

Mondial la magnifica!

Ferrari's Mondial 8 – superbly blending dynamic ability with masterful body design, clever electronics and Porsche-like build quality – is proof positive that Maranello is reaching bright new heights. Steve Cropley reports overleaf



IT MAY NOT SEEM THE greatest of accolades to call the new four-place Mondial 8 the first decisively Fiat-influenced Ferrari. Yet that is the truth of the matter. And whatever it appears to be at first, it is an accolade – one of the biggest.

Any four-place Ferrari starts fairly well behind scratch. According to lore, Ferraris are built for their drivers, and for the one passenger each they might deign to choose. Any thought of Ferraris as people-carriers is scowled at by the cognoscenti, and that attitude is reflected by the fact that it is the two-seaters which become collector's items later in their lives. On top of that, it is the two-place cars which were always the best motor cars since they were invariably closer in design to the cars that really mattered at Ferrari, the racing cars.

But the Mondial 8 may be the car to change things for four-seaters. It has the inspired blend of compromises to be numbered among the best-designed Ferraris of them all. It has the build quality and durability to last longer than any that has gone before. And significantly, it is the first Ferrari to be wholly planned, designed, developed and built since Fiat took over the Ferrari road cars business at the end of 1969. Not that the Mondial is an aggressive, noticeable character of a car – it is not. On first acquaintance you might be excused for thinking it rather too conservative and easily missed. But in all of Ferrari's road car history it is the first to approach Porsche – even Mercedes-Benz coupe – standards of build and essential useability, and the achievement is the greater because it does not sacrifice a jot of the balance and sensitivity that divides the finest Italian cars from the rest. But these realisations do not come at once.

If you are like me, you will approach the Ferrari Mondial 8 with a measure of scepticism. You will be aware that the car's function is to supersede the wedge-shaped 308GT4 two-plus-two which, despite the fact that for years it was the marque's top-seller, was not an especially notable Ferrari. Many buyers liked its low price and had to have the extra room it offered over the pure two-seaters. But at the same time the car was rather scorned by some who felt that its Bertone body did not fit into the Ferrari-Pininfarina scheme of things, and who realised that its rear seats housed jackets and briefcases – or shopping bags – better than they housed people. Whatever the truth, the verdict has been reached: there are quite a lot of low-mileage GT4s on sale, and they don't cost much.

The Mondial starts much more strongly. It has a Pininfarina body that bears a relationship with the great cars that have gone before. But the roof is rather high – saloon-like, somebody said – and

the lines seem a little straight-laced. And those rear-flank air scoop grilles are a little too 'pre-war Flash Gordon' in styling to be attractive. Certainly they aren't like the elegant ducts of the 308GTB and 246GT which make those cars look so good. But it's sleek, clean and, well, not ugly.

Broadly, the Mondial obeys Ferrari chassis principles by employing a tubular steel frame over which metal panels are mounted. The outer skins are substantially of steel but there are isolated alloy components (including the nose and engine covers) and glassfibre is used for some of the inner panels, particularly those inside the cockpit. But the designers say they have broken with tradition in two key ways. They have used more ribbed and boxed sheet in the structure in an attempt to improve its strength for no increase in weight, and they have made it possible, by removal of a sequence of bolts in the lower chassis, to drop out the engine/transaxle and rear suspension, complete with its subframe, to provide accessibility that will make the Mondial historically easy to service. In your Ferrari mechanic's opinion at least, the two-seater 308GTB is going to be a Mondial's poor relation.

Make no mistake, the two cars are closely related. The Mondial does have a unique chassis and body, but it uses much of the 308's suspension components and running gear, and the power packs of the two cars are identical, right down to their gear spreads and final drive ratios. That means both cars have coil-sprung unequal-length double wishbone systems at both ends, Koni-damped and balanced side-to-side by anti-roll bars. The brakes are powered discs all round, 11.6in diameter at the front and 11in at the rear. Steering is by manual rack and pinion. It takes 3.5turns to swing the Mondial's wheels from lock to lock, quite a lot when you consider that it can only just turn inside a 40ft diameter circle. Later, as you drive the car, the mild under-gearing of its steering is something you notice.

There is a considerable size difference between Mondial and GTB. At 104in the four-seater is a massive 12in longer in wheelbase, it is 13.8in longer overall at 180in, its tracks are an inch or so wider, it is a towering 5in higher than the 308 and nearly 3in wider – most of which seems to be reflected in increased shoulder width. All this bulk, and the extra accommodation, makes a Mondial around 350lb heavier than a GTB, though it is hard to be accurate about this because there is a considerable discrepancy between the 'official' figures quoted in the handbooks and those in the sales brochures. The car meets the road with Michelin TRX 240/55 VR390 tyres, bigger in section but similar in aspect ratio

to the 225/55s recently fitted to the new, fuel injected 308GTBi.

They're big, chunky tyres, noticeably fatter and taller than the GTB's. It's now clear that there were some problems in accommodating TRXs under the 308's wheel arches; one can't help thinking that the 240/55s might be the tyres for it as well.

The 3.0litre 90deg V8 has recently had its two banks of two twin-throat Weber carburettors replaced by Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection, and has lost quoted power in the process. It has a bigger job to do in Mondial than 308 – it must propel a body with more frontal area, weighing 12percent more, on fatter and more air-resistant tyres that doubtless have a little more rolling resistance, too. The four cam engine, you will remember, was rated at 255bhp when things were easy back in the middle '70s. Now, according to the factory, the engine produces 214bhp at 6600rpm (though a direct conversion from their quoted output in kilowatts makes that 211bhp, and at one stage their spokesmen were calling it 210bhp). The torque rating is 176lb/ft at 4600rpm. What is important is that the 255bhp of 1975 probably wasn't the truth; the latest 214bhp has to be. The engine feels as though it has lost about 20bhp, not 45, and gained immeasurably in smoothness and crisp starting.

The Mondial's taller TRX tyres give it a higher overall gearing of 20.1mph/1000rpm against the GTB's 19.3mph/1000rpm. This might be thought to further handicap the Mondial against the 308, but it doesn't work out that way. Using the 7700rpm limit marked on the tachometer (once more there is a discrepancy: the handbook says 7700rpm is the maximum, the sales brochure says 7500) the bigger tyres extend the Mondial's gear maxima by between 2mph and 6mph in the lower four gears and that makes a surprising difference to the Mondial's feeling of effortlessness in eight-10ths touring over challenging terrain. Besides, as far as we could judge in a wet day's testing, there isn't anything like the discrepancy between the Mondial's and the GTB's performance that there was between GTB and the Lotus Esprit Turbo that it met in CAR last month.

Ferrari claim a 15.0sec standing 400m for the Mondial which seems around a second too fast to us. The top speed is claimed to be near-as-dammit to 150, though we'd be surprised whether you'd ever see much more than 140 in a standard-tune Mondial on open roads. The Mondial loses little, perhaps 0.3sec, on the GTB's 0-60mph time of 6.7sec because its second gear runs a little beyond 60, the GTB's wrung-out maximum. The Mondial would pass 100mph from standstill about 1.5 to 2.0sec behind the GTB – it

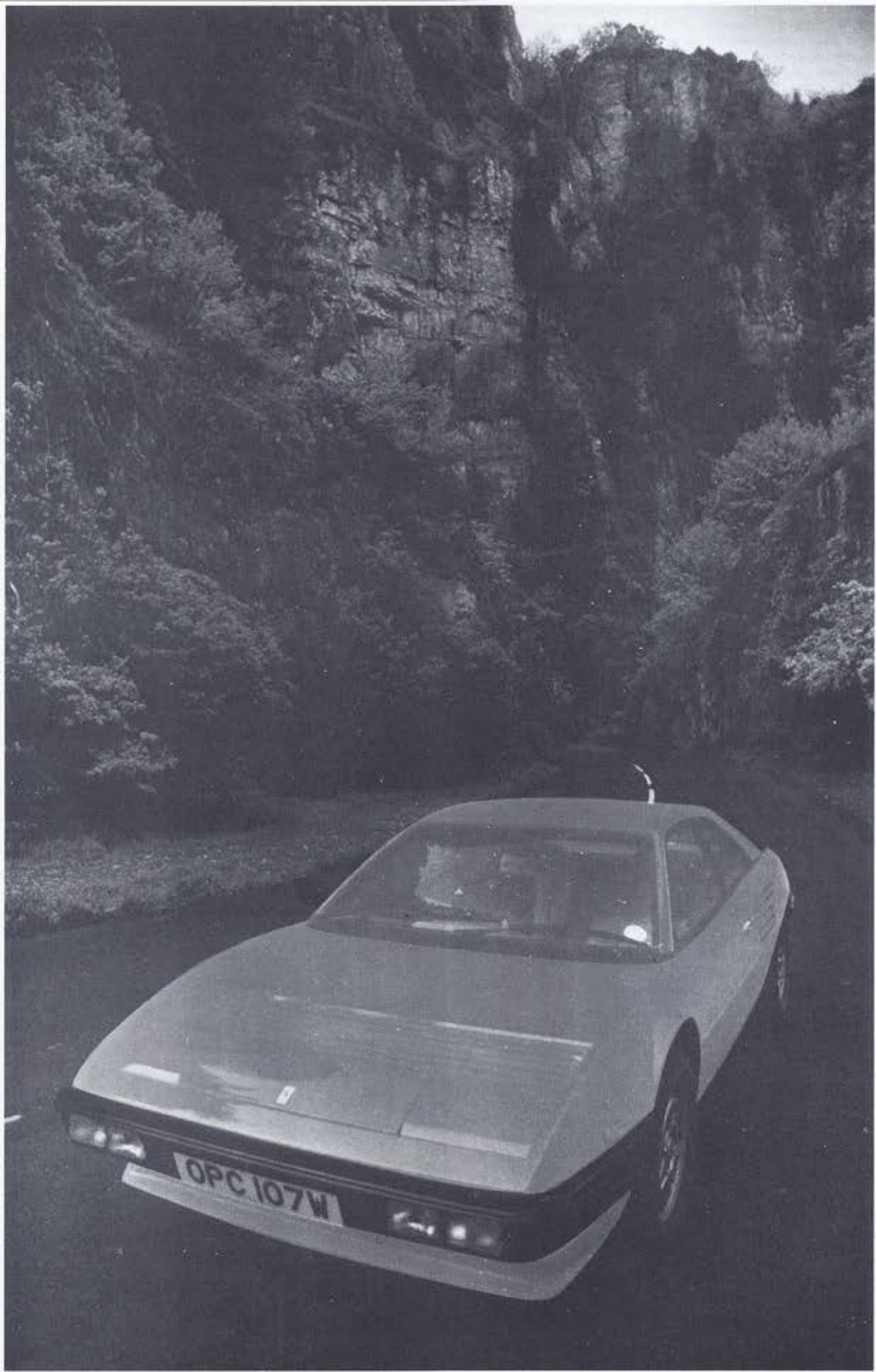
would take around 21.0sec, which remains fast. And at that speed in the Mondial there's still the business end of fourth left, and fifth to come.

If you have reservations about the Mondial's outline (and you probably do, noting the classic beauty of the 308GTB) these are dispelled when you step into it to drive it away. The Mondial's cockpit is the most spacious of any of today's crop of mid-engined cars. You notice it immediately. You aren't at all concerned about headroom (as you are in 308GTB, Boxer, BMW M1, Lotus Esprit, Merak, Countach and all the rest) and for a change, the driver's door doesn't crowd you. There is actually a surfeit of elbow room, unheard of in a car like this. There is no question of a knees-high driving position – even for long legs there is plenty of room. That part of it is slightly spoiled by the fact that your legs must reach markedly left because the pedals are offset to clear the wheel arch, but you soon get used to it.

The gearlever (lengthened for easier operation, like the 308's) is a comfortable reach away and the wheel is set at that typical Maranello angle which allows the heel of the hands to be supported by the wheel rim, and the fingers to rest lightly on the leather – to sense its activity rather than to clutch at it for support. It's made many times better in this car because the column is adjustable for height and reach. Really, the Ferrari driver's cup runneth over. Visibility is excellent in all directions, even to the rear three-quarters. The windscreen pillars aren't especially thin, they just seem aptly placed to afford the driver the best view. The steering column

Mondial 8 is less stunning than its exquisite 308GTBi sister, but considering difficulty of designing a mid-engined four-seater it's a masterpiece. Wraparound bumpers mean new level of protection for an Italian exotic; ground clearance good

controls are now Lancia's latest type, nicer looking and acting than the old, cast-off Fiat kind the 308s use. The interior and exterior doorhandles are the up-market mechanisms from the Ferrari 400i. The Mondial cockpit literally immerses you in English Connolly leather up to the armpit. It is used to cover the elegant bucket seats, differently-styled but similar in dimension to the GTB's seats, and it also covers the doors to window height, and the fascia. Deep, cut-pile carpet is used on the floor and footwells. The instruments are grouped in an oblong binnacle containing speedo and tach, a double vertical row of electronic warning lights between them, and four minor gauges (oil pressure and temperature, fuel and water temperature) grouped nearer the centre of the car. The instruments' graphics are fresh and new, but the whole binnacle tends to point



at a tall driver's chest rather than behind his eyes. I yearned to be able to incline it upward about 10deg and bring the instruments' upper graduations out from under the binnacle eyebrow. Needless to say, the arrangement prevents the lighted instruments from reflecting on the screen at night.

One of the greatest surprises of the Mondial is the sophistication of its ventilation. You do not expect to find a decent, smoothly-flowing supply of fresh air in a car like this. That is why most of these cars have air conditioning plants crammed into their engine compartments – it is a strict necessity. The Mondial duly has air conditioning, too (with Fiat-familiar buttons confusingly grouped just ahead of the gearlever) but the point is that you don't have to use it. Fresh air is available through a bank of three outlets in the middle of the car and through face level vents at each extremity of the fascia. This, the car's visibility and its exceptionally roomy cockpit give it a degree of civilised comfort those in the Ferrari market could previously only dream about.

development of the layout.

The Mondial's reason for existence, its rear accommodation, is as impressive as it was disappointing in the GT4. The front passenger has lots of legroom – certainly enough to allow him to slide his seat well forward and accommodate another medium-height adult in the full-sized bucket seat behind. There is more headroom in the Mondial's rear than the 308GTB offers its driver. It isn't as easy to accommodate a passenger behind the Mondial's driver, if he is tall, but there is legroom enough for a child of up to 12 or so. In sum, this mid-engined car's cockpit is much more roomy than plenty of front-engined coupes'

Dashboard of Mondial is outstandingly complete for an Italian exotic. New emphasis on practicality means that wheel is adjustable for height and reach. Dial faces are new. Gearlever still moves in classic gate but is now backed by console containing detailed readouts for electronic monitoring system complete enough to embarrass the best of the German makers. Cabin is superbly trimmed and really can seat four. Visibility is excellent

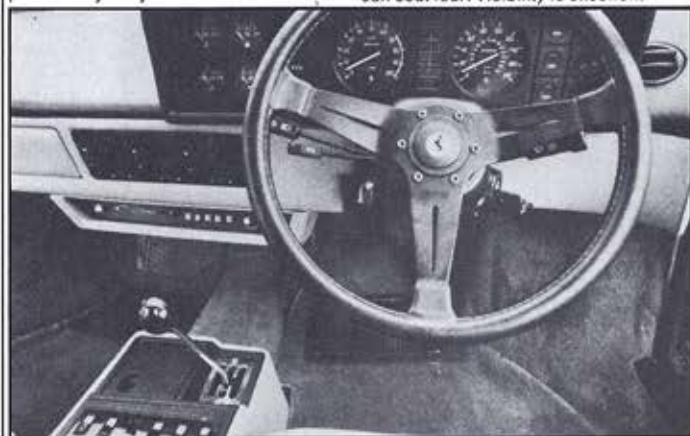
lumber support there is the same surprisingly low degree of side-support for hard cornering. Probably there has been a designer's trade-off between lateral support and ease of getting in and out. The Mondial's big doors make entry and exit very easy, except in confined spaces when you can't fully open the door.

Twist the Mondial key and there is the familiar delicate whine of the starter motor, followed a second later by the smooth rasp of a silken engine. There's no pumping of the throttle or initial spluttering built into this engine; those are things of the carburetted past. And for a V8, the engine is amazingly burble-free. Its sounds are inspiring, but they amount to a

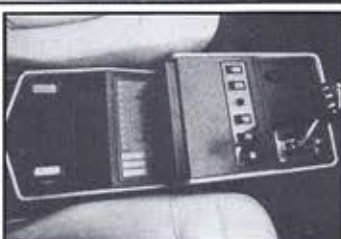
whine and a wail rather than the rumble most V8s emit. Mechanical noise is of a low order in the cockpit anyway – even lower than the 308's discreet level. Mainly, you hear the rasp of the exhaust, a whisper and a whistle from the mechanicals and some gear whine seems to bounce up off the road. You won't be disappointed; it sounds just like a Ferrari.

Your initial impression is that this Ferrari's steering is rather indirect. It is the 308's system, but it must manoeuvre a car with a foot more wheelbase. Mind you, the steering is light and entirely devoid of lost motion at the straight-ahead, so your objections disappear as familiarity grows.

The longer wheelbase of the

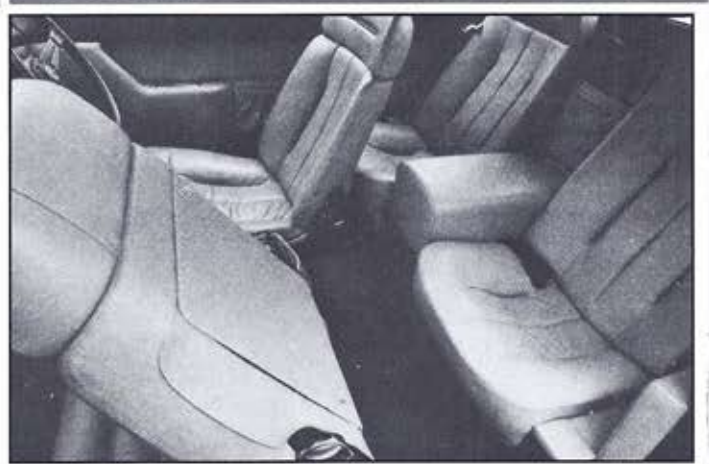
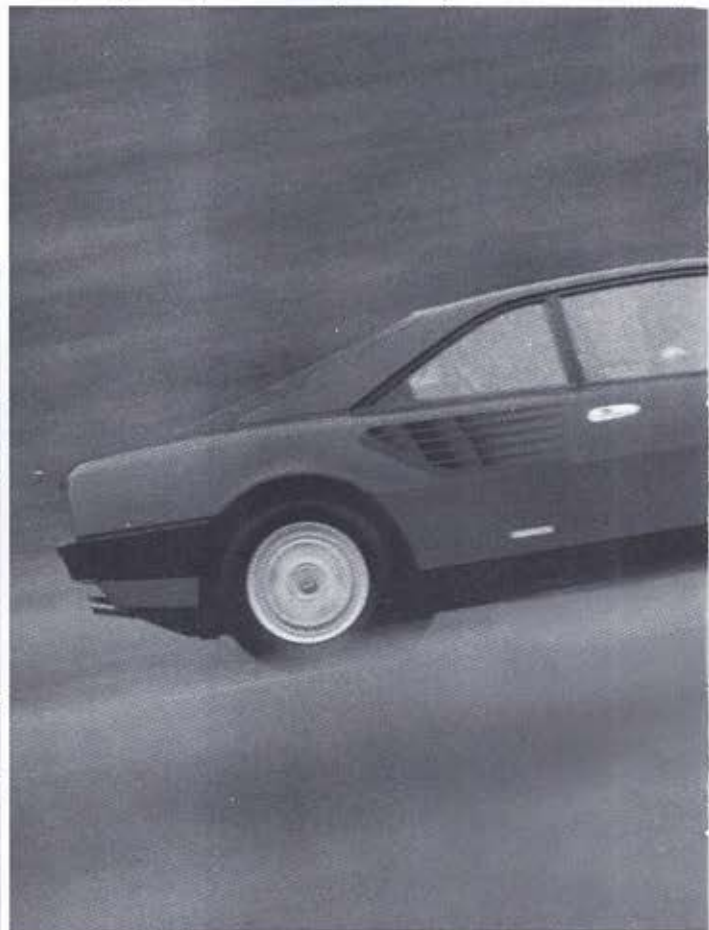


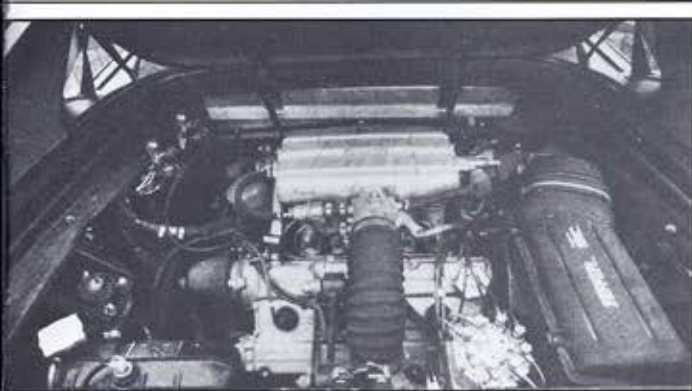
The Mondial's other major departure from tradition is its electronic monitoring system. There are sensors all over the car which feed information to a bank of warning lights, grouped between the seats (of all places) just ahead of the inner seat belt catches. The idea is that you check the lights as you buckle yourself in, presumably having started the engine, but I found that I always needed to remember to glance down there. Perhaps it's a habit you acquire. The list of monitored items reads like an aircraft checklist – engine coolant, brake lights, bonnets (are they closed?), transmission oil level, engine oil, screen washer reservoir, service due, stop lights, headlights, air conditioning. At one end of that row there are three 'general' warning lights. There's a yellow light that glows when there's a minor malfunction, a red one for when the problem is more serious, and a green that glows the all-clear. That's the one you're supposed to check for when buckling in. Indisputably, it's a good idea, but there's room for



cabins – and it beats the Porsche 911 (whose engine, you will remember, is outside the wheelbase to allow more people and luggage room) by a big, big margin. It even embarrasses the Porsche 928.

And so to the driving. After you become used to all of that extra Mondial cockpit room (and if you know how little space most exotics offer, that takes on the proportions of the New Deal) you'll find that a Mondial feels very similar to a 308GTB. There are similarities in the seating, though the Mondial's buckets are a little higher off the floor and offer marginally better under-thigh support. The Mondial seats also seem to have better





effect of the longer wheelbase, the feeling that you get in the 308 – that it's safer to be on the power in really fast corners – is not nearly as noticeable. Throttling off in maximum effort 90mph bends causes no more than a dainty, stable tightening of your line. The 308 doesn't do much in those circumstances either, but there's a tendency for it to jig diagonally, inside rear to outside front, and this leads you to prefer power in bends. Our only (slight) criticism of the Mondial is a function of its body roll; in the tightest of s-bends, taken fast, there can be a suggestion of lurch as the side loads transfer from one direction to the other. But it only happens when you're driving



brutally powerful. Overtaking manoeuvres of the 'confined' kind must be advisedly made, because a Mondial is certainly not an any-gear-open-the-throttle car like the Boxer. But if there is one thing about the power that does distinguish it from the 308 it is the extra length of its gears. It might not seem much for a car to have an extra 2mph available in first and 6-7mph in fourth, yet it matters. There is a relaxed quality about the Mondial's progress and when the going is really fast, the tachometer needle doesn't so often seem to be running towards the 7500s.

The rest of the controls work in a familiar Ferrari way (it's always a pleasure to discover that in a new one). The Mondial has the 308's sensationally direct and crisp clutch, the skinny gearlever snaps around its gate with the same panache, sometimes with a whisker of notchiness, but always precisely. The brake pedal is the same low-travel but beautifully progressive control, now weighted to match the clutch.

This car, like all Ferraris, is for consuming distance. The 120mph



car, allied to the quiet, stable Michelin TRX tyres, becomes a real asset. The Mondial is around 13in longer than the 308, and practically all of that length is inside the wheels. This makes the overhangs, and their mass, a smaller proportion of the whole and thus the car's polar moment of inertia exerts less influence in manoeuvres. The long wheelbase gives the Mondial a decisive advantage over the 308 in straight-ahead stability; the insignificant overhangs mean that it turns with the poise of a dancer but only when you turn the wheel.

In fact, this car's ability to hold a straight course, over bumps and uneven surfaces, is quite eerily good. Although the front

suspension is largely from the GTB, there have been several areas of refinement, including the inclusion of some anti-dive, and modifications to the king-pin inclination, to improve its stability. Those meaty tyres give the Mondial the firmly-damped but level and quiet low speed ride of the 308, and add a wide-tracked 'gumball grip' quality. The balance of this chassis is sensational.

Essentially, the Mondial is a shallow understeerer, but as steering effort builds up towards the limit the characteristic changes to mild oversteer, perhaps a little more prominent than in the 308 because it is accomplished by a suggestion more body roll. But because of the

Engine is paragon of alloy and black crackle in visual appeal but has new accent on ease of maintenance and repair: entire drivetrain and suspension package drops easily on its own subframe from main chassis
Headlights rise smartly and lock solidly in position; electric powered
Boot is very roomy indeed for the type
Body shape is nicest in profile, displaying balanced proportions and typically graceful Pininfarina lines

nearer to the limit than you'd normally take passengers. Most of the time the Mondial balances out perfectly through the bend, feeling fast but secure and relaxed. If you play, seeing what happens when you take it all the way, it can be held in huge oversteer incredibly easily for a mid-engined car. You soon know that it's very much a friend – a striking contrast to the old 308GTB4, which broke into oversteer like sudden death when you overcooked things (see CAR Oct 1975).

As far as power goes, there is a negligible difference apparent between Mondial and 308, even though it's there on paper. The four-place car feels fast but not

cruise, if you can find the road, is a doddle. The car can stop exceptionally quickly from that, and if you are unlucky enough not to see a kink coming at that speed, it has the chassis to cope with it, as long as it also has the driver. At 120mph the mechanical noise level is low as is the wind noise, generally speaking, although our test car had some air leaks around the lower edges of its windows.

This Mondial, in every sense, is the sensible Ferrari. It has a boot as big as many small saloons, it has a big cabin, it has superb assembly and rustproofing standards, it starts easily and has maintenance-minimising items like fuel injection and contactless ignition (not to mention the easily-removed rear subframe). These things cut ownership costs. Yet to belie the pallid, characterless component of that word 'sensible', the Mondial has poise, speed, panache and beauty. For £24,500 (with the air conditioning installed) it is very fine value against a lot of expensive cars – and let's be candid about it, the Mondial's own very beautiful sister, the 308GTBi is among them.