

CLASSIC DRIVER

Slip-Sliding in Gstaad



The following is an extract from Victoria Macmillan-Bell's feature in Auto Italia magazine, Issue 105 2005. For access to the full feature, plus articles on driving the Maserati MC12, the Ferrari 375 Plus, the Aston Martin Vanquish Roadster prototype by Zagato and much more, see www.auto-italia.co.uk

We seem to be on an interminable lateral slide across Switzerland at the hands of Massimo Fedeli, Ferrari and Maserati UK's Managing Director. As we drift, the snow is piling high in the back seat of our Maserati Spyder but Fedeli catches it just as the tail starts to flick round to embrace a Spyder slicing towards us through the now heavily falling snow. "I like to make a car dance," says Fedeli - and that he does, powering around the cones with rooster tails of fresh powder spewing out from the Pirelli winter tyres.

Organising the ice drive performance is Yul Brynner. Well, okay, his double. He is standing in the middle of this icy airfield conducting today's automotive ballet via walkie-talkie to the cars and he is not best pleased with Fedeli of Modena or, most recently, Slough - the headquarters of Ferrari Maserati UK.

"Okay, so you can stop doing that please and join the other cars; be safe, uh?" Fedeli's nose wrinkles up and he giggles like a naughty boy.

We are high up at a military airfield in Switzerland (exact position classified - sorry, couldn't resist), in the middle of a blizzard, with 390bhp on tap or ice, I should say. Maserati is indeed dancing, and to a different tune these days. The Trident now symbolises all things cohesive, and evidence of this is here in Gstaad with the model year 2005 Coupe and Spyder Cambiocorsas.

I join the Coupe at Geneva airport and the immediate front view of the car bears more than a passing resemblance to the elegant Quattroporte. Nicely reworked and not over-styled. This particular car is fitted with seven-spoke alloys which are now available as standard and another nice addition to the overall package.



We set off through Geneva and managed to catch the tail-end of Monday morning's rush hour before heading out of the city, taking the underside of the lake towards Evian and Montreux. Maserati has provided us with Cambiocorsa models alone, so paddling it is, but it's noticeably smoother in up- and downchanges than before. The F1-style gearbox used to be such a gimmicky toy and there have been some great examples of how not to do it but this isn't one of them. Newly tweaked and with a bit of deft footwork, it's now possible to glide through the gears without too much lunging from the passenger.

Maserati claims not to have played with the steering but it feels sharper and more direct. It is a more complete product and I think this is the car di Montezemolo wanted the 3200 model to be at launch in 2001.

Now we have more power available and we are making fine use of much of the 4244cc on hand as we fly by Montreux and fork off towards Bulle. Chalets and white fields deep in snow are replacing apartment blocks and clear skies are making way for cloud as we climb into the Freiburger Alps

and freshly falling snow. The roads have become much narrower now, and a series of twists and turns and resulting avoidance measures taken in light of oncoming ski traffic is a good assessment of just how in-synch I am with the car; and it with me.

We're now in Chateau d'Oex, home of colourful hot-air ballooning (luftballons). The scenery is spectacular around here but we still have a good run ahead of us into Saanen so press on, passing skiers coming off the mountain eagerly eyeing up the car. The snow muffles the engine noise but only slightly and as we arrive in Gstaad, people ahead of us are turning around to see the source of the sound. We receive more admiring glances from the hotel staff keen to get inside the two-tone interior and with that we leave them to it. The external modifications to the car seem to be even sharper here, surrounded as we are by all this whiteness.

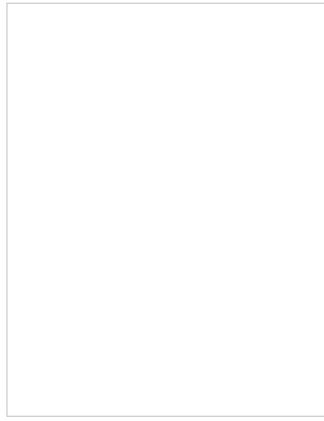
Back with Fedeli, I am now lining up to throw as much power as possible at a group of cones in the distance. "So, time for more fun," says my co-driver. These Italians, they're incorrigible. It is a great balancing act for the car and I love the way it handles in these conditions but I have no idea which way is up at the moment, having rotated so many times. If I carry on like this, I will probably drill through to New Zealand.

Rejoining an orderly queue, I power down the track and the minute I hit the line between the cones, I apply brakes, hard. The car follows a straight thread for approximately 20 feet before coming to a halt. This exercise was repeated several times with traction control switched on and off and, as I rerun, more and more snow is being kicked out by the tyres, leaving just the ice beneath. If I got out now, I would almost certainly offer up some highly comic footwork.

Unsurprisingly, we are the last car to turn up at the next activity, having had a little extracurricular displacement moment, involving more excess of power over grip with a little right-foot steering thrown in, at the beginning of a wider version of the Cresta Run.

Twenty-four hours later I was in the Fiat Panda 4x4 on Salisbury Plain. Still sideways. After such a tail-happy time, it's just not possible to go straight, is it?





Words by Victoria Macmillan-Bell and pictures courtesy of Ferrari Maserati UK, and Auto Italia magazine.

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