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190mph shootout

Wild Ferrari 288GTO and Porsche 959 go head to head



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MONSTER MATCH



Can Ferrari's wild 288 GTO compete with Porsche's techno masterpiece 959 in the ultimate supercar shootout? Alastair Clements joins the 200mph club



A split-second after entering the corner comes the realisation. Just as you're revelling in the sensation of turn-in that's sharper than a paper cut it dawns that perhaps you're carrying 20mph more than you meant to and the corner is tightening. No time to think as weight floods into the Momo wheel, focusing the mind and working the shoulders, and you strain to keep the gently understeering nose pointing at the apex, gingerly feeding the power back in as the corner radius increases. No need to worry: grip is massive and the chassis beautifully balanced. Wheels straight, hammer down and the sparse cabin fills with painful, senseless noise as both turbos come on line and 400 horses light the 255/50ZR16 rear tyres. A little squirm then they bite and the world goes out of focus as the scarlet missile slingshots towards the next bend. This is everything a supercar should be: reality-bending speed, all-encompassing dynamics, thrilling and just a little terrifying. This is the Ferrari 288 GTO.

Just a look is enough to confirm the GTO as the definition of supercar. The delicate composite shell seems to have more vents and scoops than panelwork, but sits low over butch Speedline split-rim alloy wheels, menacing from the front, memorable from behind - you'll know what overtook you. Today it sits

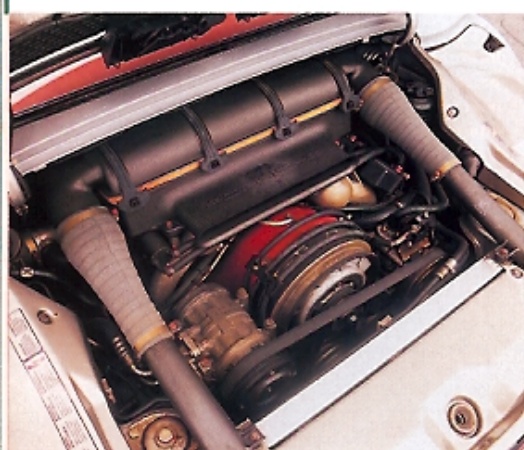
in the shadow of the very car it gave rise to, but the 288 is all the better for its pumped-up road car styling, which makes it still one of Pininfarina's horniest designs - more achingly desirable than the F40's race car caricature.

And what of the Porsche 959? The technological foil to the 288's pure animal urge, the 959 took the GTO's crown as fastest production car and forced Ferrari to go back to the drawing board to create the F40. Yet its unconventional approach puts it out in the cold. With its flat-six slung behind the back axle line and powering all four wheels, its reputation is marred by its very ability, scorned as too refined, too civilised to be allowed into the *bona fide* boys' club dominated by the products of Maranello and Sant'Agata.

Park the two together and you can almost sympathise. The 288's silhouette is certainly similar to the 308 on whose tubular chassis it is based, albeit loosely, and Pininfarina stylist Leonardo Fioravanti developed the shape from the 1977 *Millecibodi* (thousand rivets) 308GTB Speciale aerodynamic design study. But only the 308's front

Inset (l-r): evocative omologato letters; neat exit for KKK intercooler matches intake forward of rear wheel; trio of slashes in Ferrari's tail harks back to original '60s GTO





FACTFILES

1984 FERRARI 288 GTO

Produced/no built

1984-'87/272

Engine all-alloy watercooled dual overhead cam per bank 32-valve 2855cc 90 deg V8 with two IHI turbochargers, Behr intercoolers and Weber-Marelli fuel injection

Transmission five-speed manual ZF transaxle, driving rear wheels via limited slip differential

Chassis/body tubular steel chassis with composite rear bulkhead and glassfibre/composite bodyshell with aluminium doors

Suspension independent all round, by double wishbones, coil springs, Koni telescopic dampers, anti-roll bars

Brakes ventilated discs all round, with servo

Steering rack and pinion

Length 14ft 1in **Width** 6ft 3 7/8in

Height 3ft 8in **Weight** 2558lb

Max power 400bhp @ 7000rpm

Max torque 366lb ft @ 3800rpm

0-60mph 4.8 secs **0-100mph** 10.2 secs

Top speed 189.5mph

Price new £75,000 (1984)

Price now £130-170,000

1988 PORSCHE 959

Produced/no built 1987-'88/283

Engine all-alloy dual overhead cam per bank 24-valve 2849cc flat-six, with aircooled block and watercooled heads, two sequential KKK turbochargers and Bosch fuel injection

Transmission six-speed manual transaxle, intelligent four-wheel drive

Chassis/body steel monocoque with composite bodyshell and aluminium and polyurethane panels

Suspension independent all round, by double wishbones, coil springs, dual telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar

Brakes ventilated, cross-drilled discs all round with servo and variable ABS

Steering rack and pinion

Length 13ft 11in **Width** 6ft

Height 4ft 2in **Weight** 2980lb

Max power 450bhp @ 6500rpm

Max torque 369lb ft @ 5000rpm

0-60mph 3.7 secs **0-100mph** 8.8 secs

Top speed 197mph

Price new £140,000 (1987)

Price now £90-130,000

screen and doors are retained and outrageous detailing sets it firmly in fantasy. Which other car would work so well with its ZF transaxle hanging out the back or huge mirrors sticking up on stalks, Group C style, from the doors?

The 959 is beautifully sculpted, yet seems almost anonymous by comparison. Constant parallels with the 911 are unavoidable: take off that carry-handle at the back and it looks like a glorified 964, yet the only parts they share are the tail lights. Even the glazing is bespoke – and a replacement windscreen will cost you a staggering £5000. Despite having appeared at the Frankfurt Auto Show – as the *Gruppe B* design study – a year before the Ferrari's 1984 Geneva Salon unveiling, the handbuilt German coupé remains the fresher and more coherent shape today. The smooth lines are punctured by carefully resolved intakes and exits, with scoops and channels, and a flat floor panel to harness airflow over and under the car. That distinctive tail is a perfect example of function creating beautiful form as the carefully considered junction of curves create a shape seemingly whittled by the wind it is trying to control. Even the delicate – if useless – teardrop mirrors are styled to avoid interrupting airflow. And the designers' efforts were not in vain: the 959 carves the air with a drag coefficient of just 0.31 against the fussy Ferrari's 0.38. Only the clumsy rubber-tipped jacking points in the middle of the sills spoil the shape.

Move inside and the disparity increases. The 288 is almost plush compared to its spartan F40 successor – particularly when specified with the optional powered windows and aircon – but, despite decent visibility, its oppressively black cab-forward cockpit has the claustrophobic feel of a Le Mans prototype. A bulge between the seats in the Kevlar and aluminium honeycomb rear bulkhead betrays the location of the compact V8, mounted longitudinally instead of transversely as in the 308 to shift mass forward in search of optimum weight distribution



Above (l-r): clinical 959 engine bay conceals clever internals; perfect aerodynamics give zero-lift; massive intercoolers dominate 288 unit. **Far left:** '77 PF Millechiodi concept

and to accommodate the transaxle behind.

Both cars have supremely comfortable seats, the Ferrari's cycled leather-covered Kevlar buckets comparing favourably with the fabulously supportive Porsche highchairs. But after the understated exterior, this 959's unique cabin comes as a shock. Retrimmed by the factory in CanCan red leather, it's like stepping into a *boudoir* at the Playboy Mansion, though its solidity and quality are a revelation compared to the flimsy Ferrari – the thunk of the door shuts would shame Volkswagen's finest.

It may feel like a 911: unorthodox upright driving position with feet resting on floor-hinged pedals, yet once again the 959 shares nothing with its lesser sibling – even the familiar vertical wheel is bespoke. 'Comfort' spec, an almost anarchic label for a supercar, included a surprisingly usable set of rear seats along with extra sound deadening, aircon and various electric toys. Rarer 'Sport' models (only six were made) lost the rear seats and gadgetry along with the passenger side mirror on a crash diet that shed 220lb from the Porsche's mass. Both specifications feature the most complex dashboard this side of NASA mission control. You sense that there must be some sort of super-computer nestling in that front boot to regulate the various dials, gauges and switches that do everything from showing you the quantity of torque going through each wheel to controlling ride height and damper stiffness. Somewhat at odds with all this technology is the smell of glue that would be more familiar to TVR owners, a legacy of tacking trim to a composite tub that would be weakened by mechanical fixings.

What's fascinating is how two cars, so similar in ground-covering ability, can behave so differently. First impressions on the road only serve to reinforce marque stereotypes. Once you've stabbed the throttle a couple of times and fingered the push-button starter, the temperamental Italian thoroughbred spits and grumbles at being woken from its slumber.



WINNING NUMBERS

It's no coincidence that the 288 revived Ferrari's legendary GTO tag, which signifies Gran Turismo Omologato, for it, like the 959, was intended from the outset to earn its keep in competition. Both were developed to contest rallying's infamous Group B formula, which required each car to be homologated with 200 road cars built in 12 months.

The lower cost of production car-based competition rather than prototypes tempted Ferrari back into sports car racing – particularly as it offered a lucrative roadgoing spin-off. Using the 308's compact V8 as a basis, the Maranello men shortened the stroke from 81 to 80mm, keeping the same 71mm bore, to give 2855cc. The unit could then be turbocharged and still qualify for the four-litre class (multiplied by the 1.4 equivalency factor, its capacity was 3997cc). But Ferrari had more up its sleeve: the circuit racing regs allowed an even more extreme variant that could be homologated with just 20 examples and, working with dealer Michelotto of Padua, which



Clockwise, from above: Paris-Dakar 959s; F40; 961 at Le Mans, *Evoluzione*

also rallied 308s, it came up with the fabulous 288GTO *Evoluzione*. Aerodynamic composite bodywork hid a chassis further stiffened by a carbon-fibre central tub and additional bracing, while tuning unleashed a storming 650bhp from the quad-cam V8.

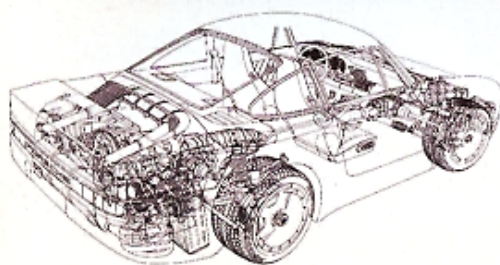
Yet time ran out for the *Evoluzione* before it had even started. Increasing fears over safety prompted FISA to ban Group B at the end of the 1986

season and the Ferrari was never raced seriously. The focus of the *Evoluzione* project shifted into creating the ultimate road car to celebrate Ferrari's 40th birthday. In 1987 it arrived as the F40, sharing the GTO's central tub and turbocharged V8 power unit.

Porsche's Group B contender at least tasted success and, if the car had been ready to compete soon after the Gruppe B design study was unveiled in 1983, it could have

ruled the roost. Porsche decided not to create an Evolution car, but a 959 variant, tagged 961, ran at Le Mans in 1986 and '87 to IMSA GTX regs. With 680bhp, the 961 did 207mph down the Mulsanne and held together in '86 to finish an impressive seventh, winning the Group B class.

But it was off the track that the 959 excelled. Developed in partnership with Dave Richards Motorsport, which would later become Prodrive, the 959 was a serious contender – thanks to power ranging from 450-600bhp depending on boost and exceptional traction from its intelligent four-wheel-drive system. A fledgling version of the drivetrain was developed under the 911 3.2 that won the 1984 Paris-Dakar, but a year on the 959 proper was on the top step of the podium with a win in the Pharoahs Rally. More silverware for the team, led by Jacky Ickx, followed in 1986 as it took victory in the Mille Pistes Rally plus first, second and sixth in the Paris-Dakar.



Clockwise, from top left: tyres can run flat on hollow Porsche alloys; showy Speedline split rims for Ferrari; 959 dash shows percentage of drive to front and rear; its graceful if useless mirrors; clumsy but effective on 288; huge complexity of 959

bogging down and baulking until properly warmed up. The Porsche displays none of these histrionics: as docile and easy to drive as a Nissan Micra, it sits smugly with a purring tick-over, engine clattering gently to itself as it boots up its various systems.

Michele Alboreto described the 288 as "a dressed-up F1", and he wasn't kidding. As a raw expression of pure speed it has few rivals. But when you first let in the aggressive twin-plate Borg & Beck clutch and kangaroo on to the road, it doesn't initially intimidate. The ZF dog-leg "box improves with every change as the oil warms and it sits surprisingly high, translating into a fine compromise between ride and handling. Its composure is magnificent – even on a bumpy lane.

But the fear sets in as soon as you think you've got the hang of it. Lag is impressively well suppressed considering this was only Ferrari's second turbocharged road car – after the tax-break 208 – and there's lots of low-down performance thanks to 0.65 of the 0.8 bar maximum boost being available from as little as 2500rpm. When launched the GTO was the fastest production Ferrari. Its 2.8-litre 8-cylinder engine – hence the name – was derived from the 268C unit that powered the Lancia LC2 Group C racer and offers an intimidating 330bhp/ton. The full force of that 400bhp twin-turbo delivery is savage: you soon learn to keep an eye on the central Veglia boost gauge to prepare yourself for the ensuing neck muscle workout. Yet it's not just a great engine. Adding 4.3in to the 308's wheelbase, plus some serious extra stiffening, produced a chassis that's simply sublime. Dry grip is outrageous and that little Momo wheel offers lightning response, with lots of weight but fabulous mid-corner feedback to give utter confidence, though the big tyres tend to pick up and track road imperfections.

First blood to the Prancing Horse in this clash of the titans, but give the 959 a chance and it soon stamps its authority on the feisty Italian.

History would have it that it's merely a quick 911 but, without taking too much away from Porsche's keystone model, it's so much more. The 962-derived flat-six is a gem, with aircooled cylinders to appease Porsche purists and watercooled heads to confuse them, plus dry sump lubrication and exceptionally clever turbo trickery to ensure a constant, lag-free flow of power throughout the rev range.

Plant the throttle from walking pace and the first turbo is on-line immediately, kicking in at 1800rpm with the exhaust gases of all six cylinders ensuring optimum boost and all the surge of a 911 turbo. But keep your toe in and something magical happens as the revs rise. Crest 4300rpm and the gases of one bank are diverted to the second KKK turbo to give an unexpected and awe-inspiring burst of power that sends the Porsche surging for the redline and the next delightful rod-operated gearchange. For the accompaniment, the boxer provides a compelling bass growl – it's as if you can hear the hooves of all 450 horses as they break into a gallop and it's far more musical than the ear-damaging blare of the Ferrari.

Light steering is pleasantly communicative, if a little dead just off-centre after the GTO, but incredibly precise once into a bend. Curiously, it contributes to the Porsche feeling like the lighter car, despite weighing a hefty 400lb more thanks to its complex 4x4 drivetrain. Yet both cars have been on the Weight Watchers programme, each using the most up-to-date glassfibre, Kevlar and Nomex composite technology in an effort to lose mass and increase stiffness. Ferrari even called in its F1 guru Harvey Postlethwaite to assist in the design. Despite this, the 288 can't help but appear prehistoric alongside the Zuffenhausen sophisticate. Just a look at the specification is enough to confirm that buyers were getting what they paid for – though Porsche claimed to have lost money on each car even with a £140,000 price tag. There's intelligent four-wheel drive, with





'While the Porsche is the swot, always ready with the correct answer for every question, the Ferrari is the dishevelled ruffian sat at the back burning ants with a magnifying glass'



JET SET OWNERS

The glamour of owning one of the world's fastest production cars has ensured some famous behinds have nestled in the drivers' seats of both 288 and 959.

Maybe because it's easier to handle, the Porsche carried Nick Faldo's golf clubs and lined up alongside the Morris 1000 pick-up in actor Rowan Atkinson's garage. Sporting hero Daley Thompson had one, boxer Nigel Benn owned an odd-looking cabriolet, and it's not hard to spot the appeal of the techno-marvel 959 to Microsoft boss Bill Gates. Über-celeb Mick Jagger aside, the rather trickier Ferrari's roll-call is more of a motorsport *Who's Who?* F1 team leader Jean Sage and drivers Niki Lauda, Rene Arnoux and Eddie Cheever had 288s, but former F1 star Eddie Irvine trumped them all by having both cars at the same time.



AND ON LESSER BUDGETS...

DE TOMASO PANTERA GTSS

Sold 1984-'90/n/a
built, 350bhp,
333lb ft **0-60mph**
5.4 secs **Top speed**



160mph **New** £41,410 ('86) **Now** £32,500
Not much sophistication, but a healthy dose of grunt and fabulous soundtrack from the 351cu in Ford, plus later cars have a well-sorted chassis. Stick-on bodykit does little for Tom Tjaarda's economical styling but a great way to go Ferrari embarrassing.

FERRARI TESTAROSSA

Sold 1984-'92/1200
built, 390bhp, 362lb ft
0-60mph 5.2 secs
Top speed 171mph
New £93,380 ('88)
Now £37,500

Launched the same year as the GTO, Maranello's conventional range topper used the 512BB's awesome flat-12 and sat between 288 and 959 in civility. Not one of PF's finest, but becoming a bargain.



FORD RS200

Sold 1985-'86/200
built, 250bhp,
215lb ft **0-60mph**
6.1 secs **Top speed**
140mph,
New £49,995 ('85) **Now** £30,000



Styled by Ghia, powered by Ford, and built by Reliant with a Tickford interior, Stuart Turner's rally tool won the '86 Ypres rally plus the '86 British and Belgian championships but was just too late to deliver its Group B promise. Mid-mounted turbocharged 1803cc BDT engine gave up to 500bhp.

LAMBORGHINI COUNTACH ANNIVERSARY

Sold 1987-'90/660
built, 455bhp,
369lb ft **0-60mph**
4.9 secs **Top speed** 178mph



New £116,432 ('89) **Now** £45,000

Gandini's Countach is searingly fast yet not quite in the 288/959 league, but it always acted like top dog and with looks like this no one was going to argue. Ungainly bodykit doesn't flatter the Anniversary (the optional wing blunts top end too), but if you're after attention, it's still the daddy.

LANCIA 037 STRADALE

Sold 1982/257
built, 205bhp,
166lb ft **0-60mph**
6.5 secs **Top speed**



137mph New n/a **Now** £20,000

With gorgeous PF lines the 037 is still one of the prettiest roadgoing Group B cars, and with drivers such as Markku Alen and Walter Röhrl, it took the manufacturers' title in '83. Twin-cam 16-valve 2-litre with supercharger managed up to 325bhp in injected Evo 2.



Clockwise, from above: non-standard CanCan red interior a bit porn star; 288 cabin feels very Group C racer; Ferrari understeers if throttle kept in check



torque sensors front and rear that detect when a wheel starts to spin and distribute the power to each corner accordingly via the fiendishly complex 13-plate Porsche PSK electronically controlled clutch. Ride height can be adjusted from a ground-hugging 4.7in to a green-laning 7.1in, and it'll automatically hunker back down to its lowest setting as you hit 100mph if you forget to trip the switch. There are anti-lock brakes, adjustable dampers, six-speed gearbox, run-flat tyres and tyre pressure sensors too. The result of all this cleverness is that you can take every acknowledged fact about rear-engined car behaviour, 911 included, and throw the lot out of the window.

The 959 is capable of flattering even the most inept driver by its sheer ability: you feel that whatever you do, this car will keep you safe. Back off at over 100mph in a long sweeper and there's no sickening lurch into a spin, merely a gentle transfer from neutral to progressive oversteer. Jump back on the throttle and it simply squats and grips. Even on the standard damper setting it's hugely impressive, but flick the dial to stiffen them up and body roll is eliminated as stability takes a further hike up the scale. Only under braking does the Ferrari's exceptional chassis balance pay dividends as the Porsche pitches forward and its hefty motor reminds you of the 60 per cent rear weight bias.

Yet perhaps the most telling evidence of the Porsche's ability shows when the heavens open. You just flick a knob on the dash to tell the car that the surface is damp – one of four settings ranging from dry to maximum traction with locked differentials for icy conditions – and drive it pretty much the same way. There's still no nasty surprises and the 235/45ZR17 fronts and 255/40ZR17 rears offer staggering levels of grip, giving the driver complete confidence in machine. By contrast, the Ferrari soon reminds the over-confident who's boss. Even with the wheels straight, the speed with which power can overcome grip is terrifying – try

flexing your right ankle in a corner and the twitchy Ferrari flicks from benign understeer to lurid power oversteer unbelievably aggressively. Gone is the ability to catch the Porsche unaware by getting both turbos on-line and leaving it for dead: by the time the wheels have fought for traction the 959 will have hit its 4500rpm sweet spot and be bearing down on the Ferrari's exposed gearbox casing.

But both are stupendous machines, and it's worth remembering that these two were truly the pioneers of the supercar revival. By the early '90s, supercars were almost *passé* – thanks to a glut of European 200mph-toppers including Jaguar's XJ220, Bugatti's EB110, Ferrari's F40, Lamborghini's Diablo and the definitive McLaren F1.

Choosing between them seems almost pointless as it would be hard to find two more different ways of going exceptionally quickly. While the Porsche is the swot, immaculately presented and always ready with the correct answer for every question, the Ferrari is the dishevelled ruffian sat at the back of the classroom burning ants with a magnifying glass. There's little doubt that the 959 is the better car. It's faster, cleverer, comfier and more refined, and its performance is so accessible that it makes a deep and lasting impression of exceptional ability. But that's making a rational decision, and cars such as these should be chosen with the heart, not the head. It may not be as fast on the road, but in delivering a hit of pure adrenalin to the bloodstream the 288 is more effective than a hypodermic needle. Good news for the fortunate few who are lucky enough to choose between them is that, if they have the funds to buy one, they can probably afford both. ♦

Thanks to Porsche specialist AutoClassica (01423 865600, www.autoclassica.co.uk) for the 959 and Duncan Hamilton & Co Ltd (01256 765000, www.duncanhamilton.com) for the 288