



Swissvax

Slippery when wet

You might imagine one tub of car wax to be pretty much the same as any other. On the contrary, says specialist manufacturer Swissvax. You get what you pay for

Story by Chris Horton; photos by Benjamin-Lukas Lörtscher and the author

I am no ambassador for the art of car care. Thirty years ago, with all the energy and enthusiasm of any other car-mad 23-year-old, I would contentedly spend an entire weekend washing and painstakingly polishing my beloved grey Rover 2000. Soon, though, I realised that even if I wasn't necessarily wasting my time, I wasn't achieving much, either. I was doing little more than slowing the ageing paintwork's inexorable decline, and at the same time contributing to the no doubt sizeable annual profit of the Ee-Ze Gleam Corporation.

The stone-chips I could live with. At least they showed I'd been trying. But within days the once lustrous cellulose would revert to a dull, matt finish that I knew would take hours of hard graft to cut back to a shine again, and the frustration (and physical effort) of eliminating those ugly swirls and blotches on the surface, as I buffed off first the cleaning compound and then the polish, would drive me crazy. And even then I knew I could repeat the process only so many times before I wore through the paint to the primer. Enough!

Over the years I have instead channelled that energy and enthusiasm into the mechanical aspects of my cars. Their engines, transmissions, suspension, steering, brakes and electrics; and, if nothing else, simply keeping them running. That, surely, is what it's all about? Driving the things – and as far as Porsches are concerned we're talking about serious sports cars here – like you stole them. Not running your hands over their admittedly rather appealing bodies like some sort of pervert. Now, though, after a visit to the headquarters of car-care company Swissvax – in, er, Switzerland – I'm not so sure. Maybe there's something to this polishing lark, after all.

My epiphany, my road to Damascus, came on a sunny afternoon in August – hardly the ideal conditions for achieving the best results with a tin of car polish: so hot that anything you put on the paintwork quickly dries and hardens to a useless haze; so bright that paradoxically you can't always see what you're doing. We had earlier been given a guided tour of the quietly impressive premises of this family-run business near Zürich, had seen the

extraordinarily wide range of products in its range, and heard the complete and unexpurgated story of how the whole Swissvax 'system' came into being. And now it was time to try the stuff for ourselves. This had better be good, then...

Our guinea-pigs for this experiment came in the form of first the maroon Cayenne GTS we had borrowed from Porsche Cars GB for our trip out here, and then a Lamborghini Gallardo on loan to Swissvax from the dealership in Zürich. This second car, ironically for me, was finished in an attractive dark-grey metallic strikingly similar to the City Grey of my old Rover. And the first task – tackled for us by two of Swissvax's team; I would have put it through the local car wash – was to hose down and then leather off the Cayenne, by now plastered with flies and dirt from its 1000-mile run from Reading. (The Gallardo was already clean – but not, as I'll explain in a moment, that clean.)

Next, explained Swissvax CEO Georg Weidmann (and rarely will you find a company boss more willing to don white lab coat and get his hands dirty), we would have to prepare the area we were

tackling (in this case the Cayenne's right-hand front wing) to receive its coat of protective wax. In the old days this would have meant cutting back the existing surface with an abrasive medium in suspension in a suitable liquid to expose 'fresh' paint – and which explains why you can carry out the process only so many times before there's no paint left to polish. Today, though, we would be using Swissvax's Cleaner Fluid, the special oils in which are said effortlessly to remove swirl marks from previous washing and polishing, as well as tar, tree sap, old wax, and even light scratches – but without scouring off even a trace of the paint itself. No less important, claims Weidmann, the product also 'nourishes' the paint, and allows the subsequent coat of wax to bond securely to it.

It seems to work a treat. Our Cayenne's paintwork was plainly virtually brand-new, but it both looked and felt immeasurably better after the process – brighter, smoother, and with no sign of the tell-tale swirls, or 'holograms', as they're known, that used to cause me so much grief. Cleaner Fluid also comes in both Medium and Strong grades, and although these work in a slightly different fashion – both contain so-called micro-granules that wear away against each other to give a progressively finer-grade abrasive effect – they still take off only the very topmost layer of the paintwork or lacquer. Swissvax claims that there's no harm in using them only occasionally.

There's even a Professional grade of Cleaner Fluid, we're told, designed to be used with a sheepskin polishing pad and a rotary buffing

machine – although that's intended for expert use on heavily weathered paint. Swissvax is justifiably proud of the fact that a significant number of professional valeters – or detailers as they often prefer to be known – use its products. Indeed, also visiting Swissvax on the day we were there was UK detailer Tim Bomford from Southampton (www.envyvaleting.co.uk), and as a regular user he, too, is clearly a very enthusiastic supporter.

But no paint-cleaning fluid in the world can be expected to tackle major surface impurities stuck fast to, or even embedded in, the paint, and for this Swissvax has developed what it calls its Paint Rubber. Looking and feeling like a slab of common-or-garden putty or modelling clay, this is used in conjunction with Swissvax Quick Finish – a spray-on lubricant, essentially – almost literally to wipe stubborn specks of dirt, sap, tar and even many of today's airborne industrial pollutants off the paint, but again without causing the slightest damage to the surface. It's a bit like rubbing pencil marks off a sheet of paper with an eraser; hence the name.

It's difficult to understand how it works, but again it does – brilliantly and effortlessly. For this process I was entrusted with the Gallardo, which although seemingly clean enough to satisfy the most fastidious of concours zealots, had an almost imperceptible roughness to the paint as I ran my fingertips over it. Just a few minutes' work with the paint rubber, though, and its right-hand door was as smooth as polished glass. No less remarkably, the almost microscopic impurities picked up by the rubber had been drawn into the

Clockwise from top left: Crystal Rock is just about the top wax in the Swissvax range; 'hologramming' can afflict even nearly-new paint; a perfect finish depends on good products, but carefully washing the car is always the best starting point; highly effective Cleaner Fluid comes in three grades; basic ingredient is yellow carnauba wax from Brazil

surface of the material, where they wouldn't themselves damage the paint. (When one part of the rubber becomes too dirty to be effective you dunk the whole thing in warm water, and fold in the soiled area to expose a clean one. Very clever.)

With the paint of both cars now not just clean, but literally squeaky-clean, it was time to wax the surface – to seal it, in Swissvax-speak. (The company recommends that in order to avoid contaminating the surface again you don't drive the vehicle between cleaning and sealing. It also suggests a further treatment with Cleaner Fluid Regular if you've used the Paint Rubber.) And at this stage in the game you've a choice of getting on for a dozen different products, with names like Onyx, Nitro, Samurai, Saphir, Scuderia, 356, Zuffenhausen, Concorso, Best of Show, Mystery, and the top-of-the range Crystal Rock. There's even one, marketed as Shield, for SUVs, trucks and buses. (Ideal for the Cayenne, then.)

All of these, with the exception of Shield, are based on Grade 1 carnauba wax harvested from the leaves of *Copernicia prunifera*, a fan palm native to northern Brazil. (Shield is made using PTFE, the famous non-stick resin invented by Du Pont in 1938.) Most modern automotive waxes,



Swissvax team had put together an eye-catching collection of Porsches for our visit. Wax can be applied using special applicator pads, or even your fingers. Horton cleaning a Lamborghini (far right): there's an image you never thought you'd see in *g11* & *PW*...



says Georg Weidmann, contain no more than around five per cent by volume of liquid carnauba – the world's purest, hardest and most transparent natural wax – but its own products are based on a special paste form of the stuff. This permits the carnauba content to be as high as 30–60 per cent. To this are then added – primarily as 'carriers', although they smell great, too – essential oils such as passion fruit, orange, avocado and vanilla.

Which one to go for, though? The starter wax is Onyx: 30 per cent carnauba by volume, designed to produce a brilliant, streak-free gloss on all paint types, and formulated to prevent hazing on dark colours. Something more specialised? Nitro, we're told, has been designed for use on nitro-cellulose paints to prevent 'chalking' after the vehicle is subsequently washed. Samurai is primarily for later-model Japanese cars. Saphir has a higher carnauba content, and is said to be ideal on modern water-based paints. Scuderia is another 'premium' wax, this time for Italian cars, and both 356 and Zuffenhausen – as you've probably guessed – have been developed specifically for Porsches: 356 for the synthetic resin paints on older vehicles such as, well, the 356, and Zuffenhausen for the two-pack finishes on later models such as the 924–968 range and the 993.

Beyond those you're into the realms of the highly specialised products developed for the rarefied, exclusive, and frankly ever so slightly bonkers world of high-end concours events: Concorso, with 50 per cent carnauba by volume; Best of Show, with 51 per cent carnauba, plus

special passion fruit and apricot extracts, and not least Mystery – no less than 55 per cent carnauba, and with a high concentration of wax esters, wax alcohols (whatever they might be...) and long-chain fatty acids (ditto). Made – inevitably – to a secret-squirrel recipe originally formulated for Swissvax founder Hans Anwander during the 1930s, this last is further enriched with walnut, kiwi and vanilla extracts, and produces what's claimed to be a 'sensational shine experience'.

Today, says Georg Weidmann, we will be using Crystal Rock. (Because we're worth it...) Tackling a small area at a time, and using one of the special Swissvax applicator pads, I apply a thin but even coat of the product over the entire wing. (You can use your fingers if you prefer, but I found that to be surprisingly hard work.) Then all I have to do is stand back for 10 minutes to drink a much-needed glass of water, and finally polish the surface with a micro-fibre cloth, turning it frequently to expose a fresh surface. Ideally, says Weidmann, you'll then let the car stand in the sun for a few hours – this allows the lustre you've created to deepen – and then, without having touched the paint with your fingers, give the surface one last quick buffing with another micro-fibre cloth. Job done.

And the results, I have to say, are remarkable. Inspirational, even. As genuinely effortless to apply and then wipe off as the makers claim, Crystal Rock produces a shine little short of astonishing. I have absolutely no idea how it manages this, of course, but that's not important – any more than you have to know how Porsche's clever VarioCam

Plus works to appreciate its effect on the car's performance. Or why an aeroplane flies. It just does, OK? The fact is, though, that both the Cayenne and the Gallardo now had an almost ocean-deep lustre, and without a trace of the ugly hologramming you so often see in darker colours – and, no less crucially as far as I'm concerned, none of that traditional chalk residue. Result!

Soaking the car with a hose again provides an even more graphic demonstration of the invisible shield created by the wax, with the water rolling up into minute beads and then simply falling off. That may in itself be a phenomenon with no practical value. The fact is, though, that in the early days of air racing some pilots polished their machines not just for looks, but also because it reduced their wind resistance, their drag, and made them that little bit faster. It's nice to think that, in theory at least, you can give your high-performance car a small but measurable performance boost simply by rubbing it with an almost entirely natural product that by chance also smells good enough to eat. And if water won't stick easily to the surface, then neither will dirt, making it that much easier to wash again in the future.

Cynics might argue, of course, that you'll get similar results from a £5 tub of polish from your local accessory store. Maybe so. And there's no doubt that some of the terminology used by the car-care industry as a whole is fanciful at best, and at worst (in this context, anyway) plain worrying. (Can you really 'nourish' paint?) No less disquieting is the cost of some of the products – typically £70

for a 200ml tub of Saphir wax. Behind it all, though, there's an undeniably serious purpose, and used correctly these products plainly do what's claimed of them. Besides, it's only the more exotic waxes that cost serious money – Onyx starts at around £40 for a 200ml tub – and, like all the world's truly innovative cleaning products, a little goes a long, long way. Swissvax suggests a 200ml tub should offer eight applications for the average-sized car, each of those lasting between eight weeks and a year depending upon the grade you've chosen.

I'm no car-care expert. But I do know a shiny car when I see one. And I do know that it can be very hard work to achieve that desirable state of affairs. In recent years I've come to justify the dirt on my own cars as some kind of protective layer – partly because the underlying paintwork is generally rather poor, and partly because in this respect at least I'm, well, lazy. Whether this Swissvax experience will make me mend my lamentable ways (the road to hell and all that...) I can't be sure – and no amount of high-tech polish is a substitute for a sound layer of well-maintained paint. But at least now I know from experience what the combination of carefully selected natural ingredients and modern technology can do if I bother to try. Neither, of course, can I vouch for the longevity of the shine my modest efforts managed to achieve on the Cayenne and the Lamborghini Gallardo. But I'm determined that my very first task when I finally get my 944 back on the road will be to give it the full Swissvax treatment, and then to find out for myself. I'll let you know! **!**

NATURAL SELECTION

The Swissvax range of car-care products has its origins in the carnauba-wax-based polish developed for Swiss chemist and entrepreneur Hans Anwander during the 1930s. This product was itself derived from a much older wax polish conceived in the 19th century, primarily for use on high-quality antique furniture.

Since then the company's range has developed and expanded to keep pace with the many changes in paint technology (and there's now a Swissvax product for looking after just about every other aspect of your car's body and trim), but at least one aspect of the production process hasn't changed. Each of the dozen or so waxes is still made essentially by hand using almost entirely natural ingredients – primarily first-grade Brazilian carnauba wax extracted from a plant that secretes the substance from its leaves, partly to protect them from the sun and partly to prevent moisture loss. It's easy to see why it should make such an effective car polish.

Inevitably this makes all of these polishes rather more costly than their mass-produced equivalents – there are only so many carnauba-producing palm trees available – but at the same time remarkably good value, too. A little, as we discovered when we used them, goes a very long way, indeed, and even if at £500 for a 200ml tub Swissvax Crystal Rock – claimed to be the most exclusive car wax in

the world – may cost more than many of us might spend buying our next set of tyres, the fact is that Onyx – £40 for 200ml – will in most practical respects do just as satisfying a job for the vast majority of us.

You might, incidentally, be just a little confused by the company name we've used throughout this feature. Here in the UK and the rest of the English-speaking world it markets its polishes under the Swissvax brand, an obvious enough derivation of Swisswachs. (*Wachs* is the German word for wax.) In the German-speaking world, though (Germany, Austria and not least the company's native Switzerland), it's Swizöl. There are various arcane and – for us, anyway – not particularly important reasons for this, but the fact is that both ranges are made to exactly the same high standards.

For more information go to www.swissvax.com, or www.swizol.com. There's also an excellent site at www.swissvaxporsche.com, which as its name might suggest is designed specifically to answer all of the questions likely to be asked by any Porsche enthusiast. It includes a comprehensive history of the company, details of the entire product range – and prices – and perhaps most importantly a full guide to precisely how to use them. There's also a secure on-line ordering facility for customers worldwide – and even a handy link to our own website at www.g11.porsche-world.com.