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Ferrari 250 GTE

Story by Andy Heywood / Photography by Michael Ward

Totale Originale



There is an old Hot Rodder's adage which states, 'Anyone can restore a car, but it takes a real man to cut one up'. Yet in the case of the Ferrari 250GTE, it would appear that the opposite is true. For many years, removal, rather than restoration, of that elegant Pininfarina bodywork has been the order of the day and the GTE population has declined under the knife of pretenders in search of a faux GTO.

It's all about that classic engine, the 3.0-litre 60° V12 with single overhead camshaft per bank, which became the mechanical staple of Ferrari production for a decade from the mid '50s. Its '250' classification, named in customary Ferrari fashion after the capacity of each single cylinder, prefixed some of what are now regarded as the ultimate blue chip prancing horses. Tour de France, Lusso, California and, of course, the aforementioned GTO.

But while it's easy to see why a comparatively valueless GTE should go under the knife to make way for another imitation, how – if it is so mechanically similar – did the GTE lose its value in the first place? Sadly, it suffers from the kiss of death to ageing Italian exotica – it has four seats. Nothing is guaranteed to knock zeros off the bottom line faster than space for an extra pair of bottoms. Today it is the 456GT, before that the 400 series and way before that, it was the GTE – the first four-seater Ferrari.

Until the GTE arrived, Ferrari rear seats could be euphemistically described as vestigial. Scant apologies that could only be used by babies or contortionists but as the company built more and more production-oriented vehicles, the prospect of pleasing all of the family could no longer be ignored. They were worried about the effect it may have on their image. However, as beautifully summed up in Antoine Prunet's *Ferrari Road Cars*: 'Would not the basic nature of the ensemble be altered in appearance? Would not a grave imbalance be created that would injure both the vehicle's performance and its aesthetics?' Absolutely.

So Ferrari turned to Pininfarina, the Prince of Packaging, to get him off the hook and the result was launched in 1960 as the 250GT 2+2. Ferrari chose a unique way to launch the car. A prototype example was loaned to the Course Director during the 1960 Le Mans race. No doubt slightly uneasy about a cold motor show debut, they were keen to maintain the link between Ferrari road cars and racing cars.

It was true that the GT 2+2 or GTE, as it became known, was as far away from a racing car as Ferrari had then strayed. While glamorous in the extreme, Pininfarina had gone for a look of restrained elegance in the hope of attracting owners with breeding (or indeed, who were breeding). In some ways, it could easily have been a Maserati except, of course, for that V12 engine.

In GTE guise the V12 produced 240bhp at 7000rpm and used three Weber 36DCL carburetors. Mounted behind the engine was a four-speed gearbox with overdrive on top. In order to get the necessarily long engine and rear legroom into the same package without lengthening the wheelbase of the proprietary 250GT chassis, the engine was moved 20cm forward in the bay. That, and the extra weight of a larger body (Ferrari quoted a somewhat optimistic dry weight of 1280kg), had a detrimental effect on the handling of the car when compared with its more competition-biased brethren.

Comparisons like that are unfair. The GTE never set out to compete for anything other than buyers' affections and, in that regard, it was a very successful car for Ferrari. Over 950 examples were built between late 1960 and 1963, which at the time was the highest production figure for any single Ferrari model. It was superseded by the 330 America, which was bodily similar and although this was in itself an interim model, it used the new 4.0-litre engine that would see Ferrari through the '60s.

Popularity when new meant that the supply of GTEs on the secondhand market was high, which meant that would allow values to drop

ONE CAR THAT HAS
ESCAPED DONATING
ITS BODY PARTS TO THE
REPLICA GTO MARKET

Ferrari 250GTE



And then there were the running costs, which like any V12 Ferrari were prodigious. As values decrease, owners become more reluctant to pay the costs and condition goes down. There begins the vicious circle. And as merely secondhand gives way to classic, practicality literally takes a back seat. An enthusiast looking for a Ferrari for the weekend already owns more practical vehicles and is therefore less likely to choose the larger, more unwieldy coupe with the rear seats, especially when the cost of ownership is the same as with something more overtly exotic.

If you are now wondering who in their right mind would run a 250GTE, meet Tony Bernstein. His right-hand drive example featured here is one of a handful of original UK imports and has been in the family for 20 years. For him, the GTE embodies old-school Ferrari. It goes about its business

FAR RIGHT: This GTE has been owned by the same family for the last 20 years
BELOW: Bournemouth registration indicates an original Maranello import

without the constant reference to wealth that has soured some to the marque, yet every drive with the V12 is as exciting as the first, something that Tony was keen to let me find out for myself.

Initially, it is all about the noise. The controls have all fallen logically and surprisingly ergonomically to hand, the clutch and steering pressures are not too high, though the steering is very low-g geared as a result and the gearbox selects first with little drama. Just pull away, though, and you are already aware that the engine is the heart of this car, dictating its whole character. There is such keenness to rev, such sweet mechanical noises emanating from the engine bay and such a distinctive howl from the exhausts as soon as the revs rise.

The narrow route to our photo location provides little opportunity to test the performance, but it gives a good impression of the handling. For such a large car, the GTE is ↪





Ferrari 250GTE



ABOVE: Like most four-seater Ferraris, the 250 GTE is not highly valued
LEFT: Classic front-engined V12 for less than £30k could be tempting



surprisingly pliable on country lanes. Sharp, almost, as long as you relearn the need to actually move the steering wheel, rather than think it round. With four-wheel disc brakes, it gives confidence in the stopping department as well. It also behaves impeccably while being shunted around for the inevitable sweet spot on the photographer's lens, displaying none of the ill-mannered temperament one has been led to expect. It really is a practical Ferrari.

With my appetite truly whetted and the photos completed, we go in search of one of my favourite roads. It is a stretch I know very well and have driven along in a huge number of different cars. When the throttle opens fully for the first time, Tony senses my slight disappointment at the lack of go. "It's all at the top end," he says while grinning. He knows what to expect and as I keep my foot planted, the noise builds maniacally until at 5000rpm it really starts to go. Not surprising as I later find out that maximum torque of only 193lb ft is not reached until that figure.

Up to third and back on the gas before lifting for a long sweeping corner, the engine cackles on the overrun and I realise that like most cars from this era, I need to be back on the gas again well before the corner to maintain composure. It remains neutral through most of the corner but with a hint of building understeer, easily dialled out with a little more throttle. It really is an old-school Ferrari – with old-school handling.

The only problem is that while I am waxing lyrical about understeer and turn-in, the best standard Ford Focus behind

me is still on our tail. We're not going that fast by modern standards. In fact, the only way to get rid of him is to plant the throttle once more and lose him in a swirl of unburnt hydrocarbons. Ferrari claimed a top speed of 157mph for the GTE if the longest axle ratio had been specified, or 125mph on the short axle. This car feels as though it has the lower ratio which makes it great fun to hustle around unobtrusively. And what if it does need lots of revs to get the best from the engine? The aural payback more than makes up for it.

I really enjoyed my time with this car. It appeals in so many ways but mostly as an eccentric choice for Ferrari folk. It ticks all the boxes in engineering terms but maintains a coolness that the red wedge brigade have somehow lost in recent years. It also says a lot about you as an owner. You clearly have a sophisticated understanding of the marque for its core values. Also you have taken the moral high ground, eschewing fakery and the lure of filthy lucre but, most of all, that contrary to the Hot Rodder's gospel, you are the real man. **al**



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Engine:	V12
Capacity:	2953cc
Bore and stroke:	73mm x 58.8mm
Compression ratio:	8.8:1
Max power:	240bhp @ 7000rpm
Carburation:	3 Weber 40DCL6
Top speed:	217km/h
Wheelbase:	2600mm
Weight:	1280kg