

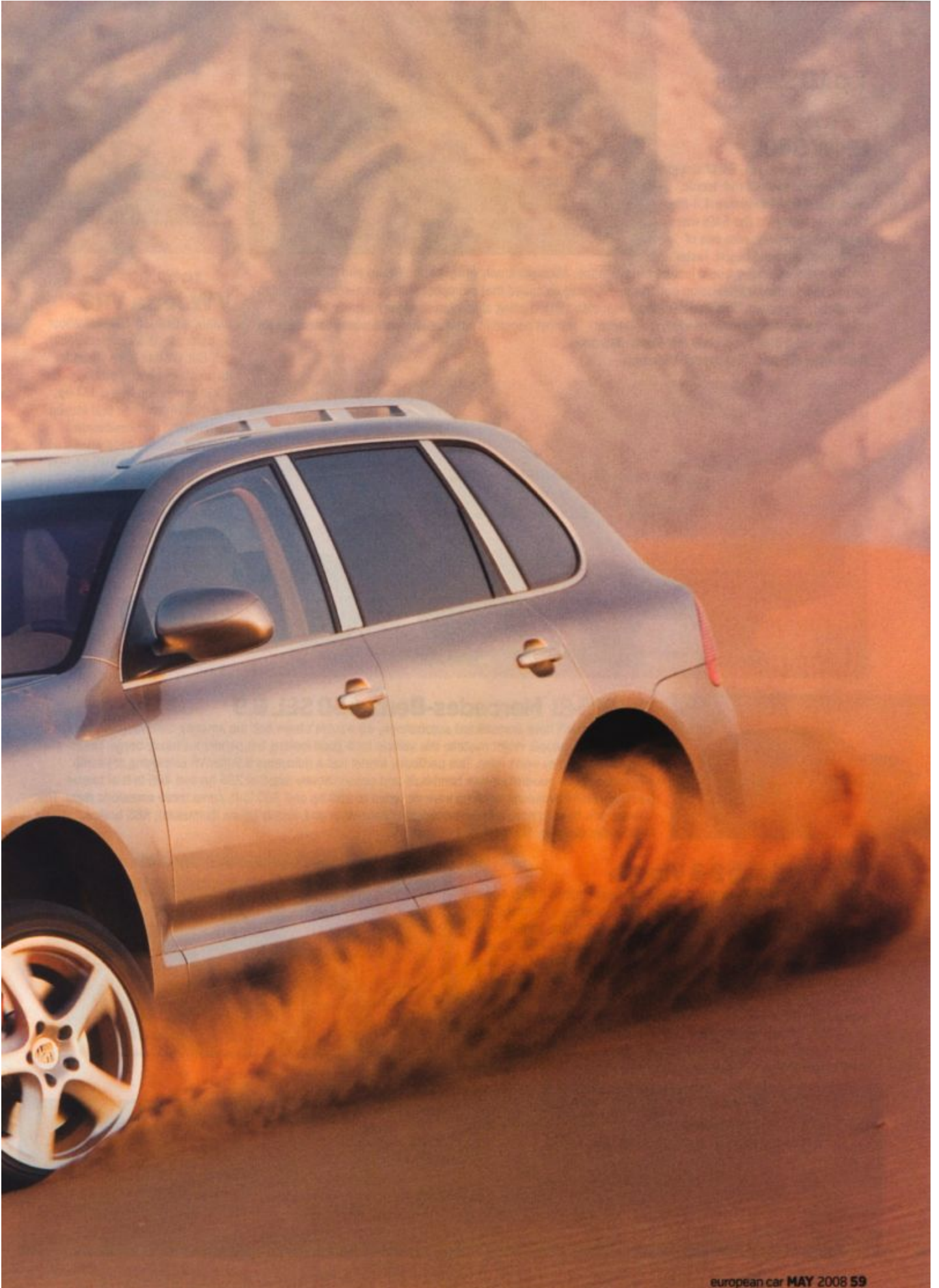
Top ^(feature) 10 Sleepers

Zooming under the radar

by Colin Ryan

Sleepers. In Britain, the country where history comes from, they're sometimes called Q-cars. This nomenclature harks back to the First World War, where vessels known as Q-ships (or Q-boats) were disguised merchant boats, used to lure German U-boats to the surface. At which point, the covers would come off cannon and depth charges, and battle would be joined. Just for good measure, both the British and American naval forces used the same play in WWII. But the point is obvious: a conveyance that conceals rather than displays its power, to fool its enemies—be they Nazis or traffic cops.





Top 10 Sleepers

★ 1997 BMW 540i

The E39 platform. Yes, BMW straight six engines are wonderful. Iconic, even. But the all-aluminum 4.4-liter V8 lurking quietly in the 540i was (is) fabulous. Really, with one of these cars, anything bigger, faster and/or more expensive would just be extravagance. Although it only (only!) had 286 hp and 324lb-ft of torque, the manual transmission option was a Getrag six-speed that prompted shifts even when they weren't completely necessary. This was the model that also started using aluminum suspension parts for less unsprung weight. Performance-wise, it had plenty for most people in most situations. It was an absolute joy to drive. And it didn't say 'steal me' like an M5 does.

0-60 mph: 6.5 sec. Top speed: 155 mph



★ 1992-98 VW Jetta VR6

Surely, a Golf GTI 16V was about as hardcore as a compact could get. But VW had other ideas for its bread-and-butter platform. The Mk III generation had a 174-hp, 2.8-liter VR6 version that looked understated and handsome. Smart aluminum alloy wheels and a couple of discreet VR6 badges were all that distinguished the car from its lowlier brethren. The cable-operated shift action of its five-speed gearbox was one of the sweetest ever. It rode a little softer than a GTI/GLI, but it could still tackle a mountain pass as well as spend hours on the freeway at high speeds.

**0-60 mph: 7.5 sec.
Top speed: 140 mph**



★ 1975-81 Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL 6.9

If Germany didn't have unrestricted *autobahnen*, we wouldn't have half the amazing machinery we do. For example, most people might mistake this vehicle for a good-looking but ponderous luxury barge. Great—what they don't see, they won't miss. This particular model has a ridiculous 6.9-liter V8 employing dry-sump lubrication. Each powerplant was hand-built and conservatively rated at 286 hp and 405 lb-ft of torque (although North American versions were de-tuned to 250 hp and 360 lb-ft, curse those emissions regs). This was the first Benz to have a hydro-pneumatic suspension and, luckily (given its muscle), ABS brakes.

0-60 mph: 6.4 sec. Top speed: 140 mph



★ 1999 Saab 9-3 Viggen

If anyone needed to know the definition of torque steer, if they opened a dictionary at the appropriate page, there should be a picture of the Saab 9-3 Viggen. Meaning 'thunderbolt' in Swedish, the Viggen sent a turbocharged 230 hp from its 2.3-liter engine to just the front wheels. At its international press launch, Saab devised a route that had hardly any corners. Yet it was fun of sorts, provided its flaws were accepted and the right foot hit the gas in a progressive manner. It didn't look much different to a normal 9-3. Except for the triangular dark-blue-and-yellow-striped Viggen badge on both flanks, and some subtle aerodynamic aids, most people wouldn't know any better.

0-60 mph: 6.4 sec. Top speed: 155 mph



★ 1994-96 Audi RS2 Avant

Apologies to Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition, but no one expects a wagon to be an adrenaline machine. Wagons are family cars, with roof racks, the kids in the rear seats, plus Fido and the week's shopping in the back. Which makes the RS2 Avant so deliciously subversive. This was the first time Audi used the RS moniker and what an occasion to do it. Part of a collaboration with Porsche, it had a turbocharged 2.2-liter, 20-valve, inline five-cylinder engine pushing 315 hp and 302 lb-ft of torque through to Audi's all-wheel-drive Quattro system. It was super-quick. Fortunately, Porsche also designed the braking system (looking past the alloy wheels, one sees 'Porsche' set into the red Brembo calipers). Porsche also designed the suspension and assembled the car.

0-60 mph: 4.8 sec. Top speed: 163 mph

Top 10 Sleepers



★ 2004-5 Volvo V70 R

Just as BMW has its M and Audi has its S, every now and then Volvo will break out the R badge. The V70 usually symbolizes the epitome of suburban practicality, but when it sports an R, that trip to IKEA suddenly becomes a lot more attractive. An inline five-cylinder, 20-valve, 2.5-liter engine sprouts a KKK turbocharger and two intercoolers to produce 300 hp and 295 lb-ft of torque going to a Haldex all-wheel drive system. That's not all. The suspension was developed in conjunction with Ohlins and could be switched to various levels between comfortable and sporty, while the brakes were upgraded to a Brembo system.

0-60 mph: 6.1 sec. Top speed: 155 mph



★ 2007 Audi S8

Among the many king-size conveyances preferred by the plutocrat, the Audi A8 remains the thinking man's choice. It's good-looking in a subtle way. It doesn't flaunt the owner's wealth. It doesn't do bling. The sportier version, the S8, stays true to that philosophy. Policemen would be more likely to salute than set off the siren. Only the truly clued-in will appreciate the fact that it has a 5.2-liter V10 all-aluminum engine producing 450 hp and 398 lb-ft of torque. And it's closely related to the V10 in the Lamborghini Gallardo. That's the kind of synergy everyone (especially those not in marketing) can get into.

0-60 mph: 4.9 sec. Top speed: 155 mph

★ 1991-94 Mercedes-Benz 500E

This is known as the four-door Porsche. That's because it was hand-built for Mercedes-Benz by the Weissach boys, who also tuned the chassis. It had a 5.0-liter V8 that developed 322 hp and 354 lb-ft of torque—90 percent of which was available from a mere 1500 rpm. The keen eye will spot the slightly flared fenders (to take the big rubber and wider track) and the Recaro front seats. It also had beefed-up brakes and a hydraulic self-levelling suspension, on which the car sat slightly lower than standard. The archetypal sleeper.

0-62 mph: 5.5 sec. Top speed: 155 mph



★ 1989 Ford Sierra Sapphire Cosworth

Ford has a history of not bringing its best models to the American market. Perhaps that's why its fortunes are in the dumpster right now. The 215-hp 2002 Focus RS turbo was brilliant. Even the '80s vintage Fiesta 1.3 Super Sport was fun. But the Sierra Sapphire Cosworth was just plain nuts. The Sierra was the British traveling salesman's stalwart transportation, but it was a hatchback. There was demand for a model with a trunk, hence the Sapphire. So far, so snoozy. Then someone at Ford (God bless them) had the idea of putting in a turbocharged, 2.0-liter 16-valve Cosworth four-pot good for at least 204 hp, transforming this unprepossessing vehicle into the kind of thing bank robbers would use for a getaway car.

0-60 mph: 5.8 sec. Top speed: 150 mph



★ 2006-on Porsche Cayenne Turbo S

Sleepers are still alive and well today. Even something this big, with huge 'Turbo' lettering on the back and a Porsche badge on its nose. That's because it's an SUV. And, just like the Audi RS2 Avant, no one expects an SUV to accelerate and handle like this. But a 4.5-liter turbocharged V8 engine kicking out 520 hp and 530 lb-ft of torque is quite a serious piece of kit, even in something weighing 5,653 pounds. And its clever adaptive suspension goes a long way to masking that bulk. Once the kids have been dropped off at soccer practice, take the long, twisting way home and enjoy.

0-60 mph: 5.2 sec. Top speed: 155 mph