

DRIVING

By Elmar Brümmer Photos by Daniel Reinhard

PASS TIME

Where the ideal line runs a zigzag course, the 911's suspension can enjoy a veritable field day. Precision is always in demand on the mountainous terrain of Switzerland. The Gotthard, Furka, and Grimsel pass routes are the traditional territory of the famous PostAuto buses. This trip takes driving pleasure to new heights.

There is a definite rumbling. Satisfied, yet insistent. With every meter the 911 ascends, its six cylinders seek to live out an agile response almost too perfect for this tour. But there is no way around it. If ever there were the right place for the German expression *jetzt geht die Post ab*—roughly, “off we go”—this is it.

Before we devote high praise to our mountain-climbing tour along the Gotthard, Furka, and Matterhorn—with an appearance by the Rhone Glacier—it is important to note a crucial tonal sequence: C-sharp, E, A. This unmistakable signal tells us we have entered the world of the PostAuto buses. Their horns are music not only to the ears of nostalgia buffs; these vehicles continue to provide public transportation to the farthest corners of Switzerland, and they seem to have chosen the most fabulous routes to do so. These roads are so twisty and narrow that one cannot imagine driving them without leaning on the horn from time to time to warn other motorists. C-sharp, E, A.

This is a drive up into the forces of nature, to the limits of cell phone reception—and beyond. The serpentine encounter between driver, vehicle, and road is reflected on the navigation display: the orange line of the road is as jagged as the path of a seismograph. That display is absolutely accurate, except for the color. For

Yellow fever breaks out in the mountain passes: a 911 follows the routes of Switzerland’s famous PostAuto buses.

here the dominant hue is yellow, a yellow so emblematic that the Swiss postal service has registered it as “intellectual property.”

There’s no question our speedy yellow car can hold its own in the color category as well. The hue fulfills its purpose even when the weather changes at every hair-pin bend. It is astonishing how many different shades the cottony billows of fog can have as they rise from the valley up the steep mountain walls—which are often just a hand’s breadth from the side mirrors. The Carrera positively glows in this milky soup. A few more curves are needed before enlightenment reaches its crew from the flats, however. By then it is clear the fog no longer holds sway; we have reached and transcended the cloud line. The steering angle is of course unfazed by meteorological conditions, but for the driver it is an eerie feeling to make what looks like a sharp turn into nothing.

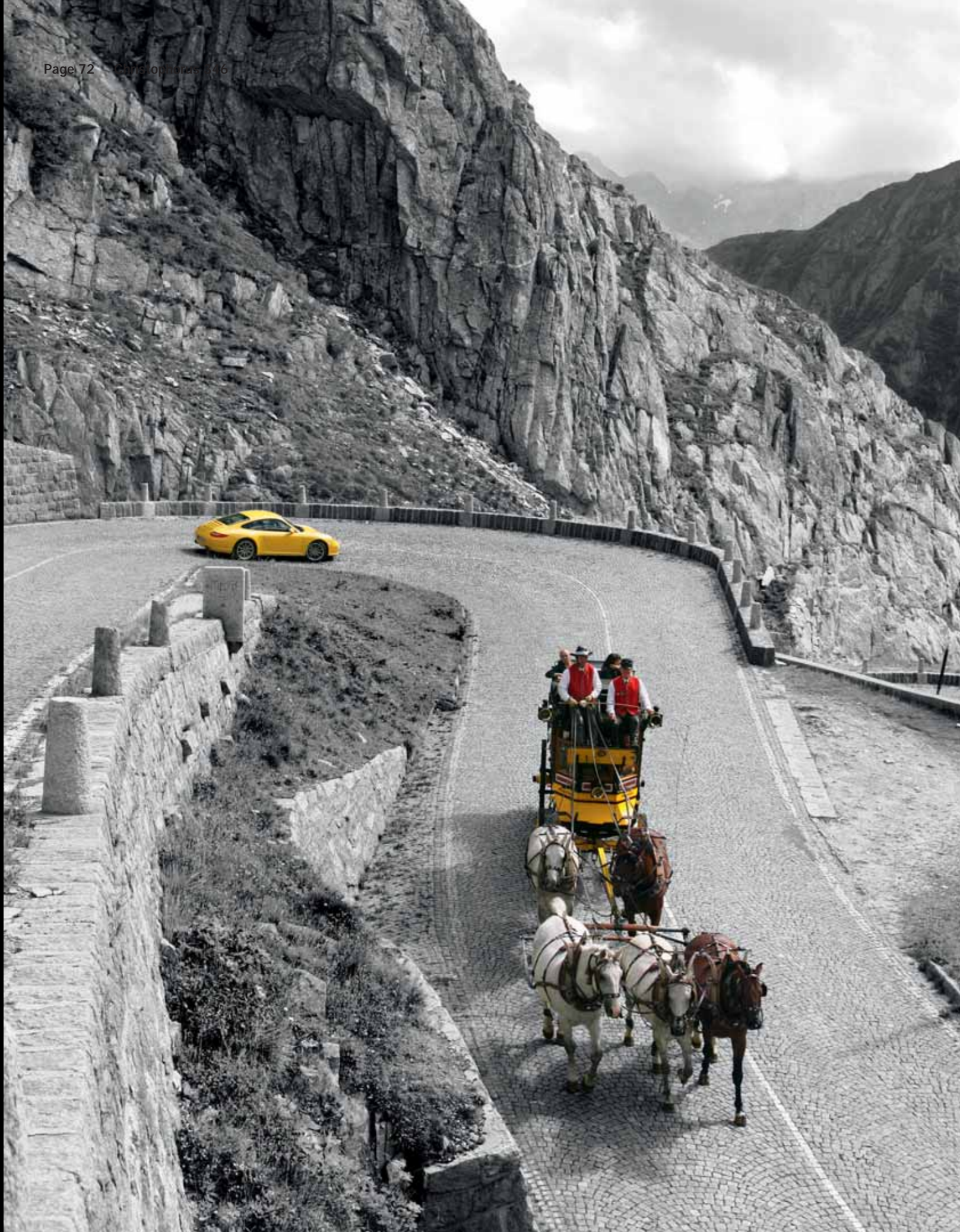


Flowing motion:
Learning curves in the mountains of Switzerland show a steep upward slope



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This slight unease lasts only and exactly until the next hairpin turn, at which blue skies and sunlight reappear to butter up the yellow visitor from Stuttgart. What began in Andermatt is something like a Christian mission: Saint Christopher (or Christophorus) meets Saint Gotthard. Those who do not promptly turn right onto the Furka Pass route set off to the left on the historical route of the mail and passenger coaches, which was the original way to cross the Gotthard before the lengthy Gotthard Tunnel was built. This massif was traversed

commanding abilities of the Porsche double-clutch transmission (PDK). The driver's thoughts are left to shift and drift at ease, aloft on the wings of the magnificent landscape. The car's 3.8-liter boxer engine purrs in contentment during the uphill climb. Of course, 8-percent uphill gradients, not to mention their 11- or 15-percent counterparts, make their presence known in human stomachs, but the car takes them in sporting stride. Steep inclines and narrow passes are handled in splendidly playful fashion by the four 18-inch tires.

It's an inexorable ascent, to the limit of cell phone reception and beyond. A sense of the sublime.

The cobblestone surface of the old Gotthard track, on the other hand, is a case for the PASM electronic damping system. PostAuto buses may sway, but not a 911. Effortlessness is the defining feature of our Alpine adventure. One can become

by a Benedictine monk from Bremen around 1236, who took this route to Rome to petition the Pope for absolution. He named the route after his role model, Bishop Gotthard of Hildesheim (960–1038).

addicted to ascents of this type—in a country famous for its natural scenery, this is a “pass time” that can hardly be surpassed.

PostAuto coaches and buses are frequent companions on the trip over the Gotthard and through the Grimsel region; in the constant interplay of acceleration and braking, the 911 remains composed thanks to the

Confidence is buoyed in the curves, but also in meeting our schedule. Our journey through the clouds proceeds according to plan, although the 911 is certainly indulgent when it comes to icy grottoes, hiking trails, golf courses, stone bridges, and mountain inns. The buses, by contrast, have to adhere to their timetables, or toe the line, so to speak, as winding as the latter may be. Unless stopped by seasonal weather conditions, these panoramic Alpine drives are among the most beautiful of PostAuto's 10,000-kilometer (6,200-mile) network.



911 CARRERA S (1997)

- Engine: Six-cylinder boxer
- Displacement: 3,800 cc
- Power: 385 hp (283 kW)
- Maximum torque: 420 Nm (4,400 rpm)
- Top track speed:* 300 km/h (186 mph)
- CO₂ emissions:* 240 g/km
- Fuel consumption:*
- City: 15.3 l/100 km
- Highway: 7.2 l/100 km
- Combined: 10.2 l/100 km

* with PDK

A slogan from the rich history of Porsche advertising comes to mind, as it is made to order for the 911 Carrera: *Ursprünglich waren Kurven eine Verneigung vor der Landschaft* (“Curves were originally a bow before nature”). A bow to nature is certainly present everywhere we look; on the way down to Airolo, the Porsche in fact passes a mail coach—the means of transport that brought a major advance in mobility and comfort to crossing the Alps in the mid-19th century. On old posters, these routes wind like yellow ribbons around the peaks. Both the posters and the coaches themselves leave no doubt: the notion of “time travel” up here is more than mere fiction.

The team of horses pulls a historical carriage with a coachman; in 1906, the main postal authority in Bern introduced the first coach tours, which were then extended to cover all of Helvetia and which continue to entice travelers as the most beautiful of the PostAuto lines. What was once a privilege of the buses,

For drivers and sports cars alike, the key to success in surmounting these passes is “Onward and upward!”

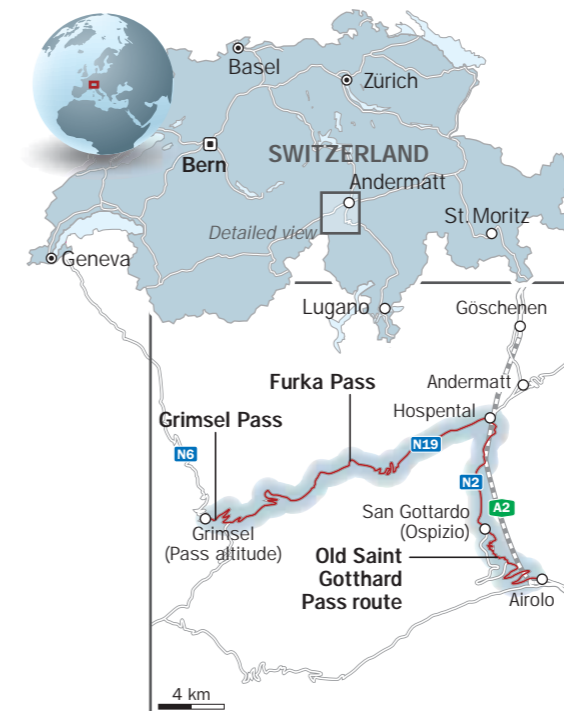
Massif structure: Nature grants a moment of shelter to our 911 on its climbing tour



namely, the right to stick to the safer mountain side of the many tight bottlenecks, has been preserved even though the steep segments have since been reinforced. Still, there are often moments when it is best not even to think of the depths right over the edge of the rather low road barriers. Such moments are an essential part of the mountain experience, and not only on the old Gotthard Pass, which is revered far and wide as the “king of passes.”

Waiting at the parking bay of the Hotel Belvédère, one’s gaze turns to the pass route across the way. In a setting that from this vantage point looks like a model train layout (including a real steam locomotive at the Furka Pass), the bus might as well be a drop of yellow paint. A sense of grandeur comes over us, but quickly settles back into perspective—for we too will soon be one of those drops of paint sprinkling the ridge of peaks. The Alps, so to speak, have acquired freckles.

THE ITINERARY



Weather conditions may necessitate closure of the pass routes.