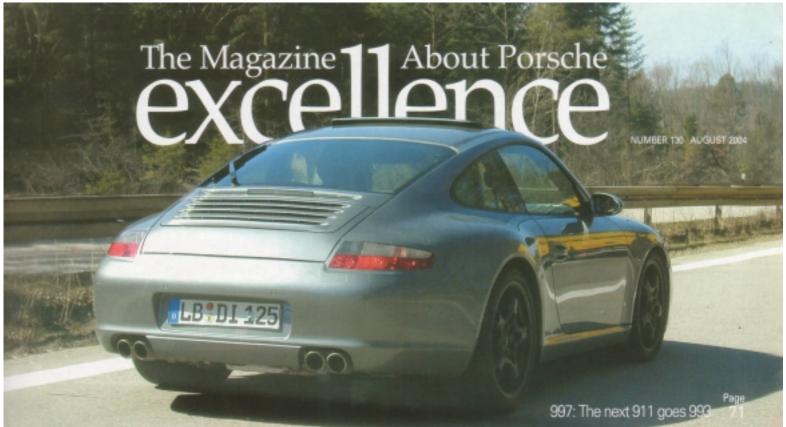
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SPIED!

The Next 911

THE 997 IS ALMOST HERE AND SHOWS SHADES OF 993 THROUGHOUT STORY BY PETE STOUT. PHOTOS BY JENS HADEL/HADEL.NET



it must have been all the more frustrating for this Porsche test driver. That's because he was driving a thinly disquised 997 prototype when a German car enthusiast - who happend to have a digital camera - got stuck in autobahn traffic with him.

The resulting images are perhaps the most revealing pictures of the 997 we've seen. And the most exiting, too, because the next 911 looks great. Take this prototype, for instane: Its hue appears to be the not-quite-Seal shade of gray now known as GT Silver. We've predicted a return to 993 design cues for some time, but these shots confirm the rumors. While And that's just what we can see.

probably be left to the 997 C4S, several shows that the "fried egg" section is 993 elements are present in the basic 997 purely taped disguise. The next 911 will shell: seperate front-end lighting, bulging revert to oval headlights as well as far fender flares, a rounded front hood, and more voluptuous fenders and bumperpull-type door handles.

Porsche is close enough to the 2005 911's introduction (slated for this sum- sion and those black-owed wheels. The mer or fall) that any remaining test mules wheels probably won't make production, as probably exist for the purpose of testing they look a lot like unfinished "sample" optional equipment. And this particular rims suppliers provide to Porsche for testmule has plenty of optional equipment ing. So these black alloys might be sizing including sunroof (standard in the U.S.), a rear- running on current "Carrera" wheels, so window wiper, headlight washers, spe- expect those (or something with similar cial wheels, and a lowered suspension. sizes) to be offered for the basic 997s. We

etting stuck in traffic is never fun, but a between-the-taillights reflective strip will Best shot of headlights we've seen mounted foglights.

> Most intriguing is the lowered suspenpark-distance control, a prototypes. Many 997 mules have been suspect the strange, black wheels seen





here have something to do with this mule's Top-Taped-over taillights appear to be ride height, which is more aggressive than more "wrap-around" than those of the any other 997 setup we've seen. Perhaps 996. Optional park-distance sensors this is final testing for the European sport account for dots along the bumper. suspension settings - or initial testing for the "Minus 30" (aka GT3) setup.

Also interesting are this car's exhaust pipes. Four well-finished, round tailpipes can be clearly seen, which are different than the also well-finished rectangular pipes of other 997 mules. Either this is an optional sport exhaust or this mule has something special under its engine lid. An optional eight-cylinder is the subject of much speculation, but we believe the flat flanks, the door handles and side mirrors six is here to stay - no matter what motor have been redesigned. The former mark is eventually offered. Our best source says a return to pull-type items inside of cavithe basic 997 will either use the current ties - though they probably won't be the 996's 315-hp 3,6-liter or possibly the X51package engine, which makes 345 hp.

Several magazines have predicted that the 997 will be quite a bit wider than the 996 due to its flares, but the 997's midsec- 997's interior. We've seen final-production tion has been narrowed to keep its over- pictures, however, and the new interior all width within an inch and a half or so of promises a huge step forward in terms of

Above, left-Engine lid gets new venting arrangement; it loses several grill slats and those openings now face rearward.

Above, right-Closer view of the front end. Wheels unlikely to make it to production.

the standard 996's. Looking down the trigger-type gems of the air-cooled era while the mirrors are now held up by two supports in semi-Carrera GT fashion.

Not seen here, unfortunately, is the

style. It pairs air-cooled dash architecture with Cayenne-ish (interior) design clarity. The overlapping five-ring gauges are here to stay, but the lower dash area on either side of the steering column and near the glovebox is simple and reminds us of the "shelfy" design found in 1965-98 911s. The center console takes a commanding role, while the steering wheel is both more modern and substantial. An early report from an outsider who sat in a pre-production 997 says that improved interior quality will also answer previous critism.

Any potential snags in visual terms? The new hood forces an awkward body seam between the headlight, fender, and hood. Also, other 997 mules indicate that high ride height is no friend to the new flares, a problem that plaqued the 993,as well. That said, the 1995-98 993 earned a loyal following among Porsche enthusiasts - as well as many of Zuffenhausen's best and brightest. Combining 993 character with 996 driving brilliance may be a very, very good move. We'll soon find out...