

Porsche Sport Driving School – Barber Motorsports Park

By Scott Witt



**At the Barber Motorsports Park Museum
entrance**

Fran and I have owned Porsches of one sort or another since 2001, when we bought our daughter's lightly used Boxster. But I got hooked by Porsche long before that, back in 1970. I was in college at the University of Washington in Seattle, working my way through with a part-time job at a hamburger joint. One of the guys I worked with had a brother in the Air Force who'd come to see him on leave. He had a brand new Porsche 914 and had let my workmate drive it to work that night. Well, we all went out to take a look at it and, of course, we'd never seen anything like it. My workmate could not stop talking about how fast it went and especially about how it handled.

We both had to close up that night, and we got done about 2 AM. I asked him if maybe I could get a ride in the car before I went home. He not only took me for a ride, he ended up letting me drive it for about 20 minutes along Lake Washington Blvd, a nice twisty-turny road if there ever was one. And that was it. I knew that someday I would own a Porsche. I don't know that I got it going very fast given the circumstances, but that thing stuck to the road through the turns like peanut butter sticks to the roof of your mouth. I didn't know a car could do that.

Fast forward about 40 years to 2010. We've got two Porsches in the garage: a 2008 Cayenne and a 2008 Boxster S RS60. We'd been driving Porsches for 7 years, but I'd never driven mine over 100 mph. I swear, it's true. Really. I decided to fix that. So, for Christmas, Fran got me the 2-day High Performance Driving Course at the Porsche Sport Driving School in Birmingham.

Best. Present. Ever.

There were a lot of high points. First, the school partners with a resort in the area, so accommodations and food are first-class. Nice. Transportation to the track is provided. You won't be driving your own car. You get a light breakfast at the track and then into the classroom for one hour to learn some technical information about vehicle dynamics and handling that will prove really useful once you're in the seat.

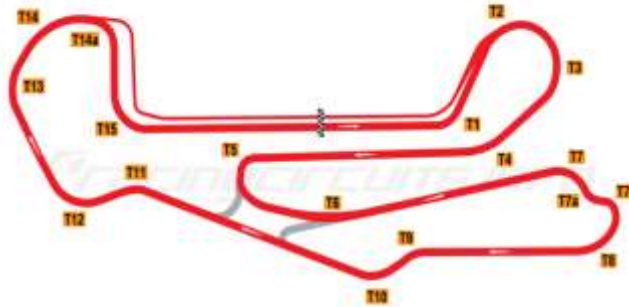
Then it's out to the cars, all 911's. You'll get assigned to a group of four or five other students. For training, your group will trail an instructor around the track, following his line and keeping his speed. The only passing will occur on the final straight so you can change position in line behind the instructor. The instructor watches your driving in his rear-view mirror and communicates via one-way intercom to you in your car. I was surprised how well this worked. It was nice not having someone actually in the car with me.

But it's not just track training. There is skid-pad training, autocross running and, for those who can drive a manual, heel-and-toe shifting training (which was terrific, by the way). Some of the track cars were manual shifters but most were PDK. There were only a few of us there who could drive a manual, which was kind of surprising, given the large number of Porsche drivers who are wedded to rowing through the gearbox.

The first day was exhausting. For most of us, this was a first-time track experience and we were probably not totally relaxed. Your first trips around the track, while you're learning the layout and line, are not particularly fast, not over 80 mph. By the end of the next day, you'll be comfortably doing 130+ mph on the straight and squealing through the corners (a squealing tire is a happy tire) and feeling good about the control you've developed in your steering, braking, and acceleration.

Here's the layout of the track. It's 2.38 miles, 16 turns and more than 80 feet of elevation change, so it can be challenging. They host the Indy Car and

MotoAmerica Superbike racing series; it's a high-quality track in beautiful condition.



Barber Motorsports Park Track

The autocross was done in a Boxster S with PDK. We got some good instruction about how to work your way around the cones successfully, and we were encouraged to really push the car. So we did. Our groups were competing against each other for the lowest aggregate time around, so we all got stopwatched. Lots of fun. After we were done getting our times and critiques, the instructors invited us to drive a Cayenne Turbo through the same course (!) So we did. My time in the Cayenne was, amazingly, only .2 seconds slower than in the Boxster. And it was about the same for a lot of the other drivers. It was a spectacular demonstration of what the Cayenne was capable of. Then we took a bunch of Cayennes, each with a full complement of passengers, and went through the off-road course, which was a very impressive show of what the Cayenne can do and how a lot of the automated handling worked.

At the end of the second day, we did hot laps with the instructors driving. You get in the 911 Turbo with the instructor for a demonstration of what a truly competent driver can do on the track. You go around twice, and finish with a cool-down lap. My take on that was, holy smokes, do I have a lot left to learn or what? Just when I was feeling pretty good about not wrecking the car for the last two days while I'm driving at the edge of my ability, I realize that the car is way, way more capable than I will ever be. Quite a humbling experience, I would say.



Barber Motorsports Park – Turn 14

That last night, we were all at dinner and one of the hosts got up and asked us this question:

After driving 911's, a Boxster, and a Cayenne Turbo, if we could only buy one Porsche, which would it be? More than half of the 30 folks there opted for... the Cayenne.

Overall, it was a truly fun and satisfying two days, definitely worth the money. I'm a lot more comfortable with my car and learned techniques that are useful on the road, too. At the end of it all, you've learned what your car is capable of and have a lot of confidence that your Porsche is going to be able to handle whatever you want it to do.

A side note: While Fran didn't take the driving course, for an extra \$100, she was allowed to ride with the instructors during training on the track. And there was a lot of track time. She truly enjoyed it. Since then, she's driven the tracks at the Porsche Experience Center in Atlanta when we picked up our new Cayman GTS last year. Now she wants to do the Birmingham training, so we're going to do that soon. I really need a refresher!



The grounds are beautiful at Barber Motorsports Park

The course I took was a basic, introductory course. They have more advanced courses, up to and including getting a racing license. For more information on the training and venue in Birmingham, go here:

<https://www.porschedriving.com/porsche-track-experience>