

Spotter's Guide to the 356 Models

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Speedster, T-5, pre-A, Convertible D, Carrera 2, SC, Roadster, 356 B, T-6, S-90, cabriolet, GT coupe, Continental.

All of the above are meaningful descriptions of various types of the Porsche 356 automobile. For the uninitiated however, they usually make no sense at all. To the untrained eye, all 356s look the same and determining whether one is looking at, say, a 1954 or a 1964 model is generally the result of a lucky guess rather than a logical conclusion following the observation of specific characteristics.

This article is meant as a "spotter's guide", i.e. it will hopefully enable you to pick up a number of major evolution reference points so that once you're on your own at a car show or at a 356 meet, you will be able to know what kind of 356 you're looking at and what model year it is. Please note that this article deals only with the street cars, and that any reference to a specific year means the model year, which does not necessarily correspond to the year of manufacture.

Finally, some helpful advice for differentiating between these cars. If you're not sure, try to work by elimination using major reference points. Imagine you're looking at a 356 coupe and you're trying to determine the year. It could be anywhere from 1950 to 1965. So what you do is narrow down until you can't go any further. For instance you look first at the windshield: that will tell you if the car was made before or after 1955. Then you look at the front fenders: that will tell you if it was made before or after 1960. Then you look at the front hood: that will tell you if it was made before or after 1962, and so on and so forth. Good luck and have fun.

Background

Except for the excessively rare 50 Gmünd cars manufactured in Austria for about two years, the Porsche 356 was built in Zuffenhausen near Stuttgart from 1950 to 1965. This is the first major reference point: 356 = 1950-1965.

Over those 15 years, four major model types are recognized: Type 356, Type 356A, Type 356B and Type 356C.

Type 356 is often called pre-A. This is not an official Factory designation but rather a convenient way of avoiding confusion and being generally more accurate when talking about the early cars.

In addition to these four major type designations, three additional ones are sometimes used: T-2, T-5 and T-6. These refer to different body types (not to be confused with body styles, i.e. coupe, cabriolet, etc.), but only the last two are commonly used for model identification.

Finally, body style is another confusing point. There are two basic 356 body styles: coupe and cabriolet. coupe is generally no problem as everyone knows that a coupe is a car with a fixed metal top. Things get a little more involved with the soft top version of the 356, as it can be a cabriolet, a Speedster, a Convertible or a Roadster, with often a combination of those in the same year (and in addition there can be a soft top with a hard top.). Are you getting really confused yet?

Engines basically follow a steady evolution from small displacement and adequate power to bigger displacement and more power. Except in the case of the Super 90 and the SC, engines are usually not relevant in identifying a model year, as other characteristics on the car will tell you more about the specific vintage.

This article deals with the different types of 356 in historical progression, i.e. pre-A (1950-1955), A (1956-1959), B (1960-1963) and C (1964-1965).

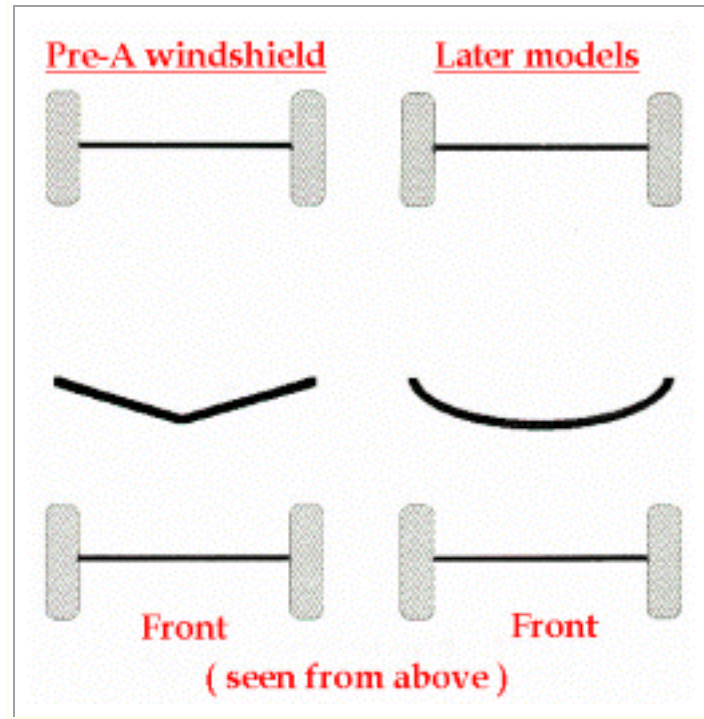
Type 356 (PRE-A) - 1950-1955

One word of caution where early cars are concerned: although there are general rules of thumb to differentiate between various model years, these are far from absolute. There are indeed numerous exceptions to the rules, due essentially to the fact that Porsche was at first a very small operation and supplies were not always readily available so the Factory had to manage with what they had on hand. This is evidenced by photos taken at the time (not photos of restored cars). So remember that there are no absolutes but only general rules of thumb for the early cars.

Major characteristics

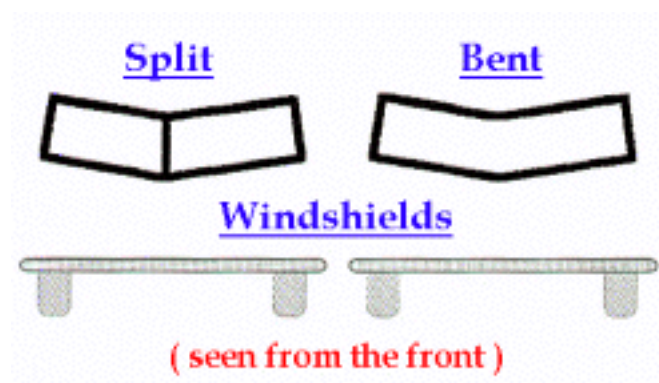
The most significant feature of the pre-A is the windshield: look at the windshield and you will always be able to tell if the car was made before 1956 or not. Everything else takes a back seat to this foolproof reference point.

The pre-A windshield (in its 2 configurations) is unique and easily recognizable. As seen from above the car, it is shaped like a wide open V (whereas all post-1955 windshields are curved), except for the Speedster of course.



This rule applies to both the steel top version (coupe) and soft top version (cabriolet), but not to the Speedster, which always had a special curved windshield.

Since it would be no fun if things were that easy, there are two different types of pre-A windshield (both in the shape of a wide open V): the SPLIT windshield and the BENT windshield (the latter not to be confused with the curved windshield). Both have the same shape, but the split windshield is made of 2 pieces of glass joined in the middle by a big vertical rubber strip while the bent windshield is a single piece of glass with a vertical crease in the middle.



Split windshields were used for about 2 years (April 1950 - April 1952) and bent windshields until the introduction of the 356A in 1956. So remember: pre-A = 1950-1955 with split windshield (1950-1952) and bent windshield (1952-1955).

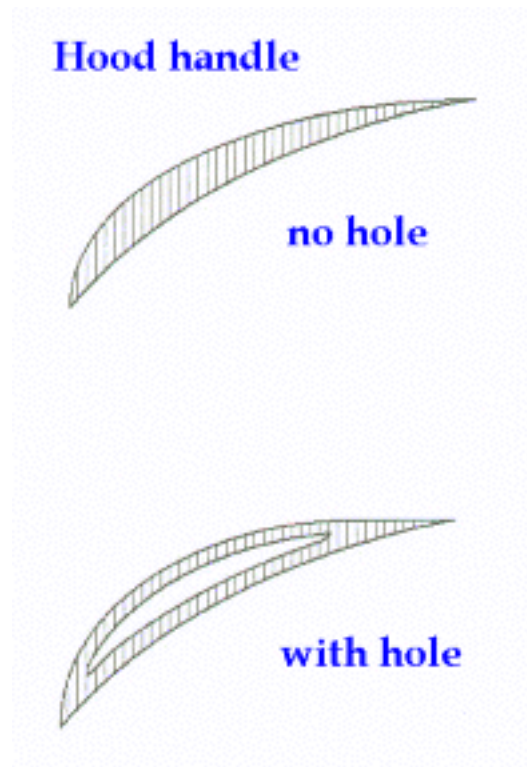
In order to accommodate these windshields, the edge of the roof has a typical "peak" in the centre.

Once you have determined that the car you are looking at is a pre-A, how can you more accurately pinpoint the specific model year, apart from the change of windshield in 1952?

A number of visible and not so visible changes were made over those six years.

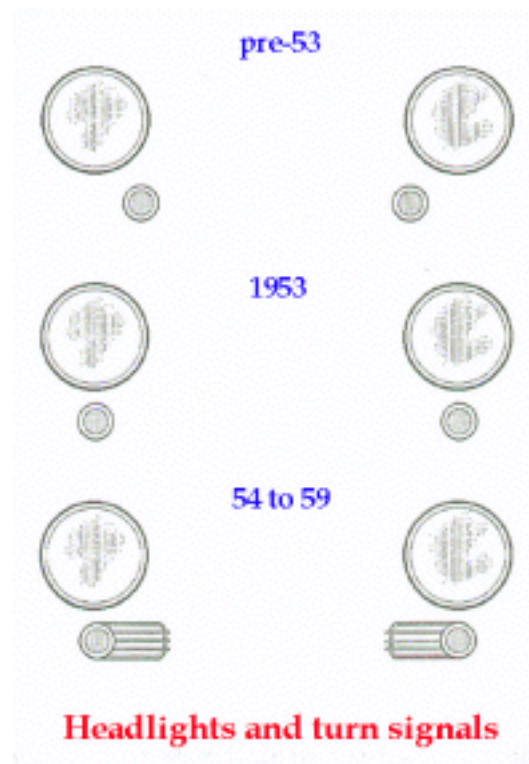
Between March and September 1952, the split windshield was replaced by the bent windshield and, on cars exported to North America, the early "body" bumpers were replaced by "interim" bumpers. The early bumpers appeared to be attached to the body but were in fact removable. The interim bumpers are mounted slightly away from the body and are larger. They are similar to the late pre-A and A bumpers but they wrap around the front and rear fenders to a much larger extent.

A slightly different hood handle appeared in mid-1952. The first hood handle was thin and short and had no hole. It was replaced by the same type of handle, except that the new one had a hole and had more of a "hump" to accommodate the hole. Here again, there was some overlapping as some earlier models had the hole while some later models had no hole. Anyway, the change occurred some time in 1952.

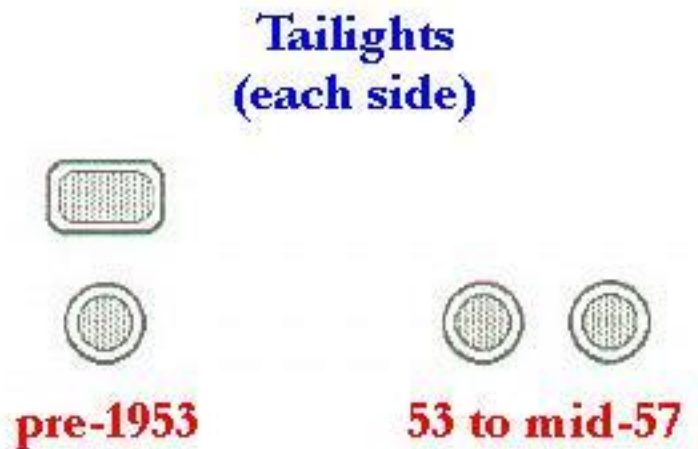


From 1950 to mid-1957, the rear license plate light assembly is mounted above the license plate (commonly called "shine down" as opposed to "shine up" after mid-1957).

1953 cars are easy to spot as opposed to earlier and later pre-A's. In the front, the turn signals were moved directly below the headlights (while they were more "in-board" on earlier models) and are of the stand-alone type (as opposed to 1954 and later).



In the rear, the round and rectangular taillights were replaced by two round (called "beehive") taillights side by side on each fender for the 1953 model year.



For 1954, another change was made which makes this vintage easily recognizable. The turn signals on the front were mounted in combination with a horn grille below each headlight. This grille was designed to allow cooling air to reach the front brakes as well as to provide an opening

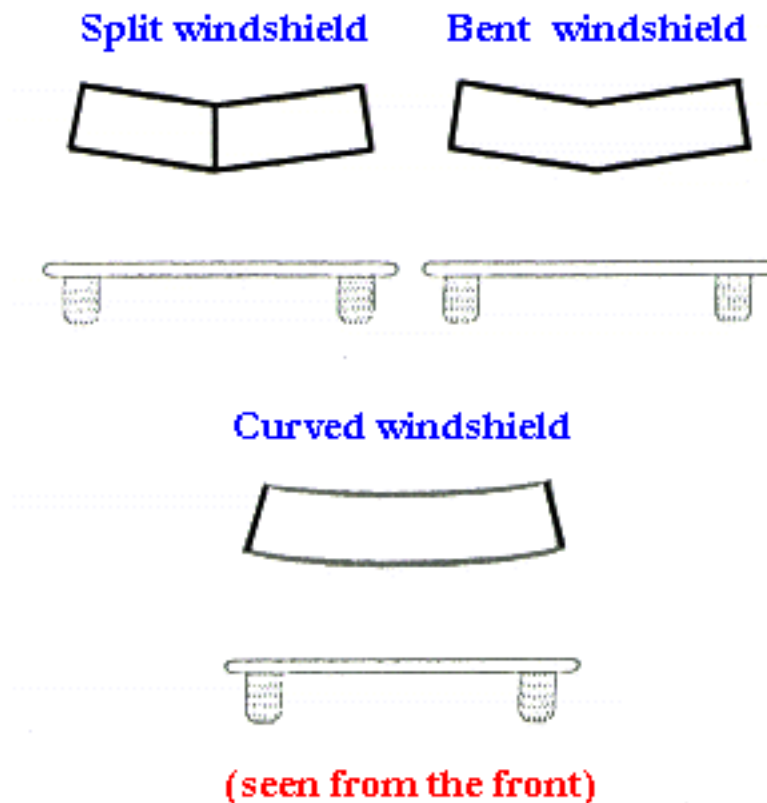
for the horn. This feature cannot be considered on its own however as it was carried over until the introduction of the 356B in 1960, which had a different grille and turn signal.

You may get a little confused when you look at a 1955 model, but this confusion is in itself your indication of the 1955 vintage. I mentioned before that there were two types of pre-A hood handles, one without a hole and one with a hole and a hump, both of them without a crest. A new type of hood handle appeared for 1955: the A hood handle, on a pre-A model. This handle is bigger and much longer and has a crest on it. So if you see a pre-A body with an A hood handle, you know it is a 1955 model. In addition, a number of 1955 models had the "Continental" script on the front fenders.

In summary, pre-A = 1950-1955. Major characteristics: split or bent windshield, shine-down license plate light, 16-inch wheels, small polished-aluminum hood handle (except 1955).

TYPE 356 A (1956-1959)

The major feature differentiating the pre-A from the A is again the windshield. All windshields are now curved, i.e. they form a smooth arc from one side of the car to the other, as does the roof (the "peak" previously required to accomodate the pre-A windshield having been eliminated).



The body remains basically unchanged, with the front having its typical rounded fenders with low mounted headlights. The hood handle was the one with the crest used in 1955 models.

On the side, the rocker panels are now flat, as seen in perspective from the front of the car (while they curved inwards on the pre-A) and a deco strip which was on all pre-A Speedsters and late 1955 coupes and carbiolets was added with a large rubber insert, as opposed to the B where the insert is thinner.

Wheels are 15-inch whereas the pre-A had 16-inch rims. Also, as a result of the new windshield shape, the dash has been redesigned and is now curved to follow the shape of the glass instead of being "pointy" as in the pre-A.

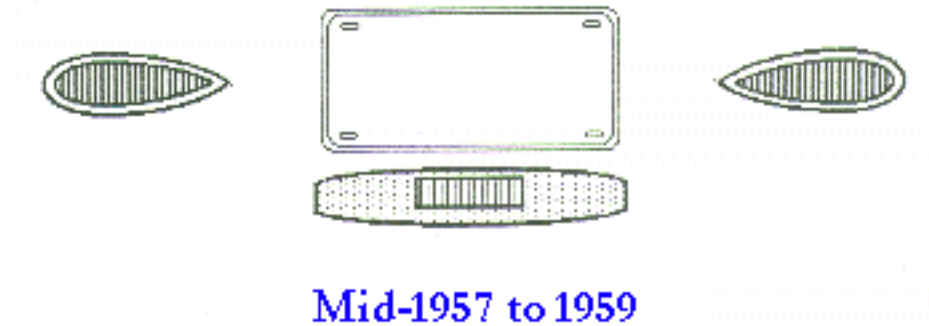
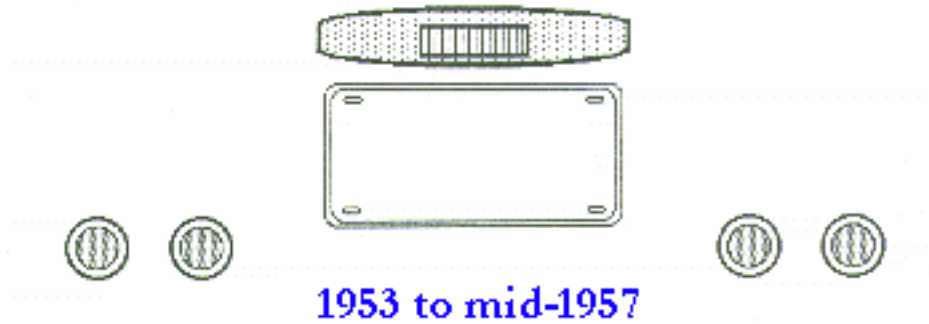
So far so good, everything is fairly straightforward. But things get a little more complicated in 1957 and 1958, so hang on to your Nomex.

In mid 1956, overriders tubes (supposedly for increased protection) were added to the front and rear bumpers on the U.S. models. So the fact that the car you're looking at does not have those may or may not be significant, depending on whether it is a European or U.S. model. In addition, they are often removed on restored cars. On top of that, these overrider tubes were first fairly low over the front bumper (1957) but were raised higher in February 1959; plus they were first one piece on the rear bumper (1957) and then 2-piece (mid-1957). Finally, the overriders were offered as an option on European models.

For 1957 also, the shape of the door handles was slightly modified and looked more rounded in its rear section.

March 1957 is a major reference point to tell cars apart. In the rear, two significant changes were made: the beehive taillights used since 1953 were replaced by a one-piece teardrop unit on each side while the housing for the license plate light and back-up light was moved from above the license plate ("shine down") to below the license plate ("shine up").

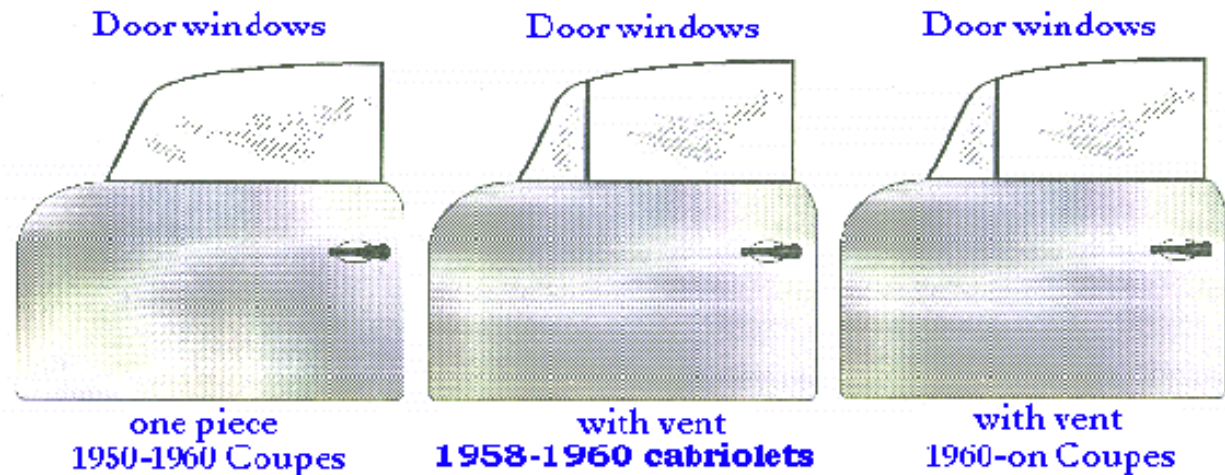
Rear lights



Model year 1958 saw the introduction of the T-2 body. This reference is not used very often as visible differences are few. The major one is the door striker plate, which was moved lower than in previous models and was held by 3 screws instead of 5.

Another telltale change is the exhaust. The two exhaust pipes now exit through the lower part of each bumper guard (except on Carrera models).

In addition, cabriolets now sport vent windows (coupes only have them starting in 1960 with the T-5 body).



Finally, inside, the ashtray was moved from the face of the dash on the right to under the dash in the centre.

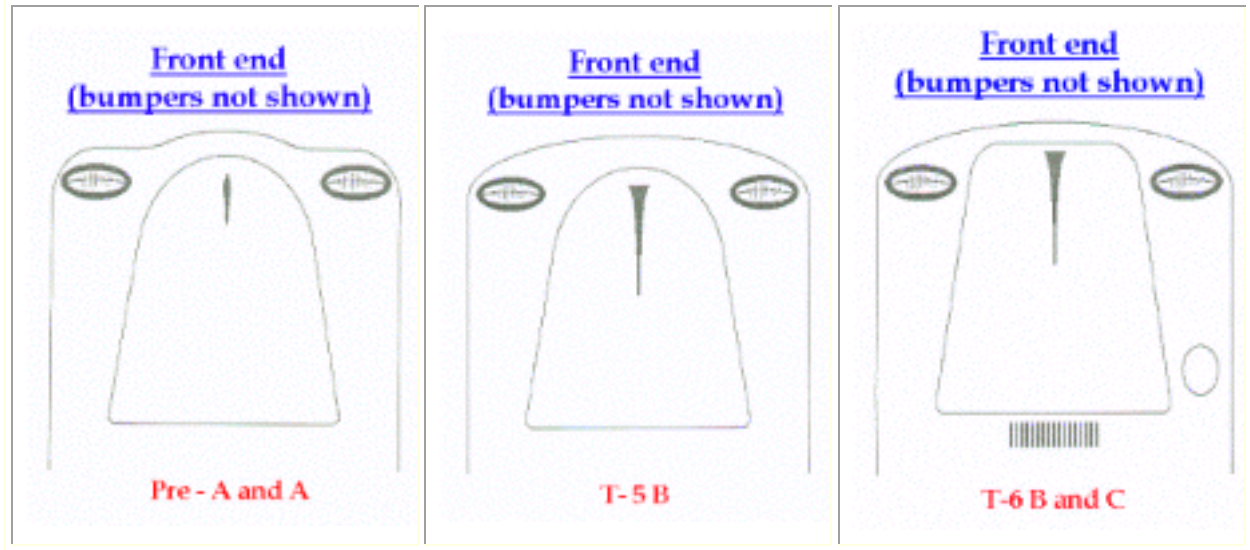
Apart from the higher overrider tubes, no significant changes were made for 1959. This was the last year of the Type 356 A, which was replaced in 1960 by the 356 B and the T-5 body.

TYPE 356 B (1960-1963)

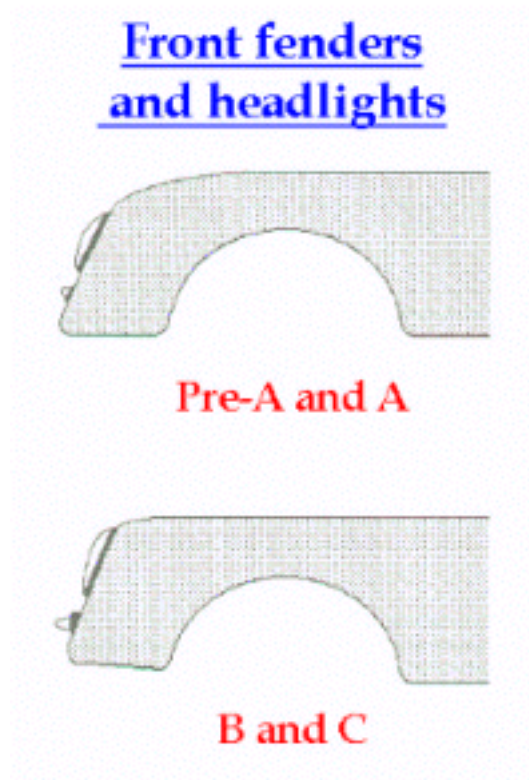
Model year 1960 is a milestone in the evolution of the 356, with the introduction of the T-5 bodied 356 B. There were both major and minor changes compared to previous models.

The most striking changes are those made to the front end. The hood is flatter, with a massive chrome handle (as opposed to polished aluminum on the Pre-A and the A). The bumpers are higher and bigger, and have a "pointy" shape. They also have large chrome guards.

The sheet metal was also revised. Seen from above, the front end now makes a smooth curve from side to side, instead of a "wave" as on pre-A and A models.



The headlights have been raised and the front fenders make a nearly straight line from the windshield posts to the headlights.



The horn grille and turn signals are different from the A cars. The grille does not come in contact with the body as on previous models, but is mounted from inside the fender and consists of only 2 horizontal anodized aluminum blades. Under the bumper, a new large opening has been added on each side, with grilles or optional foglights.

The 1960 model year is also the last year of the front mounted Porsche script. All coupes now sport vent windows.

In the rear, the bumper has also been raised and is similar to the front one (cone shape with large guards). Two license plate lights are mounted on the rear bumper. The pre-A and A license plate light assembly is therefore no longer used. The backup light is integrated into the body, under the bumper. The taillight units remain the same. Free standing reflectors appear either above the taillights (U.S.) or below the bumper (European).

Following this landmark evolution of the type in 1960, the Factory rested for a year and no major changes were made for 1961.

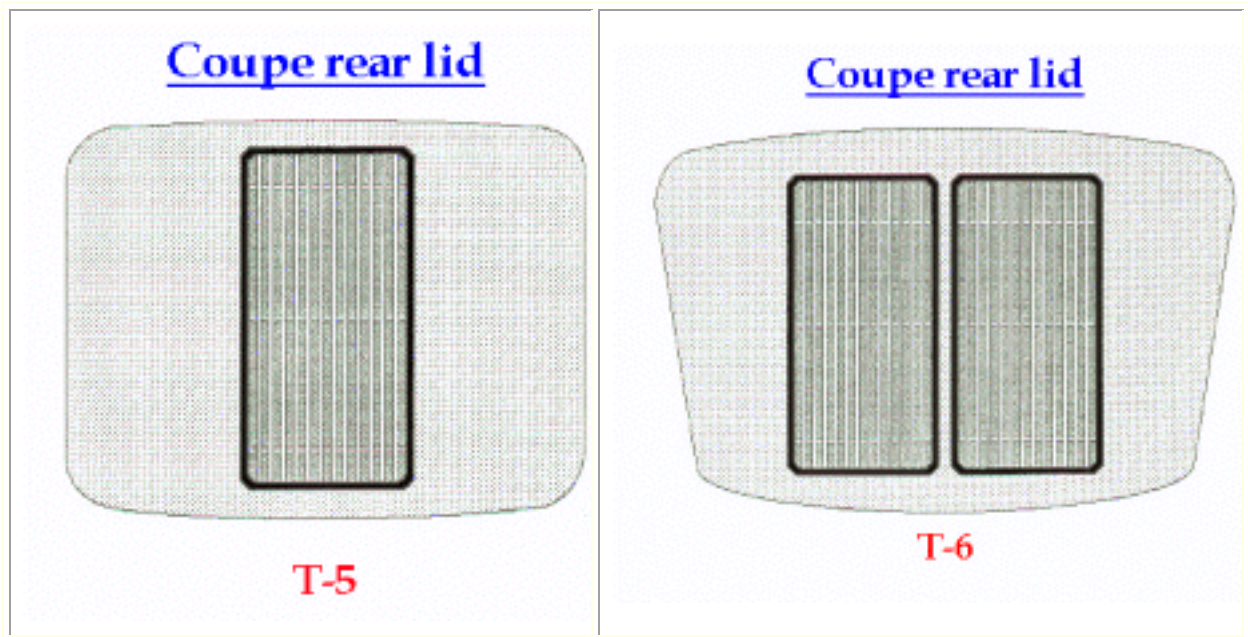
The T-6 body type was introduced for the 1962 model year, and this will need some clarification as many people get really confused and are more often than not mixed up with the B, C, T-5 and T-6 designations.

The B and C designations refer to car type while the T-5 and T-6 designations refer to body type (body type not to be confused either with body style).

The 356 B was introduced in 1960 with a T-5 body. In 1962, the T-6 body type was introduced but the car was still a 356 B. The T-6 body was used from 1962 to 1965 but in 1964 the 356 B was replaced by the 356 C, with of course a T-6 body.

Now, if you're just as confused as before, a little diagram may help.

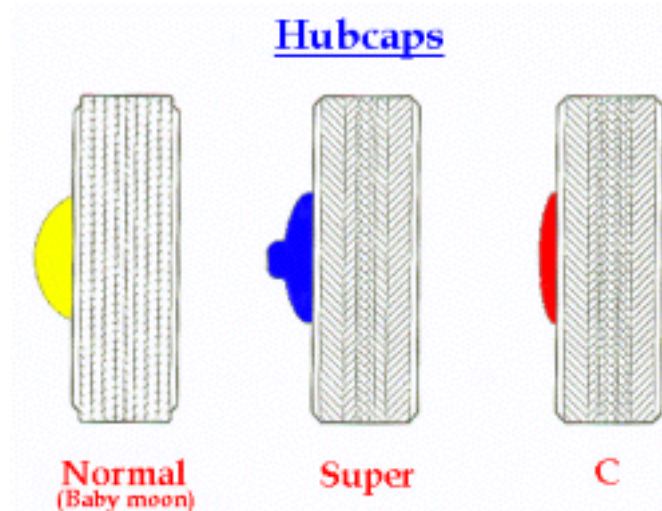
Year	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
Body type	T5	T5	T6	T6	T6	T6
Car type	356B	356B	356B	356B	356C	356C
Body style	coupe	coupe	coupe	coupe	coupe	coupe
Body style	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet
Body style	Roadster	Roadster	Roadster			



The T-6 356 B remained in production until the advent of the final evolution of the genre in 1964, the 356 C.

TYPE 356 C - 1964-1965

The 356 C was introduced for 1964 and, as everybody now knows, was a T-6 body type model. The only outward difference between a T-6 B and a C is the wheels, or more precisely the hubcaps. There were basically three types of hubcaps over the entire 15 years of production: the Baby Moon, the Super and the C.



The C hubcaps are like a disk (with or without a Porsche crest in the center). They are flat, as opposed to the other two types. These hubcaps indicate that you are looking at a car with four disc brakes, the 356 C.

There were a couple of other minor changes but none of them visible outside the car. The 1964 and 1965 cars are the last of the 356s, culminating with the top of the line SC engine (in pushrod trim) and the Carrera 2 engine (in 4-cam trim).

coupe, cabriolet, Speedster, Convertible D, Roadster, Hardtop

356 soft-top body styles are a major point of confusion for the uninitiated. I should have a dollar for each time I was told that I had a beautiful Convertible (which was in fact a Roadster) or that so and so was looking for a Speedster (when he actually wanted a cabriolet).

We all know what a coupe is, right? It's a car with a fixed steel top, as opposed to a soft-top model. The answer is basically "yes" as far as 356s are concerned (we'll come back to that later).

Now for the hard stuff. A Porsche 356 with a soft top can be a cabriolet, a Speedster, a Convertible D or a Roadster. Let's try to make some sense out of that.

A cabriolet is the soft-top equivalent of a coupe. The way to tell a cabriolet is to look at the windshield frame. The cabriolet windshield frame is the same shape as the coupe and is painted the same color as the rest of the body.

On the other hand, Speedsters, Convertible D's and Roadsters are special cars that do not correspond to an equivalent coupe model. Here again, they can be told apart by their windshield frame. Since the cabriolet and the coupe are related, but the others aren't, it follows that you can have three body styles in the same model year, i.e. a coupe and a cabriolet, plus one of Speedster, Convertible D or Roadster (depending on the year) but you cannot have a Speedster, a Convertible D or a Roadster in the same year. For those getting really confused, a little diagram will be useful.

Pre-A	Pre-A	356 A	356 A	356 A	356 A
1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
coupe	coupe	coupe	coupe	coupe	coupe
cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet
Speedster	Speedster	Speedster	Speedster	Speedster	Convertible D

356 B	356 B	356 B
1960	1961	1962
coupe	coupe	coupe
cabriolet	cabriolet	cabriolet
Roadster	Roadster	Roadster

coupe and cabriolet only for all other years (except for 17 completely different America Roadsters in 1952).

So the cabriolet is like a coupe but with a soft top and with the windshield frame painted the same color as the body.

On the other hand, the Speedster, the Convertible D and the Roadster all have removable (to a point) chrome windshield frames. Here is how to tell them apart.

The first to come along was the Speedster. It was built from 1954 to 1958. A Speedster can therefore be a pre-A or an A. It has a low, thin chrome windshield frame, with rounded upper corners.

The Convertible D (D stands for the body maker Drauz) was manufactured for the 1959 model year only. It is therefore an A. The chrome windshield posts are bigger and higher than the

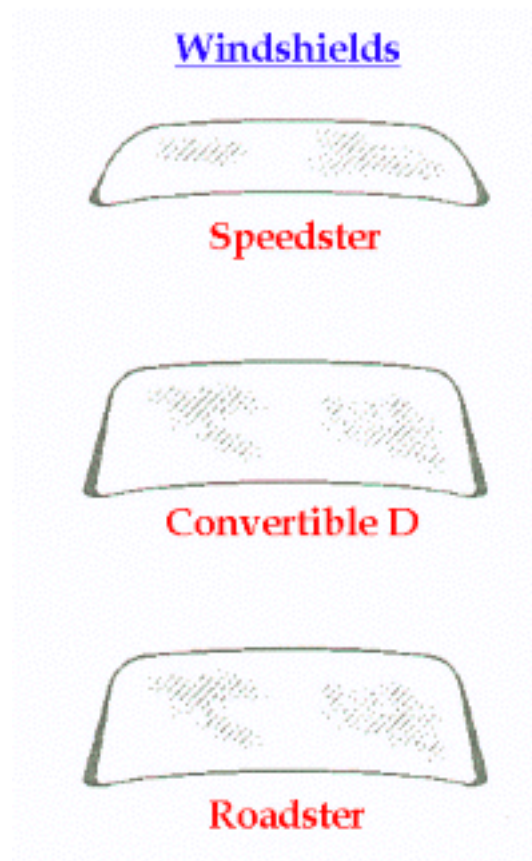
Speedster, and the two upper corners make an angle with the top of the chrome windshield frame (as opposed to the rounded corners on the Speedster).

The Roadster replaced the Convertible D in 1960. It is therefore a B car, but with the same chrome windshield frame as the Convertible D. It was manufactured until 1962, which means that the Roadster can be a T-5 or a T-6. The T-6 Roadster is known as the Twin-Grille Roadster and is extremely rare, as fewer than 250 were built, starting with #89601, with which I was intimately acquainted at some time.

Let's have another of my little diagrams to recap all this.

Speedster	Speedster	Convertible D	Roadster	Roadster
1954-1955	1956-1958	--- 1959 ---	1960-1961	--- 1962 ---
Pre-A	---- A ----	---- A ----	T-5 ---- 356 B	T-6 ---- 356 B

Plus, of course, for all those years, the coupe and the cabriolet.



One final oddity in the 356 saga: the Karmann Hardtop (also called the Notchback).

We all know that a hardtop is a removable steel (or sometimes fiberglass) roof designed to fit on a cabriolet. Removable hardtops were available for Speedsters and cabriolets either as a Factory option or aftermarket. The "Karmann Hardtop" or "Notchback" was essentially a cabriolet body with a fixed hardtop welded in place. It looked like a cabriolet with a hardtop but was in fact equivalent to a coupe since the top could not be removed. This model was built for 1961 and 1962 and less than 2,300 were made. They are easily recognizable due to their special shape and can be differentiated from a cabriolet with a hardtop in place by the uninterrupted sheet metal coming down the side of the rear window and blending into the rear cowl (whereas on a real cab with a hardtop, there is a gap between the base of the rear window and the rear cowl).

Car Type	Body Type	YEAR	Body Style	Body Style	Body Style	Body Style
Pre-A	-	1950	coupe	cabriolet		
Pre-A	-	1951	coupe	cabriolet		
Pre-A	-	1952	coupe	cabriolet		
Pre-A	-	1953	coupe	cabriolet		
Pre-A	-	1954	coupe	cabriolet	Speedster	
Pre-A	-	1955	coupe	cabriolet	Speedster	
A	-	1956	coupe	cabriolet	Speedster	
A	-	1957	coupe	cabriolet	Speedster	
A	T-2	1958	coupe	cabriolet	Speedster	
A	T-2	1959	coupe	cabriolet	Convertible D	
B	T-5	1960	coupe	cabriolet	Roadster	
B	T-5	1961	coupe	cabriolet	Roadster	Karmann Hardtop

B	T-6	1962	coupe	cabriolet	Roadster	Karmann Hardtop
B	T-6	1963	coupe	cabriolet		
C	T-6	1964	coupe	cabriolet		
C	T-6	1965	coupe	cabriolet		

PORSCHE 356 1950-1965

Type 356 (pre-A)	1950:	Split windshield. "Body" bumpers. "Crash box" transmission. 16-inch wheels. No hole hood handle. Inboard front turn signals. One round and one rectangular taillight (each side). Shine down license plate light. Single engine lid grille. Wood trim on top of doors.
Type 356 (pre-A)	1952 :	Bent windshield. Interim bumpers. Hood handle with hole. No more wood trim on top of door.
Type 356 (pre-A)	1953 :	Syncromesh gearbox. A-style bumpers. Turn signals moved directly below headlights. 2 round beehive taillights on each side.
Type 356 (pre-A)	1954 :	Horn grille with front turn signals.
Type 356	1955 :	Bigger hood handle with crest (A type)

(pre-A)		
Type 356 A	1956 :	Curved windshield. Flat rocker panel. 15-inch wheels.Redesigned dash.
Type 356 A	1957 :	Override tubes added on bumpers of U.S. models.
Type 356 A	Mid 1957 :	Beehive taillights replaced by single teardrop unit on each side. Shine up license plate light. Split rear override tubes on U.S. models.
Type 356 A	1958 :	T-2 body. Exhaust through bumper guards. Front turn signals mounted on wedge base. Ashtray under dash. Rounded door handles.
Type 356 A	1959 :	Higher override tubes.
Type 356 B	1960 :	T-5 body: in the front, bigger and higher bumpers with big bumper guards. Higher headlights and nearly straight fenders. Flattened hood with larger chrome handle. Revised horn grille and turn signal, with additional grilles under bumper. Last year of front mounted Porsche script. Vent windows on coupes. In the rear, bigger and higher bumpers also, no license plate/back-up light assembly, but 2 license plate lights on bumper and back-up light integrated in body under the bumper.
Type 356 B	1962 :	T-6 body: slightly different roof line due to larger windshield and rear window (coupes only). Larger engine lid (coupes only). Twin-grille. Air intake at base of windshield (except Roadster). Squared-off front hood. Gas filler trap on right front fender.
Type 356 C	1964 :	Disc brakes. Flat hubcaps.
Type 356 C	1965 :	End of production