

Ferrari FF review

The latest Ferrari supercar boasts seating for four, all-weather capability – and 650bhp. Meet the amazing FF.

If the idea of a 651bhp Ferrari you can drive across a ploughed field strikes you as faintly ridiculous, then perhaps a Ferrari you can drive to a ski resort seems less so. In fact, you won't be allowed into Gstaad next year if you haven't got an FF.

"Snow is new for us," says Franco Cimatti, Ferrari's technical director. Early testing on a 599 mule packed snow into the transmission coolers in front of the rear wheels, with predictable results. "We have had to change the shape of Ferrari," he says.

For me, the four-wheel drive side, while technically interesting, is less important than the shape. At last Ferrari has officially acknowledged the shooting-break style that it has been unofficially supplying to obscenely rich collectors such as the Sultan of Brunei for many years. The 1962 Drogo/Bizzarrini Ferrari 250 SWB "bread van" Le Mans racer arguably set the sleek style, although the Harold Radford Aston Martin DB5 shooting breaks, together with the racy Lancia HPE, were highly influential, as was the Reliant Scimitar GTE.

A few years back, the Cartier Style et Luxe at the Goodwood Festival of Speed featured a class of these lovely exotics, ranging from an MG Airline to a Jaguar Lynx Eventer and Pininfarina Ferrari specials. As a dog owner, I understand this body style more than most, although if Zeph, my invariably wet and muddy Labrador, jumps into the back of a Ferrari FF the main discussion will be less about the body style and more about who's going to clean the thing.

I asked Ian Minards, Aston Martin's chief engineer, about shooting breaks recently and he felt that while the style would appeal in Europe it would be less attractive to a worldwide audience. "We wouldn't sell enough to make it worthwhile," he said. Maybe Ferrari can pull it off.

The new FF replaces the controversially styled 612 Scaglietti, so its fantastic looks give it a head start in that respect, although the Citroën-like headlights aren't the most elegant on the block and there's also a stupendously dull green colour choice, which might best be named "Humbrol Nissen hut green".

Four-wheel drive? Let's be very clear. Such is the power of Ferrari's rear-drive supercars that they have required the services of traction control and electronic stability systems for some years simply to maintain forward direction on dry Tarmac. It's a truth acknowledged at rival Lamborghini with almost universal adoption of all-wheel drive, as well as Audi with its quattro R8 and R10 supercars. The Bugatti EB110 had drive to all its wheels and I don't remember that being unexciting to drive. If you think you can get on top of a 651bhp rear-drive supercar in marginal conditions, then you must be a very serious person indeed.

All the same, it's a pity that Ferrari didn't at least mention the genius of Harry Ferguson, Tony Rolt and Freddie Dixon, whose 4x4 system graced the first modern four-wheel-drive supercar, the 1966 Jensen FF. It was left to the decency of Cimatti to namecheck the Jensen.

So this all-new, aluminium space-frame car has a front/mid-mounted 6.3-litre, 65-degree V12, with direct fuel injection into the cylinders delivering 651bhp and 504lb ft of torque. For the most part this is a conventional supercar driveline with the seven-speed, twin-clutch gearbox mounted into a rear transaxle with the electronically controlled differential.

Where the Ferrari differs from convention, however, is the use of a simple, helical-cut, hydraulically controlled gearbox running off the front of the crankshaft. With two speeds plus reverse and a couple of Haldex-type clutches, this 100lb unit drives the front wheels, but only in first to fourth gears and at speeds below 124mph. Above that, you're on your own.

To understand what the system is capable of, it's worth recalling the words of test driver Raffaele de Simone. "We started with a system that would get owners up to their skiing chalets, but then we discovered what tricks you could play with it."

So the electronic systems monitor wheel slip and speeds, yaw and steering angles and predict when wheelspin will occur. It then engages one of the two forward gears, which have ratios slightly higher than second and fourth gears respectively and slips either of the clutches to direct drive torque to a particular front wheel. You can spend your life thinking of situations where the system might slip up, but it uses its predictive software to cover events such as gearchanging when torque requirements are difficult to monitor in real time. How much software is this car carrying? "Too much," came Cimatti's grinning reply.

The cabin is a delight of aniline leather and tasteful instrumentation modelled on the 458 Italia, although the carbon-fibre steering wheel strikes a bum note amid all this luxury. The cockpit gently curves around the front seats and feels cosy, with supportive and comfortable seats. Front-seat passengers even get their own digital readout of trip information, speed and individual wheel traction. I'm not sure if this is a good thing or not.

While six-footers will find the accommodation generous, there's not enough room in the pedal box for size 12 feet and your toe caps get entangled with hidden dashboard parts. In the back there's just about enough room for a six-footer, although his knees will touch the front seatbacks. While the boot is more generous than the 612 predecessor and will take two large suitcases, it's suitable for lap dogs only and the lip is so high they'll have to be carried in there.

The big V12 bursts into enthusiastic life. The exhaust is harsh when blipped, but the mechanical music is smooth and refined. New, large paddles behind the steering wheel engage first and the car gently slips its moorings, crunching exclusive snow. The ride is pretty good for such an out-and-out roadburner, but there's a fair bit of clattering from the rear tyres and the exhaust system at low speeds. What you don't hear is any evidence of transmission shunt, whirring clutches or grabbing brakes. On top of a Dolomite mountain, we parked on a snowy bank and pulled smartly away with no drama. That's more than impressive for a car with this much power.

Open her up and the steering feels weighty and serious. It turns in well, but feels slightly artificial as the fronts pull it round tight corners. There's no understeer where you might expect it but there's not a

huge amount of feel, either. Stand on it and this big car takes off like little else outside of a Nasa programme. You will definitely get to the ski chalet before anyone else, although the 6ft 5in width takes some getting used to and is inhibiting on narrow Alpine roads. Carbon ceramic disc brakes are now virtually identical in feel to steel rotors, except they don't fade.

The lasting impression is of that V12 whirring, hammering and ripping across the snow fields like a giant sheet of tearing calico. It's almost an avalanche hazard in its own right. And while one has to question the sanity of owners who would jeopardise their Ferrari on the salt-drenched roads and their wing mirrors against the post buses, here's just the machine in which to do it. Good luck to them.

THE FACTS

Ferrari FF

Tested: 6,262cc, 65-degree petrol V12 engine with twin overhead camshafts per bank and four valves per cylinder, driving all four wheels via a seven-speed dual clutch transmission

Price/on sale: From £227,026/RHD sales begin in late September

Power/torque: 651bhp @ 8,000rpm/504lb ft @ 6,000rpm

Top speed: 208mph

Acceleration: 0-62mph in 3.7sec

Fuel economy: 18.3mpg EU Combined

CO2 emissions: 360g/km

VED band: M (£950 first year, £435 thereafter)

On the stereo: *Walking The Dog* by Wilko Johnson and the Solid Senders

Verdict: Terrific style, superlative all-weather performance and surprising practicality; an intercontinental getaway car

Telegraph rating: Five out of five stars

THE RIVALS

Aston Martin Rapide, from £149,995

Clever rework by Marek Reichmann on the VH platform, which goes as well as it looks, although it's only rear-wheel drive. Accommodation is sufficient for four adults and luggage and the 470bhp, 6.0-litre V12 gives great performance if questionable economy for a grand tourer – 188mph and 19mpg. A very desirable car.

Porsche Panamera 4 V8 S, from £83,280

Competent? Of course, it's from Germany. Fast? Think 175mph. Efficient? Naturally, with four-wheel drive and 25.4mpg available from the 400bhp V8. But it's as desirable as a bag of carrots and looks like a breeze block with wheels. It's still the cheapest by a long way and arguably one of the best ways to get to the ski slopes.

Used Ferrari 612 Scaglietti and new Fiat Panda 4x4, about £114,645

Go on, live like the little people when you go skiing. Ferrari's approved site has a 2007, 8,500-mile 612 GTS for £102,950. The 1.2 Panda 4x4 is £11,695 and is the most fun you can have outside of a bedroom. Classless combination, no one will think you are a banker and the Fiat can be driven flat out everywhere.

By Andrew English