

ROAD WARS:

2004 PORSCHE BOXSTER VS. BECK 550 SPYDER REPLICA

Driving two Porsche classics side-by-side underlines the huge difference that time and technology can make in performance.

story by Charles Renny photography by Sean Francis Martin

What could two cars built nearly 50 years apart have in common? Considerably more than you might think. Separated by half a century, the 2004 Boxster S and 550 Spyder are united by Porsche's commitment to building the best sports cars around.

Built at a time when 'real sports cars' didn't have doors, heaters or all-weather gear, the 550 Spyder sat at the pinnacle of sporting design and left no doubt about its ability to win at the race track. Mainstream auto enthusiasts didn't particularly care for the car and its winning ways until James Dean made his fatal driving error.

Today, an original Porsche 550 Spyder would set you back about \$750,000, if you could find someone willing to part with their bit of history. The 550 Spyder Replica recreated by Beck Engineering faithfully duplicates the original car as well as the driving environment that existed in 1954. The basic package costs about \$32,000, but the price rises if you order such options as seats, carpet or one of the slightly improved engines that now exist thanks to fifty years of technological advances.

With the Boxster S, Porsche has included all the creature comforts that five decades of decadence have brought to the automobile. A top that does more than redirect rain to other parts of the interior is high on the list of improvements.

When you take the measure of each car, it's clear that Porsche has never been afraid to think outside the box. The Spyder and Boxster use engine layouts that produce memorable driving moments. With horizontally opposed cylinders, the 'boxer' styled engines are mounted behind the driver in what is referred to as a rear-engined layout.

By having so much mass concentrated at the rear, these cars tend to oversteer dramatically on corners. To correct this in the Boxster, Porsche has used modern ideas such as larger rear tires and electronic traction control. In the Spyder, it was the human brain coupled

with quick reflexes that kept the car going the direction it was pointed.

In addition, the hundred or so horsepower four cylinder Spyder was air cooled and carburetted, while the 270-horse six cylinder Boxster is water cooled and fuel injected. These seemingly simple improvements allow for a much smoother delivery of engine power. By eliminating the need to 'cam the engine', Porsche has taken a highly strung, peaky power plant that required constant attention to the throttle to keep the engine coming off the power band, and turned it into a docile motor that goes up the rev range smoothly. Acceleration no longer comes on like the afterburner of a jet, but more like the steady hard push of a rocket heading for orbit.

Porsche still uses a rack and pinion steering box. In the Spyder, mechanical advantage and steering control were gained by using a large diameter





steering wheel. And sitting close to the steering wheel allowed the driver to use his whole body when making steering inputs. In contrast, the Boxster's power assist removes the need to have biceps as big as leg muscles. Steering effort is minimal, but provides nearly as good a feel for the road and what the car is doing. Modern design dictates that a driver sit back from the steering wheel in a more relaxed and (due to air bags) safer driving position.

Comfort and safety have changed considerably over the years. When the Spyder was new, seat belts were a novel idea and roll bars were crude affairs that offered minimal protection in the event of a crash. Today's road-going Boxster has dual front air bags, side impact air bags, energy absorbing crumple zones, collapsing steering columns and enough electronic driving aids to keep any novice on the straight and narrow.

The opulent, by 1954 standards, Boxster goes faster and corners better, all while keeping its occupants in a climate controlled environment. The Spyder exposes you to the elements, requires constant attention and doesn't have provision for a radio let alone a CD player.

The Boxster is a child of its time. Comfortable, with electronic aids that react faster than the human brain, it coddles the driver, yet lets you experience and enjoy driving. The 550 gets your adrenalin moving at a rate similar to that of water going over Niagara falls. Your brain is the master computer in this simple, nimble and quick car. Different paths, certainly, but the grin on my face is the same at the end of each drive. 🐾





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