



# PREPARE FOR TAKEOFF

Transsyberia Rally buff Eric Brandenburg built a number of improbably tall-tyred 911s to emulate his class win on the 2007 event. We yump one in Belgium

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Left: Yumping Jack Flash! Bert Houtmann's Transsyberia Rally 911 replica, as built by Erik Brandenburg. Above: Ground clearance is amazing

**H**igh-rise takes on a new meaning, such is the potential of this 911 to get airborne. In my new-found role as flight attendant, I duck instinctively as it takes off, bracing myself for the stomach-wrenching thump as it touches down, gulping a breath before the next soaring yump. If ever a 911 resembles a big Monster Truck this is it!

I'm the co-pilot in Bert Houtmann's 3.2-engined SC, and he's demonstrating its incredible dexterity on the heathland terrain of Kalmthout Heide in northeast Belgium, close to the Dutch border. It's a wild ride, crashing over furrows and gulleys, Bert clearly delighting in the workout and showing no desire for a breather as we crunch back and forth along the sandy trails. As for my snapping colleague, I genuinely fear for his life as he hovers in the centre of the track, focussed on catching us mid-flight, dodging out of the way at the last minute as we hurtle by in a cloud of choking dust, leaving him half buried by the wayside.

The first thing that strikes you about this 911 is the comical enormity of the tyres, which, if they weren't so surprisingly effective, would be risible. As it is, they wouldn't disgrace an Allgaier tractor. They are Hankook Dynapro MT (for Mud Terrain), bearing the designation LT 215/85 R16s – the LT stands for Light Truck – and mounted on dainty 16in Fuchs rims. And then you notice just how high it is off the ground; actually, if cameraboy were to prostrate himself before it, he would actually escape a crushing, such is the depth of the underbody clearance. Accessing the car is akin to mounting a horse, or maybe clambering aboard a light aircraft would make a better analogy. Getting into a 911 that's jacked up like this makes life easy for

the arthritic oldie, but you have to remember the altitude when you get out of it, otherwise you take a tumble.

The car was built by Erik Brandenburg, one of three copies of his Transsyberia Rally 911 with which he led the supremely arduous 2007 event until deep river crossings in Mongolia dropped him down to 9th place. The Transsyberia was a two-year phenomenon, run in '07 and '08, from Moscow to Ulan Bator, which enticed Porsche to build no fewer than 28 highly specialised Cayennes to tackle the event. It took 14 days to cover the 4350 miles through Siberia, over the Ural mountains and into Mongolia. Terrain ranged from narrow, muddy Russian logging roads through thick forests, river crossings – up to 150 a day in Mongolia – swamps, deserts, snowy passes, potholes, hidden trenches,

time, its other speciality is ploughing, which Bert is more than happy to demonstrate, unhesitatingly veering across a harrowed field just for the hell of it, leaving wheel tracks a metre deep as the SC squats down and its back end digs in, accompanied by yet more clouds of grey earth flung skyward. How is this possible? There's a limited slip differential, and the gearbox has been adapted with shorter ratios to assist traction and power delivery in the rough stuff. Acceleration is slightly down because of the tall tyres, not that you'd know it as we career this way and that along the sandy farm and forest tracks more suited to equestrian endeavours than Transsyberia, Peking-Paris or Paris-Dakar – in fact any mammoth rally raid would fit the bill. Between shots, Bert explores the possibility of negotiating a deep ditch, and mercifully

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heat and dust. Predictably, the big Porsche 4x4s eventually dominated, literally dwarfing Brandenburg's lightweight 911 in the process. For now, we make do with Belgian byways, benign by comparison.

Though liveried in a monochrome version of Brandenburg's Martini-inspired Transsyberia livery, it's the wheels and tyres that are this rock-hopper's calling card. Clearly, to accommodate them required some deft work on the wheelarches, both inside and out, to provide space for suspension travel and steering lock.

As well as covering terrain with its wheels touching the ground for the least amount of

thinks better of it, though in the heat of battle I'm sure he or his progenitor wouldn't have thought twice about it. Cards on the table: back in the old days I worked on a Land Rover magazine, even owned one, so I can cope with a bit of off-roading. This, though, takes the concept a stage further; where the driver of a Solihull product takes a measured look at an ascent or descent before attempting it, Transsyberia rally guys just go for it, partly because speed is of the essence and, mainly, just for the hell of it. 'This car drives through anything,' asserts Bert. 'Rocks, sand dunes, river beds, it will even go over ditches! You can pretty much





Bert's off road 911 started life as a 1979 SC, but the engine has been replaced with a Carrera 3.2

go wherever you want to go.' Indeed, traversing the ploughed field it felt like we were actually in a boat in the water, albeit in a rather choppy sea – and in fact that's not a bad analogy as it looks just like a land-bound powerboat, bows high out of the water and stern churning plumes of spray.

Our whopper-wheels 911 started life as a 1979 SC, which Brandenburg gutted, seam-welded to such an extent that it doesn't require a rollcage to aid torsional rigidity, nor a front strut-brace, which I find mildly surprising, considering the hammering the body must receive yumping like that. The antics Bert performs today would also justify a rollover hoop, I'd have thought. You can behave like a hooligan for so long before the odds stack up too high. Nevertheless, its running gear seems remarkably stout, considering the relentless pounding. The suspension is appropriately beefed up, and consists of torsion bars and Bilstein B6 Sport rally-spec coil-over dampers, mounted upside down on the front to

address the extraordinary impact forces and side-loading that the car's subjected to. It's a Swedish system, explains Bert, the result of much testing and culminating in a spectacular jump of 20 metres. 'They drove at full speed through the fields and then made a jump of about 20 metres, all through clear air, and they used that in a

the two humps of the wings and the two orbs of the spotlamps in the centre, though the long view is the country lanes and heathland tracks seen through the upper middle part of the screen. Nothing agricultural about the controls, which, apart from the Momo dished steering wheel, are those of a standard SC. In the cabin you

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movie as publicity for their new suspension – you will see it in a few months.'

Once Bert's shown what the car is capable of, it's my turn to play René Metge – or Jacky Ickx. Even the driving position is high, and I juggle the levers to lower it a bit. My view through the windscreen consists of

are aware of the height off the ground in as far as your vantage point is similar to that of a Cayenne, rather than a 911. As far as driving position's concerned, I'm sitting relatively close to the wheel, the 915 transmission's shift lever falls easily to hand and the pedals are standard issue SC. I

The wheels are standard 16in Fuchs, but stretched over them are massive, balloon like 215/85 R16 Hankook Dynapro Mud Terrain tyres, designed to be used on light trucks







## BRANDENBURG CONCERTO

When he's not attending to gentlemen's private parts, Hamburg prostate surgeon Dr Eric Brandenburg, 49, is a passionate creator of extreme off-road vehicles. He's been doing it all his life, including fixing up a junk-yard Malaguti moped as a child and a 1970 Beetle, known as the Armadillo, which he still uses to blast around his neighbouring forest tracks. Two serious accidents along the way failed to deter him from full-tilt assaults on the wilderness. As well as the Transsyberia, he's a veteran of numerous rallies equally as arduous, including the 1990 Camel Trophy, Teambuctou and Dakar Classics, and Africa Eco. More recently he's built three off-road Porsches based on his Transsyberia experience – one khaki and two grey like this one.

Categorised as a sports-touring event, the Transsyberian Rally was a natural for Dr Brandenburg. It called for specially prepared, production-based vehicles, equipped with safety devices conforming to international FIA standards, and with sufficient fuel capacity to run 450km without refuelling. A lightweight 911 with appropriate modifications could be a giant killer, like the 953 in the '84 Paris-Dakar. The Transsyberia organisers gave out way-points along the route, along with GPS coordinates, but the precise itinerary was open to interpretation by individual crews. Where they existed at all, public roads were not closed off, except on special stages, though traffic was scarce in any case in the wilderness.

So what was the real inspiration for our High Riser? Seems Dr Brandenburg and co-driver Stefan Preuss were leading the 2007 Transsyberia handsomely in their 1975 Martini-liveried 911 till three-quarter's distance, bossing the factory's 20-strong Cayenne assault in the process, mainly due to its much lighter weight (1100kg) and greater agility. This was not in the script, as far as Porsche was concerned; they'd built 28 very special Cayennes (see 911&PW XYZ) in order to dominate the event. A classic 911 certainly wasn't meant to be heading the charge. So at this point, the story goes, Porsche CEO Wendelin Wiedeking had a quiet word with the organisers, and all of a sudden the Brandenburg 911 found itself gated in a different category to the big 4x4s (for historic vehicles built before 1987) and, thus handicapped, relegated to 9th overall – though unsurprisingly it did win the class. Officially, it was a succession of deep river crossings late in the rally that scuppered its chances of a higher placing. Undeterred, Dr Brandenburg conjured up an assortment of vehicles emulating his Transsyberian adventure wagons, the fruits of which we sample today. If further testimony is needed, Bert Houtmann had a go in one on his visit prior to acquiring Brandenburg's concerto: 'I drove through everything, from forest to heathland, and nothing stopped it! It's the most amazing car I have ever driven.' Which, given his collection of "original paint" Porsches, is really saying something.





got the sun roof open and there's a dense veil of dust behind me. It really is a boneshaker on rutted roads, and I'm giving the wheel its head to an extent here.

Helming the car feels a bit onerous on account of the vastness of the tyres relative

compliant, its agreeable behaviour at odds with the freakish image. It's a huge laugh plunging along the woodland tracks. It's amazing that it's only two-wheel drive, so all that traction comes from these big tyres. There's little headroom in the car so I

so, it's an awesome and very novel experience. The surprising thing is just how robust it is, and how you can apparently do anything to it without fear of damaging it. There's no way you could go cross-country like this in a normal 911.

On the other hand it's a paragon of stability too. 'When you're driving in it in the fields or in the woods you can put two hands in the air and it will go straight,' avers Bert. 'It's so finely tuned it will go through everything. Many 911s mimicking '72 RS racecars understeer or oversteer, but this is so balanced you don't get that.' He is right, in so far as it does go in a straight line on the road; there's no sense that it wants to veer onto the verge under its own steam, but it's nice to have that capability when a vehicle comes the other way. On the other hand, you could hardly drive it on a circuit as you would a trackday car; horses for

Above: Interior is still largely stock, but will be stripped out. Bodysheet has been seam-welded and is massively strong

“ It's a huge laugh plunging along the woodland tracks ”

to the unassisted steering, though on the lanes around our off-roading venue it drives almost normally. Scrambling on loose surfaces I chuck the car sideways, power on, opposite locking one way or another to keep it in the right direction, and it is totally

crouch down as much as possible, clinging on to the wheel because there's only an ordinary seatbelt and no harness to keep me in place. Like the absence of a cage, you'd want a full five-point harness if you were going to use the car in earnest. Even

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courses and all that.

The tall tyres make a swishing noise as we go along. An all-terrain vehicle it may present itself as, but as I goad the flat-six along field boundary roads there's obviously no shortage of poke. As Bert says, 'the 3.2 engine normally delivers 230bhp, but you don't need too much horsepower. It's low-gear power you need. It is not necessary to drive at 250kph, though I'm sure Eric (Brandenburg) would do!' Bert, who also owns a genuine Cayenne Transsyberia, stayed with Dr Brandenburg at his Hamburg home, and after being blasted around the neighbouring wildwoods in one of the Transsyberia-style 911s, he bought this one. 'The speed is not that high, but the gearbox, suspension and steering rack have all been adapted so it can perform like this. The bodywork looks normal but they modified the wheelarches inside and out for the suspension travel and the steering.' That goes for the vulnerable underside too: 'it's completely protected underneath the car,' Bert confirms,

'including the engine bay, and it's all clad with stainless steel plates.' No joke, the engine is shielded by thick plates running either side of the bay, drilled to avoid heat build up, and the plating beneath the nose of the car wouldn't disgrace a Challenger tank. There are no concessions to weight saving in that respect, and otherwise it's like a normal steel-hulled SC. 'The real rally cars Eric was driving in the desert are lightweight shells with plastic parts,' Bert tells us.

It's a nice thing to play with, though there is no real history about it. But what is interesting is what it consists of, an SC with a 3.2 engine, and set up to travel anywhere. Bert plans to go the whole country mile: 'I will pull out everything you don't need aboard a rally car, so there'll be no luxury at all, though this does have a sunroof because it had no air conditioning; I want to have fun in the desert and that doesn't include air conditioning.' In all probability the spec will evolve, to the extent that Bert will get it set up so he can tackle competitive events as well as

backwoods blinders. 'It is a fun car, though it's not yet ready to do the Paris-Dakar with,' he muses. 'But as it stands, you can have many adventures with it, and you can drive it daily.' As we parted company, Bert was going off on a rally in the Algarve, organised by a Belgian club whose previous forays include Morocco and Turkey. Bert wasn't about to be an active competitor, but his extra-terrestrial 911 would serve as the press car while his co-driver filmed the event out of the sunroof for five days, 280km a day. And of course he was relishing the prospect of leapfrogging the stages – you guessed it – by driving across fields.

On the road, it hasn't been possible to go quickly enough to see just how wayward it is with these huge tyres on it, though it didn't seem particularly out of the ordinary; rather like driving a Land Rover with a Porsche engine and chassis. Whilst it's not out of its comfort zone here, it really does come into its own on the rough. So, as Fast Show Lindsey would say, "let's off-road!" **PW**

Below: Dead side on is perhaps the best angle to appreciate this high-rise 911. Add some weaponry and it probably wouldn't look too out of place in the latest Mad Max movie!

