

Automobile



REVIEWS: First Drive: 2010 Ferrari 458 Italia

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By Joe DeMatio

Maranello, Italy -- Ferrari does it again. The 458 Italia raises the bar for mid-engine exotic sports [cars](#) to new heights.

I've just driven the 458 Italia, the latest in Ferrari's lineup of mid-engine [V-8](#) sports cars. These are the cars that, in the modern era, have cemented Ferrari's status as maker of the most desirable sports cars in the world. The 458 succeeds the F430 Scuderia, which followed the 360 Modena, which came after the F355. Before that we had the 308/328/348 series, but it's really the 360 Modena that, a decade ago, really put Ferrari back on the map.

Some Ferrari fans didn't care much for the styling of either the 360 Modena or the F430 Scuderia. Even as they conceded that the cars drove brilliantly, they pined for the classically clean lines of the F355. For them, the 458 Italia's debut at the 2009 Frankfurt Motor Show in September must have been a red-letter day, because this Pininfarina design is drop-dead gorgeous. Did you think it looked good on the show stand, or in the published photographs you have seen in print or on the Web? Wait until you see the [car](#) on the street. It will not just turn your head, it will make your head spin around like a top.

The 458 is wide, low, lean, lithe, and luscious. The rear view is the most compelling, with the car's triple exhaust pipes, the visible diffusers and venturi ducts, the silver prancing horse above the license plate, and the simple but evocative round taillights at the far upper corners. Unlike the F430, with its excessively slashed body sides, the 458 has clean body sides and relatively modest ducting. The pinpoint bi-xenon headlights and the LED eyebrows that spring back from them are delicate in appearance yet delightful to the eye. It's all quite yummy, and that's even before you take a gander through the rear glass and behold the redheaded Ferrari V-8 on display.

Ah, yes, the Ferrari V-8. It's the latest evolution of the F136-series V-8s that serve in the F430 and more recently in the California roadster. In the 458, the engine is known specifically as the F136FB, and it's mated exclusively to a seven-speed dual-clutch automated gearbox. What?!? No six-speed manual? That's right: virtually no one has been [buying](#) them from Ferrari and so the 458 is the first-ever Ferrari that does not offer a manual transmission. The dual-clutch gearbox is the same one offered in the California but here, of course, it's geared much differently for a much sportier characteristic.

We doubt that you will much notice or care. The dual-clutch gearbox is incredibly fast, smooth, and responsive. There is none of the lurching and gasping that afflicted Ferrari's F1 automated-manual gearboxes for so long. You can press the big "AUTO" button on the center console and let the electronics take care of everything for you: the gearbox will snap off shifts faster and with less fuss than it took me to type the word "fuss."

The V-8 itself is a remarkable technological and performance achievement. Ferrari V-12s? Who needs 'em? Not with a V-8 that revs, longingly, to an incredible 9000 rpm. Check out the other stats: 562 horsepower and 399 lb-ft of torque out of 4.5 naturally aspirated liters; a 12.5:1 compression ratio; dry-sump lubrication; four scavenger pumps to collect oil via dedicated oil-recovery ducts; and surface treatments for friction parts like the piston skirts, camshafts, and tappets that would do a diamond-cutter proud. And did we mention the 9000-rpm redline?

Wait, there's more technology: a sophisticated electronic differential. The first application of magnetic-fluid dampers in a V-8 Ferrari (supplied by Delphi, these first appeared in Cadillacs and Corvettes and debuted at Ferrari in 2006 in the 599GTB Fiorano GT). Standard carbon-ceramic brake pads. An all-aluminum spaceframe body structure, clad in a super-thin aluminum body shell that is both super-rigid and super-light: the roof, hood, and door skins are made of a new alloy that is a scant 1.0 mm thick. Electronically controlled pre-loading of the brakes which detect and analyze the speed with which you remove your foot from the accelerator pedal so as to position the brake calipers in high-alert mode. And an extremely sophisticated attention to aerodynamics that resulted in a car that still looks good rather than like a caricature: the flexible front winglets in the lower air dams, flanking the front prancing horse, deflect downward by as much as 20 mm at speeds starting at 125 mph for increased downforce. The small vents just inboard of the headlights suck in air that is ejected through the vents just ahead of the front wheels; this also creates downforce. The ducts at the C-pillars direct air to the engine itself, while the ducts ahead of the rear wheels are sucking air into the engine compartment. The very clean body sides are designed to direct air into the rear diffusers, which conceal two radiators: one to cool the clutch, on the left; and one to cool the gearbox, on the right.



These levels of engineering and design, predictably, lead to a very good [car](#). What was unpredictable was just how good the 458 Italia is. After all, the F430 was already a stellar performer, the car that everyone -- Lamborghini, Porsche, Aston Martin, and others -- tried to emulate. The F430 seemed like the pinnacle of mid-engine sports car design. Surely Ferrari could do little more than nudge the bar a little higher, I thought.

Surely, it turns out, I was wrong. The level of performance and driving pleasure in the 458 Italia is nothing short of extraordinary. First, the steering is exceedingly well tuned. Perfectly weighted. Perfectly precise. Perfectly communicative. Perfect. Divinely perfect. Pivoting the 458 through a hairpin corner can't help but make you grin, shout, or both. You know exactly where you're placing the car at all times. It takes only the most minute steering input to produce a corresponding output to the front wheels. And the level of driver confidence that this supercommunicative steering provides is astounding.

There are plenty of other reasons for the lucky person behind the wheel of the 458 Italia to feel like a champ. The car's structural rigidity, the brilliantly tuned suspension (control arms in front, multi-link setup at the rear), and the superhero brakes also play a part in allowing a competent driver to storm along twisty, narrow, undulating two-lane mountainous roads with a nonchalance that borders on insane. The 458 simply makes it all so easy.

You set the manettino control on the steering wheel to Sport or Race mode, pull back on the right-hand steering-wheel-mounted paddle, and you're off. If you're hitting the gas hard, as you naturally will be, somewhere between 2500 and 3000 rpm, the exhaust leaps from a low but steady background murmur to a boomy, bass-heavy beat. It's the natural accompaniment to the metallic tenor of the V-8 as it races toward the magical 9000-rpm mark. Not paying attention? The gearbox will upshift for you. Approaching a corner? The gearbox seems to know that you are going to decelerate before you even lift your foot from the gas pedal and seamlessly slams down a gear or two before you even start steering into the curve. The engine and gearbox work together so intuitively, it's very difficult to find yourself without exactly the right amount of power on tap, no matter your speed, your gear, or your steering angle. All you have to do is concentrate on the road ahead: the 458 is your natural, unquestioning ally in your quest for speed and agility.

What's not to like? Well, Ferrari is going to charge about ten percent more for the 458 Italia when it goes on [sale](#) in the United States in June 2010, so you probably can expect about \$220,000 as a base price. Some of the interior, which was designed to be very driver-focused, may come off as a little inelegant to some, especially the oddly shaped center protrusion from the instrument panel, which contains two air vents and a central controller for the electronic display that monitors radio, navigation, speedo, and other information. The seats in our test car were nicely supportive and comfortable but seemed perhaps a little narrow for some. And the turn signals mounted on the upper spokes of the steering wheel take some getting used to.

But these are quibbles. Ferrari has, unquestionably, rewritten the rules once again for mid-engine sports [cars](#). Most notably, the Italian carmaker has done so with a naturally aspirated, high-revving V-8 engine at a time when so many other manufacturers are resorting to turbocharging and supercharging to achieve output and performance targets. Lamborghini, McLaren, Porsche, and Aston Martin engineers have their work cut out for them.

2010 Ferrari 458 Italia

Base [Price](#) (estimated): \$220,000

Powertrain

Engine: 4.5-liter DOHC 32-valve V-8

Horsepower: 563 hp @ 9000 rpm

Torque: 398 lb-ft @ 6000 rpm

Transmission: 7-speed dual-clutch

Drive: Rear-wheel

Measurements

L x W x H: 178.2 x 76.3 x 47.8 in

Cargo capacity: 8.1 cu ft

Dry Weight: 3274 lb

Performance (manufacturer figures):

0-62 mph: 3.4 sec

0-124 mph: 10.4 sec

62-0 mph braking: 106.6 ft

Lap time at Fiorano, Ferrari's track: 1:25

Top speed: 202+ mph

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458
ITALIA

INTERNATIONAL
MEDIA TEST DRIVE

31ST OCTOBER - 30TH NOVEMBER 2009



