

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

OCTOBER 2000

£3.40

Amazing Ace

AC's sublime roadster vs
its BMW 328 forefather



Austria 10S Asch Belgium 245BF
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MG MAGNETTES
Irresistible attraction



MORGAN vs TVR vs TR8
Rover V8 shootout



FERRARI 250GTE
An overlooked beauty



Prime cut

Richard Heseltine gorges on a Ferrari 250GTE feast,
so often butchered for fake GTOs and SWBs





It sits there on the sunlit cobbles, brooding with an air of rapacious stillness. Emotional ambrosia and such bliss to look at: you cannot resist stroking the wing line with the back of your hand before going for the delicate door handle. Step aboard and it's equally tactile: a shrine to pleasure and style with soft, fragrant leather and handsome Nardi wheel. Turn the key and there's a distant ticking from the auxiliary fuel pump. Prime the carbs a little, press the blue button and wait half a second. Then the music starts. Wispy puffs of smoke gush out of the four tail pipes, road dust duly dancing in their wake. A few more revs send an oceanic shiver down your spine as the 250GTE's V12 awakens from its slumber. The call of the wild.

Easing your way through the urban decay, past long-dormant red brick monoliths – there must be a main road here somewhere – your heart sinks on reaching civilisation. And traf-

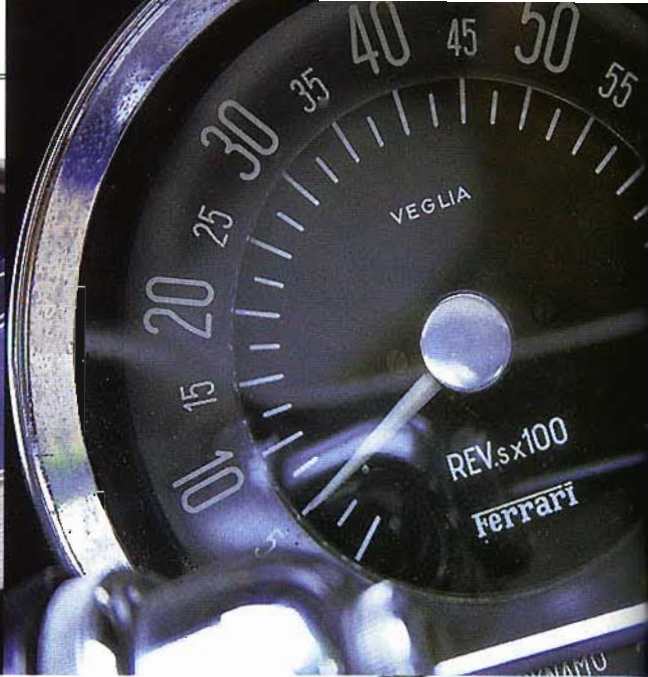


fic. Displaying a bovine lack of intelligence, a van driver's considerably blocked all means of escape by driving across the Keep Clear division. Then the lights change. A little gas and a lot of noise causes heads to turn, onlookers torn between respect and dismay. But you're away, albeit slowly, among the hordes of amorphous hatchbacks and battered Transits. Half a mile of stop-start crawling and the chrome-capped temperature gauge hasn't even flickered.

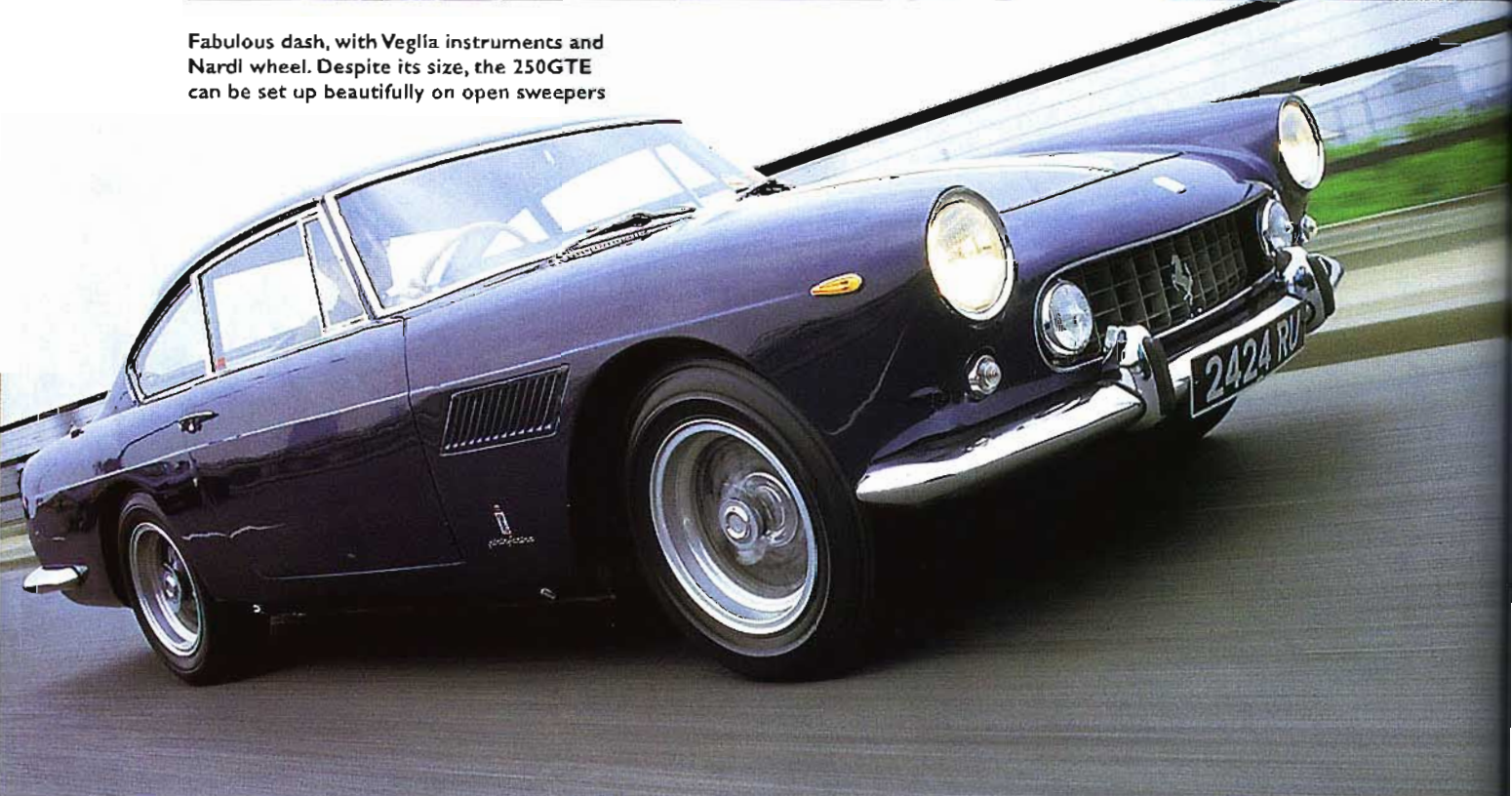
And then there's a gap. And a tunnel. Wind down the window, eager in anticipation of the impending aural onslaught. Grabbing second at four grand, you're rewarded with a highly effective pulse quickener: an engine note that runs the entire sonic range from low bass growl to lycanthropic howl. Grabbing third on the wide gate as great swathes of sound bounce off the wall, it's becoming increasingly difficult to lose the fixed grin that's snuck up on you.

But all too soon the fun's over. More traffic.

DAVID SHEPHERD



Fabulous dash, with Veglia instruments and Nardi wheel. Despite its size, the 250GTE can be set up beautifully on open sweepers



Stationary, it's time to bask in the admiring glances and ponder why so many of these cars have been cut up. Yes, that's right: cut up. Hard to believe, but over the past 20 years more than 100 of these exceptionally elegant machines have been skinned, gutted, sliced 'n' diced to form the basis for *fina* GTOs and fake SWBs. It's a bit like returning a Monet to bare canvas before letting rip with the 'action painting' because you fancy a Jackson Pollock spatterfest. While this everyman Ferrari will never wear the gravitas of its more exalted, competition-bred siblings, it's surely an act of sacrilege to take a cutting torch to something so beautiful. Surely it would damage your soul?

Apparently not; this slaughter continues unabated because GTEs have always been cheapish cannon fodder for venal, grasping replicators. It's simple market economics. Buy a healthy if slightly baggy example for peanuts and knock out a lookalike racer for six figures.





Ferrari 250GTE

FACTFILE AND PRICES

Engine 2953cc sohc per bank V12, fed by three Weber carburettors

Transmission four-speed all synchro 'box

Chassis tubular steel with steel bodywork

Suspension front: independent by wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar; rear: live axle, leaf springs, radius arms, telescopic dampers

Brakes servo-assisted discs all round

Steering worm and peg

Max power 235bhp @ 7000rpm

Torque 180lb ft @ 5000rpm Top speed 136mph

Length 14ft 1.5in Width 5ft 6in

Price new £5605 16s 3d Now £30,000 (average)

The owner's love affair

"I had an E-type which was a wonderful car: I used to tow my Mini racer with it," recalls arch GTE enthusiast Tony Bernstein. "Then I got married and the kids came along so I was, er, persuaded to get rid of it. But I needed to drive something special so splashed out on the Ferrari. That was 12 years



ago and I'm still in love with it." Sharing garage space with a Maserati Bora, Tony's beautifully mellowed machine is mechanically perfect but he's resisted titivating the bodywork, preferring it "as it is". So how does he view the GTE slaughter? "It's a shame as these are such wonderful cars to drive and surprisingly practical. But they're not that economical to own or restore, which keeps prices down. Sadly, it seems they'll always be worth more to replica builders than to real enthusiasts."

There remains the suspicion that even the most hardened of axe-wielding artisans will have a twinge of regret, however slight, chopping up such a vision of loveliness.

And a 250GTE is quite lovely. While Ferrari's recent output is undoubtedly popular with A-level candidates and balding 'n' bouffanted 40-somethings, this is a car for the connoisseur: someone who truly appreciates beauty. It effortlessly marries demure sophistication with a ready-for-anything swagger that, if anything, sends out conflicting messages. It's almost saying 'nothing to see here' while simultaneously screaming 'look at me!' But from that simple egg-crate grille to the perfectly realised rump, there's nothing superficial or gimmickled. During its short production life (1960-'63), the GTE's silhouette remained largely unaltered and, even now, looks vaguely contemporary in an old-fashioned kind of way.

Less so inside, although this has to be one of

'Grabbing second at four grand, you're rewarded with an engine note that runs the range from bass growl to lycanthropic howl'

the most inviting cabins ever: a blend of chic and opulence. The wide seats appear flat but offer welcome lower back support, the leather smooth and supple. Ahead sits a bank of glitzy, chrome-bezelled instruments – perhaps a nod to the lucrative Stateside market – and that trademark wood-rim wheel. It's a genuine four-seater too, with decent legroom front and rear. There's nothing ostentatious, just an almost overwhelming sense of luxury.

The heart of any Ferrari is its engine and the GTE's is a visual and acoustic delight. Naturally it's a V12, with an overhead cam per bank and a capacity just shy of 3 litres. Maranello's recent '12s' may be emasculated by emission controls, but this triple-Webered jewel screams its heart out. It lacks the torque of an Aston straight-six but more than makes up for this deficiency in revs. And that noise – around 6k it's as if a million chords are fighting each other for your attention – makes a modern 456 sound about as seductive as an 0800 sex line.

The controls, too, are effortless. Everything's perfectly weighted. The clutch is light with long pedal travel, gearlever action positive as long as you're firm. Somehow you expect to be applying armfuls of lock for the slightest directional change but you don't, and the worm-and-peg steering is light. And this helps when you're pressing on as the GTE's on the lardy side, abusing the scales at around 2800lb.