

FERRARIS

Lancia's Ferrari-engined Thema, just on sale in Britain, battles a car using a similar engine



FOR FOUR

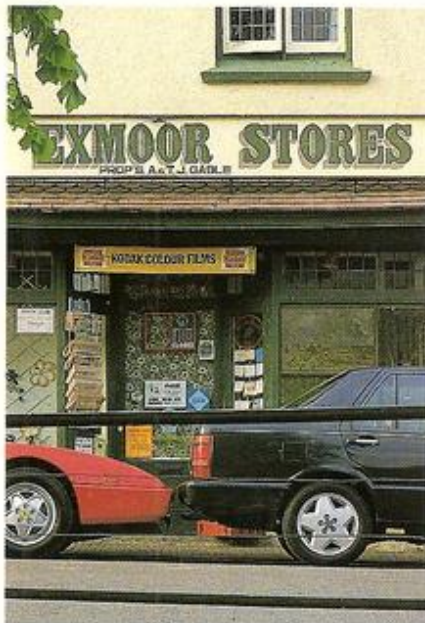
Maranello's under-rated Mondial, a machine also promising room for four! Richard Bremner



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM WREN

WHAT'S THIS? LANCIA Thema 8.32 versus Ferrari Mondial? Surely that's like comparing a Renault GTA with a Renault 25 V6 because they share the same engine? But that's not all that binds this pair. Both use basically the same V8 Ferrari engine, yes, and both are from different arms of Fiat's octopus-like empire. But the vital thing that plunges these machines into the same market, even if they arrived from different directions, is that both are four-seater sports cars.

The Mondial is Ferrari's only serious shot at a



sporting four-seater despite regular rumours, and equally persistent denials, that a proper four-door, four-seater is lurking in the shadows at Maranello. True, Ferrari makes that rakish heavy goods vehicle, the 412, also a *quattro posti* machine, but that thundering anachronism has no place in the modern world. Its competitors are long dead.

The Thema, however, has plenty of competitors, most of them from Germany – M5s and the like. It's a bizarre cocktail, doubtless mixed by the corporate power brokers at Fiat. There have been Ferrari-engined Lancias before, most recently the Stratos, even Ferrari-engined Fiats – remember the beautiful, curvy Fiat Dino? – but never anything as seemingly crass as this. On the face of it, the 8.32 (eight cylinders, 32 valves) looks like a product of the British industry in its heyday, when all sorts of evil

combinations of body and engine were concocted and foisted on innocent dealers.

The Thema deserves a sympathetic hearing, however. Lancia hasn't merely taken a Ferrari V8, cold, and shovelled it under the bonnet unaltered. Instead, the Maranello engineers have refined it to suit its new clothes, principally by tooling up a new crank, with throws of 90deg rather than 180, the better to suit its less frenetic character. And the rest of the car has been judiciously titivated. The ambience of the cabin has been altered as much as possible without incurring massive tooling bills. The suspension has been upgraded (and in this latest model, equipped with electronic damping), the brakes adapted for ABS, new Ferrari-style five-spoke wheels cast, and an outrageous fold-away spoiler built into the boot lid.

As a measure of its seriousness, Lancia assembles 8.32s away from the bustle of the main Thema production line, at the San Paolo plant where alleged craftsmen build the Lancia

Ferrari at the rate of five to 10 a day. Why 'alleged'? Because there were not a few faults in the car we drove, most of which would be unacceptable in a £5000 Uno. This machine costs £37,500. Still, to keep the record straight, we'll add that the £48,102 Mondial hardly behaved impeccably either. But that comes later.

Aside from the fact that these cars are, in their way, four-seat Ferraris, and worthy of comparison for that reason alone, we had another question to settle. We all know that a well-driven Golf GTI can hold station with a Ferrari on today's coagulating roads. That's because GTIs and their ilk are spectacularly quick and competent, but it also has a lot to do with size. Supercars (911s excepted) are just too big to funnel down B-roads and byways at speed – there isn't room enough left for oncoming cars. GTIs, on the other hand, can usually squeeze by.

The Thema, however, because it's a bulky executive machine that cannot claim the size

advantage of a Golf, must find other ways to outpoint the Mondial. So, the question is: Has a modern executive car got the dynamic nous to outgun a Ferrari?

We went to Exmoor to find out. Fast open roads, tight, tangled secondaries, and a fast motorway to start and finish with were enough to give us the answer.

Sitting in a supercar is not like sitting in ordinary machinery. And sitting in a Mondial is not quite like sitting in other supercars. From the driver's seat, the cabin seems curiously wide in relation to its length, and consequently spacious. Yet there isn't vast room for legs and feet, chiefly because the footwells are invaded by bulky wheel-arches. You also sit well forward – the B-post is some way aft of your head – and there's a lot of space between you and the ceiling, so that you look absurdly small, almost lost, inside the car. The reason is the Mondial's bizarre architecture, the result of efforts to turn the mid-engine two-seat 328 into a four-seater. More length clearly had to go into the equation,

Mondial/Thema battle fought on Exmoor. Ferrari much sharper handler, can be tempted into easily caught oversteer



'In the Mondial you're aware of the sound of reciprocating engine parts'

but height was needed, too, because the rear seats, being mounted over the fuel tanks, are set higher than those in front, enforcing the taller roofline. Given all these constraints, it's remarkable that Pininfarina made the Mondial look as good as it does. But we wonder whether its relatively poor secondhand value hasn't got a lot to do with the slightly ludicrous driving position – it can't be a good car for poseurs.

The tall roofline does make the car airy, though, a feeling reinforced by the void created by the broad centre console separating you and front-seat passenger. There won't be quite the same distance between you and anyone in the back – they'll be breathing down your neck, doubtless with increasing agitation, as they struggle to find comfortable stowage for knees and feet. Their quest will be in vain, though, because there simply isn't the space. This car will not seat four, even if there are four seats.

The Mondial driver doesn't sit conventionally, either. The pedals are set well over to the

centre of the car – those damn wheel-arches again – so that your legs stretch to the left. The steering column, conversely, points away to the right, leaving the wheel hanging at a slightly odd angle.

But, for all that, the car isn't uncomfortable, presumably because the seats are well-sculpted. Not that they look it. Lavishly upholstered in matt vellum leather, they nevertheless contrive to look mean because they are neither broad nor long. Nor do they offer much in the way of adjustment. If you're short, well, you'll just have to crane.

The Momo wheel can at least be adjusted, for rake and reach, and it's freed by an unusually lustrous chrome handle, one of only two plated parts in the cabin. The thin-stemmed gearlever is the only other chromed item – topped by a black spherical knob, it resembles a dinner gong stick.

If you turn on the Ferrari's ignition, but don't fire up, you'll hear the frantic whirr of a fuel pump priming for action. But ignition isn't that explosive – the V8 seems

quite civilised. No loud-mouthed histrionics here.

You'll probably have some trouble engaging first before moving off. It's not that the dog-leg position is awkward – simply that, when the oil is cold, the lever is recalcitrant. Getting into second is difficult, too. At least the clutch is easy – light and well-damped.

Move away, and you're soon aware of a smooth stream of eager power, though you won't be awestruck by its intensity. The Mondial may be potent – there are 270 horses on call – but it isn't the lightest sports car around, and the poundage dulls the edge of eagerness. In any case, the engine's not warmed up yet, so we're limiting revs to 3500rpm. Even so, performance is brisk, not least because the ratios are stacked close, and the overall gearing is low – fifth is a puller, not a cruiser. That means there's entertainment off the motorway, but a fair bit of noise on it.

You hear different sounds in a Ferrari. The thrash of valves, belts and cams isn't far away, and you're more

conscious of reciprocating parts than you are in other cars. It's something to be savoured for many miles, but not four-hour motorway journeys, and not every day.

Motorways are the Lancia's speciality. It'll devour them like a fat Italian eats spaghetti. Noise is not something the 8.32 makes much of, at least when cruising. But take it away from the nation's arteries, and it'll show you a dual personality, turning from tabby to tiger at the stretch of a toe.

In spite of its somewhat prosaic looks – the Thema was conceived as an elegant first-class carriage, not a sportsman's toy – it manages to convey its exotic pretensions as soon as you open the door. Your eyes and nose register one thing – leather, hectares of it. It swathes the seats, the dashboard, the door tops, even some of the ceiling. There's walnut, too, though it doesn't look quite as opulent, somehow, because it has a matt finish.

The steering wheel is swaddled in leather, too, and thoughtfully dimensioned for the eager driver. He'll enjoy the sight ahead of the wheel as well – a large speedo and tachometer, and six supplementary gauges whose messages range from oil temperature to whether the injection system is functioning properly. The markings are yellow on black.

The Thema driver will discover nothing strange in his seating position. Pedals, gearlever and wheel are all where they should be (except that they're on the wrong side, of course), and the seat itself is amply proportioned and well shaped. Adjustment is electric, and there's a heating element to take the chill off cold leather.

Turn the key, and it's not the dramatic buzz of fuel pumps that you hear, but the sound of servos adjusting the Saab heater (the controls have been lifted straight from the 9000) as it prepares to embalm you in a thermostatically controlled environment. Fire up, and once the idle has settled, you'll hardly notice the engine turning. Nor does it make much noise if you run it to only 3500rpm. Confine the engine to these speeds, and you'd think the Lancia Ferrari tame, a bit of a disappointment.

Westbound on the M4 come hints that there's more to it than that. When we slide



Thema is a cumbersome handler compared with pukka Ferrari: much more body roll. Understeer noticeable



'The engineers have refined Ferrari's V8 to suit its Thema clothes'

down slip roads, or accelerate in lower gears to clear dawdling traffic, the V8 lets rip a cultured growl. No doubt about it, we think. One of the greatest pleasures to be had from a Thema Ferrari is aural.

M4 and M5 done, we wind towards Porlock Weir, our overnight stop on the north Somerset coast. In the dying light of the sun we encounter a Golf giving chase to a Toyota. The pair are darting along the A358, a road that nuzzles the Quantocks as it heads north-east for the Bristol Channel. In the Mondial now, we naively think that when a long straight comes up, it'll simply be a matter of dropping to third, tickling the throttle and spearing by.



Only it never happens. The odd straight appears, but these two hatchbacks are well driven by a duo who seem to know the road and have doubtless been goaded on by the sight in their rear-view mirrors.

The Ferrari feels quick, but not quick enough to mount a successful charge. And the Golf wasn't even a GTI. We arrive at Porlock Weir sprouting doubts. Are today's wheel-clad appliances this close to a Ferrari? Shouldn't the Mondial's performance advantage feel absolutely decisive? Or has our driving turned tame?

"It's like a zoo up here," exclaims snapper Wren as we erupt onto Exmoor at 5am the following day. Rabbits scuttle from the road, squirrels dart for the verge, horses and foals forage shoulder to shoulder with sheep, deer shy away nervously. This is where the animals take revenge on the motor car, and leave roadside presents for tyres and sills. There's a fair bit of low speed dodging and weaving - we don't fancy car washing at this hour, and we certainly don't want to cull the indigenous population.

In spite of this, it doesn't take long to discover that the Mondial has found the arena

in which to put on an exhibition performance. And while it does it, we enjoy sensations quite alien to anyone used to ordinary transport. We're also presented with a challenge, because this isn't the easiest car to punt with speed and finesse. It demands a healthy degree of concentration.

If you can string five

bends together, and go up and down the gearbox in a honeyed blur, and position the car correctly through a curve, and don't brake too abruptly and late, and perhaps tease the tail out a shade as you leave one bend behind before hurtling into the next, you'll feel good. If you get it wrong, well, you won't be punished. The

Mondial is not a cantankerous car. But there's a huge difference between playing the piano with technical competence and playing it with bravura and emotion. Yet that is how the Mondial should be driven. You won't get the best from it if you don't, you may not even understand all the fuss about Ferrari.



Both cars use Ferrari's glorious V8. Thema (above right) has 215bhp, Mondial (right) gets 270. Both need revs



'The Thema was conceived as an elegant carriage, not a sporting toy

After the Mondial's virtuoso performance, the Thema, it seems, would be better left waiting in the wings, possibly for Godot. It was born as cosseting transport, and doesn't easily take to the role of delivering tactile excitement. The steering is light and seemingly reluctant to talk, the suspension soft and

unrevealing, the car apparently too big and cumbersome to be a handy ally in a tight spot. You're physically further from the action, too, sitting several telling inches higher above the road than in the Ferrari.

One thing the Lancia does well, though, contrary to all predictions when it was launched, is put its power

down. Those front wheels have 215bhp to introduce to the tarmac, and unless you're foolishly clumsy with the throttle, they'll carry out their task with some acumen. Torque steer isn't totally absent, but it certainly isn't a problem — there'll be no white knuckle moments if you accelerate venomously on crusty tarmac. Spinning

front wheels aren't something you encounter, either, unless the roads are sodden, and in those conditions, any potent beast should be handled with circumspection. But when the roads are dry, you'll find good adhesion unless you go mad.

So, you can move with alacrity in the Thema. And you damn well should be able to. What you can't do is hurl the car through the tight, rubber-crushing bends that make up most of Exmoor's roads. Enter one of these too fast and the unequivocal message is that you're barely in control of a large mass that does not wish to change direction at the pace required, thank you. Of course, it's no problem to get it around the turn. Off with the throttle (at least there are no tail slide dramas, unless the speeds are crazy), on with more lock, and here's hoping you aren't scraping too much expensive rubber off those 205/55 Goodyear Eagles. This isn't a very satisfying way to get about. You're seduced by a wonderful engine, then made to take a metaphorical cold shower by a chassis that doesn't want to play.

Happily the Thema is better on faster, less sinuous roads. The understeer diminishes, the feeling that you're swinging a pendulous mass from corner to corner evaporates, and you can actually power through turns, and with some gusto.

That's when you really enjoy the engine, which has to be one of the smoothest, sweetest-sounding motors you can buy today. It sounds so good, you think it must run in molasses. It's not until the yellow tachometer needle has swung past 4000rpm that you're convinced of the engine's potency. The boast is that 80 percent of the available 210lb ft of torque is on hand from as little as 2500rpm (the rest of it is released at 4500rpm) but it takes a decisive prod at the accelerator to stir the V8 at low to middling revs. Which is one reason why torque steer and wheelspin aren't the problem that they might be. Beyond 4000rpm, all the way to the 7000rpm red-line, the Thema takes on a new, aggressive personality and charges for freedom, engine wailing. When that V8's revving hard, you start to think that if there were money to burn, you'd buy a Thema Ferrari just for the noise it makes. You won't



Ferrari a little noisy on long trips. Thema more the executive express. Fwd Thema (below) has very little torque steer

One thing the
Lancia does well,
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hear the same symphony in the Mondial, because that has a different crank, whose 180deg throws make the engine sound corsa.

The Mondial is no less exhilarating for all that. You can pick out more individual sounds, and, in time, probably identify them. A riding mechanic from days of yore would doubtless be able to inform you of the



engine's condition from the passenger seat: 'I think she's running a bit lean on the second cylinder bank, m'lud.' You can hear the gearbox, too, its high-pitched whine rising and falling in concert with your right foot. It may get wearing on motorways, but on winding roads it's wonderful, part of the Ferrari dream.

And it gets you in the mood. When you and the car are in full cry you could be in the Mille Miglia. Or the Targa Florio. Or on the Futa pass. More likely you'll be on the A38, but the excitement will hardly diminish.

Much of it stems from the acceleration of the car. Oddly enough, the Mondial and Thema are pretty evenly matched when it comes to performance, in spite of big differences in output and gearing. The 270bhp Mondial will sprint to 60mph in 6.4sec and on to 150mph, yet the Thema, whose engine musters 55bhp less at 215bhp, reaches 60mph in 7.1sec and tops 149mph. All slightly baffling.

There's not much in it on the road. If the Ferrari gets ahead, it will be because the roads twist violently, and the Thema's chassis can't cope. Like the Thema, the Mondial suffers from a paucity of low-down torque. Of course, we're talking in relative terms here. The effect is heightened only by the ferocious acceleration that sets in once 3800rpm has disappeared, and power emerges in torrents. But the real flood is reserved for those who venture beyond 6000rpm and climb to the 7000rpm peak. If you're to

travel blindingly fast, the tacho needle must hover here. Which is why we weren't confident of whipping past that Golf – we hadn't yet fully grasped how hard the engine had to be kept spinning to extract full commitment from it.

Once this is learned, you're beginning to unravel the secrets of Ferrari driving. Keep the engine close to its wailing crescendo, enjoy the clock-clack as the gearlever thrusts from gate to gate (it sounds like you're cocking of a rifle at every shift), the siren whine of gears meshing against a base line of rumbling tyres. By the time you've struck the red-line a few times your blood will be up, and you'll be exploring the chassis.

It seems a pretty tame ally at first. The steering may be beautifully measured in its response, but it sure isn't quick, and nor is the turn-in. An Esprit feels more agile. There's even a trace of understeer. You can expunge that, though, with an enthusiastic stab at the throttle. The result will be deliciously neutral handling, or if you've been over-

zealous, a dose of easily quelled oversteer. Once you've suppressed the thought that you're dicing with £48,000, it becomes intoxicating, and the speeds build. And as you travel faster, you're grateful that the steering isn't over-eager – progress would turn nervous otherwise.

Not that there's cause to worry about the Ferrari's roadholding. Grip from the generous tyres is prodigious, and the Mondial doesn't suffer the sudden heart-stopping breakaway that sours some mid-engined machines. Instead, the rear tyres slide gently and tidily, so that you've plenty of time to rein them in. If they didn't, you'd wish the steering were quicker. The steering itself is equally well-mannered. There's some kickback, but only enough to let you know that you're on a road that may soon need work. But it's as well to keep a firm grip on rim, because it can writhe noticeably under braking. But then the Mondial, like any good Ferrari, is a car that needs commitment. Provide that, and you're guaranteed a good time. Its brakes

match that disposition. You need to work, to push them hard. But the rewards are precision and ample stopping power. The Lancia's, also ABS-equipped, are softer and mushier, but still effective. Like the Mondial's brakes, they are in character.

The Thema doesn't demand much commitment at all, if you don't feel in the mood. You can waft along, thoughts miles away, as you can in any executive car. But in the right circumstances, the 8.32 can be an invigorating partner. Long sweeping bends are its forte, bends where understeer won't kill progress. The trick is to throw the car in, and fight through the mushy responses that Fiat's new electronic suspension seems to send. Practise the technique with enough zeal, and you'll be surprised to discover that the Thema actually turns neutral, plunging through turns in a pretty satisfying manner.

But that new suspension has done some damage to the 8.32. It still uses MacPherson struts all round (there's none of the Mondial's

Mondial has strange driving position, a legacy of trying to cram in a couple of rear chairs. Seats comfortable. Rear cramped



'The Ferrari should be driven with bravura and with emotion'

curity here; that car has wishbones at each corner), but electronic dampers have been added to the equation. They appear sophisticated in theory – there are accelerometers and a variety of sensors, sending messages to the computer that disciplines the dampers, but its orders seem confused. One minute the 8.32 travels with a suppleness approaching a Citroën's (though it has to be said that you'll make the analogy rarely), the next it goes to pieces, displaying all the damping control of a Datsun Stanza.

That the driver has two settings to play with – sport and auto – doesn't help matters much. Even in auto, the ride is never particularly good, often jiggling and crashing. In sport, the symptoms simply worsen, without any apparent improvement in roll control or poise. This is a system that needs a lot more work.

The Thema's case isn't helped by the quality of its body, which like other Type Four cars (Alfa 164 excepted) doesn't seem stiff enough. Especially with a bigger



engine and a long list of extra equipment dragging it down. Potholes have the body shaking and jarring, the fascia and fittings singing a twittering accompaniment, to the extent that you find yourself steering around ruts. Ride is easily the 8.32's most disappointing feature.

A Jaguar is light years ahead. The sad thing is that if Fiat hadn't meddled with the original passive suspension, the car would be a whole lot better than it is now; more the car we've admired in the past.

Most amazing, the Ferrari completely shades the

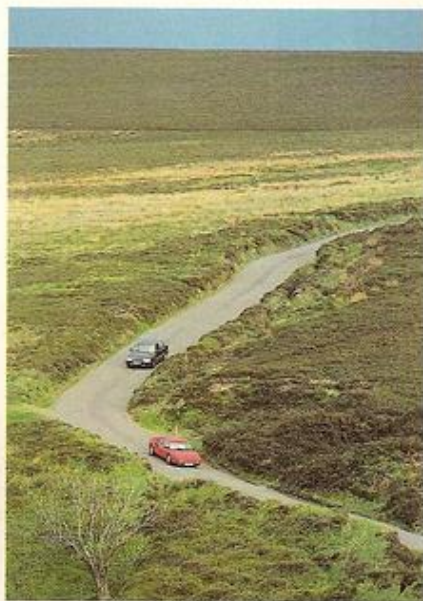
Lancia for ride. It not only has far better damping control, though that's a hollow victory against the 8.32, but also delivers a more comfortable ride, even at crawling speeds. And all this is achieved without muting the car's messages to its driver. The Mondial has another advantage, too – it's body is tremendously stiff. The car feels as one even on terrible roads – there's not a creak or groan to be heard. You soon feel so confident in its build that you believe it could be dropped from 20 feet and survive.

Only our car didn't. A mere 320 miles after we had collected it, the engine sprang an oil leak which gradually coated one half of the engine bay, then worked its way onto the rear screen. When we stopped, wisps of smoke drifted from the engine bay. Imagining the most expensive conflagration Exmoor has seen since World War Two, we decided to abandon the Ferrari at the Anchor and Ship Hotel in Porlock, our friendly refuge the previous night, for Maranello Concessionaires to collect.

Not that our Thema has a clean record. The idle speed wandered, often dying altogether, usually when we were entering a roundabout. And the car showed a depressing lack of solidity. We could even hear the doors jiggling in their frames on bumpy roads.

We left the Thema unconvinced that it will be reliable, but of the Ferrari, apparently so beautifully built, we are prepared to put the leak down to bad luck. It shouldn't happen, mind, in cars of this price.

As to which is the more satisfying, there can be no



Thema awash with cow hide. Comfort hurt by poor ride. Left-hand drive only. Bad oil leak brought Mondial to a halt (above)

doubt. The Ferrari is infinitely more entertaining than the Lancia, scoring decisive advantages in every dynamic department other than performance. And we know who was responsible for that. Ironically, its biggest failing is that it cannot really carry four people, the very thing Ferrari set out to achieve. Even children would complain at incarceration in the rear.

The Thema will carry four, even five with ease, but what it cannot do is double as Ferrari and family saloon. It has the engine, but not the chassis. A stiffer shell, four-wheel drive and conventional steel suspension might give the Mondial a stiffer challenge, but such things we're unlikely to see. The Ferrari remains unchallenged, by the executive class at least. And, magnificent though the Thema is, that has to be good news for the supercar.

'The Thema's chassis just can't cope, when the road twists violently'

