

ITALY BY FERRARI

Luxury-tour operator Red Travel offers a fabulous eight-day tour of Tuscany and Provence via Ferrari. *Private Air's* Ian Kuah reports on this fashionably fast experience.



Of all the famous sports car marques in the world, Ferrari is arguably the most evocative, engendering strong emotions among owners and fans. This passion—*la passione*, as the Italians say—is what led singer, songwriter, and longtime Ferrari aficionado Chris Rea to make a film in which cars were the stars.

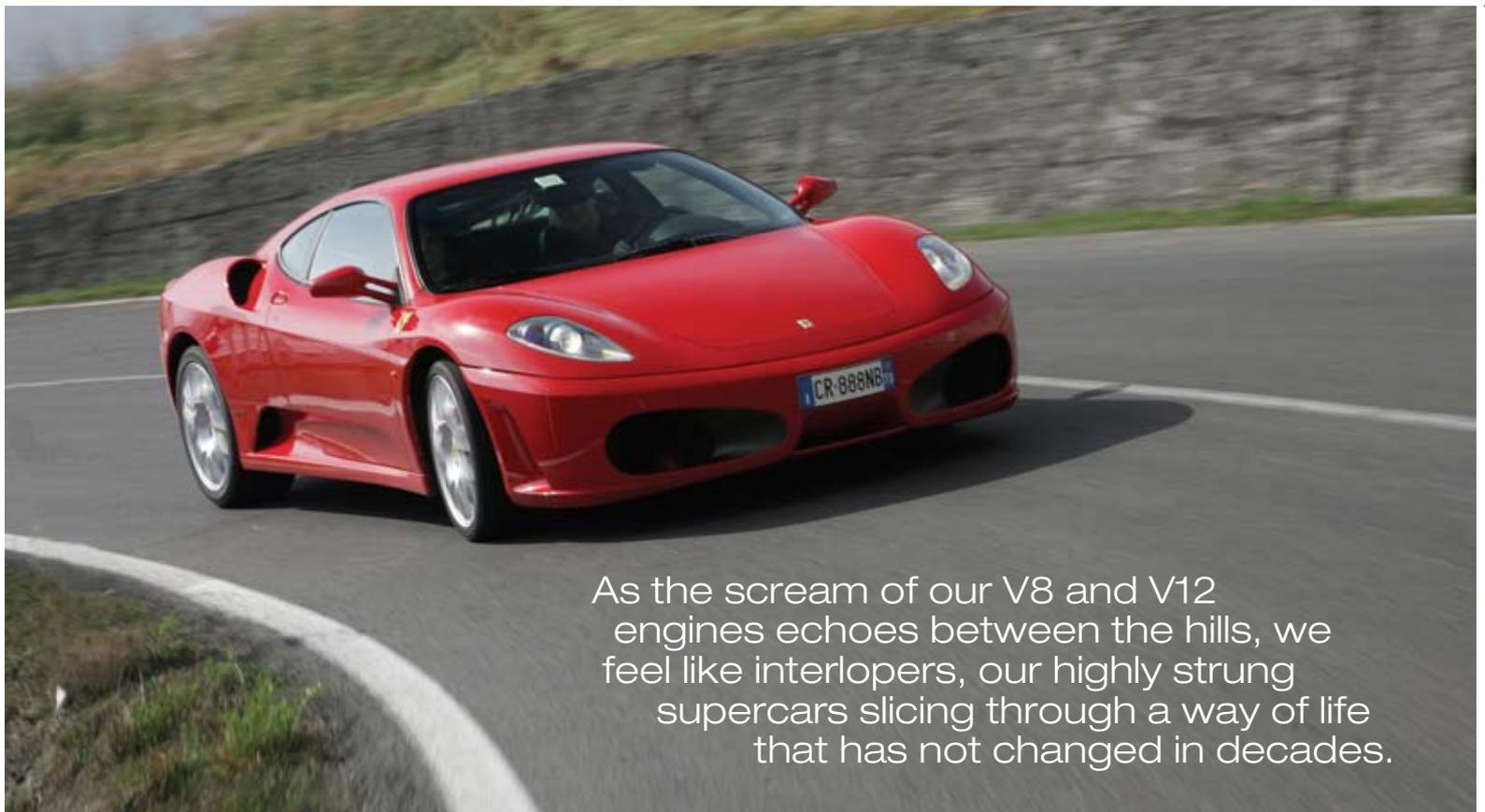
There undoubtedly was a gap in the market for a highly exclusive tour revolving around the latest Ferrari models. Such an undertaking would have been relatively easy in the South of France or America, but this would be missing half the point. Now, an independent company calling itself Red Travel has set its sights on giving Ferrari enthusiasts—who may or may not be Ferrari owners—the chance to drive the latest models in Italy for a truly authentic experience.

According to Red Travel's brochure, Italy is home to 80 percent of the world's finest works of art and also is a bastion of haute couture. With this in mind, the company offers three couples per week a unique driving adventure against a backdrop of the finest art, architecture, food, wine, and boutique hotels Italy has to offer.

"As an Italian company, we would like to show our clients the culture and country that nurtures the mind-set behind the Ferrari brand," explains Andrea Levy, Red Travel's founder. "Italy is a unique country and we wanted to showcase the very best of what it has to offer."

Red Travel had to make the experience unforgettable. It's not about





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visiting Rome, Florence, or Tuscany per se, but rather about doing it in a certain way: staying in the best hotels, eating in the best restaurants, shopping in the best areas—and connecting all the dots on the map with Ferraris!

Italy has a huge store of classical architecture, art, and music to see and hear. At the same time, it is a veritable treasure trove of contemporary fashion and leather goods, and there is plenty of opportunity to shop on a Red Travel excursion if you wish to do so. From this scenario, the company's slogan "Art and Emotion" was born.

While preparing for their launch, Levy and his staff developed their ideas, meeting with hoteliers and ateliers of haute couture and art. They also visited Ferrari five times to make sure the factory was happy with the way their ideas were developing.

"Ferrari were extremely helpful and told us that while they could not supply us with cars directly, as that would upset their dealers, they could help with delivery times," Levy says. "Thus, we were lucky to get one of the first F430 Berlinetta F1 cars from our local dealer."

The two-day press event that Red Travel set up to introduce their concept gave us a snapshot of what clients can expect. We experienced what would be essentially the third and fourth days, which revolved around driving the cars on open Tuscan roads.

On the full tour, the first two days would be spent in Rome, based at the five-star Exedra Hotel on the Piazza Repubblica in the heart of the city. Some clients will have come a long way, so a chance to recuperate with a swim and massage would be a relaxing prelude to dinner at the famous Tazio restaurant.

The second day in Rome can be spent touring or shopping. It is up to you, but the art-and-leisure director will take care of all the arrangements. Special arrangements have been made with some of the choice fashion houses and art galleries in Rome and Florence. Given notice, they will extend their opening hours for Red Travel clients.

Driving in Rome is no fun, and driving a Ferrari in a traffic jam would be nothing but pure frustration. So on the third day, guests are ferried from Rome to Ladispoli on the coast to meet their steeds for the first time, while we arrived there from the airport. Ladispoli is a port with a decent marina, and the three Ferraris looked very much at home next to the



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motoryachts and sailboats.

We are collected from Rome airport by a Mercedes limousine and driven straight to Ladispoli. It is a lovely day in Tuscany with deep-blue cloudless skies, the heat moderated by a cooling sea breeze. Lunch on the balcony of the restaurant seems like a good idea, as the food in reputable restaurants in Italy tends to be uniformly good. It would have been nice to sample the local wine, but with a long drive ahead of us, our light lunch of pasta and quiche is washed down with Pellegrino mineral water.

Black-leather interiors get very hot under the sun, but because these Ferraris will be used rather than mollycoddled, black is a more practical choice than the nicer-looking, cooler, but more easily soiled beige-leather option. Happily, our first mount of the day is the brand-new F430 F1, and we quickly find that Ferrari's air-conditioning system is really cold and is able to reduce the cabin temperature rapidly.

At lunch, Levy explains to us that his team has spent a lot of time researching sparsely trafficked cross-country routes between their chosen five-star spa hotels in Rome, Florence, and Siena. Relative lack of traffic, good road surfaces, and breathtaking scenery were priorities, so you will only encounter 10 sets of traffic lights on the nearly 300 kilometer journey from Rome to Florence.

Our journey from Ladispoli to the Fonteverdi Terme Hotel and Spa, in the ancient resort town of San Casciano dei Bagni, takes in some of the most picturesque Tuscan roads and, as a bonus for historic-car enthusiasts, part of the famous Mille Miglia route.

Since we don't know the way, the tour director leads the three Ferraris in an Alfa Romeo GTV Spider. He also sets the pace, allowing the guests to settle in and get used to the operation of their Ferraris. Being the arbiter of his guests' driving abilities, he will gradually step up the pace when and where he judges it is safe to do so.

Running in convoy is always a problem unless drivers are of similar ability.



The tour director will pick up the pace when he sees everyone is comfortable with the Ferraris behind, but it is frustrating for an experienced driver to be the second or third car in line if there is a slower driver in front. By the same token, a quick driver behind the Alfa can move the pace up too much for the following cars that can get left behind, especially along twisty mountain roads. But the director is always watching and will make adjustments as necessary.

Our well-researched route avoids the autostradas (highways), instead taking us cross-country through a few towns and villages where the locals look on in admiration. This is Italy, and here people love cars, especially Ferraris. It is obvious from the smiles and waves we get from young and old alike that seeing three Ferraris in convoy is like having all their Christmases arrive at once!

Deep in the hills of Tuscany, things could not be more different from Rome. The landscape here is so distinctive, the vernacular architecture of the farm buildings so very Tuscan, you could not really be anywhere else. Away from the bright lights of the city, life is calm, measured, and ultra-relaxed. As the scream of our V8 and V12 engines echoes between the hills, we feel like interlopers, our highly strung supercars slicing through a way of life that has not changed in decades.

After two hours of exhilarating driving, we arrive at the Fonteverdi Terme Hotel & Spa, and after a quick shower to freshen up, we head for the spa. The Fonteverdi ("green fountain") Terme was built around a 17th-century de Medici portico and lovingly restored and updated, with a new spa facility added.

The water jets in the various indoor and outdoor pools take many forms, and you can go from one to the other of 22 hydromassage outlets, treating various parts of your body with the cool healing waters. A sauna or steam bath before plunging in will really revive you after a long journey.

The Ferdinando I restaurant, decorated in Italian Renaissance style, serves everything from simple Italian food to quite elaborate dishes. Because squid and pigeon are not to everyone's taste, and because a meal in Italy should not be without pasta, we opted for the homemade spaghetti with tomato-and-basil sauce. For those used to Italian fare in their own countries, it is a pleasant surprise to find that such a simple dish can contain such delicate and exquisite flavors.

The next day is a driving day, and while some of the ladies may want to use the spa or simply sunbathe, those who love cars will not be able to resist a drive or ride in Ferrari's latest masterpiece. The F430 F1 is quite frankly one of the very best sports cars in the world. Having driven just about every type of supercar ever produced since the early 1970s, I feel I am qualified to say this.

The F430 is the star of the Red Travel show, and in terms of dynamic driving qualities completely overshadows the F360 Modena Spider and 575 Maranello that make up the trio. (This F360 Spider will shortly be replaced by a new F430 Spider.)

The F430's 90-degree V8 flat-plane crank motor is completely new, sharing no parts with the 3,586-cubic-centimeter F360 Modena engine. The latter produces 400 horsepower at 8,500 revolutions per minute and 373 Newton-meters (275.6 foot-pounds) of torque at 4,750 rpm, but these numbers are easily overshadowed by the 490 hp at 8,500 rpm and 465 Nm (343 ft. lb.) of torque at 5,250 rpm produced by the new 4,305-cc engine. Top speed is 315 km/h (196 mph), with 0–100 km/h (0–62 mph) reached in 4 seconds.

On the long straights and fast, sweeping curves of the main roads, the big four-cam V12 under the 575's long nose quickly asserted its superiority. There is no substitute for cubic centimeters, and with 5,748 cc and 515 hp at 7,250 rpm, any gap the lighter midengine cars may have initially opened up was quickly reined in.

Torque is something the 575 Maranello has in abundance, 588 Nm (434 ft. lb.) at 5,250 rpm, to be exact. Since much of that is available much lower down in the rev band and is easily accessible with the advent of the F1 paddle-shift system for the V12 car, traveling quickly with little effort is a given.

On the fifth day, the tour heads for Florence and the Villa Il Poggiale. The seventh day takes in Pisa on the way back to Rome, where the final stop is the Posta Vecchia Hotel on the coast and near the airport. Once the home of Prince Orsini's family, this magnificent villa was latterly the subject of an



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expensive and loving restoration by J. Paul Getty.

"While we recommend a structure to the eight-day tour, we are flexible about this. So long as all the parties agree on what they want to do, we can change the arrangements within the set price of €9,500 per person," Levy explains. "We have three Russian couples coming soon who want to play golf every day. This is no problem as all of them want the same thing. Of course, if some of the guests want something radically different, including, say, private jets or yachts as part of the experience, then that will be extra. But we are always open to suggestions."

Some Ferrari owners may want to take part in this tour. But rather than bringing their own cars to Italy, they can avail themselves of the Red Travel cars and not worry about shipping, insurance, and other logistical inconveniences.

Red Travel is a unique concept that integrates the passion of Ferrari driving with some of the best attractions Italy has to offer. Driving a Ferrari, or, better still, owning one, is something every car enthusiast should do when he can. Either way, the tour is to be commended for the way it intricately weaves the Ferrari thread into the richly colored tapestry of Italy.

The American Academy of Hospitality Sciences has conferred Red Travel with its prestigious Star Diamond Award for 2005. For more information on the tour, call 011.39.011.6165219 or visit www.red-travel.com.