

CLASSIC DRIVER

Timeless Classics: Ferrari 250 GT California Spider

Lead

Ferrari. California. Spider. Three words that encapsulate the very essence of what driving should be all about: a race-bred automobile, sun-drenched roads snaking beside a sparkling ocean, and an open top to make the most of the warmth, the smells, the sounds and the thrills...

It's difficult to think of a machine more timelessly beautiful than the California Spider - or, indeed, one more evocative of what many believe to have been the golden era of the sports car. Born from the vision of American Ferrari distributors John von Neumann and Luigi Chinetti, who spotted a niche in the U.S. for a roadster which combined jaw-dropping looks and truly potent performance, it arrived on the scene in late '58.

Drool-worthy drop-top



Far more feisty than the touring-orientated 250 GT Cabriolet that was sold alongside it, the California Spider evolved from the 250 GT Berlinetta competition car and packed the same glorious, three-litre, 240 horsepower V12 that had brought the latter multiple wins in the Tour de France.

Combined with that drool-worthy drop-top body penned by Pinin Farina and built by Scaglietti, the end result was a car which could out-pose anything on the boulevards and out-pace almost anything on the race tracks. Offered on the same, 2,600mm wheelbase as the 'TdF', just 50 of the original 'long' cars were built before being superseded in 1960 by the short-wheelbase version on a cut-down, 2,400mm chassis.

Elegance and aggression



In each case, the Pinin Farina coachwork contrived to be simultaneously elegant and aggressive, with a profile that flowed smoothly from the wing to the doors before rising sharply in a taught, muscular bulge which spoke of pent-up power awaiting release. Up front, the line of the long, sweeping nose was kept clean with a relatively small bonnet - topped by an angular bulge that helped airflow to the three, big-bore Webers.

The combination of the California Spider's looks and performance proved immensely appealing, and the cars were invariably bought by somewhat dangerous types who liked to drive hard. Probably the most celebrated owner was Hollywood star James Coburn, who acquired his short-wheelbase version in 1964, from the Belgian importer Jacques Swaters, shortly after filming the Great Escape in Bavaria.

California dreaming



In 2008, the car was sold by RM Auctions for the equivalent of £5.5 million to the British radio presenter Chris Evans - who acquired another one last year, which he is reported to have sold through Talacrest within the past few days for more than £9 million.

One lifetime, two examples of the most gorgeous Ferrari ever built? Now that really is California dreaming.

Gallery

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