



A custom tailoring operation for customers who want something extra special in their new Porsche cars employs 35 skilled craftspeople, all with a deep knowledge of high-end leather, in Zuffenhausen, near the automotive brand's headquarters in Stuttgart.

Something special

Nothing is simple in automotive corporate ownership these days. Everyone knows the Porsche name from the luxury car brand that Austrian engineer Ferdinand Porsche set up in Stuttgart in 1931. These days, Porsche is a holding company, of which the engineer's family still had control until recently, but with a more complex structure resulting from their investment in ownership of the Volkswagen group from 2005 onwards. Years of debate about who was taking over whom appeared to reach a conclusion in August 2012 when Volkswagen and Porsche declared themselves to be "an integrated automotive group", with the move making Volkswagen "sole owner of Porsche's

business operations".

This move cost Volkswagen almost €4.5 billion. Porsche said it would use the money to repay bank liabilities of €2 billion and keep the rest for "strategic equity investments, focusing along the automotive value chain". Porsche AG (for Aktiengesellschaft, or limited company) is still the usual name for the company that produces the series of cars bearing the Porsche brand name and coat of arms and it is these cars that are of interest to us for this article: the company currently produces the Porsche 911, the Boxster, the Cayman sports cars, the Cayenne sport utility vehicle and the four-door Panamera.

Special touches

The complicated series of events that finally settled ownership of the company last summer did not appear to alter the rhythm of life at the custom tailoring (CT) operation that takes place in a spacious workshop in Zuffenhausen. This exclusive saddlery centre, in the same Stuttgart suburb that houses Porsche's main production facility, its corporate headquarters and the attractive Porsche Museum, employs around 35 craftsmen and women whose job it is to add special extra customised touches of class to the Porsche cars customers buy. There are extensive options on bodywork colours, wheel trims and headlamps on the

Detailed craftsmanship in a Porsche Cayenne steering wheel.

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BEAST

Beauty



outside, and the team here works on all the elements that will give the customised car a matching or complementary interior.

Leather is available in more than 100 colours to help the Porsche CT team meet the specific requirements of the brand's most discerning customers. The car interior experts at the workshop have the same eye and touch for appreciating the quality of the hides they are working with, and for spotting defects, as the best of the best in the tanning industry, but they seem to have a licence to be more exacting in their selection. Michael Opitz, the director of the centre, explains that he and his team can expect to use up to six hides for a single car. "It used to be fewer," he adds, "but the requirement now is for 100% perfection and we can accept no flaws at all."

At leather cutting stage, only about 50% of each hide is used in interior upholstery, with the shoulders, neck and butt usually failing to make the cut. The unselected material is in demand elsewhere, though, and Porsche sells it without difficulty to accessories and footwear manufacturers, inside and outside Germany. And Porsche uses no splits, only the grain side.

Storage space

An example of an interesting process to watch is the cutting operation from one hide, in Cayenne red, of covers for the storage space that sits between the driver's and passenger's seats in the 911. Each piece requires around 500 square-centimetres of leather and the cutter repeatedly inserts laser images of the correct shape all over the centre of the hide. In the end, around 20 pieces come from the exercise; they come complete with holes drilled in just the right place by the laser-cutter for the cover to be stretched for the Porsche logo to be embossed onto the leather. When the cover is fitted to the lid of the storage box, these holes will be covered up.

The machine that does the embossing looks simple and a little old-fashioned, but there are so many variations, up to 80 (with different thicknesses, different crests and logos, different stitching), that Mr Opitz insists that it must be done manually, with a



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foot-controlled pump applying just the right amount of pressure for each piece. "This is part of the love, the passion our people have for their work," he explains. "They have to pay great attention to detail and have to regard themselves as being part of the wider effort to produce a car exactly as the customer wants. We talk about imaging the customer standing with us as we work on, say, covering the dashboard in the shade of leather the customer has chosen."

A handful of tanneries

The custom tailoring centre works with only three tanneries, all of whom source their hides from southern Germany or Austria. "We know them very well," says the centre's director. "It's important for us to have that continuity because there are things such as accurate colour-matching that you cannot find everywhere. Everything we offer our customers has to be the best. There is no compromise; you

only get the very best of everything.” For Porsche, this means covering as much of the interior as possible with leather upholstery. Here, too, customers can choose. Some opt for less leather, others for the maximum, which involves covering the buttons on the seats, the back of the rear-view mirror, the jacket hooks, even the slats of the air-vent in leather.

As this shows, Mr Opitz’s team works only at the most exclusive end of the market. Colour-matching for some customers in this segment can be a challenge. In some parts of the world, customised colours can mean daring mixes of blue, yellow and black on the bodywork, with the leather and the stitching inside having to complement the combination. An example that won admiring and questioning glances in equal measure (people either loved it or hated it) at a recent motor show in Austria is a 911 in acid green. In this case, the leather upholstery inside is dark grey, but Mr Opitz’s team matched the acid green colour in the thread used in the stitching.

Most discerning

Porsche sold 30,231 vehicles in the first quarter of 2012. The average number of customers who choose to use the skills and knowledge of Mr Opitz’s team is much lower. In total, the workshop probably only consumes about 20 hides per day. It means that even of the 10,000 to 12,000 cars of the different Porsche models that pass through a separate customisation finishing area before delivery each year, still only a small proportion have had what we might call the full treatment from the saddlery team. Their work is for the most discerning of the company’s exclusive customers.

There is an attractive reception area at the customisation centre, about one kilometre from the saddlery workshop, and if the owners of a new vehicle are within easy enough reach, they are able to travel to Zuffenhausen and await delivery in person. Another dedicated team works here, in an out-of-sight area at the back, making all the necessary final checks and carrying out preparatory polishing and other finishing touches before handing over keys and cars to buyers. Depending on the model and on



The custom tailoring team works with three tanners who source the finest hides from Southern Germany. Even then, it rejects about 50% of each hide.



Around 35 craftsmen and women work in the special customised tailoring workshop.

the options the customer has gone for, this last stage before delivery can take anything from 20 minutes to three hours.

Sorry to interrupt

In the case of most of the 30,000 vehicles sold per quarter, everything is installed in the normal production line (Leipzig for the Cayenne and Panamera models, Stuttgart for the others now, after a period of outsourcing some production to a partner in Finland, Valmet Automotive, came to an end in the early part of 2012). If the customer has ordered specially upholstered seats or a particular choice of headlamps, it would interrupt the flow of production to put these in place on the

normal production line, so these components go in at the customisation centre. And almost all of the vehicles prepared at the customisation centre go for delivery to a customer or a dealership by truck and (later) container ship.

If the customer is able to come and take delivery in person, however, the Porsche team makes a great fuss of them and of the cars, showing off all the vehicle’s attributes and taking a photograph of the proud owners with their shiny new possession. It’s a special moment, after all, and the more leather the customer has chosen for the interior and the more input the dedicated team at the saddlery has had, the more special it will be. ☺