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Ferrari 599 GTB vs 275 GTB, Daytona, 550 Maranello and 575M

The launch of a new V12 Ferrari is the perfect excuse to bring together its front-engined forebears. Jethro Bovingdon drives them all, from sublime 275 GTB to stunning 599 GTB Fiorano

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Text: Jethro Bovingdon / Photos: Gus Gregory February 2013



Millions of car enthusiasts suddenly understood what it feels like to be the front splitter on a 430 Scuderia when the F12 Berlinetta was revealed. In fact my chin is still recovering from the gravel rash incurred by dragging my bottom jaw around for at least two days in the immediate aftermath: 730bhp, wild aerodynamic devices like the 'Aero Bridge', Active Brake Cooling, a top speed of over 211mph... it's not so much an evolutionary step as a giant leap into a tear in the time-space continuum.

Right now we can only imagine how it drives (brilliantly seems a safe bet), but what we can do is look back to see what has made the front-engined Ferrari V12 berlinettas so extraordinary in the past, and perhaps identify the magic that the F12 would do well to carry into its startling new hyper-reality.

So we find ourselves at Millbrook Proving Ground on a drizzly Saturday morning. The forecast says we can look forward to sunshine but it hardly seems to matter. Unless giant rocks of ice start to fall from the sky, the weather couldn't possibly spoil this very special day. It's one of those pinch-yourself moments as I look around to see 275 GTB, 365 GTB/4 Daytona, 550 Maranello, 575M and 599 GTB Fiorano... I want to jump up and down and run in circles but instead I just nod in dumbstruck silence as David Ingram-Hill hands me the keys to his family's beautiful 275 GTB and coolly gives me some instructions about the finer points of handling this near 50-year-old road-racer.

'It's a 1965 two-cam six-carb model with the Webers instead of the Solex, steel-bodied and a long-nose/short-tail car. It's got a dogleg first and the throttle is a bit sticky initially. Use all the available revs, no restrictions, just go for it. It goes like stink. You will absolutely love it.'

David is, as you may have gathered, a bit of a hero. This 275 (insured by us for £800,000) has recently skimmed across Patagonia in the 1000 Millas Sport rally, is a regular on the Mille Miglia and gets used very, very hard every time it's brought out into the wild. It's beautifully maintained but never pampered, loved for what it does, not just how it looks. Even so, driving it onto Millbrook's challenging Alpine Hill Route in the damp is enough to get a swarm of mutant butterflies dive-bombing my stomach lining.

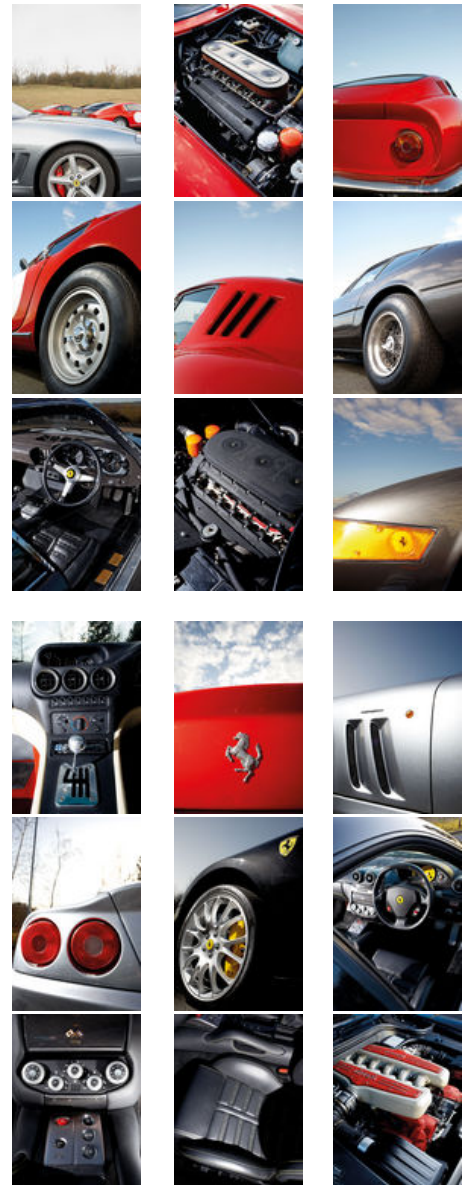
It's hard to imagine a more evocative machine than a bright red 275 GTB with white roundels on the bonnet and doors and huge Scuderia Ferrari shields on the front wings. Swing open the tiny, lightweight door and drop into the low-backed black bucket seat, remember to breathe, then just soak in the details. The big, metal-spoked, leather-trimmed wheel with that famous badge staring proudly back at you; the large, clear instruments set in a simple wooden dash (speedo reading to 300kph, red line at 7500rpm); the tightly-gated 'box and the deliciously tactile qearknob with those perfect.



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finger-shaped indentations on its rear face; the miniature elegance of the door mirrors; the almost pornographic rise and fall of the curvaceous wings and bonnet... God, I'm as cynical as the next man, but the 275 is plain irresistible.

Turn the tiny key, press the oversized black plastic rocker switch marked 'A' where you'd expect to find a stereo in a normal car, listen for the click of the fuel pump, turn the key a bit further and the 3.3-litre Colombo V12 (see panel, p68) starts to churn. Now squeeze the throttle ever so gently and feel the weight of the carbs pushing back... the engine catches then thrums and thrashes at a fast idle.

I'm told this particular V12 is good for around 300bhp and the GTB is built like a racer – it weighs just 1200kg. As I take up the clutch and try to judge that heavy throttle, I can't help wondering if the 205/70 VR14 (yes, 14!) tyres are going to be my friends or a deadly foe...

The weighty first inch or so of throttle pedal is the only heavy thing about the 275 GTB. Its unassisted steering is light and intuitive with none of the slack I'd expected, the gearchange is precise despite the transaxle layout (then a first for a Ferrari berlinetta but continued to this day) and there's a supple effortlessness about its damping. But that doesn't make it a relaxing car to drive – it's too intense for that. The V12 is torque-lite but rev-happy, and to make it feel like the full 300bhp you need to be determined to see the needle swing towards the red. The V12's complex tangle of noise is pulled tight as the revs rise and, much as I hesitate to use the words, the resulting snarl at the top end is pure Le Mans.

The 275 is not a physical car to drive but it requires real mental discipline – you must keep the engine bubbling over 5000rpm, the gearbox needs careful coaxing and an expertly judged blip of revs to change down cleanly, and the steering is exquisitely accurate but lacks the busy feel I'd expected. Even on the heavily cambered turns of the Hill Route it never weights-up to give you something to lean against; instead you feel for the grip through the seat and I never felt minded to really fling it towards a corner.

I suspect experience would breed much more confidence because the basics are so right: the 275 GTB is so narrow and agile, the body control is absolutely remarkable for such an old car, the brakes (here upgraded to Daytona-spec) are superb, and the whole car just seems incredibly happy when it's being driven hard. The noise, the smell of hot oil, the way reflections seem to rush up to the curved windscreen and then streak past the side windows... it's just pure theatre and pure race car. I'm smitten. Imagine driving this car in 1965 when the average family car (think of an Anglia 105E) covered the 0-60mph yardstick in around 25 seconds and could barely hit 80mph flat-out...

Daytona. I am about to drive a Ferrari Daytona. I knew the numbers by heart as a kid: 4.4-litre V12, 352bhp at 7500rpm, 174mph, 0-60mph in 5.4sec, 0-100mph in 12.6... To call the 365 GTB/4 an icon is like saying that Roger Federer is quite good at tennis. This is supercar royalty.

Now, it might make you feel a bit sick, but our new best mate Mr Ingram-Hill also owns the Daytona (I won't mention the F40 and the F50). He warns me it's a bit different to the 275 and the key to that is one figure that my young mind never really factored-in to the Daytona myth. It weighs 1600kg. Compared with its predecessor it's a genuine porker. The question is, has it been on protein shakes and designer steroids or just spent too long at the pasta buffet?

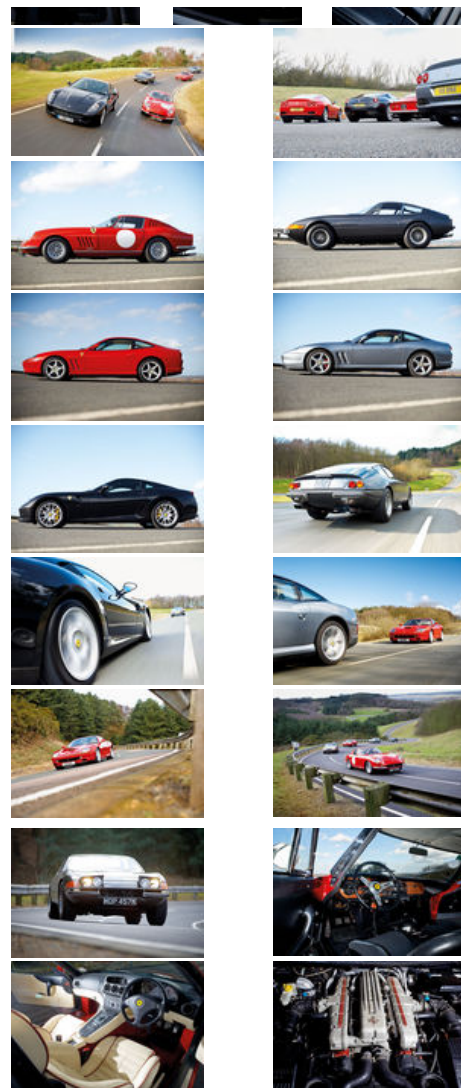
The sliver of chrome that acts as a door handle gives no clue to the car's heft, but settle into the laid-back, squidgy seat and it feels like a very different animal to the racy, minimalist 275. There's a wide centre console (complete with electric window switches), the steering wheel is vast, you sit much higher and the big, faded black dash has a sort of old-school Californian glamour to it – in other words it's stylish but unnecessarily huge. Wow, talk about a shift in focus.

The broad-chested Tipo 251 V12 churns in the same slightly reluctant fashion before booming to life and seeming to swallow up the whole car. This one has a deeper but still super-complex note. The 'box still has a familiar dogleg pattern but the exposed metal gate has vanished and the tight precision is replaced by a loose, long-throw action. Again the big carbs give a heavy stiction to the throttle but that's nothing compared with the steering (still unassisted), which is painfully heavy as I roll gingerly out of our little collecting area and on to the Hill Route.

Within perhaps five seconds of driving the Daytona you know it's not a wild, highly-strung and enthralling road-racer like its predecessor. The weight of the steering, the huge torque of the engine, the overly-sensitive brakes... virtually every detail says this is pure GT, a sea-change in the direction of front-engined V12 Ferraris. However, I don't mind admitting it makes me feel instantly more comfortable. Yes, the steering is almost comically heavy and there's more body-roll and less agility, but that means the Daytona is easier to read and doesn't feel like it might skate across the surface unexpectedly.

Delve deeper, though, and the Daytona starts to show its limitations. The engine is absolutely stonking, no question. It's quicker than the 275 even pulling that extra 400kg, and despite that deep well of torque it'll rev right out, too. But push the chassis harder and the steering becomes almost unmanageable and never seems to lighten at all, the body starts to lurch a little between direction changes, there's inevitable understeer and the gearbox has such wide ratios that smooth progress is very tricky to maintain. I've never driven a car that needs such a massive throttle input to match the revs on a downshift. It's fair to say that after the fairytales of the 275 GTB, the 365 GTB/4 is something of a disappointment.

Of course I absolutely accept that the Hill Route is the very worst place to



Extra Info

Ferrari 275 GTB

Engine V12, 3286cc
Power 300bhp @ 7600rpm
Torque 217lb ft @ 6000rpm
Transmission Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, lsd
Suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers and anti-roll bars front and rear
Weight 1200kg
Power-to-weight 254bhp/ton
0-60mph 6.0sec
Top speed 160mph
Price new £5699 (1964)
Price today £650,000-£800,000

Ferrari 365 GTB/4 'Daytona'

Engine V12, 4390cc
Power 352bhp @ 7500rpm
Torque 319lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, lsd
Suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers and anti-roll bars front and rear
Weight 1600kg
Power-to-weight 223bhp/ton
0-60mph 5.4sec
Top speed 174mph
Price new £8563 (1968)
Price today £150,000-£200,000

Ferrari 550 Maranello

Engine V12, 5474cc
Power 485bhp @ 7000rpm
Torque 419lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, lsd
Suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, electronically adjustable dampers and anti-roll bars front and rear
Weight 1715kg

drive the Daytona. This is a car for fast, wide French N-roads where you never dip below 100mph, society girlfriend in the passenger seat eager to get to Monte Carlo and congratulate you on your impeccable taste in bank accounts. Repeatedly. However, here and now it's not a patch on that eager, fizzing 275 GTB and although I still want a Daytona in my kitchen, I wouldn't be that bothered if it was bricked-in. Beautiful, thumpingly quick, magnificent noise... it just lacks that chassis sparkle I'd dreamt about.

If it hadn't been for the vision of Luca di Montezemolo, the Daytona might have been the last of its kind, the finale to a lost era of effortless continent-crossing married with genuine sports car thrills. But after the Berlinetta Boxer era and the heroically OTT Testarossa, 512 TR and F512M, in the late-'90s Ferrari went back to its front-engined roots. And how.

The 550 Maranello was received with quiet confusion, furrowed brows and comparisons with the Toyota Supra. But any notion that Ferrari had lost the plot was found to be absurd as soon as journalists and customers began to drive the 550 in anger. It was the Daytona formula updated, refined and executed with stunning attention to detail. The launch of the Maranello in 1996 was before my time, but eight years later, when we were conducting our Greatest Drivers' Cars feature (evo 066) I can clearly remember driving one across south Wales and wondering where Ferrari had hidden its 1716kg, wringing ever last drop from that creamy V12, smile growing wider with every corner.

Nick Hill's example is a peach. Gleaming in the sunshine, it's hard to believe a car of such elegance could ever have been dismissed as a frump. I can barely wait to drive it. Instantly it feels like an old friend: the towering high-rise centre console still looks terrific; the wide transmission tunnel and proudly gated six-speed 'box holler that there's some seriously big forces being channelled back to those rear wheels; even the plain, slightly slippery-looking three-spoke steering wheel feels just about perfect. With ribbed 'Daytona' seats, acres of creme leather and red carpets, this 550 is loaded with nostalgia but still functional and modern.

Breathing fast and free through a Larini exhaust, the 5.5-litre V12 sounds like it's got barely a tenth of the internal friction of the old stagers. Although the numbers say that the 485bhp Maranello isn't that much quicker than the 352bhp Daytona (12.6sec to 100mph for the old timer, 10.1 for the 550), I think the steep inclines and wickedly cambered turns of the Hill Route might just paint a different picture.

Sure enough the 550 Maranello feels lighter, faster and more agile than the Daytona. In fact even the 275 GTB feels slightly ponderous in comparison with the more modern V12. Quick steering, superb brakes, amazing throttle response and an abundance of torque just help you to drive closer to the 550's limits with more margin for error and without having to carry all the speed that the front tyres can handle. In the older cars you suspect you have to get them dancing right on the limit to feel their real magic, well into the realms of momentum – a game with fearsome stakes. The 550 indulges a slow-in, fast-out approach so you can gain confidence as the front end bites, spot the exit and then load (or indeed overload) the rear tyres at will and steer the car on the throttle. It's wonderfully accessible and ironically I think makes the newer car more fun at lower speeds.

And what you're accessing is still, 16 years on, truly sublime. The ride is firm (too firm if you select Sport mode, which makes the 550 unsettled) but the pay-off is an amazing ability to control its bulk, a front end that you can lean on with total confidence and a direct link between your right foot and a rear axle that's always intimately involved with the car's balance.

It's very rare to find a car that responds so cleanly and quickly to every input that you make, that makes the driver so central to how it behaves. There is pitch and roll but it's all perfectly in tune and only increases your interaction with the car and gives you more options.

Very few sports cars are blessed with such clarity and adjustability, and yet when you throttle back a bit the 550 is a simply brilliant and relaxing GT car. It takes elements of the rabid 275 and the laid-back Daytona and conjures a character that doesn't feel compromised in any way, yet covers every base. It is simply a terrific car.

The 575M, you may remember, didn't get off to an auspicious start in 2002. It took the athletic control of the 550 and replaced it with flabby indecision. If you so much as showed a 575 a tricky compression it'd smash its belly into the road. Fortunately, Richard Allen's 575M is fitted with the Fiorano handling package, lowering it by 15mm and retuning both the dampers and the steering, which restored much of the 550's brilliance and became the default choice for buyers outside the US. I'm expecting it to feel like a slightly softer 550.

Pull the door shut and the 575M is clearly a more modern Ferrari: dead ahead is a big central rev-counter, smaller speedo to its right. The steering wheel is smaller, more sculpted; the big shoebox console is gone. But the real change is the sheer reach of the revised 5.7-litre engine, now producing 508bhp and nudging the top speed up to 202mph, and the added polish to the chassis. I'd have scarcely believed it, but the 575M Fiorano monsters the 550. There's more steering feel, greater traction, even a better ultimate balance.

Within 200 yards I'm absolutely amazed, within half a mile I'm laughing at the ferocity of the engine, and within a mile I've turned off the traction control, stopped laughing and started working as hard as I can to bring out the best in the 575M, completely absorbed and more committed than I'd care to admit to the kind Mr Allen. Sorry Richard, but to drive the 575M in any other way just wouldn't be right...

A few laps of the route later, the 575M has me completely. The V12's delivery knocks the wind from your lungs in the mid-range and is savage if you dare wring it out, the 'box is sweet and quick, the steering – so artificial

Power-to-weight 287bhp/ton
0-60mph 4.3sec
Top speed 199mph
Price new £143,710 (1998)
Price today £40,000-£50,000

Ferrari 575M Maranello

Engine V12, 5748cc
Power 508bhp @ 7250rpm
Torque 434lb ft @ 5250rpm
Transmission Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, lsd
Suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, electronically adjustable dampers and anti-roll bars front and rear
Weight 1730kg
Power-to-weight 298bhp/ton
0-60mph 4.2sec
Top speed 202mph
Price new £160,845 (2002)
Price today £50,000-£75,000

Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano

Engine V12, 5999cc
Power 611bhp @ 7600rpm
Torque 448lb ft @ 5600rpm
Transmission Six-speed F1 manual, rear drive, lsd, ASR, F1-trac
Suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, SCM adaptive dampers and anti-roll bars front and rear
Weight 1688kg
Power-to-weight 368bhp/ton
0-60mph 3.5sec
Top speed 205mph
Price new £171,825 (2007)
Price today £95,000-£150,000

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at parking speeds – buzzes and tugs at your wrists above about 30mph, and the way you can dictate to the chassis without ever bullying it is just mesmerising. I'm bewitched – and bewildered to think that the 599 GTB is a big step on from this freakishly talented supercar...

It is, too. The 599 is faster (a bit), has more grip (lots) and when you're smacking home another violent gearshift, manettino set to 'Race', V12 screaming up towards 8000rpm, shift-lights on the carbon steering wheel blinking like crazy, you can only conclude that this is something truly extraordinary. But that's not the end of the story. The 599 GTB is incredible but it's also way too big, the chassis has astonishing agility but it's also nervous and demanding, and every lump and bump seems to introduce expensive carbon venturi to coarse road surface. It's more like a front-engined 430 Scuderia than a successor to the Daytona, 550 and 575M.

The sheer physical size of the 599 GTB is extraordinary and the feeling that you're a little kid in a big man's car never evaporates. But the lightness to the way it drives is more extraordinary still. You'd barely guess there was a 6-litre V12 ahead of you when it pivots into a corner with seemingly no inertia to overcome, magnetorheological dampers keeping the body flat, steering light and completely uniform in weight, driving hard through the rear wheels and climbing in steps at 3000rpm and 5500rpm until you're getting the full noise of 611bhp up towards eight.

If there's a downside it's that the manic F1 gearshift, scalpel-sharp V12 and darty steering response seem to demand that you attack, attack, attack... it feels like the 599 GTB is running away from you and, when you attempt to wind the pace back in, the gearshift feels unnecessarily manic, the V12 doesn't deliver such easy-going torque and, because there's less weight transfer, the steering provides very little information about grip levels. It's both highly-strung and slightly aloof after the 575M – an odd combination, but inescapable after the transparent balance of its predecessor.

Privileges come no greater than driving these cars back-to-back on a perfect Spring day on a road with very loosely advised speed limits. I've been staggered, disappointed, elated, mildly terrified and completely smitten. The 275 feels like a racer with numberplates and I love its infectious character, its tiny dimensions, the elegance of every detail, the view, the smell and the noise when its V12 is working hard. Clearly the F12 Berlinetta would do well to recreate its sense of uncompromising dynamic focus. I didn't gel with the Daytona but it too has lessons for the new car: The F12 needs the capability to deliver its performance easily and conjure up images of a lost way of life, a life of relaxed journeys down tree-lined French roads, of vast distances dispatched.

The 550 and 575M nailed that dual character perfectly. They're a delight to drive slowly, effortless at a fast cruise and yet totally absorbing with traction control disengaged, an empty passenger seat and a fabulous road ahead. The 599 GTB is a very different V12 Ferrari – more manic than the 275, more demanding than the lucid Maranellos, more thrilling than either on the right road on the right day, but less rounded, less loveable and less forgiving. The F12 will be faster still: its dual-clutch 'box will give it instant shifts, its active aero even greater stability at speed and its electronics should make 730bhp exploitable. I just pray it puts the driver right at its centre, just like the greats from Ferrari's past. Can't wait to find out.

Huge thanks to David Ingram-Hill, Nick Hill and Richard Allen for sharing their superb cars.

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