



SLIP SLIDING AWAY

The 911 is one of those cars with which you just don't take liberties. So let's add subarctic ice, petrolhead camaraderie, a little derring-do... and see what happens

WORDS Robert Coucher //
PHOTOGRAPHY Malcolm Griffiths





WINTER BECKONS, the northern hemisphere's historic racing season is drawing to an end and cars are being put away in garages or workshops. But don't sling your old racing boots into the cupboard just yet. The chance to enjoy some of the best and most exciting driving you will ever experience is back again: driving on ice in Sweden.

There are a few ice driving schools about where you can slide a modern road car around but, for drivers like us, the chance to enjoy a properly prepared classic 911 racer is the real deal. Professional rally ace Richard Tuthill's Below Zero Ice Driving experience offers this unique thrill. Richard finished third in the East African Safari rally in 2003 driving a 911. He's also the son of Francis Tuthill, who established the legendary Tuthill Porsche company, one of the best race and rally preparation specialists in the business.

'Our properly prepared, lightweight 260bhp 911s are absolutely fantastic to drive on the ice. They are a constant challenge and, let's face it, a full-blooded slide in a 911 is something most people will never experience unless they come to Sweden,' he laughs.

Below Zero Ice Driving is based just outside Åre in northern Sweden, where the frozen lake is located. Åre is Sweden's largest ski resort and is as stunningly beautiful as you'd hope. The place is completely covered in thick snow and is seemingly deserted. Arriving in the evening, we decamp to the modernist Kall Auto Lodge hotel, built by rally drivers Colin McRae and Staffan Parmander in 2005. There are a number of other hotels in the area and Åre offers good restaurants and nightlife too, if you have the stamina of James Hunt.

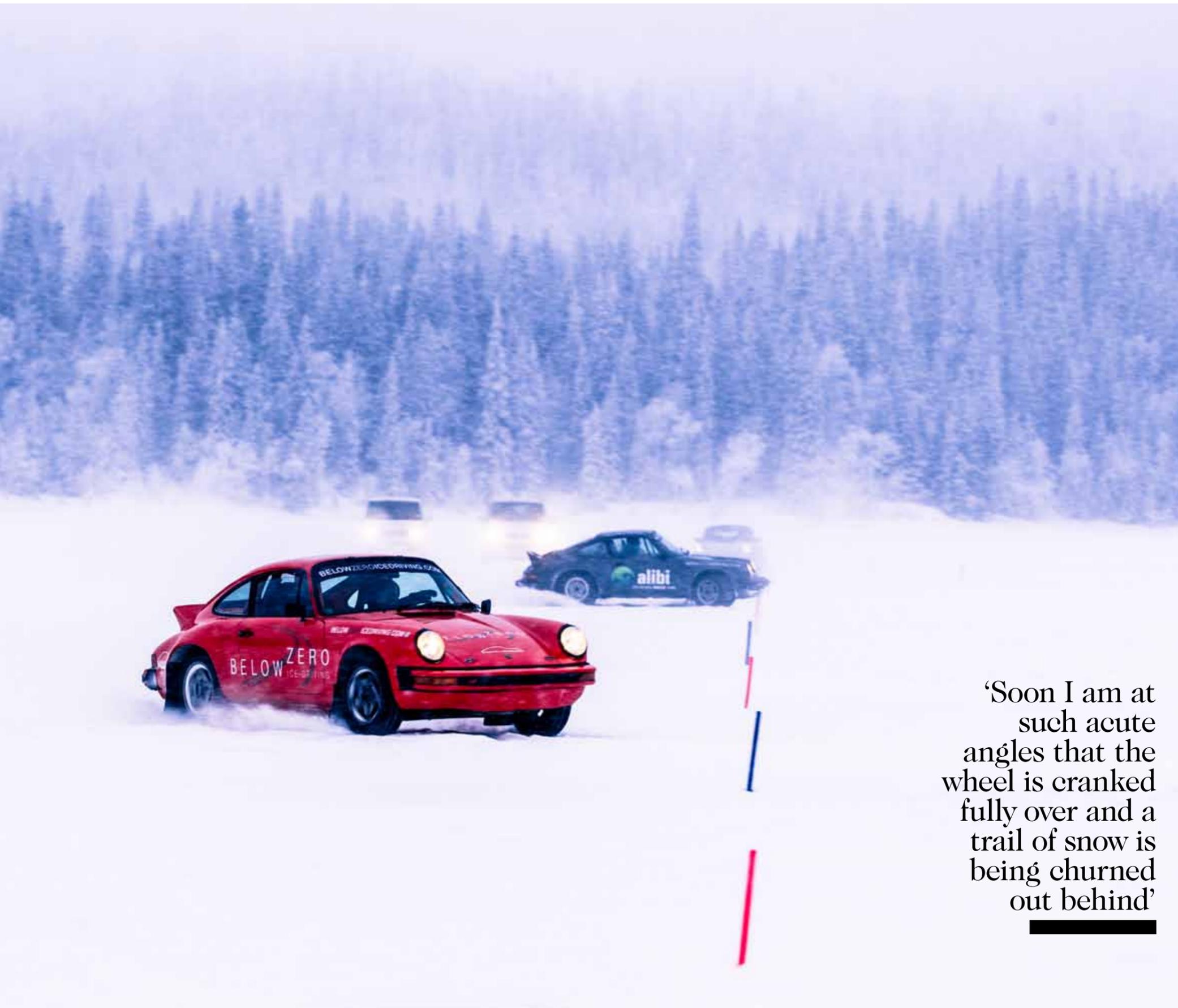
Next morning we arrive at the lake and are met by the Below Zero team and a line-up of half a dozen classic 911s. The cars are stripped-out late-1970s and early-1980s 911SCs, their 3.0-litre engines producing about 260bhp, and featuring close-ratio gearboxes and limited-slip diffs. Their interiors are equipped with race seats, harnesses and rollcages. Simple and effective classic 911s, then, but what you notice is that the cars are set fairly high on their suspension and the tyres are studded.

This really is an arrive-and-drive experience, and all the cars are ready and on parade with driving instructors and technicians on hand. →

'A full-blooded slide in a 911 is something most people will never experience unless they drive on ice'

Above and right
A frozen lake in Åre, northern Sweden: perfect place for sliding a 911 with abandon. Richard Tuthill (centre, right) provides cars and tuition; lunch is enjoyed in a log cabin.





‘Soon I am at such acute angles that the wheel is cranked fully over and a trail of snow is being churned out behind’

Below and left

Coucher behind the wheel in fleece, scarf and hat – a world away from his habitual environs of leather-and-walnut-lined Jag XK140 and the more polite streets of London; there’s plenty of drama to be had when 911s are let loose on slippery surfaces.



The idea is to keep you driving for as long as your neck and arm muscles will take it.

The two-day experience begins with a few hours of familiarisation on the handling circuit. Here you learn car control and take instruction from a proper rally driver. Then it’s to the ice track, where you get to grips with the 911 on a series of straights and corners. The cars are shod with 3mm button-stud tyres, allowing them to remain loose and slide about. Later 7mm studded competition tyres are fitted for the full 100mph experience. Finally it’s the 7km rally stage around the lake’s perimeter for the ultimate feeling of driving in a World Rally Championship.

Don’t worry; those snow banks around the entire course are soft and forgiving. And if you want more then there’s the chance for a passenger ride on a special stage with one of the Tuthill crew’s fearless and awesomely accomplished rally nutters behind the wheel.

Richard Tuthill is a fast-moving kinda guy and he doesn’t waste precious driving time. We climb into the nearest 911, strapping up the racing harnesses. He fires up the loud engine, grabs first gear and we wheelspin away in a flurry of snow. Instantly I am comfortable as he aims the fast-charging Porsche at the first practice slalom pole.

‘I like to disprove the myth that a 911 is tricky to drive. I love to drive them – they are simple, strong, reliable cars and offer a wonderfully raw driving experience,’ he says.

‘You have to work a 911, you must tell it what to do in no uncertain terms. If you tell a classic 911 politely, you’re then being driven, and you become reactive. Particularly in classics like these you have to be proactive,’ he says, as he sets the Porsche into a series of stomach-flipping slides, pin-point perfect down the long slalom test. ‘Be positive. The rear of a 911 is the best bit, it’s getting the front end to grip that is the challenge,’ Richard says, adding a dab of left-foot braking and lifting-off to change direction.

Then it’s my turn, trying to remember everything he’s told me. I wind it up in second gear, aim at the first pole, lift the throttle, brake, turn-in, flick the steering wheel in the opposite direction and the 911 is instantly sliding. Hold the slide on the throttle then lift, brake, swing the other way for the next slalom. Fantastic! Within seconds I am sliding a 911 about with abandon because there is no worry about having an off. Get it wrong and the car just nerfs into a soft bank of snow.

Confidence builds quickly and soon I am at such acute angles that the steering wheel is cranked fully over on the stop, and there’s a trail of snow being churned out behind. Tuthill gets back in and continues the lesson, pointing out that my slides are slow and I am being too throttle-heavy. ‘With a 911 there are three stages to a corner: aggression, then a degree of patience, then power out.’ I do as instructed and, sure enough, the car is instantly faster. →



Above
Try *this* on tarmac and maybe you'll live to tell the tale. Maybe. But here there's plenty of run-off and lots of soft snow.

After lunch in an atmospheric hunting lodge it is time to attack the long ice circuit. What an absolute pleasure to hold a 911 on the throttle in such long slides at such ludicrous angles. With the basics learnt the support team swaps the tyres for the more pronounced studs and the difference is immense. Now there's 50% more grip, which equates to more control and much more speed. The fun of sliding about takes on a harder edge as you are soon attacking the corners at about 140km/h on the steering stop. Which gets your *total* attention.

Richard has brought along his personal project car. It started life as an early 912, so it's a light, short-wheelbase car, but shoehorned into the back is a 2.2-litre six-pot 911 engine, which produces around 140bhp. He takes me out for a last blast in this diminutive weapon.

The car is not overly powerful but it's taut and eager, and is wearing thinner tyres with even bigger studs. Richard's commitment is

astonishing. He gets the front wing buried right into the apex of each bend on full throttle and dances the car around the circuit at impossible speeds, sideways all the way.

'This is the perfect environment to push a 911 to the limit,' says Richard. 'Most of what you learn here is transferable to racing and it is all relevant for safer road driving.'

Initially I never thought I'd find myself capable of sliding and controlling a classic Porsche 911 to this degree. But after a full two days of tuition your confidence and skill improve enormously, to the point at which you find yourself in a full drift doing 140km/h with the rev needle pointing at six thou'. If you really enjoy driving on the ragged edge, it doesn't get any better than this. 

BOOKINGS ARE now being taken for Below Zero Ice Driving for the 2014 season from January to March; www.belowzeroicedriving.com; +44(0)1295 750514.