

CLASSIC DRIVER

The Editor Drives - the 2004 Maserati Quattroporte



Maserati's big Quattroporte model has a specification that would appear to offer Bentley and Aston Martin exclusivity - at S-Class prices. The attraction of four doors, a front-mounted 400bhp V8 and acres of leather and wood, all wrapped in heady Italian styling is a strong one. But is the total less, or more, than the sum of the parts? We took time out to drive the £70,000 supercar.

The first thing that strikes you about the car is the elegance of the design. From a quick walk around the exterior, to surveying the inside, you just don't notice it's a saloon. Sure it's a big old thing but it shouts '*coupé!*' at you rather than 4-door Eurobox, businessman's express. Releasing the electro-magnetic door-catches, you'll find the seat automatically sliding rearwards, to allow extra room. A clever trick that's not really needed. Turning the ignition key will bring the seat back to its normal position and it's the work of moments to find a comfortable driving position. The small steering wheel is adjustable for height and reach and is surprisingly vertical; I found myself steadily moving it away from me as the journey progressed - this had the effect of seeming to improve the steering 'feel', more of which anon. Anyway, the view from the cockpit frontwards is good, but the rear screen appears small in the rear-view mirror and woe betide anyone not adequately checking over their shoulder as the wide B-pillar, and high doors, do restrict some side vision.

Starting the ('Nuovo Nero Carbonio' - that's metallic Black to the rest of us) car up on one of England's rare 30°C days quickly demonstrates a climate-control system powerful enough to cope with just be about anything Mother Nature could throw at it. In Spain, or the South of France, in August and can't find a covered parking spot? No problem whatsoever, I think it must have taken under a minute to bring the internal temperature down to around the 20° mark. Very impressive performance also matched by the blistering Bose sound-system. The engine gives a nice throaty howl as it starts up and then settles down into tick-over.



Not wishing to overburden your correspondent's brain, we decided to start the journey off in Maserati's equivalent of 'Drive'. The six-speed 'box is rear-mounted and, equipped with a dry, twin-plate clutch, is not a conventional automatic with torque-converter but a very clever electro-hydraulically actuated system that can change gears either 'automatically' or via the steering-wheel mounted paddles - 'Up' on the right, 'Down' on the left. There's no doubt in my mind that if you are expecting the seamless changes of a Mercedes (the finest in the world) conventional auto than this system is not for you. Practice probably would make nigh-on perfect, but in the short time I was behind the wheel in this mode, driving conventionally 'one-footed', I found it difficult to make smooth progress. Pulling up at a roundabout you are pleased the car does not roll back (it has a feature which brakes the car for a few seconds allowing you to quickly move your foot from pedal to pedal) but then it does not 'creep' either - so you cannot use the brake-pedal to release the motion of the car before swiftly flooring the accelerator.

Once underway, travelling along the A- and B-roads of picturesque West Country England, the car comes into its own. We press both the 'Sport', and 'M/A' shift, buttons on the dash to allow the engine to rev higher, stiffen the suspension via the 'Skyhook' system found on the GT and Spyder, and manually change gear via the paddles.

Wowee - it certainly goes now, in fact it revels in 7,000 rpm blasts when all 400 bhp are unleashed. Max torque is a highish 4,500 rpm so that's another reason for the jerky progress when pottering around town. The paddles are so easy to use and the best technique is one of just a *slight* lift of the throttle before clicking a higher ratio and planting the pedal again. Ditto when down-changing but I was disappointed at no DB9-like throttle-blipping on the down-shift. The selected gears are clearly marked in a central display in the instrument panel. If you forget to change down when approaching a junction, the car will do it automatically for you, selecting first for the next take-off with all the hill-start cleverness of its 'auto' mode. The best way of driving smoothly in manual mode is probably left-foot braking and using the brake to balance the throttle when setting off.

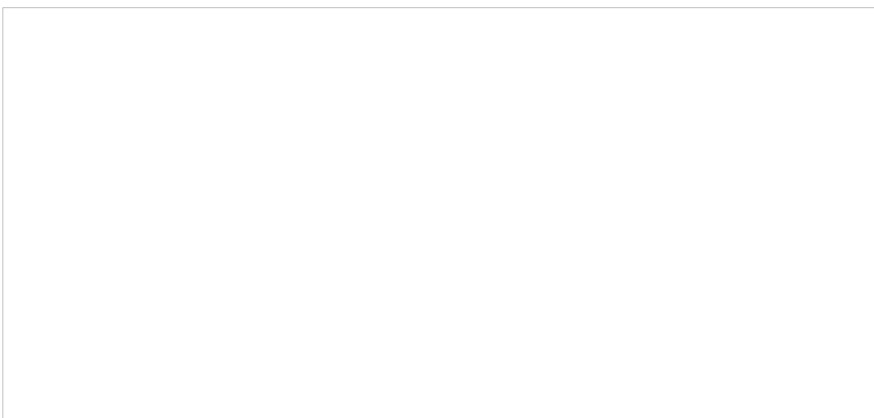


The handling is superb and pressing 'Sport' just firms things up but in no way destroys the car's effortless handling of poorly maintained highways. Tested to 100 mph in sixth, the car's cabin remains quiet and calm with just a hint of wind noise beginning to intrude. 'Our' car was running on the standard 18" wheels (19" are a £1,880 option), and provided more than adequate grip coupled with comfort. Come on chaps, you've got a Maserati key-fob, do you really need 'cotton-reel' wheels and tyres as well to show-off down at the Golf Club? I mentioned earlier the steering being over-light. Correct adjustment of the wheel certainly helped, but even heaving it through bends at speed with the suspension in 'Sport' left the steering slightly vague. If it lacks that element of the Teutonic steamroller, may I remind you that the average Aveling-Barford wasn't designed for comfort, and that AMG, 'M' and 'RS' specced saloons will be set up for peerless German tarmac. The ride in this car is utterly fantastic and that, combined with the mighty performance, comfortable (yet supportive, without the kidney-grabbing Recaro-effect) seats make you want to keep on moving, right down to that little Provençal fishing village. It's that good.

So throw the 'saloon' ideas out immediately. This is a sporting GT car, a coupé, and the great thing about is that it will seat four in comfort, a two + two when the result really is four. If you want an everyday car to 'drive and forget' then quite simply, err, forget it. Buy a 530i BMW or even better a 320 CDi Mercedes Estate and an E-Type with the change.

We haven't heard about two-seater F1 cars for a while, but people who have experienced the shared sensation of speed that these missiles represent will like the Maserati Quattroporte.

The two-seater for four people.



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The Maserati Quattroporte's list price in the UK is £69,995, a figure that includes a 'Three Year Peace of Mind Service Package' (Services at 10,000 km, 30,000 km and 50,000 km), and standard equipment of 'Poltrona Frau' leather, 'Rosewood' trim, B-Xenon headlamps with washer jets, automatic windscreen wipers with rain sensor, electric (three memory-positions for driver) fully adjustable front seats, 'Blaupunkt Info Centre' featuring GPS sat-nav and CD player, Bose sound system, cruise control, electric rear sun-blind and alarm with 'Nav Trak' vehicle tracking system.

The car we tested was finished in 'Nuovo Nero Carbonio' metallic paint, with 'Beige' leather interior and 'Walnut' wood.

Optional extras fitted to this car included -

Front seat comfort pack - £3,408.00

Rear seat heating - £388.00

Metallic paint - £505.00

Electrochromatic rear-view mirror - £341.00

Front + rear Park Sensors - £893.00

Mobile Phone kit - £975.00

Power Sunroof - £1,163.00

Red-painted front callipers - £388.00

Rear-passenger, wood pull-down tables - £1,350.00

5-piece full luggage-set - £2,468.00

With grateful thanks to Simon Jordan, Sales Manager, of Dick Lovett Maserati -



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