

“Taking a Ferrari home is an event worthy of a BBC outside broadcast”

A FAMILY AFFAIR

There aren't many excuses to be made these days when you go to pick up your new Ferrari. With the latest Mondial t it's all quickly understandable and workable. Except the gearchange. "Don't even try to get second when the oil is cold," said the Mondial's regular keeper as he handed me the keys and a month's pass. "Do like all Ferrari drivers and just use first, third and fifth until everything has warmed up."

The advice is not so much an apology as a statement of fact that you, as someone who has chosen to drive a Ferrari, will accept without question. Ferrari chief Luca di Montezemolo doesn't just accept it but in an interview with this magazine (6 May) has enshrined the stiff gearchange and noisy engine as things without which a Ferrari wouldn't be a Ferrari.

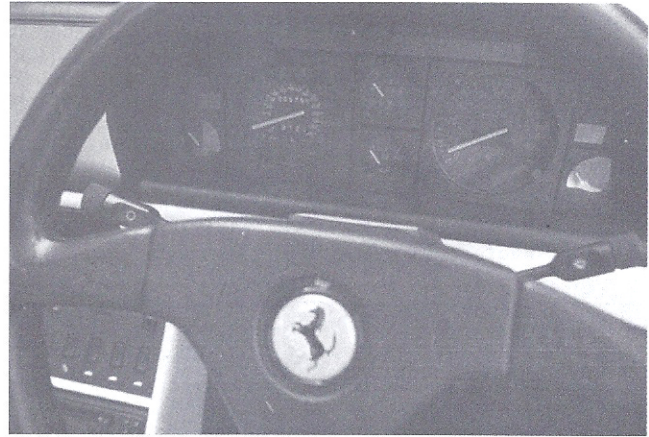
It's meant to be old-fashioned logic that says the more out of reach a car is — for its high price, tough driving challenge and impracticality — the more people lust for it, but there has to be truth in it still, even though Ferrari seems to be covering all options with the Mondial t. Here is a Ferrari it's said you can use every day, one which comes with four seats, power steering and a sunroof, with even a new semi-automatic gearbox on the way. In a telling and necessarily

anonymous quote, a Ferrari insider said: "With the Mondial a lot of reasons for owning a Ferrari have disappeared. A woman could drive it."

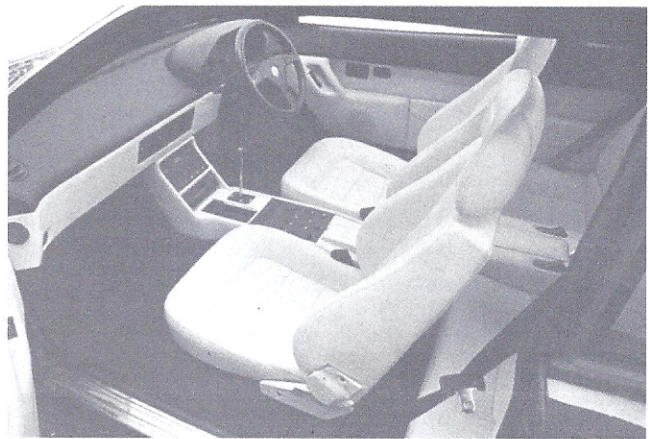
Aargh! I am the first journalist ever to be lent a Ferrari for a month and a woman could drive it. What is the world coming to?

It's certainly a different world for Ferrari today. The Mondial's body is a mixture of aluminium, steel and glass-fibre but not so long ago you would have thought that even this, the tamest prancing horse, was made of gold. You can take delivery of a new one tomorrow, and you will pay less than the cost of a big Mercedes saloon. Offer an attractive cash or part-exchange deal and you will probably get the stereo thrown in, maybe a rounding down of the price. What you couldn't expect to do is sell it the next day for more than you paid for it: the trade would depreciate it by about £20,000 after a year. Immediate delivery, discounts, depreciation? The prancing horse has resisted far longer than most, but for the world's most famous sports car, reality has dawned.

And reality for this particular Mondial t was a most unusual month by Ferrari standards: it was to be used not as a fashion accessory or a weekend plaything, but as a car. Every day. In all weathers. To the corner shop for a bottle of milk and to school to drop off the kids. With four people aboard, and luggage.



Dash is simple, but with that badge it can afford to be



Leather-lined cabin looks great but gets grubby quickly



Given its head on open road, Mondial is swift and sure

I was to do 3000 miles in it in a month, more than the average Ferrari owner does in a year. Snicking the gear lever between third and fourth at 7500rpm on a winding moorland road was going to be important too, but before that the famous exposed gear lever gate had to withstand a fusillade of Jelly Tots being flicked at it from the back seat. Welcome, Ferrari, to the real world.

What do you find when you get your Rosso Corsa pride and joy home for the first time? The neighbours all come out, that's what. The Mondial t was never

the greatest looking Ferrari and today, for all its quite excellent packaging and handsomeness, is dated: just look at that improbably long and high front overhang. But, and this is the point, those Pininfarina lines aren't anywhere near prosaic enough for anyone to take it for anything *but* a Ferrari. Taking a Ferrari home for the first time is an event worthy of a BBC outside broadcast.

What you find is a car more than 150mm (6ins) shorter and 150mm narrower than a Granada, and what appears to be an equivalent amount



Pre-breakfast blast across open country roads is fine start to day; handling is as neutral and poised as it appears

lower. The drivetrain is identical to the Ferrari 348's, which means the 3405cc all-alloy V8 pumps out 300bhp at 7200rpm and 234lb ft of torque at 4200rpm. For the Mondial t the quad cam, 32-valve engine, fully catalysed these days and dry-sumped as always, uses the new transverse gearbox, a compact solution that puts the drivetrain in line astern, just aft of the two rear seats. Everything else is just as proper — double wishbones, big vented anti-lock discs, limited slip diff — until you get to the powered rack and pinion steering and three-way adjustable dampers with their suggestion (well-founded) of ride comfort.

The cabin is proper, too: there's a simplicity that borders on the uninteresting, were it not for the elegant detailing (let down only by a horrible plastic air vent) and acreage of exquisite leather. With a layered colour scheme that goes red, cream and black, the cabin takes on the appearance of some exotic gateaux. Take delight, too, in the embossed leather case containing a well-stocked tool kit that includes the aerosol tyre inflater (no

spare is carried) and, surely the ultimate in workshop one-upmanship, pliers bearing the prancing horse symbol.

The first drive home was neither intimidating nor hard work. Driving a Mondial for the first time, as Ferrari virgins in the office will testify, is far easier than most people would imagine. For the first and last time in the Mondial, I made the mistake of using my normal, speed-humped route — not a good idea — and the equal mistake of a brisk first gear take-off from the lights only to be passed 100 yards up

“ It sounds like ancient plumbing when you fire it up from cold ”

the road by sundry hatchbacks as I was suddenly confronted by a box full of neutrals. The good news with the gearbox is that you can slot home first and third come what may, and the gap between them isn't large enough to show any serious hole in the V8's torque delivery. But, as the man in the shop said, you need to wait for the oil to thin before relying on

second. Really, it's a bit rich in a £67,000 car.

By the time I reached home I had, in true road tester fashion, made a mental list of about a dozen things likely to annoy me over the month. In view of the seat cushion's lowness, flatness and paucity of padding, coupled with a sharing of the footwell with half a Goodyear Eagle, I imagined the most serious of these would be a certain amount of discomfort for someone 196cm (6ft 5ins) tall with most of that between backside and toes: not exactly the proportioning of a typical

plumbing when you fire it up from cold? That it then goes on to do a first-rate impression of an electric sewing machine in need of a service? That there is precious little provision in the cabin to store anything more than a soft-cover map? That the minor switches are arranged such that all the less important ones are where you can see them and the important ones aft of your left buttock?

Similarly, would it matter that the windscreen bonding was losing its grip, that wires were visible beneath the dashboard, that the rear luggage lid was chafing the bodywork, the seat backrests rocked an inch backwards and forwards and a bit of backing plastic on the dash was coming unstuck? All of this would be a Nissan's undoing, but a Ferrari's too?

The first question on my mind was rather more practical: I did rather want to have a car to give back at the end of our month together. And in pretty much the same as-new condition in which it arrived. Suddenly in the world of park-by-ear, fling-open-the-door merchants and car thieves, the Mondial seemed very vulnerable. Body protection ►

Italian. Wrong. I was never as comfortable as I am in, say, a long-limbed special like a Porsche 928, but I was never uncomfortable either, even after three hours at the wheel.

How many of these other things on my list would be the same? Does it matter the doors don't open as wide as they could? That the engine sounds like a house with ancient

“**Supercar clutches used to have an inspirational feel. The Ferrari’s still does**”

◀ amounts to diddly, anti-theft modifications to a door lock I wouldn't put money on and a pull-out radio. It wasn't the radio I was worried about.

Driving a Ferrari changes your habits. You find the car park spaces where none can park next to you; you don't leave it in unlit corners; I took a taxi to the airport rather than leave it languishing in the long-term and you have rather interrupted dinners when visits to the loo suddenly become far more frequent and are via a route that takes in the restaurant car park.

So what is it that makes this car precious beyond its price and function? Or is it that we are just conditioned to think that way? Certainly most people would agree the mystique of Ferrari, founded on legends of both the man and his racing and fuelled by an irresistible Italian passion, is as enticing as any in the car world. Hype or not, it works: there are no cheap Ferraris, no tatty ones, and none lurking unloved in *Exchange & Mart*. Normally this is treatment reserved for classics no longer made, but to be in such a position and still turn out 4000 or so a year is unique.

And even with the Mondial, Ferrari has been pretty true to itself in making a car that stands for the virtues on which that image has been established. The athletic dynamism, driver involvement and precision are real enough.

It takes a Ferrari to tell you

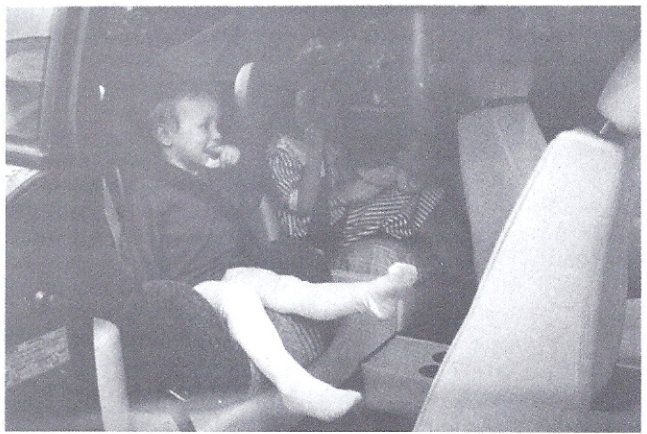
what a well-engineered throttle linkage should feel like after too many cars that don't know or don't care. How many power steering systems are this alive between your fingers, how many chassis so talkative (if ultimately so very challenging)? Supercar clutches used to have an inspirational feel. The Ferrari's still does. You don't know what well-chosen gear ratios are until you have click-clacked that Bakelite-topped spindly chrome lever between two, three and four at 7500rpm. Perfection. Do this on a diving and twisting country route, heeling and toeing your way down the gearbox as well as charging up in it, and — if you do it well — it's as invigorating and stimulating an experience as we're allowed these days.

And of course if you fluff a gearchange or miss an apex you can always go back and do it again: there is always the challenge of being able to drive it better. For all its delicacy a Ferrari is as tough as they come where it counts, and the harder and faster you drive, the more the car starts to work in harmony with itself and the driver. Awkward second gear? Forget it. Double declutch accurately and you can bang the lever up from third into second as fast and cleanly as any. Sound like a sewing machine? Not now it doesn't. It's still not the most musical sound but it is all mechanical, and it's very hard and very loud.

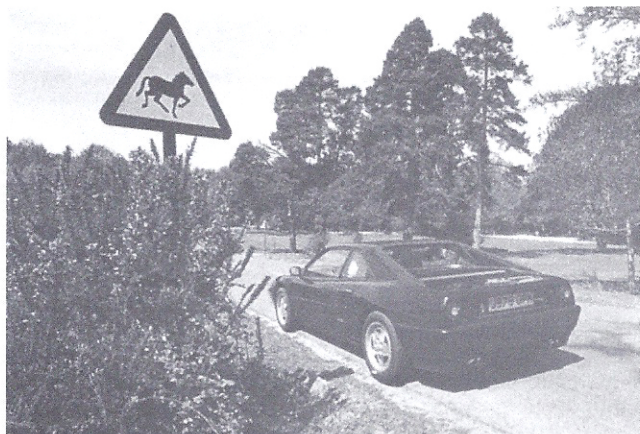
Don't think that this relies on



With 0-60 in 5.6secs, Mondial can gallop with the best



Kids loved sitting in the back, safety seats an easy fit



Every horse needs its exercise; first find an open road

taking the car beyond its capabilities. To drive a Ferrari well is to drive it fast, yes, but also to use up road space not much greater than the 1810mm, or 71ins, of its width. The incisive turn-in to a corner, the flat body and the prodigious grip coupled to the very clear signals about the direction in which the car's rearward bulk will want to go if your right foot gets the willies mid corner, these are all sufficient to stay within the wide band in which handling is neutral, perhaps just occasionally nudging into mild understeer. On the scale of effort, say driving at seven to eight-tenths.

We have all seen enough photographs of Ferrari test driver Dario Benuzzi at 10 and 11-tenths, holding his car in wild oversteer slides to see that, in the right hands, such handling is not beyond the car's capabilities, but it is foolish to pretend it would not be beyond that of many drivers. Certainly mine: playing with the Mondial on a steering pad was enough to confirm that the great feeling of weight transference under throttle lift-off at maximum lateral acceleration is no idle threat. The subsequent oversteer slide is not as quick as a

348's but it does go on and on and on and you do need a lot of very quickly applied power as well as opposite lock to get it all back in shape. I lost the tail more times than I caught it, for odds I would not care to bet on in public road driving.

What is delightful in the Ferrari is driving it at 70 or 80mph on a country A-road — barely six-tenths motoring — but still take a delight in its responses, precision and poise. At least, with the family aboard, I told myself I could.

Yes, for a small family this car works. Some compromise of front legroom is required but once made there is room for both child seats and children, with effective seatbelts and, the real clincher, plenty of glass so they can see out. Bigger children than Kate, five, and Brooke, two, will find the backrests too meanly padded and upright, something Peter across the road, a 12-year-old used to riding in the much more sumptuously padded and shaped back seat of a 928, was quick to point out. For adults, headroom is the big problem.

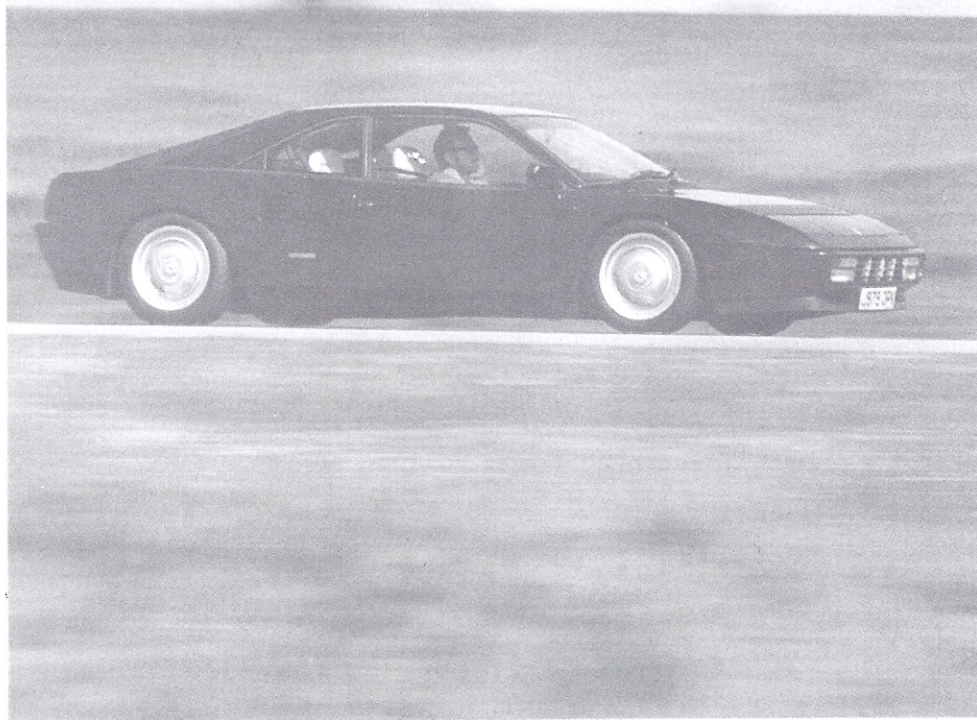
After 500 miles to Devon and back in a weekend, no one had any grounds for complaint

on being too hot, too cramped, too uncomfortable (apart from Cat's-eyes which go off like explosions, the ride anywhere is superb), too unable to hear *Three Billy Goats Gruff* on the stereo (it was close that one, though) or too sad at having to leave a favourite teddy behind. With the front boot able to take a mid-size Samsonite and rear boot a well-shaped oblong, it is surprising what luggage you can squeeze in.

There was only one thing that drove us all wild: the almost complete lack of anywhere in the cabin to put anything. Nevertheless, the kids took to the car instantly and never went off it; they loved the picture of the little horsey so much they insisted on taking the keyring to bed.

Whether the car liked them so much is another matter. Finest Italian leather in light cream is not known for its child resistant properties, although at the end of a month it was the driver's seat that looked the grimy one, with the bolsters creased and the leather tinged blue from jeans. The carpets had started to curl up at the edges and, more worrying, the paint was getting stone chipped and had flaked off some of the external aluminium panels. To use it every day and keep it immaculate would require hours of work a week.

A month showed up no mechanical weaknesses. The only problem was a suddenly very noisy and inconsistent power steering pump that



Mondial is still a handsome car, despite age; people automatically know it's a Ferrari

needed topping up. In 3000 miles the V8 got through two litres of Agip SINT 2000, and unleaded fuel at the average rate of 20.4mpg, with a best return of 22.9 and worst of 16.7. Not bad, considering when last we tested the Mondial t we got 154mph flat out and 0-60 in 5.6secs, both of which felt readily achievable.

Other figures don't add up so well. UK Ferraris get used so irregularly that importers Maranello Concessionaires had to devise a special six-monthly service check: leaving a car like this in a garage is as

bad as over-using it, they say. Just as well, you say, after looking at the scheduled servicing costs over 37,000 miles: at £6400 plus VAT it's five times more than a Honda NSX

What it costs to service a Ferrari

Mileage	Labour	Parts	Total
6000	£295	£158	£453
12,000	£744	£428	£1172
18,000	£282	£173	£455
25,000	£2055	£572	£2627
31,000	£282	£192	£474
37,000	£744	£477	£1221
Total	£4402	£2000	£6402

Note: 25,000 miles/two year service includes recommended cambelt replacement. VAT extra

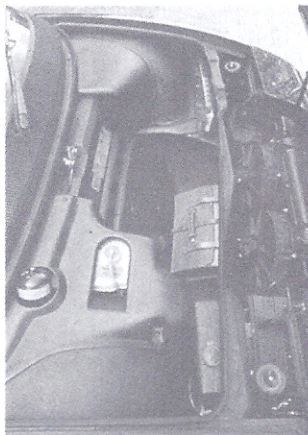
would cost at £1169.

Another big incentive not to use it is insurance. I asked John Scott and Partners of Farnham, Surrey, what a Mondial t would cost me to insure. Answer: a reasonable £948 a year and no no-claims bonus necessary. Handy for many Ferrari owners who drive a company car and don't have a bonus in their name. The only snag here is that I could cover only 3000 miles a year. That's one good European touring holiday, I reckon. John Scott has 300 Ferraris on its books and most are covered

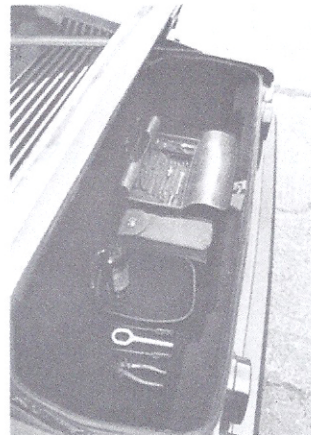
under this limited mileage policy. For unlimited miles, a 38-year-old with maximum four years' no-claims bonus living in a low risk area would have to shell out £1620 a year.

I get the impression no one is that keen to change any of this. To do so would be to bring ordinariness to Ferrari and the inevitable kiss of death, no matter how much more accessible the marque would become. The concessions the Mondial makes are real enough but far from enough. You could use it every day but you would be stupid, or wealthy way beyond the asking price, to try. It's still a special occasion car for high days and holidays, the only Mondial difference being the family can come, too.

No, there aren't many excuses to be made when you pick up a new Ferrari these days. If there were Ferrari wouldn't make them anyway. Ferrari doesn't make excuses, it makes the fastest, most beautiful and exciting sports cars in the world. The only thing I haven't worked out is whether it's Ferrari that's not yet ready for me, or me not yet ready for a Ferrari. Just as well it's only academic... ■



No spare fills front boot



Rear boot ok, tool kit posh