

Hyperpace

Ferrari's new 'F70' is almost here. Meanwhile, time has taught us that 1995's F50 is closer in appeal to its legendary F40 forebear than we'd thought

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Top and above right Author Heseltine reckons that in-period criticism of the F50 was overstated simply because this wasn't an F40; time has certainly mellowed its styling.

RIGHT ABOUT now, you half-expect the engine to explode like popcorn. Surely the revcounter is lying. If it is, then so is the speedo. At moments such as these, all pretence of impulse control goes out of the window. Instead your eyes widen as your lips form a silent expletive.

Then you laugh. The clamour of the 60-valve V12 behind you is of the shrill, hair-stiffening variety and yet the Ferrari F50 feels strangely non-threatening. You expect it to be nervily alive as extreme centrifugal forces reshape your face and jowls but instead it's almost civilised at high(ish) three-figure speeds. Almost.

It's all so unexpected. Somehow the F50 is that rarest of things – an underrated Ferrari. When it was launched in March 1995, the men from Maranello promised Formula 1 performance for the road – promised a Formula 1 engine no less – and, while that was a bit of a stretch, a top speed of 202mph and 0-60mph time of 3.7sec

placed it squarely in hypercar territory. Yet the F50 was met with guarded praise by the motoring media. Instead it was left to its great rival, the McLaren F1, to hog the limelight. And while we still reach for the thesaurus each time the Woking Wonder is mentioned, the F50 remains greatly misunderstood.

It deserves better. There was none of the papering-over-cracks, subsistence-led engineering that typified Ferrari then. It seems hard to believe, given the marque's status now as a technological leader, but in the late 1980s and early '90s the marque hadn't kept pace with German or even Japanese rivals. With the F50, Ferrari sought bragging rights.

Legend has it, perhaps apocryphally, that the car was instigated by Piero Ferrari (né Lardi). Ferrari's vice-president routinely drove his F40 to work and it was he who laid out what its replacement should be. Or, to be more specific, what it shouldn't have: no turbochargers, no power steering, no brake servo, no airbags and certainly no cupholders.

This was at the dawn of the 1990s, when Scuderia Ferrari hadn't won the

Formula 1 Drivers' Championship in more than a decade. However, it was beginning to come good, thanks largely to the engineering genius of John Barnard and the driving flair of Alain Prost. The Frenchman won five Grand Prix races in 1990 aboard the lithe 641 single-seater, only to lose the title after rival Ayrton Senna famously used his McLaren as a battering ram in the Suzuka finale and took them both out.

Lardi had envisaged a supercar with a Grand Prix car engine, and work on the F50 began that same year using the V12 from 641/2. Come the big reveal at the '95 Geneva Motor Show, the production car's engine borrowed little from the racer save for the dimensions of its block, which was cast in iron (with Nikasil-coated cylinder liners). This in itself was no great shock, as a genuine Formula 1 engine would have been next to useless in a road car. There would be no pneumatic valve actuation here, no revving to a stratospheric 13,500rpm. But the production F50's undersquare unit was – and remains – a gem, a masterpiece of packaging that, in true competition style, acted as a

stress-bearing member. It was bolted directly to the back of the bulkhead and carried the rear suspension on a yoke cast into the final-drive casting. This also acted as the dry-sump oil tank.

The GP car's 3.5-litre displacement was stroked to 4698cc, the final specific output being 109.2bhp per litre, which would top even that of the McLaren F1 (103bhp). The factory claimed an outright 513bhp at 8000rpm and torque of 327lb at 6500rpm. The engine was enclosed by a full-length undertray, with two fans that extracted air from beneath the car and blew it over the exhaust manifolds and catalytic converters. Hot air was then dissipated through slots in the engine cover.

The F50 was also Ferrari's first composite monocoque supercar, with inboard, pushrod-operated suspension. That said, strictly speaking it wasn't a full carbonfibre tub, as there was a supplementary tubular steel chassis to which stressed composite panels were bonded. Ferrari claimed it was three times stiffer than a steel monocoque.

Then there was the styling. The F50's outline was rooted in Pininfarina's

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well-received Mythos concept car, which debuted at the 1989 Tokyo Motor Show. However, while the Mythos was widely touted as one of the finest show queens of the day, very little was transposed intact to the F50. The shape was pushed and pulled, tweaked and honed until there was little commonality between the two cars.

For a start, the F50's nose emerged much longer and the side intakes much smaller, as the water radiators were relocated to the front. The massive rear wing was also fixed, possibly out of fear that unwitting owners would →



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fiddle with settings and upset the car’s aerodynamic balance at the double-ton. One of the F50’s unique selling points was that it came with the choice of *berlinetta* or *barchetta* configurations. If you fancied *al fresco* driving, you could remove the roof panel for that full bleeding-scalp sensation.

And then came the launch. The F50’s styling attracted criticism and media test drives were performed exclusively (and briefly) at Ferrari’s Fiorano test track, serving only to tell hacks how good the car was on a perfectly smooth circuit. Damn near perfect as it happens, but what about on the public highway? Read any contemporary

report and the sense of frustration at Ferrari’s control freakery is palpable. However, with production limited to just 349 units – and with all 349 selling to ‘97 despite the £329,000 price tag – this was of little consequence.

Fast-forward to the present and it seems that prices are belatedly rising. ‘A circa-10,000km car right now is a touch over £450,000,’ says DK Engineering’s James Cottingham. ‘It’s rare to find super-low-mileage cars as the F50 is very useable over a long distance. The reclining seats make it much more bearable than an F40; it’s a simple thing but it makes a big difference. However, due to it having

a largely one-off motor based on that from an F1 car, they are reckoned to have a life of approximately 40,000km before they’ll at least need a top-end rebuild. Low mileage affects value.

‘I think the looks have held them back, too. As the values of the other “F cars” have climbed, F50s have been overlooked. However, we have seen a big increase in demand recently but as the number built is low it’s tough to find them! I think it helps that the looks are starting to be accepted as retro, or of the period, which gives the F50 its unique place in supercar history. Plus it’s the last manual Ferrari supercar. That’s pretty significant!’

What strikes you on first contact is the sheer scale of the F50. It’s 76in wide but just 44in high, which makes it appear oddly proportioned. It isn’t classically beautiful, or any other kind of beautiful for that matter, yet the passing of time has made it appear a little less peculiar. For all the criticisms that were levelled at the Lorenzo Ramaciotti-penned styling, it’s infused with the sense of theatre of all true supercars. The F50 has presence to spare, that’s for sure. It also looks much better with the roof panel in place, even though Ramaciotti lobbied for it to be painted black so as to lend the impression of a large glass dome.

Left
F50’s styling was crafted by Lorenzo Ramaciotti and had roots in Pininfarina’s Mythos concept car; underneath are a carefully civilised F1-bred engine and chassis layout.



WHAT COMES NEXT...

Ferrari has revealed some ‘F70’ secrets

THE MARANELLO grapevine is hinting that we’ll finally get to see the new Ferrari ‘Enzo’ (or F70 as some people refer to it) at the Geneva motor show in March (Ferrari will be showing selected potential customers the car during December). Surprisingly for a new Ferrari, we already know quite a lot about it. That’s because the Modenese are keen to show the world that it has an environmental conscience, albeit one that involves a new hybrid drivetrain that can both drop emissions by a claimed 40% and give a decent slug of extra performance.

And what performance that promises to be, thanks to the combination of 800bhp+ from the 6.3-litre V12 engine (based on the same V12 as in the F12 Berlinetta’s but with the ability to rev to a scary-sounding 9000rpm). On top of this firepower, there’ll be another 115bhp available from the hybrid electric-motor-cum-generator mounted at the tail of a seven-speed DCT gearbox and mobilised via one of the clutches within the new HY-KERS hybrid drivetrain.

Ferrari revealed its new carbonfibre chassis tub for next year’s hypercar at October’s Paris show, and the most significant change over the 2002 Enzo’s tub is that the seats are fixed and moulded into the tub itself, in an effort to save weight. To cater for different-sized drivers, both the pedal-box and steering wheel will be fully adjustable and the first owners will have the fixed cushions tailored to their exact requirements when they commission their car.

Ferrari employed its F1 designer Rory Byrne to help develop the new Enzo chassis because of his enormous experience in working with carbonfibre; he reckons 50% of his time in Maranello is now spent on the project.

Using a mix of special carbon-fibres all laid-up by hand, rather than being resin-injected, the tub is a remarkable 20% lighter than the one used on the Enzo, as well as being 27% stiffer in torsion and 20% stronger in compression. Thanks to this new lightweight construction, Ferrari hints that the new car will be very close to the weight of the Enzo, despite the extra weight of the batteries. The result of all this trick technology is that this will be the fastest roadgoing Ferrari ever created. The company bullishly expects to find customers for the 500 cars it plans to build, even though each one will cost around €800,000 – about what an Enzo fetches today. **Harry Metcalfe**



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Step inside and the simply decorated cabin is awash with carbonfibre; even the gearlever is made of the stuff. The digital/analogue instrument binnacle offers all the expected racer reference points, yet you feel at home in here. The floor-hinged, adjustable ally pedals aren’t a stretch away, the Momo wheel is non-movable – but, then, it’s perfectly positioned where it is.

The beautifully crafted cast magnesium pedal box actually came in two sizes, one for up to shoe size seven, and the other for those customers with less dainty feet. You have to adjust the leather buckets manually using an aluminium recline knob (electric items would have added weight and complexity, after all), and you’re obliged to wind your own windows. What is telling is that you don’t feel pinched for space, nor are you forced to contort yourself to an unnatural cant as in other supercars. It’s surprisingly comfortable.

But rubber mats and afterthought stereo aside, there’s little else in here. The mission statement is clear: the F50 was trumpeted by its maker as being capable of delivering ‘the emotion of Formula 1’ for the road and this much is obvious the moment you rotate the ignition key half a turn, thumb the starter button and fire up the 65° V12.

It sounds frantic yet idles at a strangely disconcerting 500rpm. The twin-plate clutch is also far more progressive than you might imagine and, once you’re moving, there isn’t much in the way of chuntering; you don’t awkwardly whoops-a-daisy off the line as in many similar cars.

At relatively low speeds the F50 doesn’t intimidate. With the quad-cam

V12 bolted directly into the tub there is a little vibration, the occasional tremor being transmitted through the structure, but there are few corresponding squeaks or rattles. And then the *really* good bit. There are faster cars, albeit not many, but few deliver such incendiary power and such a devastating shove forward.

All too often cars of this ilk leave you strangely desensitised; fast doesn’t always *feel* fast. Here it does. The longitudinal six-speed ‘box is an absolute joy, being smooth-acting across the gate and perfectly weighted, while the unassisted rack-and-pinion steering is heavy at pottering speeds but sublime when you’re trying that bit harder. And the brakes! There is no servo assistance, but the humungous 14in discs and four-pot Brembo calipers offer massive levels of retardation without any corresponding squirrelling should they be called upon in a hurry.

The thing is, while acceleration is brutal, the actual speed element isn’t really the big draw. There’s no ABS or traction control here, but the F50 feels nimble and confidence-inspiring for its size. It’s been said before that if you can drive a Lotus Elise quickly and competently, then piloting an F50 shouldn’t be a problem. It’s an honest assessment. The revelatory part is how good the ride quality is, the active damping working its magic from the get-go. Each damper is controlled separately and the front end can be temporarily raised by 40mm to clear sleeping policemen. It’s easy to forget this function but, such are the corresponding graunching sounds from the underbelly, it isn’t something you’ll overlook a second time. →





The F50 is a supercar in every sense of the word. It's a machine you want to keep driving. Sure, it doesn't deliver quite the harum-scarum adrenaline hit of its predecessor the F40, but then nothing else does. And it isn't far off.

Nor does it scramble your senses like an Enzo. Instead, it subtly seduces you before pummeling you into submission, should you summon all 513 horses. That V12 powerhouse tingles your spine and revs higher and harder than any comparable Lamborghini unit, but thankfully it comes with a chassis to match.

You don't need to be a driving god to enjoy piloting an F50 at silly speeds. Unlike, say, a 288GTO, you don't feel as though you're teetering on a knife edge at every moment. Colossal grip and beautifully weighted steering play their parts. Yes, to wring absolutely everything out of an F50 you would have to work at it, but this is one of the most intuitive supercars imaginable. The rewards are there for the taking and at some way south of ten-tenths it's easy to drive quickly and safely. Think of it as a bridgehead between the blunt instruments of yore and today's gadget-laden hardware and you will be most of the way there.

Much of the criticism levelled at the F50 back in '95 seemed to be concerned with the fact that, more than anything else, it simply wasn't an F40; that somehow it was a bit too soft to be a true 'F car'. All of which is absolute nonsense – and let's not forget that even the sainted F40 received a kicking from some influential quarters of the media when it was new.

The F50 has the pomp and swagger you crave from something capable of 202mph. This car shouts quality and it shouts it with shiver-inducing intensity. Its time may have passed, but its day has surely come. **End**

THANKS TO James Cottingham of DK Engineering (www.dkeng.co.uk), and Neil Godwin-Stubbert.

FERRARI F50

ENGINE 4698cc V12, DOHC per bank, 60-valve, Bosch Motronic 2.7 fuelling and ignition
POWER 513bhp @ 8000rpm **TORQUE** 327lb ft @ 6500rpm **TRANSMISSION** Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Rack and pinion **SUSPENSION** Front and rear: double wishbones, pushrod-operated coil-over dampers **BRAKES** Vented, cross-drilled discs, Brembo four-pot calipers **WEIGHT** 1350kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 202mph. 0-60mph 3.7sec

