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BEHIND THE WHEEL | REVIEW

Ferrari 458 Italia Has Enough Superlatives to Match the Sticker



THE RIGHT CURVES Styling of the Ferrari 458 Italia suggests that beauty need not take a back seat to performance. [More Photos >](#)

By LAWRENCE ULRICH
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MONTICELLO, N.Y.

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2011 Ferrari 458 Italia

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TOP GUN The Ferrari 458 Italia sets an industry record in power-per-liter for a normally aspirated engine. [More Photos >](#)

HEAT pouring from its carbon-ceramic brakes, the Ferrari 458 Italia rests its heaving lungs at Monticello Motor Club, preparing for more shrieking laps to come.

Perspiring and exhilarated myself, I have a moment to appreciate Ferrari's newborn beauty in repose at this private road course tucked below the Catskills.

Today, as club members romp at this challenging track, the scene resembles an improptu Ferrari family reunion: there's the Italia's beach-bum cousin, the California convertible; its just-retired predecessor, the midengine F430; and from the traditional gran turismo side of the clan, a 599 GTB Fiorano with a V-12 engine.

Not wanting to bruise anyone's feelings, I keep one thought to myself: my baby, the 458

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Italia — all right, so I'm just the nanny — is definitely the prettiest. The smartest, too, thanks to the latest [Formula One](#) diet of Ferrari racing technology. And the Italia is also the second-least-costly Ferrari (after the California) at \$230,275. That base price undercuts the 599 by over \$100,000.

What I'm about to say might enrage the guy struggling to keep a roof over a 10-year-old Chevy. But if you have that kind of money, the Italia — unlike some high-priced, half-baked exotics — is worth every penny. The car's sensory experience is nearly unfathomable; barreling [Woody Allen](#)'s Orgasmatron over Niagara Falls might get you close.

Stumbling from the 458's cockpit after hours of g-force frolic, it's easy to get caught up in woozy hyperbole. (See above.) But even with endorphins normalized, I declare the 458 is the best sports car I've ever driven, the current state of the art. Or maybe that's the art of the state, given that Ferrari's chairman, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, named the Italia after its homeland. Italy should cut Ferrari a check for such product placement.

The Ferrari certainly buffs Italy's reputation for high design. It may also represent a revival of Ferrari's legendary styling form, which had shown signs of becoming secondary to remorseless function. Even some Ferrari owners agree that recent models, including the F430 and the limited-edition Enzo, were becoming less purely sensuous, a pulse-quickening quality that had always elevated Ferrari above more cold-blooded sports cars. (I once parked a [Lamborghini Gallardo](#) next to an F430 and asked a few dozen passers-by to judge which car was better-looking. To my surprise, only a few men, and not a single woman, chose the Ferrari).

The Italia should find more love from either sex. The striking carrier-deck rear end also recalls the departed Enzo. But while that forceful styling suggests, truthfully, that the Italia can match or outrun that \$650,000 supercar, the old Ferrari flow is back in the steamy suggestion of its Mediterranean curves. The Italia says that beauty doesn't have to be sacrificed to modern performance.

The design also inhales cool air for the engine, brakes and aerodynamic downforce — while dispersing gearbox heat and smoothing turbulence at the rear — without a profusion of scoops and nostrils. In the nose, a pair of rubbery winglets deform nearly an inch at high speeds to reduce drag and lift.

The cabin is all about the driver, with every control and display angled that way. Passengers are clearly meant to sit in awe, thankful to get a ride. A saffron-colored tachometer nods to tradition and a 9,000 r.p.m. red line, but it is flanked by a Ferrari first: twin digital displays that flash everything from performance parameters to navigation maps and iPod playlists.

A few critics have griped that these displays seem more Honda than Ferrari. But as with Lamborghini and its modern Audi-based screen controls, I'm just grateful they work, in only mildly awkward style. In some Italian cars, you're lucky to find the AM radio.

Continuing the Grand Prix fantasy, the Ferrari's steering wheel houses so many controls that there's barely room for the pretty pony at the center. Fire the red start button, and LEDs trace the rim of the wheel to chart the engine's upward progress. The manettino — not an obscure pasta, but Italian for "little hand" — controls settings for Ferrari's remarkably transparent F1 Trac stability and traction systems, in tandem with an electronic differential that dynamically apportions torque between the rear wheels. Another switch adjusts the Ferrari's magnetic-fluid shocks for especially bumpy roads.

Even the turn signals and wipers are controlled by steering-wheel buttons. The steering column eschews stalks entirely, leaving huge paddle shifters for the dual-clutch, seven-speed automated manual transmission.

The six-figure fish tank

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Citing indifference among potential buyers, the Italia does not offer a conventional manual.

While I'd still prefer a clutch (and if you've got a quarter-million to spend, why shouldn't Ferrari cater to your whims?), the Italia's transmission is a piercing riposte to My Left Foot purists.

Drivers can fire off buttered-lightning shifts until their fingertips ache. But even the pure automatic mode makes an amazing show-and-tell: it is murderously aggressive when driven hard, snapping off firecracker double-downshifts and holding gears as high as 8,000 r.p.m. Especially in the Ferrari's racier performance modes, the Italia is so loudly oblivious to community noise standards that I often reverted to manual to avoid attention.

Yet owners may volunteer for 2 a.m. diaper runs just to hear that six-figure exhaust note. It's one part classical, one part metal thunder, like a duet of Pavarotti and Chris Cornell. A trio of exhaust outlets, reminiscent of Ferrari's old F40 supercar, open the outside pipes to unleash sound under hard throttle.

In the center of a space-frame chassis lies the source of that racket, a flat-crank, dry-sump V-8 that makes 562 horsepower and 398 pound-feet of torque from just 4.5 liters of displacement. That's an industry record in power-per-liter for an engine that breathes naturally, without air-cramming aid from superchargers or turbochargers.

Ferrari claims a 3.4-second run from a standstill to 60 miles per hour, a few ticks faster than the F430, and a top speed of 202 m.p.h. But the edge over the F430, as well as most other sports cars, isn't raw numbers. Instead, the Ferrari opens an unmatched window onto how a champion driver must feel. It's like waking up to find you can trade groundstrokes with [Rafael Nadal](#), and even rip one past him on occasion.

On Monticello's 4.1-mile, 22-turn course, the Italia shrieks past 160 m.p.h. on the back straight, thrillingly composed even as it brakes into bends and catapults out with shuddering force. Ferrari claims the newest F1 Trac and E-Diff deliver 32 percent more longitudinal force leaving turns than the F430, and the seat of my pants doesn't argue.

Nor does Bill McMichael, the track's chief executive, who is awaiting delivery of his own crimson Italia. And while I'm expecting a measured appraisal on Mr. McMichael's first trip in a 458, he instantly pegs the car above his own F430 Scuderia. "Even from the right-hand seat, I can tell there's more grip, more power, better body control," he said with enthusiasm as we rolled into the pits. "It never puts a foot wrong."

One problem must be mentioned. I had driven this identical car to Monticello a week earlier, when a wire worked loose and fried on hot metal. That put the car into limp-home mode before the engine shut down entirely. In the Ferrari's defense, the rigors of track laps can take out any car — though that caveat wouldn't have prevented a few choice Italian curses if I were the owner.

On this trouble-free day, the Ferrari seduced everyone it met, including club members whose opinions might translate into sales. One is Mr. McMichael, whom I can't help but jealously imagine practicing in his new Italia, whacking seconds off the eye-popping lap times he recorded in previous Ferraris.

"So," Mr. McMichael asked with a grin, "should I cancel my order?"

Fat chance.

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