

CLASSIC DRIVER

Ferrari 250LM

The following is an extract from Simon Park's feature in Auto Italia magazine, Issue 110 2005. For access to the full feature, plus articles on driving the Maserati 300S at Spa, the Val Savio Hillclimb, a triple supercar roadtest (Aston Martin Vanquish, Lamborghini Murciélago and Ferrari 575M Maranello), and much more, see www.auto-italia.co.uk



Collector and historic racer Carlos Monteverde likes yellow cars, and this 250LM acquired a coat of Belgium's national racing colour soon after being delivered to that country's foremost racing team, Ecurie Francorchamps, in April 1965.

What better place to sample this rare Ferrari today, than the epic grandeur of the 3.2-mile Silverstone Grand Prix circuit. As you climb into the LM, the top of the screen pillars need watching but the sills are quite narrow, and slope away. The seat was a bit too low for me, but everything else was just fine. Drive may be right-hand, but it's centre-foot. Heavily offset due to the hugely intrusive wheel-arch, the pedals seem odd at first, but you acclimatise quickly. Heat, I imagine, could be a problem in a long race, what with the panoramic screen, the engine breathing down your neck, and both hot oil and water circulating to the radiators via the chassis tubing. A quick cockpit check revealed info on water temperature, oil pressure and revs in the main binnacle, while to the right of the wheel lurk fuel level, pressure and oil temperature gauges. The car's custodian, Gary Pearson, kept a watchful eye on them as I let the engine warm up. Then the leash came off...

The serpentine Maggots/Becketts/Chapel combo is especially tricky, but Hangar Straight's a blast - in every sense. The fast-approaching Stowe corner, though, needs some brakes and I'm still trying to pull it all together when the red flag comes out. Back to square one, and a few moments' reflection in the pits.



It's all been said before, but historic race-ace David Franklin - testing a lovely old Monza alongside us - summed it up perfectly: "these engines sing, don't they?" Yep, but in operatic terms it's more *can bello* than *bel canto* - Verdi meets Vesuvius. The bottom end is really just a trickle of lava, but at about 4k the real

eruption begins, and Pavarotti in his prime couldn't match the soundtrack as it gets properly into its stride. Gary had asked me to keep to 6500rpm (another grand is usable for racing), but that was enough to keep me grinning. Just inches behind your head, the V12 screams its frenetic aria in your ears - an endless commentary, mostly paroxysms of joy, but stern admonishment, too, if you let it down. A fluffed gearchange, for instance

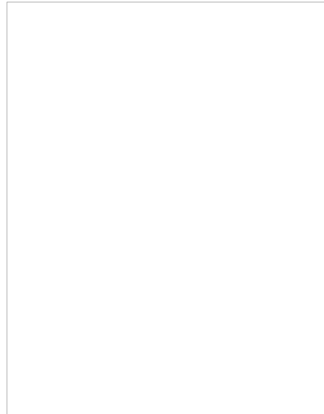


The five-speed 'dog' box is the usual beefy, open-gated Ferrari item, but it features an interlock mechanism which takes a bit of getting used to. Essentially, it's a moving steel lock-out that stalks the lever, ensuring sequential changes - it won't let you go up or down two cogs. And it doesn't miss a trick, as I found out when I porridged a downshift entering the complex at Brooklands and ended up with a box full of neutrals, the irate V12 spluttering its disapproval behind me. It was even reluctant to let me select first gear in the pits, until I'd done the hokey-cokey with third and second, in that order. It's all down to the correct alignment of the dogs, but your brain cells need to be neatly marshalled as well. It's a sensible precaution, though, even if the engine's characteristics mean you'd never deliberately miss out a gear.

The two laps I had left confirmed other initial impressions, principally that this first-generation mid-engined Ferrari lacks the instant user-friendliness of, say, the 250SWB I drove recently at Spa. It's harder to 'read', to find the limits, and you're always aware of the high centre of gravity and the 'low polar moment' factor - the possibility of a sudden gyration, something best avoided in someone else's multi-million pound car on a busy circuit. But the breeding - that Maranello magic - flaunts itself with (almost) every response to the driver's commands. The expected initial, mild understeer is neutralised by the power supply, the nose and tail re-adjusting their stance accordingly - it was a bundle of joy through the awesome Bridge right-hander. Balance and poise the LM has in abundance, but it's delicate, and does need rather smoother, more finely-tuned inputs than its front-engined predecessors.



There's no such thing as a Ferrari you can climb out of not wanting to get back in again as soon as possible. It's especially true of the 250LM, since it asks questions which take time to answer. I'd have loved 20 laps in it, but was mighty grateful for the three I had.



Words by Simon Park and pictures courtesy of Phil Ward, and Auto Italia magazine.

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