

CLASSIC DRIVER

The incredible story of Valentino Balboni

Lead
For almost 40 years, he had the best job in the world: Valentino Balboni was Lamborghini's chief test driver. We look back on an extraordinary career...

It's only rarely that I remember meeting someone for the first time. In Valentino Balboni's case, the truth is very different. It was 31 October 2006, the mist hanging over the industrial buildings of Sant'Agata Bolognese – and Balboni was driving a red 1964 Lamborghini 350 GT with a gentle smile playing across his grey stubble, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Valentino does his job with the casual attitude of a postman on his rounds – the only difference being that we overtook a truck at 230km/h. On the wrong side of the road. In a bend." So I wrote in my notebook later, after the tingling in my fingers had somewhat subsided. And I added, "Why has nobody discovered this man as the ideal star of a Spaghetti Western?"

Heavenly addition



That Balboni did not land a job with Sergio Leone, but in Ferruccio Lamborghini's company instead, is ultimately thanks to the heavenly inspiration of don Alfredo Pizzi who, in 1968, lived in Balboni's home village, but came originally from Sant'Agata. Pizzi wasn't averse to the automotive pleasures of life, so he took some teens, including 18-year-old Valentino, to visit Lamborghini. Valentino applied for a job, got it, and started at the very bottom. He didn't even have a driving licence, but that didn't prevent him 'testing' customers' repaired cars – mainly 400 GT, Espada or Islero – within Lamborghini's own premises. His role model at the time was Lamborghini's legendary chief test driver, Bob Wallace.

By 1971 he'd become a mechanic, and was increasingly driving test laps in customers' cars. The reaction from the boardroom was initially irritation, but eventually they came to see him as an asset... and Balboni was allowed to start testing current Lamborghinis alongside Bob Wallace. Two years later, he achieved his goal: technical director Paolo Stanzani arranged for him to have a licence that enabled him to test-drive the cars alone, on public roads.

A licence at last

What will the motor car be like in 1984?

Your answers could win you a chauffeur-driven trip around Monza.

The car.

The chauffeur.

The car is the Lamborghini Miura. The chauffeur is Valentino Balboni, test driver for Lamborghini. And Monza is one of the most famous race circuits in the world.

Put this together, and you could have the most exciting day of your life. Write, and you could have the most exciting day of your life.

How do you win a place in the passenger seat? Simply by giving us your ideas on what the motor car will be like in 10 years time.

It's not just for fun. Our involvement with designers and motor manufacturers helped in a great deal in the development of Super Vitesse-Serie.

And it occurred to us that you might have some thoughts of your own that could be of value.

How to answer:

There are five categories to choose from: Performance, Safety, Performance, Styling, Handling.

Put this into a clear and brief statement and send us what you think will be the biggest influencing factor related to motor car development in that category.

If you like, you can send us drawings or photographs, but please remember to include a stamped addressed envelope if you want your material returned.

Judging the competition will be some distinguished names connected with all aspects of motoring, headed by Gola.

Champion of Europe.

The winner of all the best answers in each category will win a trip to the Lamborghini factory in Modena, and more on for a free chauffeur-driven trip around Monza.

One more thing. If in the opinion of the judges, your idea is particularly outstanding, we will put you in touch with any motor manufacturer interested in it.

So, as well as the prize you're going to win, you could win something else. A place in motoring history.

Send your entry to: Super Vitesse-Serie, Lamborghini, Via Modena 10, 41013 Sant'Agata Bolognese (BO) Italy. The deadline for entries is 31st March 1984. Entries should be sent to the address above, and the winners will be notified by post.

Super Vitesse-Serie

New licence in hand, Balboni headed that same evening to the customer service department and selected a Miura SV in which to drive, alone in a car for the first time, along the route he would follow for the next 35 years, testing almost all the company's prototypes and 80 per cent of all Lamborghinis built. The route goes from the factory premises at Via Modena, towards Nonantola and then past Bomperto to Finale Emilia. "I just went for a drive with no destination in mind and none of the usual time pressure," recalls Balboni. "What has remained is the incredible feeling of travelling alone by car."

The Miura remained his great love – but there was little time for pleasure rides: Balboni's task was to coordinate the testing of each freshly assembled sports car. Often the mechanics would hear him from a distance, as Balboni's evening test drives made sure everything was in order: first gear, second, third, fourth, fifth, a short time at full revs – and then they knew that everything was all right, that they could pack up and go home. But things didn't always go smoothly: in May 1978, testing a customer's Countach, he had just reached 180km/h when a truck appeared from nowhere. Balboni rolled several times, and was only able to exit through the side window by using a fire extinguisher. But the test driver was lucky: the accident left him with only a few scratches.

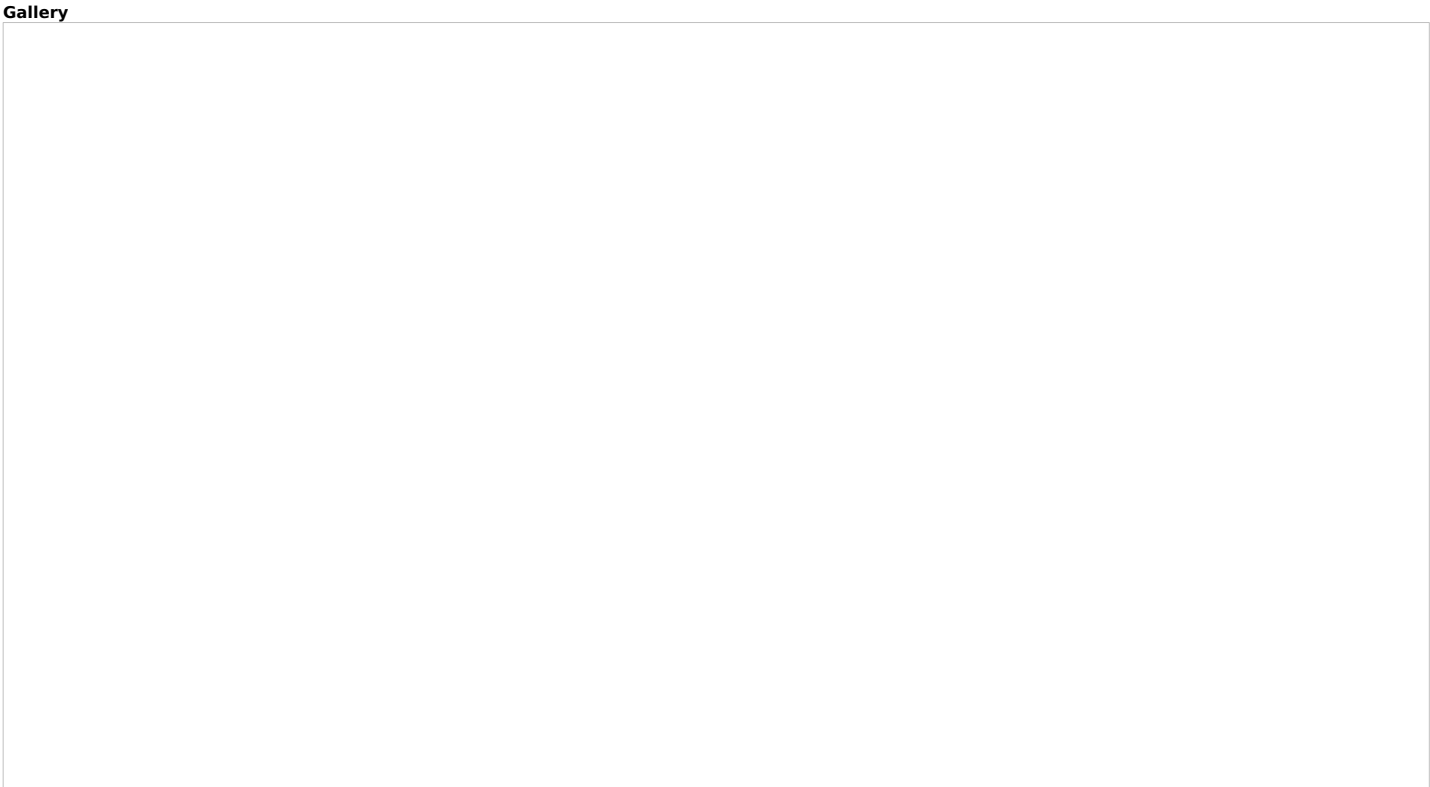
The face of Lamborghini



In the 1980s, Balboni was the only test driver who was simultaneously employed in prototype development, production and customer service at Lamborghini. He became the face of the brand and an ambassador for Lamborghini. In the 1990s, Sant'Agata began production of the Diablo – and prominent customers in the USA, Japan and the Arab states often insisted on meeting Balboni in person, to hear about their new car directly from the chief test driver.

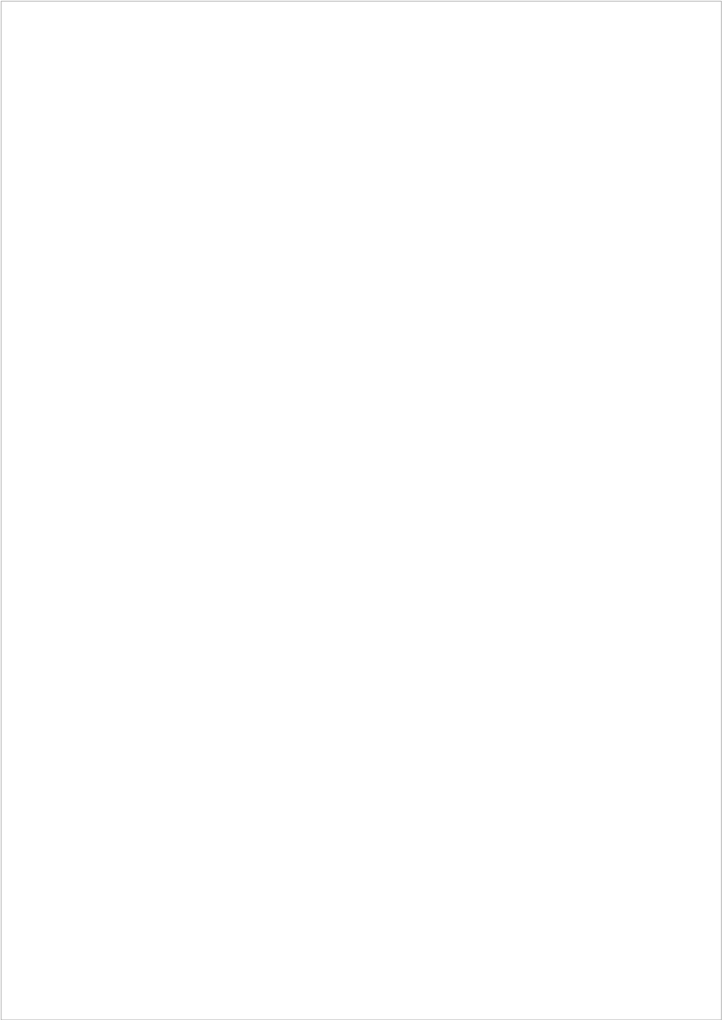
Today, Balboni leads the life of an ‘elder statesman’ – and, despite retiring, he is still proud to be known worldwide as ‘Mister Lamborghini’, a witness to both the founding era of Ferruccio Lamborghini and to the age of carbonfibre. Anyone who has ever sat beside him in the passenger seat, their palms sweaty and their heart pounding, will never forget the experience.

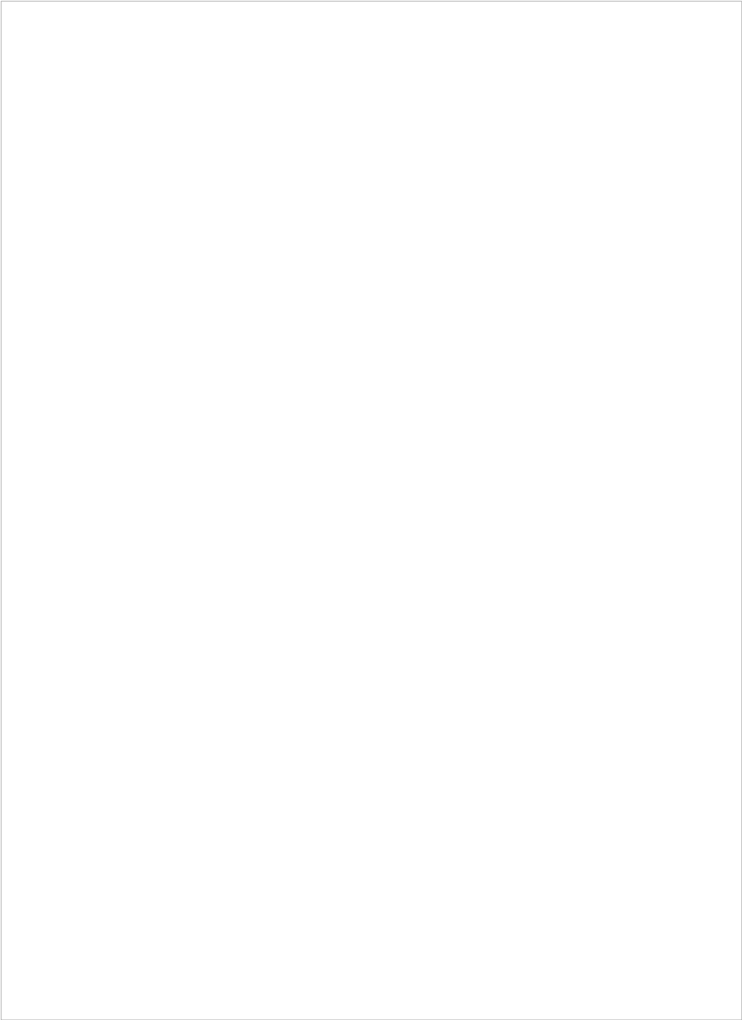
Photos: Balboni Archive, Umberto Guizzardi, Günther Archive, Armin Johl, Automobili Lamborghini Archive, Rainer Schlegelmilch

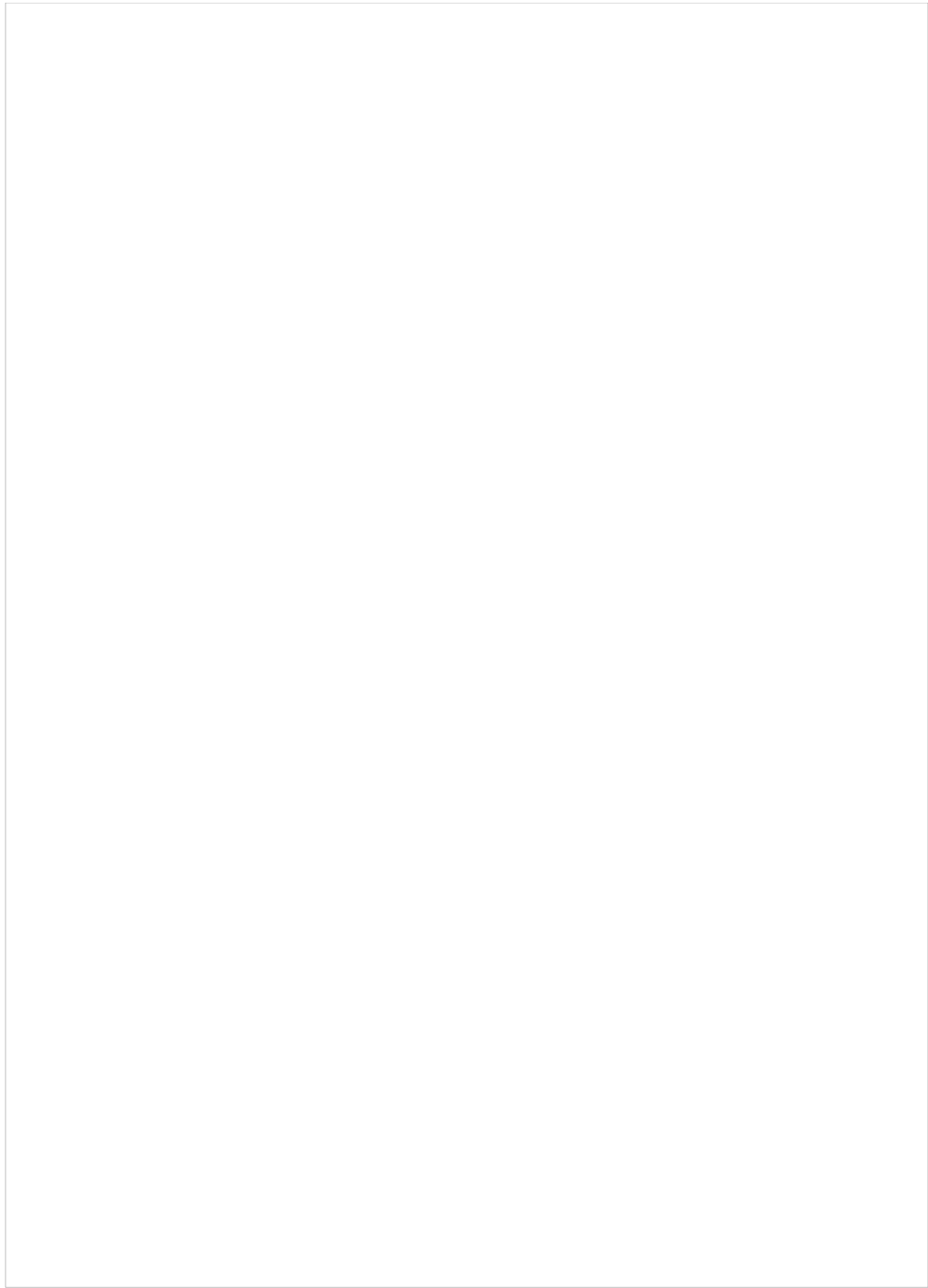












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