

Ferrari 458 Italia Loses Its Top, Gains Hugely



Dan Neil for The Wall Street Journal

The Ferrari 458 Italia Spider, their first midengine retractable-hardtop convertible.

News of Ferrari's new \$300,000, 562-horsepower convertible might seem a trifle irrelevant to the moment. Never mind the 1%; buyers of this car are the 0.001%, and some of them are pretty unsympathetic characters: Russian kleptocrats in track suits that match their mobile phones; Brazilian soccer stars with microwave-size wristwatches.

If Silvio Berlusconi doesn't have one on order, maybe he should have.



Ferrari's newest car, the 458 Italia Spider can hit 0 - 62 in less than four seconds and is yours for a cool \$300,000 and change, Dan Neil reports on the News Hub.

And at least a few of the new clientele have galaxy-class bad taste. As I was touring the factory's new "Tailor Made" customization atelier in Maranello, Italy, I confronted a customer's electric-lime-and-black 599 GTO, with chartreuse hides and monogrammed seats, destined for the Middle East. Had you requested such a car from Enzo Ferrari himself, he would have swatted you with a tire iron and had you dumped onto the Via Abetone. Ah, the good old days.

Ferrari continues to walk the iciest tightrope: It's a legend, a motorsports mythology, the Camelot of fast cars. It's also a business, the most profitable unit for parent company Fiat (pretax profits were up 23% in 2010, to about \$274 million), and an ultra-luxury trophy worth billions if

Fiat should decide to sell. As much as it might like to require some sort of literacy test from its clients—Who was Phil Hill? What was the company's first midengine V8 Berlinetta?—the fact is, all you need is a checkbook.

Why does it matter? Because all cars are tribal, and no tribe is more self-regarding than the Ferraristi. You may think you're joining a tribe of noble automotive connoisseurs such as Ralph Lauren and Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason; but people who see you in your car might think, "Hey, is that Charlie Sheen?"

Photos: Represent in the Spider



Ferrari

Make no mistake: In the 458 Italia Spider, you will be seen. This is Ferrari's first midengine retractable-hardtop convertible, combining the brilliant operability of the Ferrari California's disappearing hardtop with the Tantric sports-car ecstasy of the 458 Italia. Fascinating design, exquisite stick-and-rudder handling, raw power like Samson on Rogaine, the Italia is absolutely one of the two or three best sports cars in the world. Cutting the top off doesn't make it any subtler, however. In the Spider, you are wayyyy out there, brother. You are representing. Be sure to wear your good track suit.

Engineered by Ferrari and Webasto, the two-panel aluminum roof folds like window blinds as the assembly goes vertical and dives into a compartment behind the seat, as the twin-buttruss rear deck opens and shuts. The one-button cycling process takes a mere 14 seconds, which means that you can put the top up or down at stoplights with time to spare (no, of course you're not showing off).

A convertible version of this car was always part of the product plan, so the Spider chassis is uncompromised by the loss of the fixed roof's structure. The Spider weighs 110 pounds more than the coupe—about 3,400 pounds—but when you're plunging down the autostrada with the Dyson vacuum of the gods pulling at your coiffure, the Spider doesn't feel a bit slower than the coupe. Actually, it feels faster.

And louder. Here's where the Spider really starts to earn its real-estate-like price. The bright-hammered melody of the flat-crank 4.5-liter V8, the fiery spall of the overrun note, the tach-rapping flexibility of the 9,000-rpm engine as you gear-bang the seven-speed dual clutch tranny—all of that is at a slight remove in the fixed-roof car. In the Spider, with the top down, the sound of the machine takes up the very center of the experience, a high-octane chord of surpassing transcendence resonating in your forebrain.

Not always, of course. Thanks to the 458 Italia's active exhaust system, the Spider is able to burr quietly and without resentment at low speeds around town (the system helps the car pass European noise standards). But when the revs roll above about 4,000 rpm, the valve in the three-pipe exhaust opens up and, man, that's when the Seraphims' brass section comes in. This is me with adrenaline running out of my ears.

Another nice feature of the Spider is the two-position motorized backlight—what Americans call the rear window. This small tab of safety glass rises up between the deck buttresses as a draft-stop, helping to keep the high-priced hurricane just outside the cockpit.

It all adds up to a supercar with the most comfortable, accessible and aurally compelling open-air experience on the market. I mean, really, short of something Biblical—locusts or a torrent of frogs or something—why wouldn't you have the top down? Don't want to get wet? Go faster.

2012 Ferrari 458 Italia Spider

- **Base price:** \$300,861
- **Price as tested:** \$320,000 (est.)

- **Powertrain:** Mid-rear-mounted, naturally aspirated, direct-injection flat-crank, 32-valve, 90-degree V8 with variable valve timing, induction and exhaust, dry-sump lubrication; seven-speed dual-clutch automated manual transmission; rear-wheel drive with electronic limited-slip differential
- **Horsepower/torque:** 570 hp at 9,000 rpm/398 pound-feet 5,250 rpm
- **Overall length/weight:** 178.2 inches/3,384 pounds
- **0-62 mph:** <3.4 seconds
- **0-124 mph:** <10.8 seconds
- **Top speed:** 199 mph
- **EPA fuel economy:** 20 mpg combined
- **Cargo capacity:** 8.12 cubic feet

However, I do spy a bit of a miscalculation in this car. It kind of shows up the coupe, aesthetically, even if the top is up. The volumes of the Spider's roof/deck intersection are more balanced, with the buttresses providing a complementary angle to the windshield rake. The whole silhouette coheres better than in the coupe, whose roof structure can look a little over-winnowed and thin by some angles.

The only downside to the Spider is the loss of the coupe's transparent engine cover, which would have left the blood-red nacelles of the V8 out for all to see. In the Spider, the rear deck between the buttresses comprises two louvered aluminum aero surfaces shunting air toward the rear-mounted heat exchangers.

In other respects, the Spider is identical to the coupe, which is real nice, to put it mildly. There are certainly a lot of fast, capable cars out there, including the new Porsche 911 and McLaren MP4-12C. Around a road course, the Chevrolet Corvette ZR1 can keep pace with the Italia, and might be a tick faster—astonishing, when you consider the Ferrari is several multiples more in price.

But no car delivers the holistic, pilot-focused experience, the synaptic download that the Ferrari does. From the seating position and cockpit ergonomics—the vibratory timbre, position and hand-fit of the steering wheel, for instance—the Italia just speaks to you.

As Ferrari courts a global audience—and customers who couldn't drive a nail—there is a risk that the cars could become too soft. Certainly, the Spider is very refined car, with a supple and compliant suspension, a set-and-forget AUTO setting for the seven-speed gearbox, and loads of techno comforts.

But just turn that manettino dial on the steering wheel up, from SPORT to RACE. The magnetic suspension gets leathery, the gear changes start shoving you in the back, the hateful honk of eight angry cylinders boils through the firewall, and the computer's protecting angels abandon you.

Oh yeah, right, Ferrari. I remember these guys.