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2013 Ferrari California - First Drive Review



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More power, less weight, new handling package. All of these are good.

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After a morning spent driving the revised-for-2013 Ferrari California in and around Maranello, we're sitting in a cramped storage/conference room in a nondescript building near the company's fabled factory gate. Test driver Raffaele De Simone wants to know what we think of the two cars sitting outside. Our take: There's a noticeable difference between the car equipped with the new Handling Speciale package and the non-HS 2013 California—but that difference is small. "Good," he says. "We didn't want them to be too different."

To understand why Ferrari chose to limit the differences between the cars, however, we must first learn about the *clienti* for whom this model is intended.

It's a Ferrari, and Everyone Knows It's Fast

In the California's first three years, 70 percent of buyers were new to Ferrari. Offering everyday usability with its all-weather retractable hardtop and large-for-a-Ferrari trunk—a fifth of owners use their car on a daily basis, which is 50 percent more than the brand's average—the car is tuned softer than the rest of the Ferrari range. Buyers get Ferrari performance, a Ferrari badge, and everything else that goes with the ownership experience, but the car isn't an inconvenience for them. It's civil. In Ferrari's words, the California offers ingress and egress similar to that of "a normal car." Imagine that.



And although it's somewhat hard to believe, a majority of buyers claim they bring their kin (plural) along. Since an adult could really only fit their head in the tiny rear seats, Ferrari says that they're best for emergency use or kid storage. If you don't anticipate either in your future, then it's probably best to order your California with the available rear parcel shelf instead.

There's Always Room for Faster

A minority, but apparently a vocal one, wanted more power. Cue upgrades for the fantastic-sounding 8000-rpm V-8: a one-way reed valve in the crankcase that lets blow-by gas and oil escape, thereby reducing pumping losses; new exhaust manifolds that reduce backpressure; pistons with revised crown machining to match the other changes; and new ECU tuning. The net is 483 hp (an increase of 30) and 372 lb-ft of torque (up 14).

In these hard economic times—in this case, “hard” meaning “strictly regulated” and “economic” referring to fuel usage—automakers are often obliged to accompany any increase in output with a reduction in mass. Great for greenies, great for performance. Say *grazie* to Ferrari's aluminum maven, who have kept the efficiency scale balanced with a 66-pound weight cut. Where there previously were eight alloys used in constructing the California's space frame, there now are 12, with the additional four coming into play via parts and design revisions. As an example, the previous car's steel engine cradle has been replaced by one assembled from aluminum castings and extrusions. Thirteen pounds saved. Ferrari also is using a new core casting process that lightens and strengthens hollow pieces—according to the company, it's the first application of its kind for an automotive space frame. As part of the lightening process, the front crash structure was redesigned to improve impact- and suspension-load paths.

Is the weight change noticeable, and what of its effect on the car's 47/53 front/rear weight distribution? There was no early car on hand for comparison, but another comment by De Simone is telling: “You'll feel the weight [distribution] change more putting the top down than you will notice the change from the last car to this one.” Fair enough. With the seven-speed dual-clutch auto's launch control engaged, we expect the increased power and reduced weight to yield an improvement of up to 0.2 second in the 0-to-60-mph dash. The last California we tested hit the mark in 3.9 seconds.



Make Mine a Handling Speciale, Easy on the Speciale

Back to changes that are easily noticed. The newly available Handling Speciale package ratchets up the car's sporting character for the small number who want more from their GT convertible but aren't yet interested in a 458 Spider. It's a bone tossed to the near-enthusiast.

The HS package starts with a different steering rack; it's quicker, about 2.3 turns lock to lock as opposed to the standard rack's 2.5, and it has slightly higher effort. Not that the base steering is sloppy, but we much preferred the Speciale version. It's most noticeable in tight switchbacks, and the added heft isn't a bother during relaxed cruising.

Next is a set of stiffer springs. The fronts increase by 15 percent and the rears are turned up by 11. They're coupled with Ferrari's magnetorheological SCM dampers (an option on the base car), which get a specific tune to complement the spring change. Again, we could feel the difference, with less body roll in cornering, an issue we noted in our previous experiences with the car and even saw with the 2013 non-HS car. Ferrari admits that the suspension sacrifices some ride comfort, but the active setup means the firmness never crosses the line into harshness, even in its most aggressive setting; it's still nowhere near the racier setup on a 458. If you want, Ferrari offers a no-charge option that paints the HS car's grille, side vents, and hood scoop mesh a silver color called Argento Nürburgring. And if you really want, you can get any Ferrari in any color with whatever insane interior you'd like through the Tailor Made studio and more cash. (How about an FF with pinstripe-cloth seat inserts, a cashmere headliner, and a teak-lined trunk? It exists, and looks way cooler than you think it does.)

By design, the HS makeover is nowhere near as comprehensive as the HGTE package that came at the end of the 599GTB's lifespan. While that package saw a take rate of 70 percent, Ferrari projects just 15 percent of all California buyers will go for the HS kit. A slightly higher proportion may choose it in the U.S., especially because the package adds just \$7227 to the car's bill, while the magnetorheological dampers by themselves, albeit with a different tune, pull \$5200.



HS or not, the adaptive SCM damper system has been overhauled with a faster ECU, new control software, and reduced internal friction from a lubricated piston rod. You still get adjustability from the steering-wheel-mounted *manettino* to control various characteristics. In SCM-equipped cars, the HS's Comfort setting basically overlaps with the base car's Sport setting, and the two modes also vary transmission shift characteristics, the behavior of the exhaust valves, and stability-control intervention. The ESC off mode remains and continues to deliver the Sport chassis settings without a safety net.

Bene e il Male

There's good news and bad for the 8000 or so current California owners. Ferrari says these slight changes to the car shouldn't hurt residual values of pre-2013s; for better or worse, there are no aesthetic changes inside or out, save for the Handling Speciale's optional gray accents. The bad news is that the HS pack can't be retrofit to older cars. First-time Ferraristi can place an order for the new California starting in June.