

TWIN TEST
Ferrari 308 GTS
VS Fiat X1/9





Is a mid-engined Italian supercar something that should be left on a teenager's bedroom wall, or can you live the dream without having nightmares?

Like most of my friends I had a poster of an Italian supercar on my bedroom wall when I was a teenager. In my case it was the Lamborghini Countach with gullwing doors raised, although I seem to remember that the 12-cylinder Ferrari 365 GT4BB was also popular. But we all stood in awe of Dale, who lived just round the corner. For one thing, his mum allowed him to pin up that poster of the tennis player scratching her bum, but even more amazingly, he took it down and replaced it with a poster of the Ferrari 308.

Clearly a man of taste and good breeding, Dale and I drifted apart over the ensuing years, him to a career in

accounting and me to the life of excess and debauchery that is part and parcel of being a motoring journalist. But one day recently after test-driving a Morris Marina in Grimsby, I stumbled into a local hostelry to revive my spirits and who should I meet at the bar, but good old Dale. He was staying overnight while going through a client's books, so I booked a room for myself and we set about catching up on old times over dinner.

By the bottom of the second bottle of Shiraz, it was clear that not so much had changed since we were kids: I was still not allowed to put up pictures of semi-naked women on my bedroom wall and Dale was still lusting after a Ferrari. The only real difference was that now

Dale had a small windfall to play with, 25 grand that wasn't earmarked for the kids' college tuition, home improvements or any such trivial nonsense.

I woke up in the morning with a vague recollection of promising to help Dale find the car he wanted. Subtle probing over breakfast reminded me of the more salient details, phone numbers were exchanged and two weeks later we met up again at the home of Mark and Caroline Munnings in deepest, darkest Norfolk. They just happened to own not only the car from Dale's teenage dreams, but also an alternative that I thought could satisfy his desires and save him a ton of money too. Surely as an accountant, that would be impossible to resist? Time to find out. ▶



FERRARI 308 GTS

The origins of this Ferrari are somewhat complicated, not least because of the numbering system. It's logical enough once you get to know it, but it can be confusing to the casual observer. The story of the 308 arguably begins with the Dino 206 of 1968. Named after the son that Enzo Ferrari lost in 1956, this was never actually badged as a Ferrari partly because of concerns about using an engine that only had six cylinders and was mounted behind the driver – a stark contrast to the twelve cylinders sitting between the front wheels that were currently enjoyed by Ferrari drivers. The engine in question was a quad-cam V6 of just two litres (hence the 206 name: 2.0 litres and six cylinders). It grew to 2.4 litres for the 246 of 1969 and powered the Lancia Stratos to three consecutive world rally crowns between 1974 and 1976 (Fiat having taken over Ferrari in 1969).

The Dino finally got to wear Ferrari badges in 1975 when it morphed into the Bertone-designed Dino 208 and 308 GT4. If you are following the numbering logic, then you will have already figured out that this had 2.0-litre (for the Italian market only) and 3.0-litre capacity options, both with eight

cylinders. The rather angular 2+2 styling was never a favourite in the marketplace, but help was at hand because traditional Ferrari coachbuilders Pininfarina had also been working on a replacement for the Dino 246. Again sold in 208 and 308 guises from 1976, the Pininfarina design reverted back to a strictly two-seat configuration and a body that was balanced, bold and utterly curvaceous.

Initially only available as the GTB (B for Berlinetta, or coupe to you and me), it was Ferrari's first glassfibre-bodied road car. But by the time the GTS arrived in 1978, the factory had reverted to steel panels. The 'S' stands for Spyder, and in this case meant the provision of a removable Targa top for all the joys of convertible motoring with none of the hassles. And it is a 308 GTS of 1980 vintage that owner Mark has kindly brought out for Dale to experience. This is one of the last carburettor-equipped cars, and when Ferrari fit carburettors, you can be sure that they do the job properly. In this case four twin-choke Webers shovel in the fuel that provides us with an adrenalin-inducing high-octane aroma as the 308 is backed onto the road. It idles a little roughly at first, but soon settles

down smoothly enough, and the Webers are a major plus compared to the first injected cars – they cleaned up emissions, but power dropped from 250bhp to as low as 204bhp until the four-valve heads arrived in 1982.

Once Dale has located the door handles (they are high up the frames so as not to interrupt those lovely air intake scoops), he has to stretch his little legs to get across the low and wide sills with any degree of style before dropping into a sculpted bucket seat that is snug, but in no way cramped. Headroom is a tad on the modest side, but with the Targa top removed (an easy process) and stored behind the seats, this ceases to be an issue.

The dash top is plain black vinyl, sweeping round and into the door trim to blend seamlessly into an armrest on either side. Straight ahead is a lovely small instrument pod packed with dials, definitely owing more to Sixties style than Seventies chic. A 180mph speedo and 10K rev counter jostle for space with dials for fuel, water temperature and oil pressure, while a clock and an oil temperature gauge are relegated to a secondary position below the dash (they got promoted to the main cluster with the



neck-snapper and the engine delivers its ample power seamlessly from 3000rpm right on through to 7700rpm. It has got torque too, and will pull from as low as 1100rpm if you are gentle with the throttle.

But of course, Dale isn't thinking of buying a Ferrari only to be gentle with the throttle. Fortunately the 308 is a forgiving car for our would-be hero to cut his power teeth on. It was built to satisfy a market that was moving away from brute power and towards refinement. The steering is heavy at parking speeds, but nicely weighted on the move. Take a little too much speed into the corners and lifting off only inspires the nose to turn into the bend. It was also the first Ferrari to be developed from start to finish with the benefit of a wind tunnel, and as a result it remains stable, whichever way the wind is blowing.

Not that we want to give the impression that the 308 is in any way soft. True, the suspension settings are comfortable but the clever combination of long suspension travel in a low car means this does not compromise the handling. Besides, this car was simply not designed for casual driving. Brakes, clutch, gear change, steering: they all respond best to firm and decisive action and this Ferrari is a total drivers' car in the best tradition.

Back at base, it takes time for Dale's adrenalin to dissipate but owner Mark helps the process along by touching on some of the running costs. Although, £200 for a distributor cap can wilt even the stiffest of wallets, but there are some bright spots: with classic insurance policies available from as little as £260, Dale is currently paying more to insure the VW Golf he uses every day than he would to cover 5000 miles in the Ferrari. ♣

arrival of fuel injection). Out front, the nose of the car drops away from view through a steeply raked screen. There are obviously no power bulges to interrupt the flow, but the way the wings curve aggressively over their wheels does more than compensate for this phallic deficiency. Visibility out the back is surprisingly good for a supercar like this, the upright rear screen curving nicely at the ends and being flanked by quarter glass that is covered by fake vents.

With bearings taken, Dale is ready to move off. The clutch takes a man-sized effort in the narrow footwell before allowing him to move the gearstick left and back through a classic Ferrari chromed gate into the dog-leg first. With masses of torque available, it is easy to spin the wheels or slip the clutch, but Dale is taking it easy while he explores the car. From first he goes directly to third – second gear takes a while to warm up and the official recommendation is to avoid using it for the first ten miles or so.

The engine has a hard-edged metallic tone rather than the gentle burble more normally associated with a V8, not unpleasant and hinting at a slight menace. Peak power doesn't arrive until 6600rpm, but this is no





FIAT X1/9

And so to our challenger for the Ferrari's crown. Also from Italy, also mid-engined and also belonging to Mark and Caroline, this is the evergreen Fiat X1/9. And if the 308 trod new ground for Ferrari, the same and a whole lot more is true of the X1/9 and Fiat. But it was something of a minor miracle that the car was ever built in the first place. To start with, Fiat didn't even want a mid-engined car, figuring that it would be too expensive to produce. Fortunately for us, Nuccio Bertone had other ideas.

As with any car, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when development of the X1/9 began. Certainly the Autobianchi Primula of 1964 proved the transverse FWD formula to Fiat's satisfaction, leading on to project X1/1 that became the Fiat 128. With a new 1116cc SOHC engine designed by Aurelio Lampredi (of the legendary Fiat Twin Cam fame), the 128 had rack and pinion steering, MacPherson struts all round and was voted European Car of the Year when launched in 1969. Available initially as a boxy saloon or estate, a coupe joined the ranks in 1971, as did a 128 Rally with the engine bored out to 1290cc.

What the range didn't have was a convertible option. Bertone was still churning

out the old 850 Spider, but this was obsolete and so Fiat asked him to draw up proposals for a replacement using the 128 as a base. They wanted a cheap, entry-level rag top with the engine either up front or in the tail. Bertone duly obliged and built both options, but he also built a third with the engine in the middle. Flushed with acclaim from the mid-engined Lamborghini Miura that he had also designed, this was clearly Bertone's favoured choice but initially it found little favour with the management in Turin.

Things started to move in the mid-engine's favour when worries surfaced that legislation in the US would kill off convertible designs – Bertone's proposal had a Targa top and incorporated a rollover bar as part of the roof design. Approval was eventually given for production of the new Spider to get underway at Bertone's factory in 1972, alongside the Alfa Montreal, Fiat Dino Coupe and Lamborghini Uracco, which were also made there. Running gear was essentially from the 128 Rally and by 1974 the new sportster had killed off the 128 coupe. At this time, Radbourne Racing converted some cars to RHD for the UK market, but we had to wait until 1977 for factory versions to arrive on our shores.

In 1978, the longer-stroke 1500 engine arrived coupled to a five-speed gearbox courtesy of the Fiat Strada. This boosted power to 85bhp (up from 73bhp for the smaller engine) and required a raised engine cover to clear the taller power unit. The Italian carmaker offered fuel injection in the American market for 1980, but the following year the model was pulled from the States and production handed over in its entirety to Bertone. Lacking any real interest from Fiat after that, these Bertone cars soldiered on with only minor tweaks to colours, transfers, wheels and interior trim until the final batch of Gran Finale limited edition cars brought production to a close in 1989.

The car we have to try and tempt Dale out of the Ferrari is a 1984 model. It was restored some years ago by Classic Car Restorations in Rackheath, near Norwich (01603 720550) and still looks factory-fresh. Standing back and looking at the red wedge, it comes as a surprise to remember just how sharp the little car's lines are – in every sense of the word. The mundane saloon-car door handles can't compete in Dale's mind with the Ferrari's bespoke items, but opening the door reveals a deep sill and low floorpan that hints at the sporting potential.



Once inside, the angular theme continues with a modular dash that could not have come from any decade other than the Seventies. It is stocked with the essential dials, seemingly shrunk down to match the car's diminutive proportions and sporting a 140mph speedo and anti-clockwise rev counter with a 7k red line. The rather odd-looking gearstick proudly proclaims its five speeds, and initial stirrings suggest that while the linkage may not have the snick-snick action of a rifle bolt, it still provides plenty of feel. The clutch feels infinitely lighter than that in the Ferrari and while the wheel is bigger, it is still small enough to be sporty.

Looking out of the front screen, the bonnet slopes smoothly away with nothing in the way of adornment to interrupt the flow. Visibility all round is excellent, with a heated rear screen close behind our heads and only small buttresses to intrude on rear three-quarter vision. Out the back, the raised engine cover hides the tail from view, but a slight stretch shows that this is not far behind. Headroom is generous with the roof in place, but we soon relegate this to its storage position in the front luggage compartment where careful design (the spare wheel is stored behind the driver's seat) means you can still fit some shopping underneath the roof. That leaves the

boot behind the engine free for the matching luggage that Fiat offered with the car.

So, the Fiat is clearly a practical car, but the more important question for Dale is whether it is also fun to drive. The answer isn't long in coming. The X1/9 cribbed structural elements from the Lancia Stratos, so its chassis is compact and rigid. So rigid in fact that it does away with the need for anti-roll bars without compromising the handling. It lacks the ultimate grunt that the chassis deserves, but makes up for it with superb handling. With a near-perfect 50:50 weight distribution and very little body roll, you simply wind up the speed and wang it through corners with total confidence. The steering is light and precise, and it makes the Ferrari feel something of a lumbering beast in comparison. And if you do have to stamp on the brakes, the discs all round (split front-to-rear for added safety) scrub off speed effortlessly without sending the nose into a dive, thanks to clever suspension geometry that links the lower wishbones directly to the bottom of the dampers. On four-speed cars there is a bit of a gulf between the top two ratios, but no such problem on a five speeder such as this. Engine and wind noise can intrude into the cabin, but it is an effortless 70mph cruiser that still returns 40mpg. ▶





Despite the fact that you can buy five or six excellent Fiat X1/9s for the same price as a Ferrari 308 in similar condition, this isn't quite the resounding victory for the Prancing Horse that you might expect. Yes, the 308 is a hugely desirable machine by any standards, but it's the diminutive Fiat that's the favourite of Mark and Caroline – owners of both the cars. Surprising isn't it?

VERDICT

Both cars are mid-engined Italians, both are true enthusiasts cars and both have a following of owner-enthusiasts who can draw on the services of active owners' clubs, but there is obvious clear water between what they represent. Buy the Fiat and Dale can expect a club-organised adventure weekend away on which spontaneous SuperSoaker water fights have been known to erupt, and his day could be rounded off with anything from pub food to BBQ to Pot Noodle at accommodation in a holiday camp or under canvas. Buy the Ferrari and his weekend could be spent at a race circuit or a stately home, with hotel accommodation probably being the order of the day. Not that Ferrari enthusiasts are in any way snobbish and some may secretly relish a serious water fight, but generally they like to take their fun in more comfortable surroundings so it's probably best to leave the SuperSoaker at home.

If it was a matter of using the car regularly, then the Fiat would be a no-contest, hands-down winner. The Ferrari is simply not practical for everyday use with a clutch that is too heavy for town, a turning circle that goes round a small county and 15mpg being easily visited with a heavy right foot. On the other hand, it is probably one of the most practical Ferraris you can buy: there is at least some room for luggage, running costs are high rather than ruinous and you can get a good one from around £20,000.

In contrast, Dale could get a good X1/9 for just £2500-£3000. After some reflection,



the cars' owner Mark admits that if he had to choose, it would probably be the Fiat that he would keep. His wife Caroline is clearly in agreement, commenting that while both cars get to your heart, the Ferrari also gets to your wallet. But in the end, this decision is about more than money and practicality. Just sitting in a Ferrari is a magical experience for

us mere mortals, and Dale has the chance to put one in his garage. Sometimes you just have to say: 'What the heck!' Right now, it is Dale's wallet that is bulging. He can live out a childhood dream, and that is an opportunity that doesn't come around every day.

Personally I'd take the Fiat, but for him there is no contest: Dale wants the Ferrari. ■