



MOTORSPORTS

“Geistdörfer, fasten your seat belt!”

Much too much fine fall weather made life difficult for Walter Röhrl and his 30-year-old 911 at the 20th Targa Tasmania. Only when it rained buckets at last did the sun really shine for the former world champion.

By Wilfried Müller Photos by Porsche Cars Australia



Tasmanian roller coaster: The last day covered the route from the western coast across the island to the finish in Hobart; here the 911 SC is in the labyrinth of the Queenstown special stage

The stage for the drama is set. For six days, ten long hours each, Walter Röhrl and Christian Geistdörfer, the Rally World Champion duo of 1980 and 1982, has driven a Cayenne through 39 special stages. Geistdörfer “compressed” 500 kilometers (310 miles) of Tasmanian back roads on 400 pages of his route book (aka “The Prayer Book”): concise notes about any curves, bumps, and other hazards. “Well, we’re not on vacation here,” says Röhrl. “We’ve got to get things done.” Codriver Geistdörfer adds, “Once Walter puts on that helmet, it’s all over with the friendly chitchat.” But it turns out to be fun anyway. In the spirit of rally enthusiasts: “Geistdörfer, fasten your seat belt!”

Targa Tasmania is the great adventure for historic automobiles, and always a very big challenge for the delegation from the Porsche Museum. The Röhrl/Geistdörfer duo—one of them now a Porsche rep, the other a successful entrepreneur in the auto business—is rolling up to the start in a very special Porsche. It is the very same 911 SC in which they had fought a breathtaking battle in the 1981 San Remo Rally against the then highly favored Audi Quattro. Within easy view of the sensational victory, the duo learned from a loud bang on the left rear that their trip was over—the driveshaft had broken!

The Museum on Wheels in Tasmania: Museum director Klaus Bischof, Christian Geistdörfer, Walter Röhrl, and the technicians Hans Jürgen Eckert, Peter Bowen, and Traugott “Bertie” Brecht (top photo, left to right). The wheeled jewels (from second photo down): Bischof with a courageous guest in the 908/2; Bernd Ostmann/Peter Thul in the 356 GS GT; and Bischof in the 962 C, which Porsche displayed at a festival before the race.

For more information: www.targatasmania.com.au



Daring duo: Christian Geistdörfer and Walter Röhrl

In the years that followed, racing engineer Roland Kussmaul subjected the car to the most grueling tests in various European quarries as a trial for the Paris-Dakar event. The restoration began close to Christmas of 2008 and was essentially completed by March of 2011. Only the right cylinder bank and the tight transmission still needed some refinishing touches. With 1,100 kilograms (2,425 pounds) and 250 hp, the 911 is now in great shape for the twentieth running of this Targa. Just like the other four-wheeled jewels—the Type 908/2, the 718 RS 60, and the 356 GS GT: all the pride of Klaus Bischof, director of the Porsche Museum on Wheels.

The first leg: with firm determination and his legendary feel for the wheel, Röhrl drives at the limit of the doable. But still he falls back a second or two per kilo-





meter behind the leading car. The diagnosis: against retrofitted state-of-the-art racing technology under classic bodies—and against modern cars with much more powerful engines—even a brilliant race driver does not have much of a chance when using technology that is 30 years old. But that does not allay Röhl's injured pride: he knew before the start that this would be hard. But by a second or two per kilometer? That is hard to bear for a guy like him. He grumbles dryly, "What I need is rain!"

Day two: even at breakfast, the group's mood is subdued. Suddenly, around noon during the next leg, a loud bang in the 911! From the left rear—just like 30 years ago. And exactly like then, the driveshaft is broken! Röhl gets out of the car and stares into the Tasmanian jungle, which covers the landscape like a layer of dense, green cotton. "I really don't need this anymore, at 64," he says. "I'm flying home." Geistdörfer doesn't feel like that—and keeps silent. He's been Röhl's friend since 1975 and he knows: Just let Walter sleep on it! By the end of the day, the time-check lists the 911 SC with Röhl/Geistdörfer in 95th place out of 103 starters in the Classic category.

Third day: there is tense anticipation in the breakfast room. Will Röhl drive again? But then a bell chimes as the elevator stops and opens, and Walter

Röhl emerges. In his racing suit! Geistdörfer has already been at the table for a while—in his racing suit. They're ready to roll. Röhl proceeds to make good times, second or third places, in some special stages. But the champ is not happy. "I'd really like to show the fans that I can still cut it. But what can you do against seven-liter engines and special racing suspensions? I need some damn rain. Tasmania is known for its storms, buckets of water from the sky. But the weather around here is like in those wine commercials." However, the weather forecast that evening at last is to his liking: a low is approaching from the west across the Indian Ocean. Röhl's eyes light up. Geistdörfer leans back, relieved.

Fourth day, afternoon: now the wind is driving the clouds across the sere high plateau in West Tasmania. Rain forms a dense, gray curtain that occludes the horizon. Soon the rally staffers at the start of the stage retreat, shivering into their tent. And the gloomier the sky turns, the happier Walter Röhl becomes. Because this is what he loves—an underdog car, and bad weather. The 18 kilometers (11 miles) of the penultimate stage are tough, but he is 30 seconds faster than the leader. What comes next are 33.4 indescribable kilometers (20.7 miles): aquaplaning, visibility dropping near zero, loads of mud and gravel on the asphalt. Röhl is in his element: he wins the stage 1:04 minutes ahead of the overall leader, though that man

Auspicious beginning: Day one ends with the Western Creek stage near the port town of Launceston; Röhl and Geistdörfer are in fifth place among 103 starters

is an ace in this sport. Rex Broadbent won the Classic category the last four years in a row in his 320-hp 911 Carrera RS, weighing 1,050 kilos (2,315 lbs). He will do the same in spades this year. Now he walks over to Röhl and says, "Walter, I'll be coming to Germany in September. Is there a chance I could do a lap with you in the Porsche on the North Loop?" That is the League of Champions.

That evening in the hotel the mood is correspondingly sunny. Geistdörfer shudders as he recalls the bump in the road that kicked up the tail of the 911 so high at 8,000 revs in the highest gear that both men saw only the black asphalt for several seconds. "No problem," says Röhl, "you just can't react frantically when that happens." Geistdörfer adds, "During the training run, the Cayenne simply smoothed this bump over with its immense suspension travel. But the rally car did not do that when its turn came." Then both men josh around about getting older: Geistdörfer, at 58, finds it annoying to have to fiddle with his glasses under his helmet. Röhl, six years his senior, jokes about his "Golden Years pillow" that cost him six euros, which he smuggles into his seat to make it more comfy.

Day five: the great finale in horrendous weather. In this longest stage of the Targa, Röhl once again delivers a driving performance none of his opponents can match: 59 kilometers (36.6 miles), averaging over 120 km/h (74.5 mph), by far the best time. Then he crosses the finish line in Hobart in tenth place. Now all is well! The Porsche duo has gained quite a lot in this Targa, making up 85 places, and in terrible weather.

"A whole lot more rain would have been much better still," says Walter Röhl. The sunny outlook of a fighter who doesn't give up.



TARGA TASMANIA

One of the world's last great asphalt rallies. The Targa Tasmania has been held every year since 1992 on this island just off the southern coast of the Australian continent. Total distance, about 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles), 500 kilometers (310 miles) of that as special stages against the stopwatch. The race includes current as well as historic racing and sports cars. The starter field in 2011: 254 participants, including 103 in the Classic category.



www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgHxqkUzo3I

Time warp: If you scan this code with the QR reader on your smartphone, you'll share memories of the Rally San Remo of 1981. For more information on how this works, see page 8.

Touch and go:

Röhl/Geistdörfer pushing the envelope, here in the 37-kilometer (23-mile) Riana stage on the north coast