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Low drag Drogo

Ferrari aficionado Martin Hilton always lusted after the exotic Drogo-bodied 250GTO. But when that car was broken up, he did the next best thing; had another created from the original bodyshell. Mark Hughes drove it

There may be Ferraris of greater classic status than the one you see here, but how often have you seen a shape that looks quite so wonderful? Its unique body, the work of little-known coachbuilder Piero Drogo, must make it a candidate for any list of all-time most beautiful cars.

The history of this car is convoluted and fascinating. Drogo designed the body as a facelift for a 250GTO, which its owner intended to run on the road after its racing days were over. A decade later, the car was involved in a crash, then resurrected with a new body to return to its original GTO identity. The damaged Drogo shell gathered dust for many years in the corner of a Modena bodyshop, but eventually – in the hands of current owner Martin Hilton – it came back to life on Ferrari 250GTE running gear, comprehensively upgraded to GTO specification.

"I leaped at the chance four years ago to buy this Drogo body," says Hilton, "because I had desired it from afar ever since I first saw it, way back in 1975. I thought it was one of the most sensual pieces of styling from any Italian coachbuilder. Since then, nothing has changed my mind. Now the car is back on the road, it is a view, I have discovered, shared by many of my fellow Ferrari enthusiasts."

Piero Drogo, an Argentinian, was one of several South Americans, many of Italian descent, who came to Europe in the fifties to be great racing drivers. Some, such as a fellow called Fangio, made it to the top, but Drogo didn't. His name pops up as a co-driver, usually in a Ferrari, in some of the major sports car races of the late fifties, but the nearest he came to a result of distinction was winning the 2-litre class, with seventh place overall, in the 1957 Buenos Aires 1000kms, sharing a four-cylinder Ferrari 500TRC with Julio Pola.

Drogo's place in Ferrari history became properly established in the early sixties when he opened a coachbuilding business, Carrozzeria Sportscars, just across the street from Modena's autodromo in premises now occupied by Micar, the Maserati specialist. Being a small fish in the big pond of Ferrari coach-



Drogo's snout echoes 250GTO, but it's not as brutal



Ferrari badge (top) unnecessary; this car has many marque styling clues (above)

building, he was never commissioned to build bodies on new Ferraris, but instead carved himself a small niche with some distinguished work rebodding out-of-date or crashed cars.

Drogo was never prolific – a best guess puts his output at no more than 30 cars during the sixties – but his work was of the highest quality. When left to his own devices, he invariably produced shapes that were better than the originals, but occasionally there were grim creations when a customer insisted on incorporating ideas of his own. Giotto Bizzarrini, the designer of the GTO and a freelance after his departure from Ferrari, often had a hand in Drogo's designs, while Giorgio Neri and Luciano Bonacini (known as 'Nembo') could deal with the mechanical side in their nearby workshops.

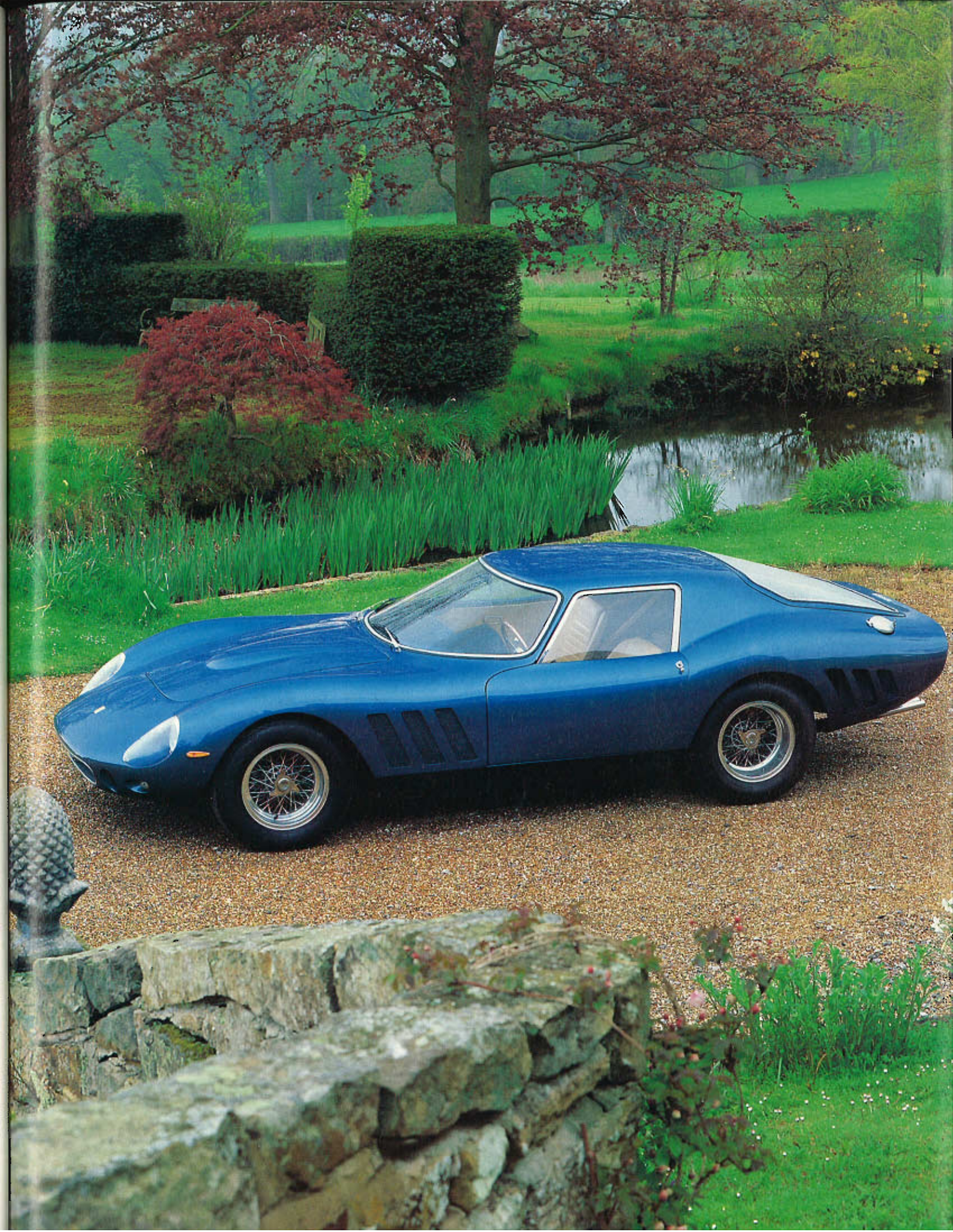
Drogo is often credited with the creation of the 'Breadvan' Ferrari, a rebodied SWB 250GT that raced at Le Mans in 1962 and earned its nickname from its distinctive box-like tail section – but this was not his work. However, two other SWB-based projects, both Bizzarrini-penned shapes that look like sharpened GTOs, were early highlights in Drogo's portfolio.

One began life as the SWB (2735 GT) that Stirling Moss took to five victories in GT races in 1961. This car was later sold to Chris Kerrison, who submitted it for a Drogo rebody after it was involved in a collision with Jim Clark's Aston Martin Zagato and John Surtees' GTO at the 1962 Goodwood TT. Kerrison then illuminated long-distance events for the next couple of seasons.

The donor SWB (2053 GT) for the second car was used by the factory for GTO studies, then reclothed as a *berlinetta* (coupé) and sold to a customer of Jacques Swaters, of Ecurie Francorchamps, under whose banner it was crashed at Spa in 1962. Drogo then gave it an exquisitely lean body, its beauty marred only by the chevron shape of its larger radiator nostrils. The car raced through 1963 with mixed results before being badly damaged at Spa in 1964. The car was subsequently rebuilt and is still around today.

These two Ferrari specials were such a good advertisement for Carrozzeria Sports

PETER ROBAIN





So close to the real thing, but this car sits on a shortened chassis with GTO-spec motor

-cars, that many Ferrari owners with pensioned-off racers or elderly road cars knocked on Drogo's door for an automotive revamp. Drogo's enterprise did well through the mid-sixties, Bizzarrini's frequent contribution on the design side undoubtedly enhancing its reputation. All manner of Ferrari chassis, from 250GTes to a North American Racing Team P3, received the Drogo touch – as well as a single Jaguar E-type.

By all accounts Drogo was a charismatic, cigar-smoking character who was good at drumming up business, but who also insisted on a quality of workmanship rare among the other Carrozzeria, large and small, operating in Italy at the time. Perhaps his extrovert style was his undoing, for he was killed in a Ferrari Spyder California on his way home from a party in Rome. Drogo's widow, a Modena nurse, later married Lamborghini engineer Bob Wallace, who now runs a Ferrari shop in Phoenix, Arizona.

To many admirers of Drogo's work, the body you see here is rightly regarded as one of his best. It is so sensitively proportioned and delicately curved that it looks gorgeous from all angles, but is particularly beautiful from a rear three-quarter view. Certain styling elements, like the large rear window and sharply tucked-in sills, look like Bizzarrini trademarks, while traces of contemporary Ferrari design – the roofline of an LM, the air vents of a '64 GTO – can be seen in the shape.

This masterpiece was created for the GTO that Swedish driver Ulf Norinder raced extensively around Europe. Forget today's stratospheric GTO values: in 1965, when Norinder took his car to Drogo, a GTO was just a redundant racing car, but one that could at least be driven on the road. Norinder asked Drogo to refine his GTO, chassis 3445, into a truly usable road car with unique lines.

The cabin was trimmed in leather, laid with good quality carpet and padded with a reasonable degree of sound-proofing to subdue the GTO's famously raucous sound. Adding a good practical touch, Drogo gave the body a hinged rear window for easy access to the carpeted luggage platform, spare wheel and fuel and oil fillers.

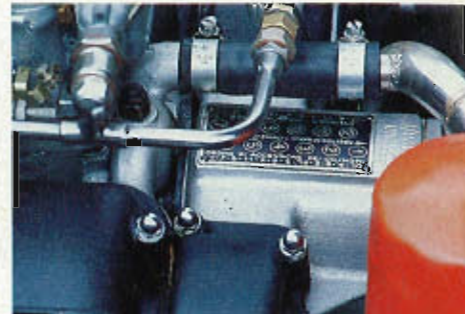
Norinder used the car, painted midnight blue, on the road in this form before selling it to Robs Lamplough, then a fellow Formula 5000 driver, in the late sixties. During Lamplough's ownership, Hilton, a long-time Ferrari enthusiast from Sussex, first saw the car in the flesh and fell in love with its shape. Hilton's passion for Ferraris began in the early seventies with a secondhand 275GTB bought for £3750, but the car he really wanted was a GTO. He turned down the GTO that Nick Mason now owns when it was offered at £16,000: "About twice what I could really afford," but soon after, in 1975, tried hard to buy Lamplough's Drogo GTO when it came up at £18,000. He couldn't quite make it financially...

Had Hilton's bank manager been a little more reckless, the history of this car would have been very different. Lamplough was demonstrating it to a prospective purchaser in High Wycombe when a Vauxhall shot out of a side road and whacked it hard in the side, severely damaging the left front quarter.

The damaged car languished for a while until Lamplough located a suitable Italian bodyshop, Modena's Carrozzeria Allegretti, to repair it. Allegretti was the ideal choice, for



Interior, in cream leather and carpet, is more luxurious than GTO, with soundproofing



...six Webers help it to 285bhp

Mauro Allegretti (father of current proprietor Stefano) had been the senior panelbeater at Fantuzzi, next door to Drogo's shop. While with Fantuzzi, he almost certainly worked on some of Drogo's creations.

At this stage, however, Lamplough took the decision to have the car rebodied in its original '62 GTO form. The sad-looking Drogo shell was neatly removed and stored in a corner at Allegretti's premises, where it remained until four years ago. Lamplough had a notion to repair the body and fit it to a SWB chassis, but never got round to it.

Although Hilton knew nothing of the Drogo body's whereabouts after the GTO escaped him, Ian Webb, a Drogo aficionado who is

now Hilton's business partner, had been keeping an eye on it in the hope that he might one day buy the wreck from Lamplough. Already the owner of the ex-Kerrison Drogo body, Webb had an ambition to make the Norinder body his second Drogo project. Eventually Webb completed a deal with Lamplough and arranged for the body to be brought back to England, only to give in to gentle persuasion from Hilton to sell.

Once a suitable Ferrari, a '62 250GTE, had been located to carry this wonderful body, Hilton entrusted the work of producing a running car to highly-regarded Ferrari specialist Terry Hoyle. What has resulted is not a Drogo-bodied GTO. But it is a full-blooded

Ferrari that is very close to GTO specification, identical to its ancestor in spirit, and blessed with an authentic Drogo body. Hilton's car, a most worthy clone, has been built up as the best means of preserving a fascinating offshoot of Ferrari history.

Hoyle modified the GTE chassis to GTO specification by shortening it to the correct 2400mm (94in) wheelbase, adding the appropriate bracing, and building the space-frame-like body frame in the same manner as Drogo would have done. Suspension fore and aft is to GTO pattern: only spring rates were changed at the front, while rear location is now by Watt linkage and radius arms.

Bob Ford repaired the body, using as much



Drogo car is most beautiful from rear threequarter view, with its elegant, upswept haunches



Opening rear hatch adds a practical touch, although most space is taken up by the upholstered spare wheel. Two fillers are for fuel and oil

original aluminium as possible, observing, says Hilton, how well-made this structure was compared to the work of most Italian coachbuilders. Original photographs, some the work of the late Pete Coltrin, the talented Modena-based photographer, were used to recreate the car's interior and the badly damaged sections of the body.

Hoyle comprehensively reworked the GTE's 3-litre V12 engine to produce a unit very close to GTO specification: enlarged valves, needle roller rockers, GTO profile camshafts, ported heads, six Weber 40DCN carburettors (instead of three down-draughts), high compression pistons, polished rods, balanced bottom end and dry sump lubrication, with the oil tank in the boot. Around 285bhp, only 10bhp short of the figure usually claimed for an original GTO engine, has been seen on the dyno.

The gearbox is a newly-manufactured all-alloy five-speed GTO unit, driving through a rear axle altered to a more suitable ratio. Since the car was finished, the axle ratio has been raised, to permit less frenetic cruising.

Hilton is a great user of the cars in his

stable, which includes a distinguished Bentley – the 3-litre that took the first of five Le Mans wins for the British marque, in 1924. He has driven the Drogo extensively, most enjoyably on travels around France, first with the V12 Register of the Ferrari Owners' Club and, more recently, with Club Ferrari France. On the latter trip, the car performed superbly in nearly 3000 miles of motoring in six days, and won the Trophée Charles Pozzi for the best rebuild of the year.

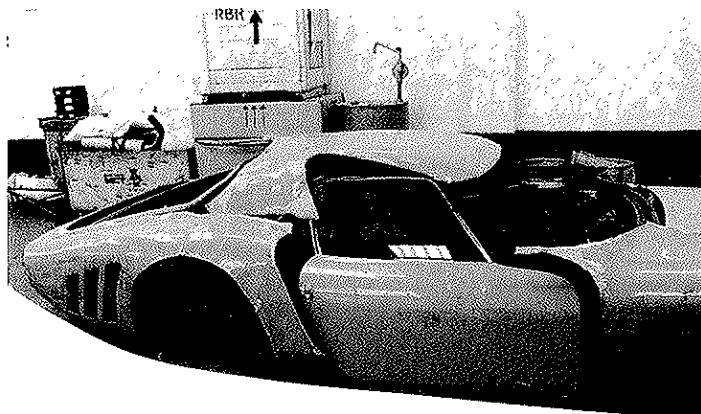
Apart from the Drogo's fantastic performance, Hilton's main impression of the car is that it's "gloriously noisy". My run in the car around Sussex lanes confirmed that. Layers of exhaust, valve gear and intake noise create a delicious cacophony that drowns conversation and intensifies the sensation of speed. There's no speedometer, but subjective impressions are enough to be sure that top speed is higher than 150mph, while performance figures on genuine GTOs – including 0-60mph in the sub-6sec bracket – have shown that acceleration is the equal of modern supercars.

But a GTO's greatest quality, sung in so

many hymns to the car, is its sublime handling. Hilton's dexterity through a few favourite bends revealed the Drogo's exquisite poise. Strong braking, crisp turn-in, communicative steering, instant throttle response and perfect power-on balance blend into a superbly deft whole, allowing effortless artistry at the wheel. No other car is quite like it.

Apart from its noise and lack of passenger legroom, the Drogo makes a surprisingly practical road car. It's easy to see out of the glassy cabin, the furnishings are tasteful and comfortable, the controls are meaty but not too heavy, ride quality is very tolerable, and the rear deck can take several squashy bags around the spare wheel.

Much to Hilton's regret, the Drogo will soon be on its way to a new home, for it is one of the star lots at the upcoming Coys auction at the Nürburgring. Once the owner of a genuine 330GTO, Hilton is building a replica Nembo Spyder – using the original team, headed by Giorgio Neri – with the 4-litre V12 running gear he has longed for since the 330GTO was sold, and he and the Drogo must part to pay for it.



This was the damaged body as found in Carrozzeria Allegratti's workshops, after removal from Lamplough's GTO

Ferrari craftsman Terry Hoyle had to make a new body frame, while Bob Ford recreated the missing sections of alloy

