

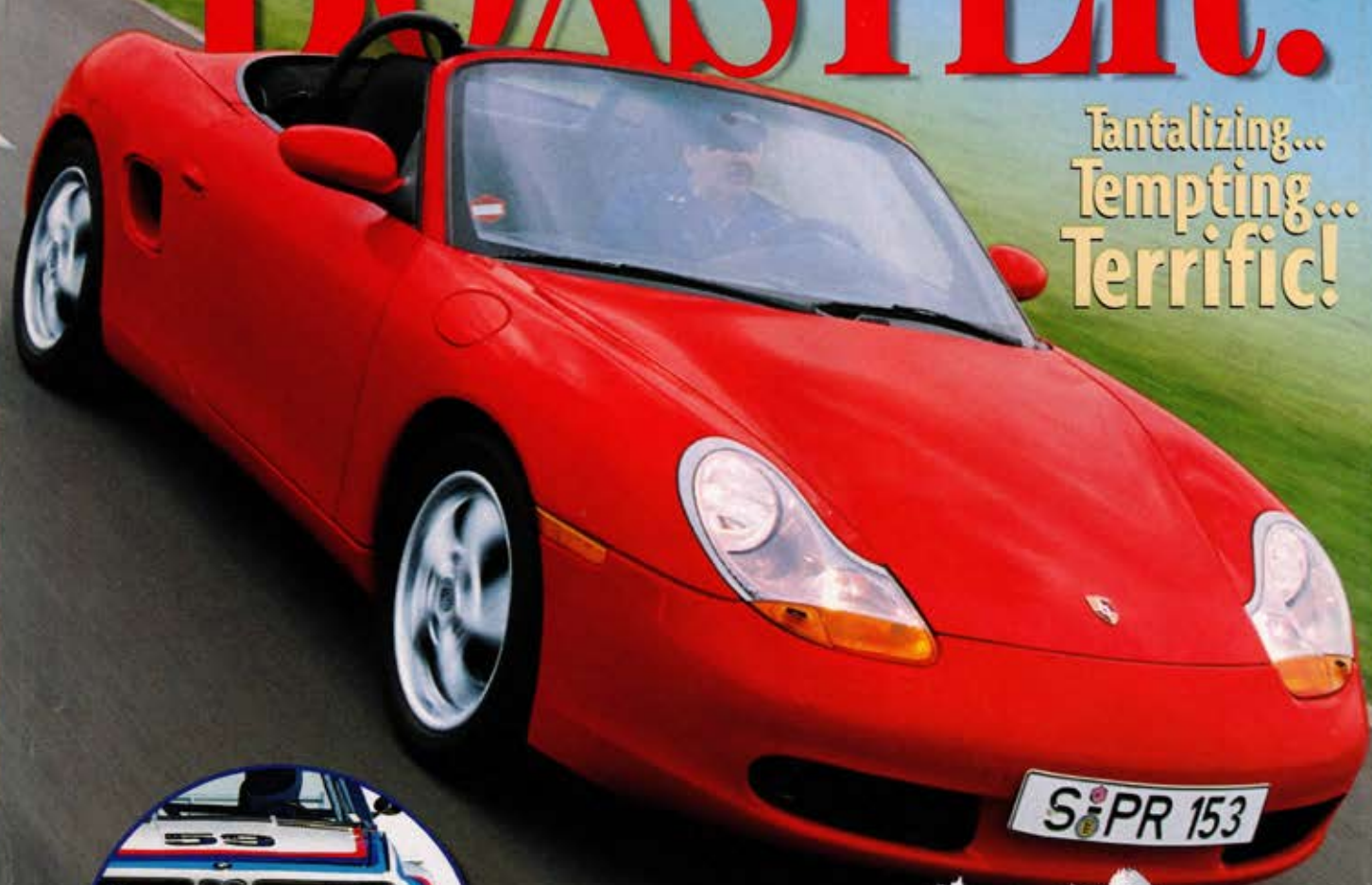
ROAD & TRACK

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Straman FERRARI 456 SPYDER

A top-down restoration

BY RICHARD HOMAN

PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM



"I have done the deed. Didst thou not bear a noise?"—Macbeth

NO MATTER HOW confident Richard Straman may appear, it's hard to believe that the creator of the Ferrari 456 Spyder didn't have a moment, some time right in the middle of the project, when he sat down on a bench in his Newport Beach, California, shop and said to himself, "Richard, you've just given the buzz-saw treatment to that nice man's \$200,000 automobile. What in the hell were you thinking?" Scientists say that they have isolated the risk-taking gene. So have I. It resides in Southern California.

But Richard Straman is no stranger to special projects. Indeed, he has a gift for it. Over the past 28 years, his steady hand has guided the conversion of every kind of car, from Mercedes-Benz 560SECs and Ferrari Testarossas to Honda's diminutive CRX. Additionally, R. Straman Co. has done design and prototype work for an A-list of carmakers, including General Motors, Honda and Nissan.

All the same, before I took on a 456 GT conversion, I'd make sure my passport was up to date just in case... After all, Ferrari itself has only been frus-

trated by internal attempts to turn the 456 into an appealing convertible. Thus far, its roadster experiments have ended up with unfavorable results and compromises such as the loss of the 2+2's rear seating.

Cut to the Inn at Spanish Bay during the Monterey historic races/Pebble Beach concours weekend. I'm meeting John Lamm there to drive Straman's newly completed 456 Spyder for this story's photo shoot on 17-Mile Drive. The Inn is booked up with old and new money showing off trophy wives and trophy cars. Cool and expensive cars are everywhere you look. I pull up at the lobby in the Straman Spyder, top down. It causes one of the highest-priced traffic jams the Monterey Peninsula has ever seen. A short while later out on 17-Mile Drive—John in a BMW Z3, me in the 456 Spyder—we pass a group of interested tourists. The women are interested in the Z3; but the men don't even see it—their eyes have locked on to the Ferrari.

Richard Straman spent a lot of time musing about doing the conversion on a 456 GT. "I thought it needed it," he says. "As a coupe, it was pretty, but wasn't very exciting and it wasn't very Ferrari. My thoughts were that, as a convertible, if we restyled it a little bit,

we could make it a nice, aggressive, proper Ferrari."

When the donor 456 GT's owner, a longtime Ferrari enthusiast who races a GTO and short-wheelbase 250 Spyder in vintage events, approached Straman—or rather, approached Straman's reputation (the two men had never met)—and offered his black V-12 Ferrari coupe as a conversion candidate, he immediately received an answer in the affirmative.

Maranello cooperated by giving Straman a solid block of granite to carve a convertible from. Nevertheless, any coupe, even a Ferrari, will have a hard time concealing that its spine has been removed, so some steel sinew was added to the chassis and inner-body structure. Straman determined that the A-pillars—a notable weak link in aftermarket convertibles—were adequate, but he reinforced the windshield header, finishing it nicely with a chrome strip covering its span.

From the outset, Straman had two goals for the 456 Spyder. The first was that it should be a finished, luxury convertible with a fully automatic top. At the same time, he figured that while he was at it, he'd recock the rear third of the car, stirring in some of the styling spice that he felt was missing.



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This month's issue reads like an enthusiast's Christmas-shopping dream. For the sultan, sheik or surgeon on your list, we have a Road Test of the bold Bentley Continental T and a First Drive of Ferrari's wondrous new 550 Maranello. The hard-to-buy-for old-car lover will adore our special section covering the Monterey Weekend, the Chicago Historic Races and Dennis Simanaitis' vintage adventures in Pennsylvania. And while you're under our tree, treat yourself to the first Road Test of Porsche's Boxster, plus lots of other gifts.

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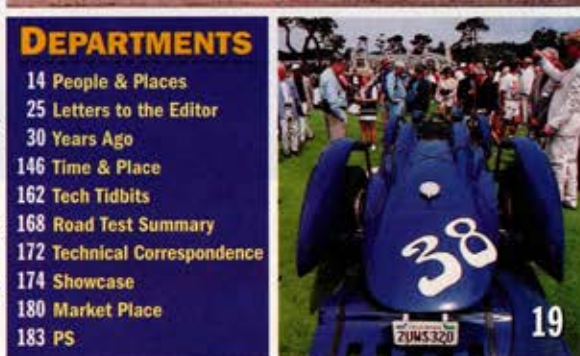
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Once inside the coupe, Straman discovered that the fuel tank behind the rear seats was very tall, leaving no room for a top to collapse into. And as Ferrari had learned, moving the rear seating forward amounted to sacrificing the 456's 4-person accommodations. Determined not to make any seating concessions, Straman instead cut a few inches off the sides of the fuel tank to allow the folded top to straddle it, an honorable 4-gallon loss for the sake of open-air driving.

So Richard Straman had a place to put a folding top; now all he needed

was a workable folding top to put there. He knew it would be complicated: "The top had to fit around the rear seat, which required us to design a top that grows wider as it goes down."

Complicated: "On a normal top, all the pivot points are 90-degrees to earth, and you're almost dealing with a single-plane mechanism. With this top, none of the points are 90 degrees to earth, nor are any of the points parallel to one another."

Complicated: "Everything's done with heim joints—ball-joint pivots—and if you change any one pivot by one degree, the top doesn't work at all. So

when it's perfect, it's perfect, and when it's not, it doesn't work at all."

The project was budgeted for four months. It took almost a year to complete. Straman's finished mechanism, while bloody complicated in its creation, is simple in its execution, using fewer pieces than most of the other tops he's designed. And it takes up only about 3 in. of stack height in the folded position.

Two rocker switches control the right and left windows; a center button controls the top. The retraction sequence works thus: Release the two header latches, push the center button (which actuates three motors) and enjoy the show as the top disappears, M-B SL-like, under a hard boot. Then manipulate the rocker switches to roll down the Straman-designed power windows (the original coupe's quarter windows are fixed in place).

To add the visual chuff and energy to the 456 Spyder that he thought the coupe lacked, Straman did an effective rethink of the 456 GT's rear end. He raised the rear deck about 2 in., eliminated the coupe's lower fenderline and extended the line that starts at the air ducts in the front fenders all the way back to the rear. "Kind of like on a Daytona Spyder," he says, "so it gave the car a wedgy, aggressive look that it didn't have before."

Raising the rear also retrieved some of the trunk room lost to the intrusion of two hinge points for the top boot. All but one piece of the 456 GT coupe's fitted luggage still fits.

Rear passengers will notice only a soft breeze in their hair. And the front-seat folks won't even notice that, the cockpit is so calm. A Ferrari 456 Spyder owner could light his big \$30 cigar with a \$100 bill—the conversion *does* cost \$45,000—and smoke it with the top down at highway speeds without having to clean up ashes from anywhere but the ashtray.


So Richard Straman did the deed. And what kind of noise did he hear during the Monterey Weekend where he premiered the Ferrari 456 Spyder at the Concours Italiano and in the paddock at Laguna Seca Raceway where he presented it to its owner? "At the Concours, it got rave reviews from everybody, the Ferrari Club included. As for the owner, a big grin said it all. He and I were in the paddock looking at the car, and there were about 15 people standing around the 456. No one looking at his GTO or at his 250 short-wheelbase Spyder." Score one more for the risk-taking gene. 



PHOTO BY BRIAN BLADES



■ From first cut to finished canvas. At the top: Straman removes the 456 GT coupe's backbone—you're committed now, baby. Above: a look at the cleanly finished interior—nice chrome touches. Below: Top up, the wedge is complete and the rear-seat passengers get plenty of head room.

