Porsche 914

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by Tim Suddard

How could something so right have gone so wrong? That's the question regarding the infamous Porsche 914. Born out of confusion, it had some major design flaws that were later corrected, but was plagued by bad press throughout its brief and turbulent life. It's a wonder that roughly 120,000 were sold.

A brief review of the history of this Porsche model, and an hour behind the wheel of one, however, will remove all doubts as to why the 914 has risen from ignominy to become a favorite among vintage motorsports enthusiasts.

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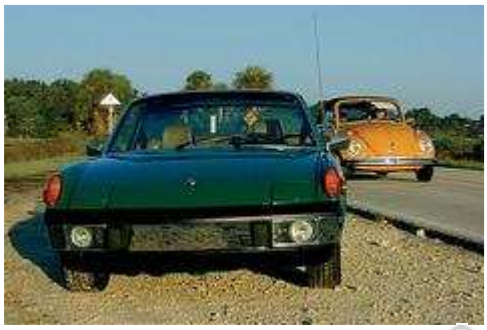
Born Out of Confusion



In the late 1960s, Porsche wanted to deepen its line with a low-cost, entry-level sports car, but didn't have the capital and production capabilities to build it. Volkswagen needed to boost its image with something sportier than the Beetle, but didn't have the sports car know-how and credibility to design it.

Heinz Nordhoff, then head of VW, and Ferry Porsche structured a deal in which Porsche would design and develop a new sports car for VW that would use the VW Type 4 engine The car was to be marketed as a Volkswagen, though the two men agreed verbally that Porsche could also market the car with an engine of their own.

What seemed like a good partnership went seriously awry when Heinz Nordhoff, then hea VW and orchestrator of the VW/Porsche 914 partnership, died in 1968, just as the project was coming to fruition.

Nordhoff's successor at VW, Kurt Lotz, found that the deal between Nordhoff and Porsch was largely done by handshake, and Lotz had no intention of letting Porsche market the c under their own name as the deal had called for.

After considerable argument, an agreement was finally reached that may be one of the screwiest ever made between two automobile manufacturers: In Europe, the car would be marketed by the combined marketing organization as the VW-Porsche 914; in the U.S., Porsche would give up the rights to market the cars on their own, and the new sports cars would be marketed through Volkswagen's newly created Porsche+Audi division as the Porsche 914.

The 914 was designed by Gugelot Design GmbH. The tubs were to be built by Karmann (then builders of the soon-to-be-phased-out Karmann Ghia). Karmann would assemble fo cylinder 914-4s, and would also send 914 bodies to Zuffenhausen for Porsche to turn into six-cylinder 914-6.

Through some complicated cost accounting, Lotz managed to charge Porsche so much fo the 914-6 bodies that the car ended up costing buyers just a few hundred dollars less tha the 911. This move caused the early demise of the 914-6. Porsche had the last laugh sho after, though, as Mr. Lotz was asked by his management board to find the door in the sea red ink he had created for the company.

Plagued by Bad Press

In January of 1970, the 914 became available as the Porsche 914 in the U.S.(although th was only some small script on the engine lid to indicate that it was a Porsche) and as the VW/Porsche 914 in Europe.

The car as introduced was a good product, but it had a few real problems. Perhaps becau of its mixed parentage, the automotive press lambasted it, greeting the debutante with mediocre marks and some really terrible reviews.

On the plus side, the 914 was a true engineering marvel. The tub, despite being of targa-t design, had the rigidity of a 911 coupe. The car handled incredibly well. Driver comfort, by sports car terms, was wonderful. The two-trunk setup offered a lot of room for luggage, ar the targa panel stored neatly in one of the trunks.

The torsion-bar front suspension was lifted straight from the 911, but front hubs were VW units. Rear suspension was an all-new independent, trailing arm design featuring big 11.0 inch rear discs instead of the VW 411 drums, and the four-wheel-disc brakes worked pret well. Few other cars in this price range offered all-independent suspension, fuel injection, five-speed transmission—and the Porsche name. At the $3500 introductory price, the 914 appeared to be quite a bargain indeed.

Unfortunately, the 1.7-liter Volkswagen flat-four was just too anemic. A Porsche with VW power and zero-to-60 times in the 13-second range found little favor among road testers o the day.

What made the car even more annoying, and contributed to the poor zero-to-60 times, wa the terrible shift linkage on the supposedly glorious five-speed that was linked to the powe challenged engine. Reviewers castigated this setup, saying it ruined an otherwise good c

In contrast, the 914-6, with its 2.0-liter, six-cylinder Porsche engine, was thought to be a wonderful car, even though the engine was the only difference. The only complaint with th six was the price, an issue that killed the car after only two years of production.

Correcting the Limitations

Despite some initial shortcomings, the 914-4 managed to soldier on. In 1972, better ventilation and an adjustable passenger's seat were introduced. The press began to warr to the 914, and sales improved. The big news came for 1973, as a new 2.0-liter engine w introduced along with a new transmission. This finally solved the shifting problems, and reviewers were ecstatic, claiming that this was the 914 that Porsche should have started Zero-to-60 times were now in the 10-second range. Front rubber bumper guards were ad but comfort was improved, performance was improved and sales responded positively.

The 914's first engine had been a 1.7-liter Volkswagen engine from the 411. The 2.0 was also a Volkswagen engine, but with some major differences. First and foremost, it was redesigned by the Porsche engineers, who took the VW-designed 1.7 and said, "Okay, no let's make a Porsche engine out of it."

The bore was enlarged from 90 to 94mm, and the stroke was also increased, from 66 to 71mm. The crank was modified, and new steel connecting rods were made. The head wa modified by increasing inlet and exhaust valves by 3mm, while the inlet and exhaust ports

were enlarged. The 2.0-liter was good for 95 horsepower DIN in U.S. trim and 100 horsepower in European trim.

Standard with the 2.0-liter package (and optional with the 1.7) was an appearance group included beautiful 15x5.5-inch Fuchs light alloy wheels, a leather-covered shift knob, a ha storage bin between the seats, anti-roll bars and a console that featured a clock, voltmete and an oil temperature gauge.

So by 1973, the 914 was finally worth owning. Then in 1974, driven by global inflation and floating exchange rates, the price rose, incredibly, to more than $5000. Other news for 19 was the introduction of a new base engine, the 1.8-liter fitted with Bosch L-Jetronic fuel injection. The car also got rear rubber bumper guards.

The biggest change in 1975 was even bigger bumpers that were heavy—49 pounds each and, in most people's eyes, ugly. (Fortunately, it isn't hard to convert one of these 914s b to the earlier bumpers.) 1976 was the last year for the 914. By then, the 1.8-liter engine h been dropped in favor of the 2.0-liter, which was down to just 88 horsepower thanks to all U.S.-mandated emissions gear. Production was unceremoniously halted to make way for water-cooled 924, which also began its life amid much controversy. But that's a different story.

In all, 115,596 four-cylinder 914s had been built. In addition, just over 3000 copies of the 6 were manufactured, and about 20 914-6 GT cars were built, for a grand total of 118,976 units. That's not a lot for most companies, but for a company the size of Porsche, it was a successful production run, if not the most profitable venture the company had ever entered into.

Driving Impressions

A Porsche 914 drives like no other car. Upon getting inside the roomy cockpit—there's enough room for a six footer—passengers are greeted by a very solid German feel. You j don't get this feel with an American or Japanese car. The 914 is huge inside with plenty o room and lots of shoulder room. The driving position is low, yet comfortable, and the shift lever falls easily to hand.

But that shift lever is what gets you into trouble. Like the Porsche 911, the 914's five-spee transaxle features a dogleg first gear. What operates fairly well in a 911 works less well w the transaxle is reversed, as it is in the 914. You can get a 914 to shift only so well, and it

takes a gentle, yet deft, touch to quickly go through the gears. If you can accept the fact t
a 914 will never shift like a Miata, you can move on to the rest of the driving experience.

The non-power, rack-and-pinion steering is nicely weighted with little or no vibration. The
pedals reach from the floor, like the Porsche 911 and VW Beetle, but are placed well and
right. The view from the cockpit is great with few blind spots. The large VDO gauges are
Porsche-esque and easy to read, if not obscured by a too-small aftermarket steering whe

Once underway, the 914 feels like only a mid-engined or rear-engined car can. You hear
throbbing, half-Porsche, half-VW engine, but the noise is behind the cockpit, so it is not
intrusive. There is no sensation of heat in the cockpit unlike old front-engined sports cars.

The 914, especially in slightly modified 2.0-liter form, drives comfortably at 80 and even 9
miles an hour. The fuel-injected, low-revving four coupled with a fifth gear make for truly
effortless high-speed cruising that is unmatched by nearly any 30-year-old car, no matter
what the original price.

Our mildly modified, Koni-equipped 1973 914 (shown here) has a comfortable, yet firm, ri
even over railroad tracks. In stock configuration, a 914 tends to transition between unders
and oversteer mid-corner, but adding a Weltmeister 22mm front bar eliminates that proble

In typical Porsche tradition, the 914 truly is more fun to drive than the sum of its Volkswag
parts would suggest. Our modified car is quick—zero to 60 in 8.7 seconds—and starts, st
steers and handles well in track and highway conditions. In terms of drivability, if equippe
with air conditioning and a bit better shift linkage, a well-setup 914 could pass for a mode
Miata or MR2 Spyder.

Buying Tips

As with nearly all classic sports cars, the most important thing a 914 buyer can do is find
rust-free car. The second most important thing is to find a rust-free car, and third most
important is to find a rust-free car. Look for rust under the rocker panels (the covers come
off), around the jacking points (pull out the black plastic covers), in the cowl, the trunk floo
the back of the floor pan, the battery tray (look for signs of replacement here: was it done
well?), the front hood-seal channel and the firewall.

Next, check all seams for rust. Then get the car on a lift and look carefully for signs of damage underneath and in the front. Don't buy a car that's been smacked in the front; it's almost impossible to get one of these to go down the road straight again.

Once you've checked these points, be alert to the "previous owner" syndrome. As with ma other affordable sports cars, the second or third owner may very well have been a young enthusiast with great confidence in their driving ability and a very limited budget for maintenance. Look out for cars that have been driven hard and put up wet or, worse, bee the victim of an accident.

The early 914s also had a few design flaws, which were corrected on later models. The m notable (and unfortunate) was a tendency to burst into flames, due to the fact that Porsch located the battery above the fuel lines. Any failure of the battery case (say, rust, which is too common in this area) could drop the battery out of its case and onto the fuel lines, wh would then rupture. Sometimes just the acid dripping out of the battery did the trick.

To avoid this problem, many owners replaced their cars' fragile fuel lines with braided stainless lines. In 1975, the factory started to relocate the fuel pump and lines, a move co by many owners of earlier vehicles. Moving the fuel pump to a cooler location away from engine also cuts down on the potential for vapor lock.

The cost of a 2.0-liter engine rebuild is at least $2000, so prospective buyers should budg this amount if serious competition is in the plans, or if compression and driving tests show weaknesses in this area. There are very few aftermarket wheels available for 914s, so a s of Fuchs alloys or aftermarket wheels can really sweeten a deal.

After that, the rest is easy. A concours 914 is almost an oxymoron, since the car's value is enough to justify the significant expenditures required. Instead, the greatest good for this is as an inexpensive street, track or autocross performer.

You don't even need to worry about what year to buy, since it's relatively simple to mix ar match engines, transmissions and bumpers to get the version you want. It's even reasona simple to swap a good six-cylinder Porsche engine into a clean 914-4 body. However, if you're looking for power, there are several ways to upgrade the performance of a four-cylinder engine that are cheaper and easier.

Market values don't differ much by year, either. With a price range of less than $1000 acr the years, the condition of the individual car is much more important than its year of manufacture, even if it's still faithful to the specs of that year.

A 1973 2.0-liter with all the goodies would be the hot setup, but there aren't many left. Th are more expensive, but $8000 to $12000 is still not a lot to pay for a cherry original or we restored car of the 914's caliber. A 911 in similar condition would cost twice that.

The 914 is a sturdy little car. Parts availability is good, and prices, while not at VW levels, aren't in quite the lofty range of Porsche 911 pieces, either. Restoration and repair are straightforward, although the mid-engined design doesn't make engine access a major pl If your car is straight and rust-free, you should have little difficulty getting it sorted into a competitive street or track car.

Competition History

While the 914 played a short and not particularly glorious part in Porsche's racing history, model did make its mark in the American racing scene. Some 30 years after the car's release, it can still be found at vintage, autocross and club racing events.

In 1970, Joe Hoppen, VW's U.S. motorsports manager was given the task of developing a racing reputation for the 914. His strategy was to run the higher-priced 914-6 as dealer/factory-sponsored cars, while encouraging privateers to campaign the less-expensive 914-4.

Datsun and Triumph lobbied hard to keep the 914 out of their classes, but Hoppen had ar effective bargaining chip to play: If the SCCA would let the 914-6 run in C Production, and 914-4 run in E Production, Hoppen would concentrate his efforts there instead of spendin another year dominating the under-two-liter Trans-Am category with his much-hated 911s The SCCA agreed.

Hoppen's plans for the 914-6 called for three factory teams. Each factory-sponsored team would get $50,000 and cars to run for the season. In the East, he selected Peter Gregg o Brumos, while the Midwest effort would be headed by Art Bunker, Bob Hindson and Kendall Noah.

In the West, Hoppen gave the nod to VW-Pacific under Richie Ginther. However, VW-Pac demanded triple the original cash figure, since they were to do all the development. The

negotiations caused such a delay that Ginther went his own way rather than waiting for a decision.

Results for the season were mixed. In the Midwest, Bunker posted six SCCA national win co-driver Noah got three more wins, and the CP 914-6 Midwest team was on their way to season-ending Runoffs. In the East, things weren't going as well. Gregg and co-driver Pe Harrison took a number of seconds and thirds, but only two more wins for the 914-6.

Running for Ginther in the West, Alan Johnson took four firsts in the VW-Pacific prototype then scored three more wins after Ginther's team went out on its own. Ginther also took h new guy, Elliott Forbes-Robinson, along for the ride to Road Atlanta.

However, the Porsche teams might just as well have skipped the Runoffs. The Datsun 24 dominated the SCCA's year-end showdown at Road Atlanta.

For 1971, Hoppen took a different tack, introducing the 914-6 GT, intending to run it in CP a variant of the 914-6 roadster. However, this was too much for Leyland and Datsun, and they had the 914-6 GT ruled an all-new model with too few built to satisfy the SCCA Production class requirements. In fact, only 11 were built at that time.

The SCCA's decision was understandable, but it had some unintended and far-reaching consequences. Hoppen took the 914-6 GT to the fledgling IMSA organization, which was willing to accept it into competition. Thus began a long-standing connection between IMS and Porsche, one that would blossom into one of the best relationships in motor racing.

Brumos and their new driver, Hurley Haywood, took the 914-6 GT to IMSA and cleaned u winning six of seven IMSA GTU events and the 1971 series championship. (The winning which was recently restored by Brumos, can now be seen at East Coast vintage events.)

Hoppen didn't forget the SCCA, though, and in 1971 Hindson repeated as Midwestern Division champion. With the four-cylinder cars racing in regional SCCA events, Hoppen s an opportunity to win E Production at Atlanta in 1971, so he got Ginther and Elliott Forbes Robinson to campaign the four-cylinder cars .

At the Runoffs, Hindson lost to Central Division 914-6 driver George Parish, while anothe young unknown, Al Holbert, finished third. Ginther got his 914-4s to Atlanta and won—bu was disqualified because their rain tires were mounted on wheels that were just slightly too wide.

Taken at face value, the racing history of the 914 may not seem that amazing, but considering its impact on the professional racing of the day and the number of important drivers who got their start in 914s, this car deserves a lot more racing credit than it usually gets.

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