

2012 Ferrari 458 Spider, an *Autoweek* Flash Drive Car Review

By: Barry Winfield on 10/05/2011

What is it?

The [Ferrari 458 Spider](#) is a hardtop convertible version of the company's superlative [458 Italia](#), completing the model lineup of mid-engine V8 sports cars. The new roof design was executed in-house by Ferrari engineers, using a two-dimensional concept to reduce the size, weight and stowage volume of the power-operated, articulated aluminum top.

Thus, the coupe's roof was excised at the windshield headers and above the B-pillars, and the two-piece top hinges about two-thirds of the way back during a relatively quick 14-second stowage process. The conversion adds only 100 pounds over the coupe and takes just 3.5 cubic feet of space, leaving quite a usable storage ledge behind the seats.

When the roof is up, the car looks like a fastback coupe with a bit of an Enzo-like cab-forward silhouette, and when it's down, the car has its own exclusive spider profile with the dual buttresses adding volume to visually shorten the rear deck.

That rear deck is much different from the coupe's, with bodywork that slopes downward past meshed vents into two rear air intakes integrated into the tail spoiler. Air adheres to the rear deck as is required for aerodynamic efficiency, then flows through cooling radiators (for oil and transmission) in the tail spoiler and exits through grilles alongside the round taillights.

Because of the rear bodywork revisions, modifications were necessary to the air-intake system. The exhaust system was retuned, too, but mainly because engine sound is a critical aspect of the Spider's appeal to its well-heeled clientele. You hear the 9,000-rpm V8's every nuance clearly when the top (or even just the small glass backlight) is down.

A lot of aero work went into the car, and the backlight/windstop parks at a spot deemed optimal by Ferrari for the fewest drafts and least buffeting in the cockpit. A day's driving suggests Ferrari was not wrong.

What is it like to drive?

To nobody's real surprise, the 458 Spider is a dazzling road-going device, with an engine that is as flexible as it is exuberant at high revs. The sounds feeding into the rear of the cockpit are music to any enthusiast's ears, running through a repertoire of vibrant drones, growls, snarls and trumpeted fanfares of frantic engine activity that thrills to the bone.

The vehicle dynamics are as flamboyant as the sounds, but what really blows the mind is the Spider's operating bandwidth. Because Ferrari uses variable damping in the car's shocks as part of its roll-control strategy and varies almost every other aspect of its chassis setup according to the driver's selection of one of four operating levels at the wheel-mounted *manettino* lever, it can

dial back chassis control to settings as mild as a Toyota Camry's when you're crawling. Then it will then ramp everything up to Formula One ferocity as speeds build.

The car feels light on its feet at city speeds, exhibiting a supple ride with none of the head toss associated with sports cars that are stiff in roll. With added assist at low speed, the steering is fluent, friendly and light, completely camouflaging the car's exquisitely savage alter ego.

But, crank that *manettino* to race and stand on the loud pedal until the prominent tachometer has nine grand under the needle and the Spider will prove that all arachnids can bite. Driven hard, the Spider gobbles lower gears with glee, the DCT dutifully snapping off lightning-fast shifts. The sprint to 60 mph takes a little more than three seconds.

As fast as the car is, its agility on the mountain route generously picked by Ferrari's crew was what impressed us the most. With much of its mass concentrated between the wheels, the Spider turns in like a slot car, cleaves to its line through the bend, and then catapults out of the other end in a way that makes its driver feel truly heroic.

With big carbon-ceramic brakes on all four corners and equally generous 20-inch Pirellis doing their bidding, the temptation to redline it between curves is intoxicating. Best of all, the car's F1-traction control, ABS, ESP, E-Diff and generally vast dynamic envelope have your back if you should, say, go in to a curve too hot and have to turn in on what little adhesion is left with the ABS cycling.

With tons of grip, a benign chassis, huge brakes and an army of electronic sentinels, the car transforms even this situation into just a scruffy-looking corner exit. How do we know? We just do.

Do I want it?

At the end of a long drive route we had few criticisms to offer a curious Ferrari debriefing team. Perhaps the seat cushion is a little too narrow for tall drivers. Maybe the steering-wheel-mounted turn-signal operation could be more obvious.

That's all. Well, that and a price that is way out of our reach. With a sticker that might be beyond \$300,000 by the time you leave the showroom, the 458 Spider is not inexpensive. It is, however, probably worth it.

2012 Ferrari 458 Spider

On Sale: January 2012

Base Price: \$257,000 (provisional)

Drivetrain: 4.5-liter, 562-hp, 398-lb-ft V8; RWD, seven-speed dual-clutch automatic

Curb Weight: 3,400 lb (est)

0-60 MPH: 3.2 sec (est)

Fuel Economy: 13 mpg (est)