

Drives

Ferrari Mondial semi-auto

AS TECHNOLOGY offers more and more opportunities to make cars easier to use, designers have to decide which new features constitute desirable aids and which are unwanted distractions that come between the keen driver and his steed.

Traditionally, Ferrari hasn't been a firm keen to supply its cars with cossetting addenda. Its cars are essentially simple things, engineered to make the driver feel part of the machinery. And few parts of a Ferrari feel more mechanical than the gearchange.

Shifting cogs in a red car is a remarkably absorbing pastime. It takes accurate and well timed clutch and throttle footwork to produce a smooth shift, and the lever itself demands a decisive hand, but when you do get things right the change is swift and slick. It might be hard work but it's an integral part of the Ferrari experience. Ceding the gear strategy to a conventional autobox wouldn't really do, partly because it would deny you the desired intimacy with the car's oily bits, and partly because you'd

lose the wonderful sense of control the car imparts. Through a torque converter, throttle response wouldn't be so crisp, engine braking couldn't be so accurately modulated, and you'd be denied the opportunity to make the engine sing your own tune.

And yet there are, Ferrari reckons, a sizeable number of owners who would use their supercars more often, were it not for the clutch-pumping dictated by the daily city grind. Some, indeed, find the clutch pedal too heavy at any time, apparently. How best to make life easier for them, without going for the full slushmatic solution that would rob Ferraris of their Ferrariness?

The answer is now available as an option on the Mondial: a standard gearbox and lever (with Ferrari's characteristic chrome gate) - but no clutch pedal.

It's important to understand that the standard clutch is all present and correct; the only difference is that it is automatically actuated, by a system first demonstrated by component supplier Valeo three years back.

As in all current V8 Ferraris, the engine sits longitudinally, the transverse gearbox

(linked to the lever by cables, and over-stiff ones unfortunately) is behind it, and the clutch behind that, rotating in the same axis as the crank. The Valeo system's major component is a small electric motor that engages the clutch. It's this that takes the place of your left leg.

Sensors monitor the positions of the gearlever and throttle, as well as gearbox input shaft speed. These feed information to a central brainbox which makes sure the clutch does just what you would want it to do if you were operating it yourself.

Hang on. An electro-mind that second-guesses what's going on inside your head? Yes indeed, and very well it works, too. Imagine you're at rest, lever in neutral. The system keeps the clutch disengaged. Shift the lever to first. Nothing happens. Touch the throttle and away you go, gently and smoothly. Floor it, and you blast off.

You can't stall, for if the throttle is insufficiently open the clutch won't fully engage. If you want, you can move away in a higher gear, and things will still be smooth - if slow. Under way, the system checks for gearlever movements. As you move the ball-topped

aluminium wand towards neutral, the clutch is freed off (unless the throttle is still too far open - a design precaution to avoid piston-through-bonnet embarrassment). Then you can shift to the next gear, up or down as required. If you've matched the revs correctly, the clutch will take up immediately, but otherwise, it feeds in slowly in order to cushion your progress.

The result is remarkably natural. Just as in a manual Mondial, proper co-ordination of hands, feet and ears will give a smooth, quick and musical change. You can heel-and-toe the downchanges if you care to. All of which is very, very nearly as satisfying as it is with the manual-clutch car, yet rather less effortful. And stop-start driving is a breeze: just leave the lever in first and control motion solely on the throttle and brake. So the objectives are achieved, all without doing any damage to the music, or to the performance.

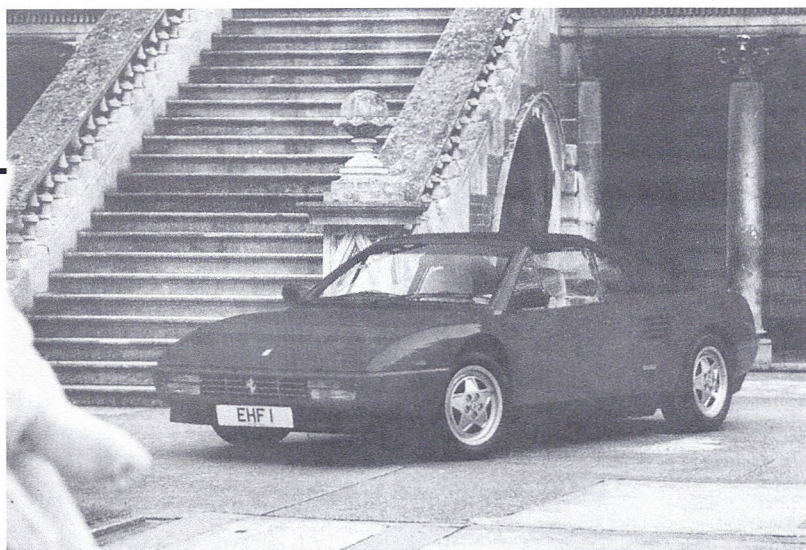
This Mondial, then, is still a real Mondial. Which means it's a glorious chariot. It tends to get a bit ignored because it looks a little gawky alongside the gorgeous 348, whose engine it shares. It's also fractionally slower than its close sibling, because

Semi-auto transmission makes Mondial a Ferrari for everyday driving

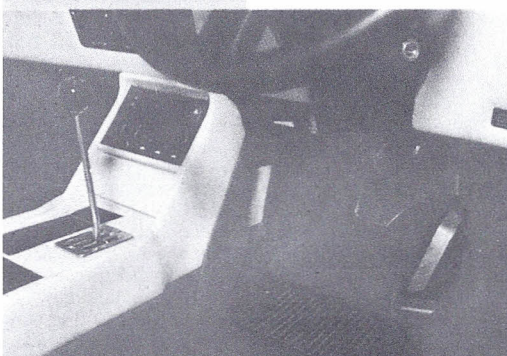
it's longer and heavier. But it's more fun. Its chassis is emphatically more friendly, and more communicative. The 348 might have bigger tyres and a higher ultimate level of sheer grip, but making use of it is a real task. In the Mondial, you can explore the limit, because the chassis and steering work more progressively and provide better feedback.

There's a suppleness to the suspension, too: not softness, but enough to let the car flow down a lumpy but fast stretch of road with terrific fluency. So a hard punt in the 2+2 Ferrari is a true joy.

Now, £5000 is a lot to pay for a system that actually makes less difference to a car than does the £2500 Porsche Tiptronic transmission. But when you're fiddling with the driveline of a Ferrari, the less you do the better. **Paul Horrell**



Look - no clutch pedal. But the Mondial retains the traditional Ferrari gearstick



Vitals

★ **PRICE:** approx £72,000 coupé, £77,000 spider

★ **ENGINE:** 3.4-litre 32-valve V8, 295bhp at 7200rpm, 234lb ft at 4200rpm

★ **PERFORMANCE:** (claimed) 158mph, 6.1sec 0-60mph, 20.2mpg

★ **DUE IN BRITAIN:** now