

2013 Ferrari F12 Berlinetta First Drive

The Most Impressive Thing About the Fastest and Most Powerful Ferrari Ever Isn't the Horsepower



Ferrari's legendary 1.9-mile Fiorano test circuit hosts an intelligently arranged series of turns that provide a clear picture of a vehicle's handling. Or so I'm told. I remember little of my three laps there in the 2013 F12 Berlinetta besides the engine screaming flat out into fifth gear on the barely half-mile straight. My shock wasn't with the velocity itself -- such speeds are routine with 731 horsepower -- but with the ease and comfort with which it was attained.

A lap around Fiorano is short. Ferrari says the F12's best is 1 min 23 sec, making it not only 3.5 seconds faster than the 599 it replaces, but the fastest road-going prancing horse-badged supercar ever -- Enzo included. Zero to 60 mph? Three seconds. Top speed? Comfortably over 200 mph -- in seventh gear. Superlatives don't get much more super, but more impressive than the F12's empirical accomplishments is that it serves up its performance with the smiling efficiency of an In-N-Out drive through.



My few, discombobulating laps revealed a supercar that is remarkably compliant and very easy to drive fast. The half-day I spent along a two-lane mountain road highlighted an incredible overall ease of use -- and some pre-production glitches: A slow navigation system and the occasional clunky gear change at low speeds.

The F12 is Ferrari's current flagship (at least until the end of this year, when the next Enzo will be revealed) and has the armament to support that title. The main battery is a direct injected and oversquare 6.3-liter V-12 with a 13.5:1 compression ratio. Peak torque doesn't arrive until 6000 rpm, but rolling onto the throttle in any gear at in any rpm produces immediate acceleration. Gs build exponentially as you approach the 8700 rpm redline and the sound it produces at full song would put the vocal belters on American Idol to shame. Lift off the throttle and the exhaust emits a muffled staccato of pops and burbles. It's downright orchestral.

The V-12 sits behind the front axle and 1.2 inches lower than the 599's mill, helping lower the F12's center of gravity by 1.0 inch. The car also weighs 154 pounds less, thanks in part to a beautiful aluminum chassis that forms the gorgeous proportions. The F12 is smaller than the 599 in every exterior dimension, but as a large number of

customers will drive this car daily and for higher average distances, Ferrari took extra care to keep the its interior space similar.

It takes a mile or so to acclimate to the steering, which has the delicacy and gravity of a katana. Its lightness allows the driver to rotate through its two turns lock-to-lock with a thumb and trigger finger, and yet, the wheel offers an immense amount of feedback, clearly relaying not just the onset of understeer or oversteer, but precisely how to correct it. The bottom right of the wheel holds Ferrari's famous five-position dial (manettino) that commands an array of computer-controlled subsystems.





Make no mistake: The F12 is a car driven by technological advancement, but it masks its numerous processors well. Its twin-clutch gearbox makes immediate and well-controlled shifts, never disrupting the chassis. While approaching a slow speed corner, you can hold the downshift lever and the transmission will drop as many gears as revs will allow.

The electronic rear differential -- not to mention nearly two feet in width worth of Michelin rear tire offers fabulous traction on corner exit. Working in conjunction with Ferrari's stellar F1 traction control system, the differential searches between open and full lock, always aiming to reduce the need for steering input. It feels like there's a miniature wizard in there, dolling out torque with magic. Interestingly, Track mode locks up the differential more aggressively and relies on traction control to reel in more clumsy maneuvers. Turning traction control off actually reduces lock.

-

At all four corners sit a new generation of magnetorheological fluid-filled shocks (based on the same Magneride system found in the Ferrari California and Corvette ZR1). A secondary electromagnetic coil helps the shocks to react in as little as 5 milliseconds to changing road conditions, resulting in superb ride quality that feels appropriate for a car at this level of performance -- taut and firm, but not uncomfortable. The carbon ceramic brakes, which Ferrari redesigned in search for more consistent feel versus the 599, offer progressive and linear application along with shorter stopping distances. When the large, 15.7-inch front rotors get too hot, vents on the side of the fascia open automatically and draw air in.



Such air management is the result of extensive use of computational fluid dynamics and wind tunnel testing, in which Ferrari's philosophy was to find improvements through subtracting bodywork rather than by adding components. An opening at the top of each fender that exits behind the front wheels is called the "Aero Bridge," and while the styling may not age well, Ferrari claims it reduces drag and helps the F12 generate 271 pounds of downforce at 124 mph. The rear blends aerodynamic function and aesthetics more gracefully than the bridge and the F1-inspired fog light is simply cool.

Technological and aerodynamic advancements seem to leak out of every detail in the F12's beautifully sculpted lines, and more are coming. Soon, Ferrari will even offer Internet applications accessible through the infotainment system (brag-plaining on Facebook goes to a whole new level). But what separates the F12 from other techno-wonder supercars is that the hardware and software don't take center stage. No, they function like the headlights, shining brightly on the road ahead.