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We Drive the Sultan of Brunei's Astonishing FX!



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the FX files



The buzz started on the local grapevine in Turin in the mid-1990s, when whispers were first heard that a number of cars were being constructed for the Sultan of Brunei.

Despite the local automakers' attempts to keep things under wraps, it soon became clear a serious operation was underway—one that was, in essence, a small industry.

Rumors soon started flying like crazy: Rolls-Royce was designing and building custom-made cars for the Sultan's family in a secret,

high-security facility, and Pininfarina—with the stamp of approval from Maranello—was making an unbelievable array of Ferraris. It sounded like a return to the glory days of the 1950s and early '60s, when the only limitations as to what could be constructed were the existing technology and one's imagination.

By late 1996, specifics started to materialize. A series of 456 derivatives under the moniker "Venice" were under construction; these included sedans, elegant cabriolets and, of all things, an

For years, both Ferrari and Pininfarina denied this car's existence. But WINSTON GOODFELLOW nonetheless managed to track down the elusive FX—a car custom built for the Sultan of Brunei—and even got to take it for a drive.



"estate" (four-door station wagon).

The rumblings became wilder the following year. Some of those 456s had night vision technology. A small run had been made replicating 1989's stupendous Pininfarina Ferrari show car, the Mythos. A 550 Maranello had been built with an automatic transmission, and it would smoke the standard six-speed in straight-line performance. A 550 Spider was under construction that looked different from the current, limited-production barchetta.

At the top of the pecking order of these ultra-exotics sat the most elusive of the Ferrari X-Files: the "FX." It was reportedly a radical 12-cylinder mid-engine bolide that no one could describe. It was simply said to be "aggressive" in appearance.

In 1998, the veil of secrecy was broken when the "Asian Contagion" infected Brunei. As the financial crisis took hold, the incredible cash flow to Turin suddenly shut off. Almost overnight, an extremely large cottage industry found itself out of work.

The automakers in Turin weren't the only ones affected. Later that year, some disgruntled mechanics who used to work in the Sultan's "garages," as they were understatedly called, released a few furtively-taken photos to several car magazines, hinting at the treasures of Brunei.

Several weeks after I saw those photographs, I got a call from Italy. "The last 456 wagon is being completed," my

October. After chasing leads on a Venice station wagon said to be in England, a look in my own backyard yielded the Holy Grail of Sultan finds: An FX was supposedly lurking in southern California!

Within days, I had tracked it down to gonzo performance car/Ferrari aficionado Dick Marconi. Proper introductions were made, and—knowing all the plausible deniability that had existed over the years in

Dick Marconi is an outgoing yet modest self-made mega-millionaire who has a serious predilection for fast machinery. He acquired the FX through a former racing associate who later became the Sultan's "garagekeeper."

"When I was young," Marconi says, "I never dreamed that I would have anything like I do today. I really like sharing my good fortune in life, partic-

reason only: to see the FX. Dick couldn't even change my direction with his other recent purchase, an ex-Sultan of Brunei 456 Venice Cabriolet.

When Rene fired the FX up for the first time, its raucous bark ricocheted off the walls. The gates to Heaven had opened, and Rene aimed the FX for the exit. As the Ferrari entered the sunlight, my jaw dropped. That dark blue metallic shape was beautiful but



informant frantically said. "I looks absolutely fantastic in person, and you have to see it." I missed it by a week.

The truth was out there, though just beyond my reach. BBR's scale model lineup of "Sultan of Brunei" Ferraris only reinforced this impression—and my determination to see some of the royal family's fantastic machines in person.

The trail became red hot last

Turin and Maranello—I held my breath that I would be the first to photograph and—if the planets were properly aligned—maybe even drive a Ferrari that officially didn't exist. And on April 19, this would-be Fox Mulder parked in front of Marconi's mecca of postwar performance machinery, the Marconi Automotive Museum for Kids, with precisely that aim.

ularly if it can help underprivileged kids. That is why I started the museum, to try and accomplish that."

After a brief tour of the offices, Marconi and Rene Cortez, the museum's Director of Operations, escorted us into the museum. Though we were surrounded by F40s, F50s and a whole bunch of other seriously cool stuff, my path was unwavering. I was there for one

aggressive. Its forward stance bristled with tension, its strong rear haunches evoking a tiger ready to pounce. Rene shut the FX off, and silence enveloped the parking lot.

I walked around the Ferrari a number of times, absorbing its form and details. The proportioning was spot-on, as one would expect from Pininfarina. A NACA duct, a la F40/F50, sat forward of the rear wheels,

just below the Pininfarina badge and script. Above it was another air intake, unlike anything Ferrari/Pininfarina has used before.

The engine's decklid is dominated by a raised, triangu-

lar shaped clear surface that has two rows of six circular air outlets, looking much like the top of fuel injection trumpets. The back is cleverly split in two, with a recessed dark wire mesh that allows air to escape. An aluminum surround highlights the four exhaust pipes.

The "trademark" circular rear taillights are the only giveaways of the car's Ferrari origins. Still, viewed directly from behind, the FX has an air of mystery, one helped by that lack of badge identification.

In fact, the bodywork's only Ferrari badge is on the FX's aggressive nose. Two air intakes dominate the valence pan. The

Ferrari's Testarossa, the F512 M (in this case, s/n 103396). The tubular frame is complemented by independent suspension front and rear composed of double unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar

signature weave. Like the vast majority of the body panels, the one-piece rear deck is composed of carbon fiber, as are the wheel wells.

The interior is also unique, understated and filled with outstanding architecture. The steep windshield and severely raked A-pillar give a wonderful sense of drama and speed. Contours and surfaces are soothing and continuous as they flow from one side to the

As the Ferrari entered the sunlight, my jaw dropped. That dark blue metallic shape was beautiful but aggressive, and its forward stance bristled with tension, ready to pounce.



SUPER-MODIFICATO: The FX's custom coachwork rides atop a Ferrari F512 M. "FX" script on the valve cover suggests that the 12-cylinder engine might have been massaged for the Sultan's pleasure. The F1-style shifting system activated by green (for upshifts) and red (for downshifts) paddles behind the MOMO steering wheel was developed by Williams F1, not Ferrari.



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The "trademark" circular rear taillights are the only giveaways of the car's Ferrari origins. Still, viewed directly

recessed headlights, the crease that runs between them and a NACA duct near the base of the windscreen break up the large, sloping, single-piece hood. As at the rear, the effect is exotic, and the elements work well together.

As I started to snap photos, I contemplated what lurked under that entrancing Pininfarina form. The FX rides on the ultimate version of

and twin shocks in the rear.

The F512 M's fabulous *tipo* F110 HB flat-12 greets you when you lift the lightweight rear decklid. A unique cover crowns the engine, topped by an intriguing "FX" script in the center. The exhaust is custom-made, leaving one to wonder whether the engine's internals have also been massaged.

Also catching the eye everywhere you look is carbon fiber's

other. Tasteful accents such as aluminum door handles and transmission/clutch controls between the seats beautifully break up the soft, two-tone sea of blue.

The view straight ahead is all business. The gauges in the custom dash are easily legible behind a meaty, three-spoke steering wheel that adjusts electrically for reach. The 320-kph speedo and 10,000-rpm tach

(redline is 7,300 rpm) are flanked by an oil pressure gauge on the tachometer's right and a water temp gauge on the speedometer's left. The center console houses a small binnacle for the clock, oil temperature and fuel level gauges.

But what truly separates the FX from all other 12-cylinder Ferraris is what resides just behind the steering wheel, but ahead of the dash. A large green F1-style paddle on the right is for upshifts, while the red one

used a modified Porsche Tiptronic gearshift (developed by AES) and featured buttons mounted on the steering wheel.

With the details examined, it was time to discover how the FX performed. Rene slipped behind the wheel, pointing out its special features. "It is really quite easy to use," he summed up. He then fired the Ferrari up, and off we went.

Several minutes later, it was

low-slung roofline and you're greeted by custom-made, upright seats upholstered in what has to be the world's softest, most supple leather. Side bolstering is minimal, and dreamily delicious suede is used on the seats' outward facing edges, as well as the headliner.

Push the seat all the way back and you'll find the FX does not have as much legroom as an F512 M. Fortunately, headroom is good. Forward visibility is excellent, as expect-

The engine fires with a twist of the key. To engage the clutch, reach between the seats to activate the transmission's "main" control. Unlike the system used on Ferrari's F1-equipped production cars, the FX's small aluminum ball travels forward (engaging "drive"), remains in the center position (neutral) or moves back for reverse. It is completely intuitive, and the lever has a nice size, feels substantial and is much more befitting an



VISUAL CUES: Other than its unmistakable sound, the FX's traditional round taillights and *cavallini rampante* on the wheels and hood are all that suggests to the world at large that the car is built on a Ferrari platform. The interior is finished in the softest blue leather, while transmission modes are selected by a substantial aluminum lever in the center console. The small knob to its right selects any of several clutch settings.

on the left is for downshifts.

Based on the surprising logo on the transmission/clutch control between the seats, the system was not developed by Ferrari, but Williams F1! The ex-employee photos show that earlier FXs (production is rumored to be between two and six cars, but the exact number has never been truly verified; all went to the Sultan)

On the road, the FX causes nearly every other car to speed up and dart across lanes for a closer look. Thankfully, potential trouble is vanquished by a quick dab at the accelerator.

my turn to play at being a member of the globe's richest royal family. The feather-light door opens with a simple pull on the handle. Slide under that

ed—all you see is road. The side view is adequate, while a look in the rearview mirror reveals that mighty flat-12 powerplant and a sliver of sky.

expensive performance machine than the F355/360's dinky "T" handle.

Just slightly to the back and right of this is a dial that acti-

vates various clutch settings. Like the tranny lever, it seems to be made from a single aluminum block, and it's perfectly at home in these surroundings. Per Rene's request, I left it alone.

You activate the transmission by nudging the chrome ball forward. The clutch engages very s-l-o-w-l-y, then everything quietly thunks into place.

The accelerator requires a light touch to get the FX moving and, feathering the throttle,

Thankfully, the side mirrors provide adequate rearward vision, and instant vanquishing of potential trouble is a dab of the accelerator away.

The thick steering wheel is the perfect tiller for this unique ship. Couple its small diameter, blazing yellow MOMO logo and *cavallino rampante* to the large, colored upshift/downshift paddles, and it is clear the FX means business.

And that it does when you mash the throttle! Docile down

simply increases in decibels the higher the tach needle spins, enveloping the cockpit with one pure, sinuous tone.

With a light tug on the green paddle, second gear engages with a quick, reassuring "thunk." The pull of that flat-12—coupled with a paddle shift system—is brutal in its efficiency and so silky smooth, so seamless in its continual thrust that it feels like water from a tap. Press the throttle harder and the FX simply

Even more delicious is the way the system operates on downshifts. Unlike the F355 F1—which was made *after* the FX—this Ferrari mimics the 360 in that the engine revs up before it shifts down, matching rpm in the lower gear.

And as marvelous as the F355 and 360 are, no V8-powered Ferrari comes close to the thrill of hearing a 12-cylinder engine blip and then instantly and precisely pop into a lower gear. If the



we pull out into traffic. Outside of occasional balkiness and clunks from the transmission, the FX is extremely docile at low speeds, the engine happily pottering along at 1,500 rpm.

Despite its rather sedate dark blue paint, the FX causes almost every other car on the road to speed up and dart across lanes to get a closer look at the mysterious Ferrari.

low, the engine comes alive as it rips through 3,000 rpm. Now in stride, those twelve cylinders, four cams and 48 valves working away just inches behind your head meld with the memorable, screaming below of that custom exhaust.

The resulting symphony is enough to turn any F50 owner red with envy. The ripping sound from those four pipes

pushes you back more, accelerating with greater urgency.

While this Ferrari pulls with more alacrity than any TR, what makes the FX truly extraordinary when run hard through the gears is the way the engine works in concert with that transmission: it delivers an excitement that the heavier, production TRs—or any F355 or 360—can't touch.

upcoming F60 (which, interestingly enough, is dubbed the "FX" inside Maranello) can do this, that aural and tactile sensation alone will be worth the price of admission.

The communicative steering is also a marvel. It is light and quick but not darty, with ideal weighting. No doubt the lightness and rigidity of that carbon fiber shell helps in its accurate

and immediate road feel.

The high-tech skin has the same effect on the chassis. With less weight to handle, the suspension dishes out a supple ride, yet never fails to communicate exactly what is happening underneath.

This all makes the FX an absolute delight to push through turns. Body roll is nonexistent, and the car feels incredibly light on its feet.

To truly feel like the proverbial billionaire, drop the

times yes, for the FX is undoubtedly one of the coolest cars I have ever driven. Its startling looks are pure Pininfarina, radical yet more sleek and purposeful in a way the F50 can't touch. There are no superfluous wings and vents, just an aggressive, well-proportioned carbon fiber wedge.

Couple that shape with a gorgeous, understated but flowing interior, that magnificent flat-12 engine, howling exhaust and an F1 shifting system that




FUTURE-THINK?: Pininfarina employed several novel design elements in making the FX, particularly the inlet ducts above each rear wheel.



hammer as you come barreling out of a turn, run it through the gears hard, then hit the downshift paddle as you set up for the next bend. The engine jumps, the exhaust snarls and spits, and you realize you have found heaven without first having to die.

So how does one sum up an experience like this? Was that five-year chase worth the effort? The answer is yes, a million

makes you wonder if the Sultan helped subsidize Ferrari's paddle-shift technology research, and you've got one of the world's truly great cars.

I honestly can't believe I've been lucky enough to get to drive it. To make sure I never forget the experience, I think I'll call Dick next year to see if I can have a refresher course. *Grazie per la memoria, Signore Marconi!* 

The Marconi Automotive Museum

FOR ANY LOVER OF POSTWAR performance machinery—and Ferraris in particular—the Marconi Automotive Museum is one of the finest facilities in North America, and a must to visit. Nestled in a business park in Tustin, California (about one hour south of Los Angeles), the museum is understated from the outside and easy to miss.

Yet the moment you enter the sprawling, 15,000-square-foot main exhibit hall, you'll realize that it's a true Mecca for any Ferrari lover. At the time of our visit, 18 Ferraris were on display, including a 550 Maranello, 1996 F1, two F50s, a 355tb, a 348 Spider, two 348 Competizioni, an F40, two Testarossas, a 512 BBi, a Daytona Spyder, a 246 GTS, a 246 GT and a Touring-bodied 1950 195 S. And, of course, let's not overlook our featured FX and the Museum's most recent "royal" Ferrari acquisition, a 456 Venice Cabriolet.

But that's just the start. Wherever you turn, there is another exceedingly rare performance machine.


Covering most every postwar decade and country, at the time of our visit we saw such rarities as a Cizeta V16T (one of eight) from the late 1980s, a Jaguar XJ220S, a Plymouth Superbird, a Maserati Bora, an AC Cobra—the list goes on and on. The veranda houses an equally impressive collection of motorcycles.

Unlike most museums, each treasure is totally accessible—there was nary a rope in sight. Just pick your favorite, walk up, and gaze unimpeded all you like, from any angle.

One of the museum's greatest treasures is Dick Marconi himself, the man who created it. Enthusiastic and extremely passionate about his cars and the facility's charitable mission, Marconi doesn't have a pretentious bone in his body. During our two-day stay, he often welcomed visitors with a hearty greeting and handshake, never saying who he was. Later, when someone didn't have film to take pictures of the FX when it was parked outside, Dick went into the office, got his own camera, loaded it with film, handed it over and let the guest fire away. And while we were out testing the FX, Dick pulled up alongside in his 550 Maranello with an ecstatic young visitor hanging out the window, snapping photos of the FX with—you guessed it—Dick's "loaner" camera!

Best of all, the museum is not just some monument to its founder's ego. Instead, all the proceeds help fund The Marconi Foundation for Kids, a charitable organization that assists underprivileged children.

Open most every day, the Museum is located at 1302 Industrial Drive in Tustin, California just off Highway 55. The admission charge is \$5 per person, and the Museum specializes in private functions. For further information, call 714-258-3001, fax 714-258-9117 or visit www.marconimuseum.org.

 M•A•R•C•O•N•I
AUTOMOTIVE MUSEUM FOR KIDS



ENTHUSIASTS: Dick Marconi and Be Moore.