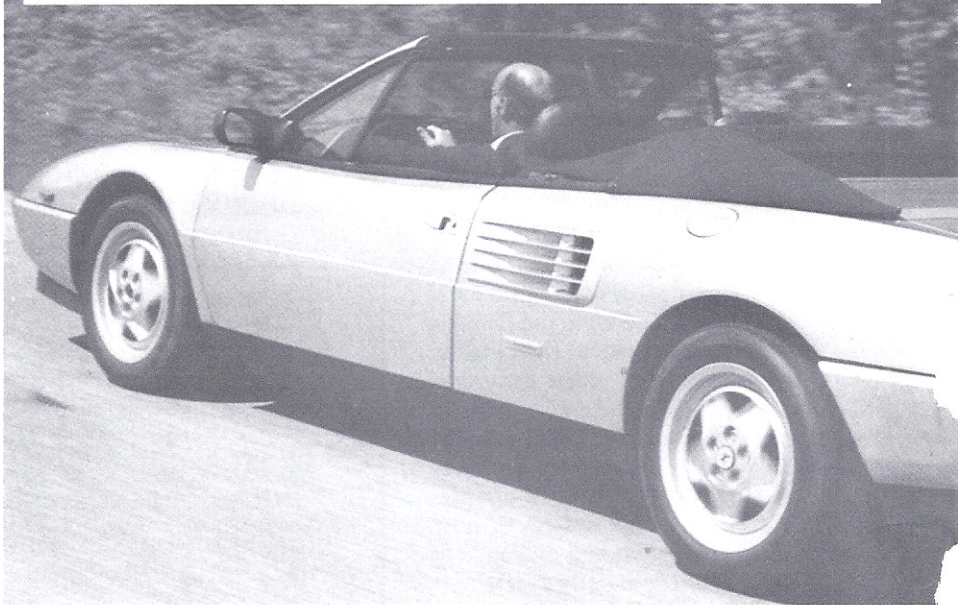


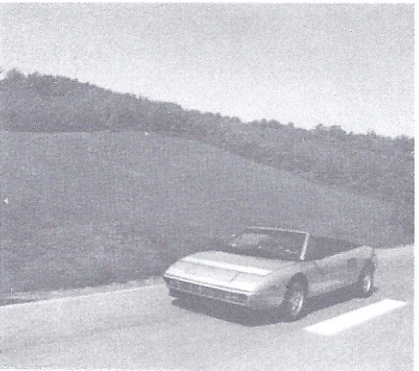
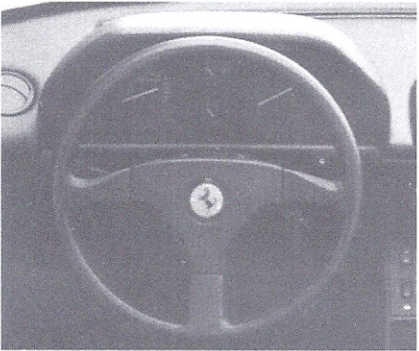
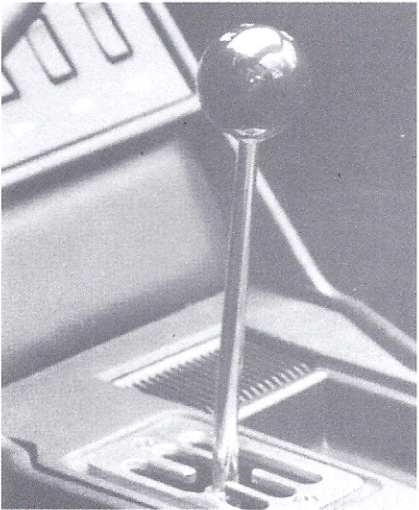
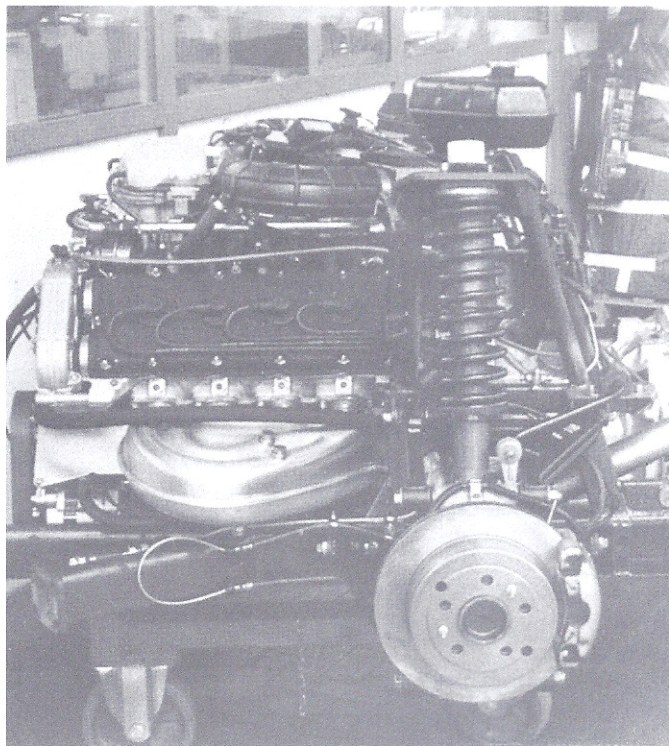
Done to a



The new Ferrari Mondial t Cabriolet is set to capture the public imagination in a way its predecessor never could. With a bigger, longitudinally-mounted V8, Ferrari's only true convertible is now the dream car it always promised to be. Peter Robinson



**Discreet changes to nose and tail and smaller side intakes distinguish new Mondial. Seats are far more supportive but chrome gear lever takes some getting used to. Adjustable Momo steering wheel is well placed. Engine gives smooth responsive flow of power through incredibly wide rev range**







**O**f all current Ferraris, the Mondial is the least emotive. Deprived of the flawless beauty of the 328, the stirring presence of the Testarossa, the shattering potential of the F40, even the gracious manners of the enduring 412, the Mondial has always been something of an uncomfortable compromise. Understated, the styling lacks the strong personality expected of a Ferrari — a reaction that driving only served to verify.

Creating an attractive body around mid-engined packaging that insists upon two-plus seating has never been easy. Bertone tried with the 308 GT4 in 1973, only to see his efforts completely overshadowed by Pininfarina's two-seater 308 GTB two years later. Yet Pininfarina's attempt at a successor to the GT4 resulted in the rather sombre Mondial. And for all its greater length and surprising height, the Mondial was no more than a mediocre two-plus-two. Moreover, with its bulk came weight so the performance was ordinary, at least by the standards demanded of a Ferrari.

I remember writing, in 1982, "downright slow . . . intolerably uncomfortable . . . a model that is not destined to become an instant

Ferrari classic," and getting into dreadful trouble with the men from Maranello who told me it was the worst road test ever penned of a Ferrari. Sales figures seemed to bear out my judgement.

That was before the Quattrovalvole heads and the 3.2-litre V8. But although the increased power restored the performance to an acceptable degree, it did little to lift sales. It was left to the release of a convertible version — Ferrari's only truly open car — in 1983, and initially for the US market only, to bring some respectability to the Mondial's sales figures.

In 1988 Ferrari delivered 511 Mondials, 219 of them Cabriolets. On the other hand, 2242 GTB/GTS models were sold. In the UK, Cabriolet sales of 17 were just one shy of matching the coupe, while in the warmer climes of the US Cabriolet sales were almost five times those of the coupe. Practical, four-seater Ferraris evidently lack the charisma of the two-seat models, a fact of life the beautiful new 348 is certainly not going to alter.

That's a shame, for the Mondial has been developed painstakingly into a fine car, the latest 't' modifications bringing improved performance, handling and comfort levels and even subtle changes to benefit its appearance. In convertible form, especially in convertible form when spring flourishes sunny and bright and an open Ferrari beckons, the Mondial t merits close scrutiny.

We arrived in Maranello expecting to drive the new coupe but, not for the first time, were told there had been a change of plan. Instead of the coupe we were handed the keys to a Prova Cabriolet and left in the care of one of the legendary Ferrari test drivers. Claudio Ori, he of the abundant moustache, shiny bald head and the soft suede shoes that are the trade-mark of Italians who like to drive fast cars fast, would drive the car outside the plant for photography. Our driving was to be limited to the tight Pista Fiorano circuit, the insurance problems of an outsider driving on Prova plates being simplified on Ferrari property.

Ori's skill behind the wheel isn't matched by a talent for lowering the soft top of the Cabriolet. If there is a quick and simple method we were unable to find it, so there are no photographs here of the Mondial with the roof in place. Once down, we weren't about to raise it again. Take it as read that the car looks far more alluring with the roof tucked away under the still-exposed tonneau cover, despite the large black cover being all too conspicuous against the silver body.

The new model doesn't look significantly

**If there is a  
finer  
automotive  
engine in  
production in  
the world than  
the 3.4-litre  
Ferrari V8, I  
know not from  
where it comes**

different, but under that lightly modified body — the most obvious change being smaller side intakes, though there are also discreet alterations to the nose and tail that reduce the drag co-efficient to a still poor 0.40 — the larger capacity V8 engine now sits longitudinally, running at 90deg to the crankshaft.

This is fundamentally the same powertrain unit that will appear later this year in the 348. Ferrari says the change is to promote serviceability, but primarily to allow the engine to be lowered in order to drop the centre of gravity and therefore further improve handling. On the old Mondial (and 328) the gearbox lay beneath the engine; fitting the gearbox at the end of the engine would have created too long a drivetrain. The solution chosen by Ferrari's engineers was adopted from the 312T Formula 1 cars of the late '70s. The result is that the engine is now five inches closer to the blacktop.

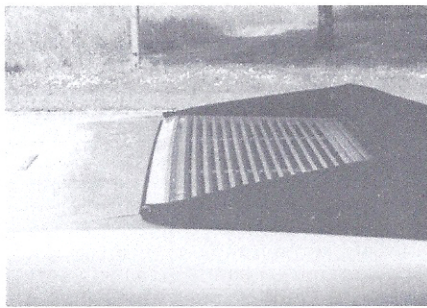
To enhance performance, the capacity of the double overhead cam V8 has been taken out to 3405cc by increasing both the bore and stroke, up from 83mm x 73.6mm to 85mm x 75mm. Maximum power has climbed to 300bhp at 7200rpm and torque of 238lb ft is developed at 4200rpm, compared with the 3.2-litre engine's 270bhp at 7000rpm and 224lb ft at 5500rpm. The gearbox is, of course, all-new with the drive coming from the engine via a 90deg bevel gear set to the hydraulically-operated clutch. This is mounted with the flywheel in an external housing at the end of the drivetrain, rather than being on the end of the crankshaft. A 40 per cent limited slip differential is coupled to the gearbox by cylindrical transfer gears. There's even a choice of final drive ratio, the standard ratio being 3.823 and giving 20.2mph per 1000rpm in fifth gear and a slightly higher 3.706 giving 20.8mph. Official Ferrari figures suggest a top speed of 158mph which represents 7800rpm — 300rpm into the red with the standard ratio — or 7600rpm with the optional ratio.

Watching Ori thread the Mondial through the traffic of Maranello, as we headed up into the foothills of the Apennine mountains to the west of the town, taught me much about the car. He drifted along, taking advantage of the engine's wonderful torque and rarely exceeding 3500rpm, slipping the delicate chrome gear lever in apparently measured changes from one ratio to another, pausing momentarily in neutral before pushing firmly into the next gear. Deftly, with the considerable skill that comes of daily exposure, Ori knows only the smoothest line through the corners, never appearing quick or even to be concentrating. Nonetheless we proceeded so swiftly as to leave any other traffic in futile pursuit.

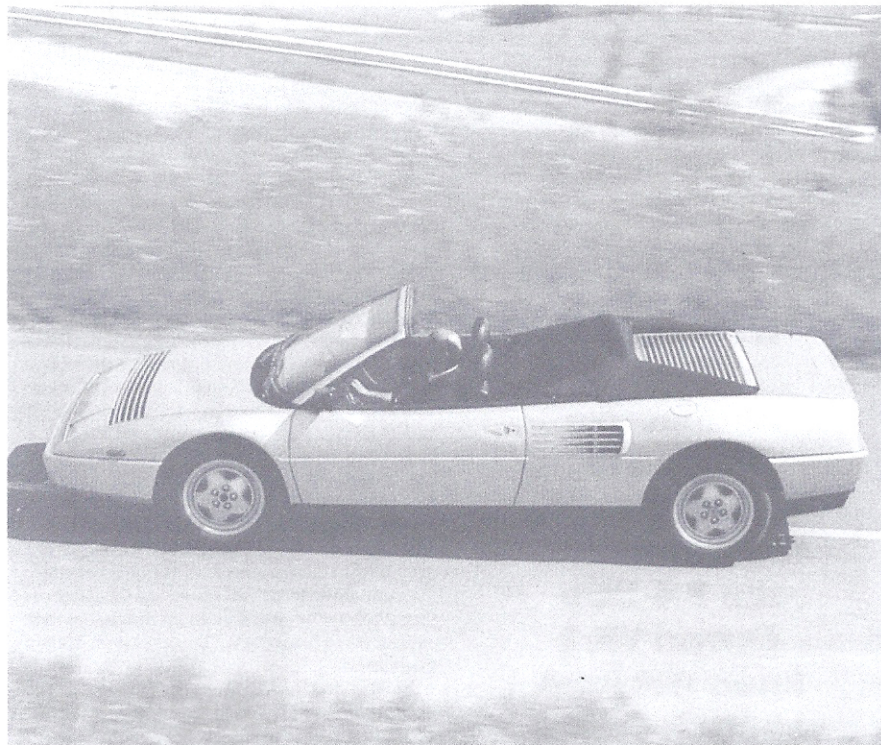
It is a big car, the Mondial, long in wheelbase — at 104.3ins it's 11.8ins longer than the 328 — to make room for two small rear bucket seats. The cabin is well forward, with a short bonnet and steeply raked windscreen, and there are large fixed quarter windows, where the coupe has none, to provide additional rigidity. Restricted by the position of the engine, this is most definitely two-plus-two accommodation although, if the front seat occupants are prepared to compromise a little, it is certainly not uncomfortable in either compartment, though those behind will find wind turbulence excessive. Headroom, however, is not a problem.

Elastic and surprisingly comfortable, the ride quality is only spoiled over the most severe of bumps which induce some scuttle shake. ▶





**New Mondial feels more agile and responsive, an indulgent car to drive with impeccable manners. Power steering is major improvement. Mondial looks more alluring with roof tucked away but lowering soft top proved a chore**



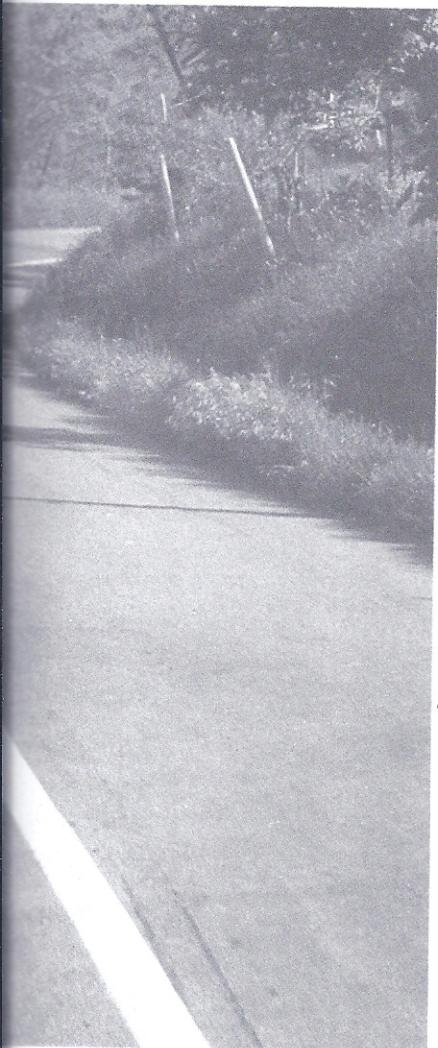
◀ Body control is excellent, a three-position damper adjustment allowing the driver to choose between soft, intermediate and hard for the now Bilstein, rather than Koni, dampers. Ori selects soft for the transport stages, switching to hard only when really rapid driving is required for the camera. Knowing the dampers firm up automatically when vehicle speed or lateral forces build up, he prefers to leave the system on soft to enjoy the real benefits of the extra low-speed comfort.

Sitting low in the cabin on thinner yet more supportive front buckets, the rush of wind passing over our heads if not those behind, we whistle up the ridge top and zig-zag roads that have become familiar to two generations of journalists and a playground for numerous Ferrari test drivers to show off in the latest model. Here, where it has been tested and tested again, the Mondial's chassis balance and manoeuvrability are plain to see.

Ori's control is masterly and he slides the Cabriolet through the bumpy corners in long power drifts for the camera, spinning the car through 180deg from a standing start in less than its length to avoid having to drive down the road to find a turning space. You know he has done it all before and will do it again soon.

Suddenly it is lunch time and our photographer has finished for the morning. On the way back into Maranello, the sun glints off the Mondial's bonnet and heat is held in a





permanent shimmer above the vents to the engine. In an open car, you remember again, there's no necessity to travel quickly. There is so much pleasure in motoring gently, the senses absorbing the joy that comes from total involvement in the countryside. You smell the change of season, taste the perfect visibility, catch the wind in the Cyprus trees over the constant whirr from the Ferrari's engine.

Back at the legendary figure of eight Ferrari test track, an F40 circulates rapidly, thrilling the American visitors who've left their 30-year-old Mille Miglia chargers at the factory to ride beside another fearless Ferrari test driver. The F40 streams past the timing shed, reaching 150mph down the short straight. Claudio parks the Mondial beside an old farm building, now converted to a garage. It contains, along with a Fiat fire truck, a couple of pushbikes, a Fiat tractor and a pile of old racing tyres, five Ferrari F1 cars of recent vintages. Three carry the name Alboreto, one Berger and the fifth and oldest, Villeneuve. The F40 disappears to be replaced by a Testarossa with Leitz Correvit performance testing equipment.

Then it is our turn. Two hours alone on Fiorano, to play at being Nigel Mansell in a Mondial convertible. There might be better ways of spending an afternoon in Italy, though for the moment I can't think of any.

You drop down into the Mondial feet first, using the windscreen pillar for support,

because the cushion is well forward and the doors don't open very wide. The pedals are still offset, due to the intrusive wheel arches, but you're only aware of this for a brief moment. The Momo wheel is adjustable for height and reach and is now straight ahead and very comfortably positioned at a more vertical angle than on previous Ferraris. The excellent driving position is enhanced by properly comfortable bucket seats that have clearly been completely redesigned and provide good lateral and thigh support. The controls are conveniently laid out, mostly on the central console, while the instruments — the tachometer graduated to an impressive 10,000rpm and the speedometer to 280km/h (174mph) — are easy to read under their heavily shrouded cover. The interior is surprisingly conventional and spacious, and beautifully finished in soft leather. Only the traditionally delicate-in-appearance-but-not-in-action chrome Ferrari gear lever, feeding into the exposed gate, requires some intimacy before shifts become second nature.

Ori had been having trouble starting the Mondial all morning, the engine demanding frequent cranking, a problem he explained isn't normal on this early prototype. Fortunately it fires immediately, the V8 idling quickly even when warm. The clutch is heavy yet flowing in its movements, the gearchange less so; it needs to be teased out of one ratio and forced into another before you understand that a firm hand is required. And, as always with a Ferrari, there is a tendency to look down at the gate when changing gears to ensure you have selected the right ratio. The indecision soon fades. First is down to the left and reverse opposite, the change being heavily spring-loaded to the second-third plane.

If Ferrari allowed its low-emission engines from the early '80s to fall behind established performance standards, the latest engine, tuned to run on unleaded fuel, restores the status quo. If there is a finer automotive engine in production in the world I know not from where it comes. There's torque enough at 1000rpm to pull fifth gear and yet it will run effortlessly to the red line of 7500rpm, the deep gutsy ring of the V8 building from 2000rpm with a wonderful visceral induction roar that expresses the engine's power better than any performance figures.

This engine delivers a smooth and responsive flow of power right through its incredibly wide rev range. Only over the last 500rpm to the red line does it begin to display any sign of stress and that is more a shrill gear whine than

inherent harshness. So progressive and expansive is the spread of power that the Mondial is a docile car to drive, tolerant of infrequent gear changes, demanding little of the driver once the gear shift has been perfected.

So tractable is the engine that first can be engaged with 1500rpm on the tachometer, the car then moving forward on idle. No, Ferraris aren't intended to be driven in such a way. Push down firmly and the car sprints forward, the engine shattering the quiet. Ferrari claims a 0-62mph time of 6.3secs for the Mondial — 1.1secs faster than the old 3.2-litre version — and that seems about right, though it happens remarkably effortlessly.

Two things strike you immediately when driving the Mondial. The first is that the power steering, fitted for the first time on a Mondial, is so light at low speeds as to make you doubt its competence. But turn into the first corner and you begin to appreciate its accuracy and sensitivity. Beautifully weighted, with 2.9 turns lock to lock compared to the previous model's 3.4, the power steering is one of the more obvious reasons why this Mondial is so superior to the old. The old rack and pinion kick-back that afflicted former models has disappeared, and the steering is so delicate that the car can be driven very quickly from the finger tips. No longer does understeer intrude on turning into a corner to take the edge off the old car's excellent handling. The new Mondial feels both more agile and more responsive.

There is gentle understeer, but even that is too strong a term for the way this Ferrari drives around corners. Yes, it is possible to kick the tail out on the tight Fiorano corners and hold the car in a lovely, balanced oversteer slide, if that's the way you want to drive. The grip provided by the Goodyear Eagle ZR55 tyres — 205/16s up front and 225/16s at the rear — is convincing, yet they are also progressive when they do lose adhesion. The new Mondial is an indulgent car to drive quickly, with impeccable manners.

The second aspect is the car's low gearing. Disguised by the engine's incredible flexibility and the breadth of its rev range, the low gearing means short ratios. First runs to just 40mph at the 7500rpm redline, second 62, third 89, fourth just 119 and fifth 151.5, although the engine will spin even faster for short bursts. Does the Mondial need a six-speed gearbox? It's a solution Ferrari is exploring.

Of course the immense torque of the engine means you don't have to be constantly changing gears so it is almost an academic point, exposed only when accelerating through the gears for the first time and before coming to terms with the span of the engine's range. Five minutes into the drive and any thoughts of low gearing are forgotten.

Today's Mondial has anti-lock brakes, the pedal communicating some sponginess that is an instant give-away, though there is little pulsating at the pedal when the anti-skid device comes into operation. Vented at each wheel and with floating calipers, the brakes are formidable.

We left the Mondial at Fiorano, wanting to prolong the drive and knowing that the lower-case t after its name has furnished the latest Ferrari with respectability at last. Practical, certainly, but also appropriately fast and with fine handling, the Mondial deserves serious consideration. And there's still the glorious attraction of the convertible body — a Ferrari convertible after all. ■

**Two hours on Fiorano to play at being Nigel Mansell in a Mondial convertible. What better way to spend an afternoon in Italy?**