rally wheels slot in front of it.

Moving the fuel tank also helps safety in case of a collision. The engine oil tank is relocated for similar reasons, shifting from the standard position in the right rear corner to the centre of the engine bay firewall. Damage to the front end or to either rear corner will be less of a showstopper with the tanks safe and sound, and a decent Safari result is all about reaching the finish.

The fuel tank change is one of many alterations to the front luggage space. The fabrication team welds up the redundant fuel tank hole in the front suspension pan, adding a floor as part of their chassis strengthening. This floor becomes the bottom of the luggage compartment, supporting the spare wheels.

Either side of these wheels in each front corner lies an oil cooler, mounted in the original pre-'73 battery box locations. Protected by metal grids to the front and Tuthill's bespoke rally arch liners to the rear, the oil coolers do a great job in keeping the engine temperatures under control in baking hot sunshine.

Set above these oil coolers is a pair of long tubes, bringing air straight to the dashboard through a pair of face vents serving the driver. More vents come through the roof, with a carbon fibre roof vent serving air (and plenty of dust on event) into the cabin. These vents are essential on full-blown Safari cars, which have no opening windows: just a pair of sliders set into fixed Perspex windows which replace the wind-down glass in both doors.

The dash vents replace two of the five gauges in front of the driver. No longer present is the clock, and the combined fuel and oil level gauge. The clock in a rally car is rendered redundant by an accessory fitted to the passenger seat. Commonly known as a co-driver, these accessories come with not one, but two wristwatches. Co-drivers also famously time everything at all times of the day, including the drive to the hotel after the rally has ended. There is no need for an oil level gauge either, as the new oil tank has a clear tube running up the vertical face. This serves as an easy visual oil level indicator for the mechanics checking the car in the permitted service intervals.

To keep tabs on fuel, a new fuel gauge is fitted to the dashboard of all Tuthill cars, just above where the ashtray would be on a standard 911. Other new dash fittings include


Classic carbon fibre rally roof vent is painted in body colour

This Safari 911 is destined for a life on the road

a fusebox: part of a full replacement loom covering all of the additions to the electrical system. Not only does the new loom bring absolute reliability to rally 911 electrics, the replacement saves a huge amount of weight when compared to the original.

Sliding into this orange Safari car more than two years after my extended February road trip, it's clear just how much attention I paid to petrol consumption over my three days in the car way back then. One of the first things I notice in this orange machine is the lack of a central fuel gauge. Instead, the left face vent has been deleted and a circular ATL fuel gauge sits in its place.

Looking closer at the cockpit, other things are different. The windows wind down: no sliders. Instead of the flock covering favoured by rallyists, the dashboard is trimmed in leather. So too is most of the roll cage. The dash is nicely finished with a plain leather trim panel and the fusebox hidden from sight. All else is as I remember; adjustable pedal box, Motordrive seats, Momo steering wheel, three fire extinguishers - but this is clearly a different sort of Safari car.

Minor cabin comfort upgrades are the only differences between this 911 and a fully-fledged Safari car. It still has the same rally winning EXE-TC suspension, Tuthill brakes, that 3.0-litre rally engine on PMO carbs and a custom-built 915 transmission. Built for an American client fascinated by the challenge of marathon rallying, this orange Safari 911 is destined for a life on the roads, but it could easily be flown to Africa and stand every chance of winning the world's toughest historic motorsport event.

During the original Safari Rally era, no 911 ever won in Kenya. Waldegård won the original Safari four times in total, but never in a Porsche, although the factory tried repeatedly. In 2003, the original Safari was revived for cars from 1975 or earlier, with no turbo or four-wheel-drive cars allowed. The Safari Classic Rally was a move back to the golden days that held all the same challenges.

"Don't let the title fool you: this is not some classic cruise through the wilderness," Waldegård cautioned me in 2011. "Safari reborn is as tough as the original. In 1971, we were running 100 km/h average speeds on the roughest roads in Africa. Now, it is the same."

The Safari Classic Rally organisers are dedicated to preserving this legacy. The most recent event in 2015 covered more than 2,000 miles, spread across nine days of rallying (day five was a rest day, allowing the cars to be thoroughly inspected and repaired as required). Twenty-four competitive sections totalled more than 1,250 miles, with the longest single stage being almost 100 miles alone. "One day on Safari is longer than an entire historic season anywhere else," as one driver put it.

Run every two years, 2017 will be the eighth edition of the East African Safari Classic Rally. Originally conceived to recapture the excitement of an almost-forgotten adventure, this charismatic event has since evolved into a unique and remarkable rally experience. One that this road car could easily compete in ○


Suspension is the best money can buy and identical to Tuthill's Safari cars, as are the in-house Tuthill brake callipers with fully adjustable brake bias

This year's Safari Classic starts in Mombasa on November 23rd – follow all the latest news and learn more about the rally at www.safariclassic.com. Find out more about the Tuthill Safari 911s at www.tuthillporsche.com.