

2012 Ferrari FF

Ferrari builds a four-wheel-drive wagon—and it's just as thrilling as anything else prancing out of Maranello.

March 2011

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As I'm driving through hairpin corners in the Dolomite Mountains of the South Tyrol region of Italy, the Ferrari FF's two-door wagon body style is the last thing on my mind, which is interesting because it's probably the first thing anyone else would notice about the latest four-seater from Maranello. Instead, my most pressing thought, besides not dropping a \$300,000 GT car off a cliff, is the FF's four-wheel-drive system, which has so tamed the 651-hp V-12 engine that a tail-out hero photo of a drifting FF requires serious commitment with the stability control fully switched off. When the back end finally does come around, though, it does so in a predictable, gentle manner. In sport mode, the sportiest of the five chassis settings accessible via the steering-wheel-mounted *manettino* knob, the back of the car hardly wiggles on dry pavement.

But the first roadgoing Ferrari to put power to all four wheels doesn't understeer like so many other four-wheel-drive sports cars. It's actually mostly neutral through corners. Ferrari engineers repeatedly explained to us that the front wheels are used mostly for traction in bad weather and that power is otherwise shunted to the rear wheels as much as possible. Based on a cockpit display of power to the front wheels (we were told the display won't be on customer cars), however, that's not entirely true, as the system activates on almost every uphill corner if you request full power.

Without the display, the only clue the FF isn't rear-wheel drive is the aforementioned lack of oversteer. There's no torque steer, no power-on push. And so it seems that the biggest compliment we can pay to the FF's groundbreaking four-wheel drive is, paradoxically, that it's not really a big deal.



What is a big deal, of course, is the FF's body, a shape known to most of the world as a three-door hatchback, or a shooting brake. The latter term dates to the days of horses and carriages. In more modern times, it represents a sporty car in which a gentleman has enough room to carry his guns and hunting dogs. But Ferrari doesn't necessarily prescribe a tweed jacket and a couple of hounds for customers (of which there will be about 1000 per year worldwide); it sees the FF simply as an evolution of the GT car with more cargo space and more mobility than its predecessor, the 612 Scaglietti, had. Heck, this Ferrari even has cruise control and cup holders. How's that for progress?

Evolutionary Styling...and Chrysler Nav?

The V-12 sits entirely behind the front axle, and it resides within a snout that brings to mind cars like the original BMW M coupe or even the Jaguar E-type. Aside from the rear and its familiar round taillights, the Pininfarina-styled FF is an evolutionary step in styling away from Ferrari's California and 458 Italia, with headlights that stretch back along the front fenders and functional vents and ducts scattered about. Inside, the nozzle-shaped vents recall those of the 612 Scaglietti as well as the 599GTO. But living among the vents on the dash, we find the FF's biggest disappointment: a stereo-and-navigation unit common to the entire Chrysler family. It's not only disgracefully downmarket but also not very good. Primary map functions, such as zooming in and out, must be done with fussy touchscreen buttons. The steering wheel, like the one in the 458 Italia, houses the turn-signal and wiper controls, leaving the giant paddle shifters as the only protrusions from the steering column. The instrument cluster features a giant center-mounted tachometer flanked by two high-resolution LCDs. The right display shows speed as a digital readout or a conventional dial, and it displays the rear camera's feed when reverse is engaged. The left display shows accessory dials, navigation and trip information, and any warning lights. Front-seat passengers can be entertained by an optional screen that shows engine and vehicle speed or trip information.



The rear seats are accessed by pulling up big aluminum handles on the side of each front seat to move them forward electronically. Ingress to the rear involves basically falling into the snug seat, although once you're planted, there's plenty of head- and legroom. Rear passengers sit slightly higher than those up front, stadium-style, and well-behaved sub-six-footers should last a few hours without complaint, or perhaps longer with the optional rear-seat entertainment system. Taller folk will fit, albeit less comfortably. The rear seats fold in a 60/40 split and feature a center-section pass-through. Seats up, the FF's 16 cubic feet of storage beat the Porsche Panamera's 15.7, but the FF loses to the Porsche with the seats folded, 28 cubes to 45.

More Space *and* More Power than an Enzo

The FF's engine shares its bore spacing and 65-degree -V angle with that of the Enzo and 599, but the FF gets a new block and heads plus direct injection. That and a 12.3:1 (!) compression ratio and an engine stop/start system result in a claimed 25-percent reduction in fuel consumption. We expect the FF to travel a few more mpg than the 612's 9 mpg city/16 mpg highway EPA ratings. The FF's V-12 is the most powerful Ferrari road-car engine ever built, with 651 hp at 8000 rpm and 504 lb-ft of torque at 6000 rpm. The latter seems lofty, but 369 lb-ft are available at 1000 rpm. The FF's engine doesn't lurch if you lift off the throttle near the 8000-rpm redline. Such behavior is particularly appreciated when you're jumping on and off the go pedal just to hear the exhaust run through the six-into-one headers as you blast through a tunnel, which we did endlessly—or, for that matter, during a launch-control-enabled acceleration run, which we estimate will propel the FF to 60 in 3.5 seconds. We still have chills 24 hours after returning the keys.

The FF's seven-speed dual-clutch automatic gearbox sits at the rear of the car and is partly responsible for the 47/53-percent front-to-rear weight distribution. The electronic rear differential has been integrated into the gearbox housing, and all the chassis and powertrain control systems—for the magnetic adaptive shocks, stability control, four-wheel drive, and electronic differential—are integrated into a single module.



At the front of the engine lies a *second transmission*, and it's this unit that makes the FF's four-wheel-drive system so revolutionary. This so-called power transfer unit (PTU) consists of two forward gears (plus reverse) that route power through computer-controlled clutch packs, one for each front wheel. The lower of the two front gears is about six percent higher than second gear in the rear transaxle, and the higher gear is similarly taller than the rear's fourth. For the first four forward gears, the PTU slips the clutches in low or high gear to match the rear-wheel speed and provide extra traction. At most, 20 percent of available torque can be sent forward.

Exorbitantly Priced Cars, Elaborate Demonstrations

As we mentioned, Ferrari stresses that the four-wheel-drive system is primarily intended to offer all-weather capability, even going so far as to helicopter two cars to the top of a ski slope and build a small winter-weather test track. On factory-approved Pirelli winter tires, the FF moves around without much trouble. In the *manettino's* ice-and-snow setting, the FF stays well within the limits of grip, and the stability control acts so smoothly that little of the tussle for traction makes its way to the driver. (In the other settings—wet, comfort, sport, and ESC off—the FF demonstrates a more rotation-happy nature.) In low-grip situations, most cars generally understeer as the front tires lose traction, resulting in frequent car-on-snowbank action. In dry, high-grip situations, however, understeer is generally considered good for less-skilled drivers, in that it can be corrected by a person's natural instinct to hit the brakes. Keeping this in mind, we find the snow driving reveals a neat trick in the 4WD system's programming: The FF uses its four-wheel drive to reduce understeer in the snow and keep the handling predictable in the dry.



Absent wetness, the FF moves through corners effortlessly. Actually, the FF does pretty much everything with a smooth effortlessness. Whereas the 599 and 612 exhibit body roll and some reluctance to change direction, the FF's front end responds sharply, and its cornering attitude is more composed. Some of this is due to the quick (2.3 turns lock-to-lock), perfectly precise steering, although it does lack some feel. Through corners, the steering wheel loads up only slightly, and bumps are completely isolated from the driver. It's refined and suitable to the long-haul *gran turismo* driving mission of the FF, but we'd like a little more information for our fingertips. The brakes also want a bit for tactility, with a long pedal travel that requires increasing force to achieve ABS-level stopping. We'd prefer a shorter, stiffer brake pedal. But there's no shortage of stopping power, and the third-generation Brembo carbon-ceramic discs are as easy to modulate as any carbon binders we've tried. Luckily, things like the brakes and transmission (it refused to downshift below fourth gear at highway speeds in full automatic mode) can still be tweaked before North American deliveries start in November.

Not Already in Line? Bummer

Of course, if you've been waiting to read our review before putting in your order for an FF, you're going to wait a lot longer than November, as the first year of production is already sold out. But if you have the money, the FF is worth the wait. It's not an all-out sports car like the 458 Italia (nor is it even as sporty as the Porsche Panamera), it doesn't have the all-conquering comfort of cars in the Mercedes-Benz CL-class, and it's not a wholly emotional car that transcends all subjective measures. But if you consider any of these things a priority, you can look elsewhere and find a number of more affordable and possibly quicker options. Those who remain in the Ferrari camp, however, will be rewarded with a highly exclusive car that has world-class performance, all-day comfort, and newfound all-weather capability. In evolving its GT car, Ferrari has hit the mark.