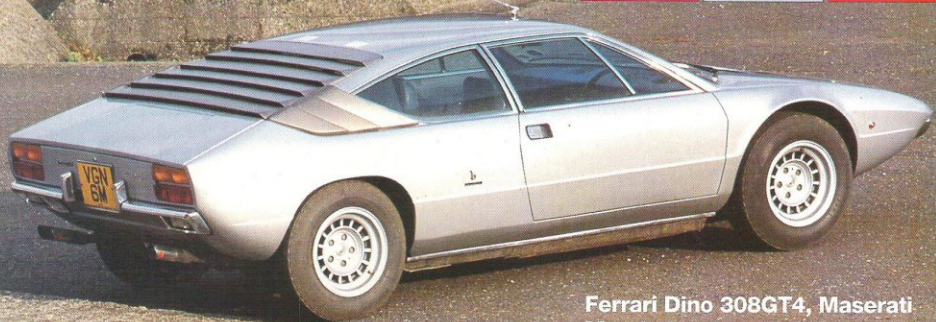
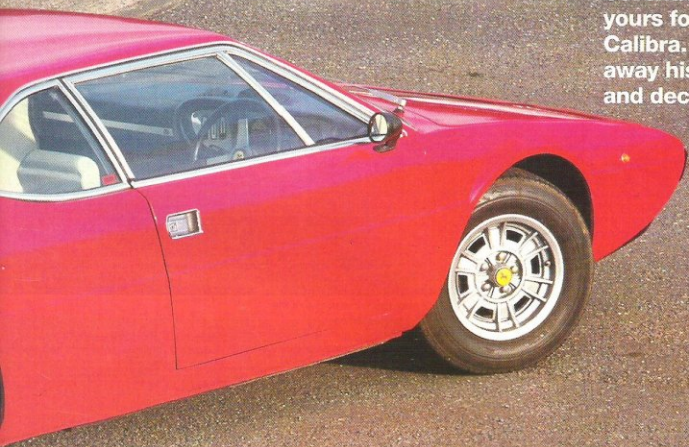


# MISSION



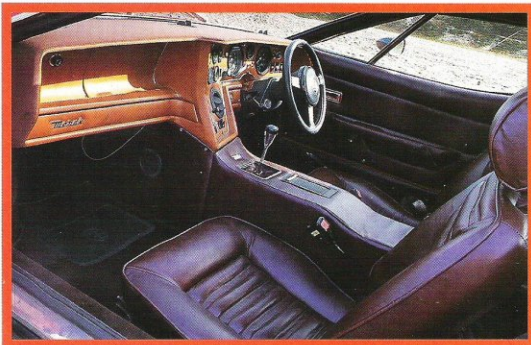
Ferrari Dino 308GT4, Maserati Merak, Lamborghini Urraco — any one of these classic Seventies supercars could be yours for less cash than a Calibra. Peter Tomalin puts away his rose-tinted glasses and decides which is best



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● Maserati cabin is comfortable, but low seats and high waist make it slightly oppressive



**F**ive years ago we couldn't have run this story. Five years ago, the combined worth of these three cars would have been somewhere in the region of £150,000. Today it's rather less than £60,000, which is a bit of a bugger for anyone who bought at the height of the late-Eighties boom but absolutely ruddy marvellous for the rest of us. If you're in the market for a second car, a car for sunny weekend blasts, a Caterham or Morgan perhaps, or maybe a TVR S, just take a long, hard look at these three slices of prime Italian exotica, and then tell me your pulse doesn't quicken ever so slightly at the thought of having one of them nestle in your garage.

Fifteen years ago, the three would have been locking horns in a *Performance Car* group test of junior supercars, had *Performance Car* been around at the time. And it's hard to imagine three more closely matched cars. Their list prices lay somewhere between £17,500 and £19,000. They shared the same fundamental design — engines mounted amidships, drive

through the rear wheels, two-door coupe bodywork and two-plus-two seating. Each was powered by a 3-litre engine (though the Lambo could also be had with a 2.5) with cylinders arranged in a Vee, eight pots each for the Urraco and Dino, six for the Merak. All three could call on well over 200bhp, and each had a top speed of around 150mph.

Today, a mere 15 years later, we're bringing them together for a different kind of group test, because good examples are unlikely ever to be this cheap again, because we want to take a level-headed look at their strengths and weaknesses, but most of all because we love fast Italian cars. We're all of us dreamers.

First to arrive at the test track is the Merak. Low and wide, curving in all the appropriate places, it verges on supercar caricature. If it lacks the visual drama of some contemporaries, it nevertheless remains an elegantly proportioned car, but then one would expect nothing less from the pen of Giugiaro. Built between 1972 and 1983, it was one of the fruits of Maserati's financial alliance with Citroën, which lasted from 1968 until 1975. In 1970 came the Citroën SM, for which Maserati built a 2.7-litre V6 — basically the Bora's all-alloy V8 with two cylinders removed — and the same engine, in 3-litre form, was used in the Merak. It was a compact, lightweight unit, with twin overhead camshafts per bank, originally producing 190bhp, though this was hiked to 220bhp for the Merak SS, as tested here. Maximum speed was around 145mph, 0-60mph took 7.7 seconds.

Our example, owned by commodities broker Peter Earl, dates from 1982 and has travelled just 18,000 miles from new. Even so, when Peter bought it four years ago it required a virtual rebuild. 'Even if they're not used they still go rusty,' he says. 'They didn't put any primer on at the factory.' And this is the first thing to learn about classic (ie: old) Italian supercars. They rust, badly. The answer? Find one that underwent an expensive restoration back in the late Eighties when values were high. There are plenty about, and bargains to be had. Meraks, even pristine ones, struggle to fetch more than £20,000; good cars can be had for £15,000; presentable ones for less than £10,000. Peter's car, in fine order bodily and mechanically, would be worth around £18,000.

Peter clearly has a thing about Maseratis. Back home he's got a Khamain too, and he's not put off by their curious little ways. Consider: the first Merak he bought he'd had just one day when the high-pressure hydraulics that power

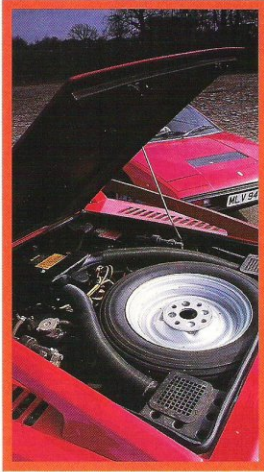
brakes and clutch (Citroën brought more than just money to the partnership) failed suddenly and completely. He was involved in a head-on collision and the car was written off. 'Apparently someone had fitted the wrong pipes to part of the hydraulics,' he says with a rueful grin.

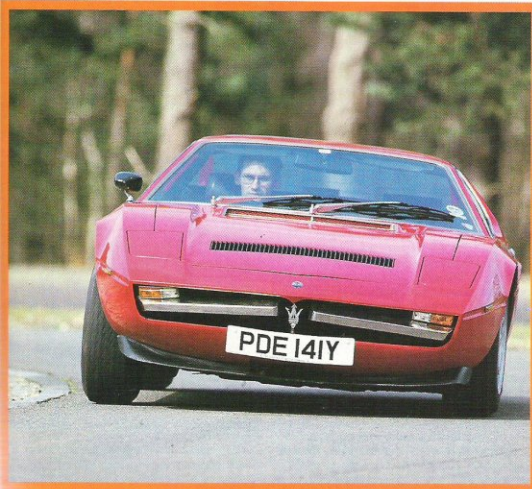
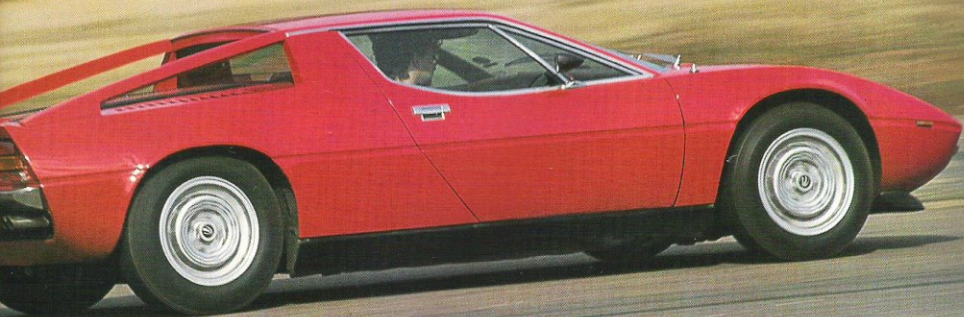
And this is the second lesson. It's vital to find a car that's known to a specialist, one that's been properly cared for. And when you find your dream car, don't even think of scripping and saving on servicing. Buy at today's prices, pay what you have to pay to maintain it in good mechanical order (for the Merak, Peter recommends Bill McGrath Maserati in Herfordshire, telephone 0439 832161), and it's unlikely you'll lose out when you come to resell, not when you weigh the cost against the likely depreciation of a new car.

Same goes for the Dino 308GT4. Ostensibly less desirable than the original Dino 246 — and let's face it, its crisp lines (drawn by Gandini at Bertone) are still no match for Pininfarina's liquid curves — 308s often fell into less than caring hands in the late Seventies and early Eighties. As they do tend to rot away underneath, it's essential to have any prospective purchase checked over for signs of sub-standard repairs. Remedying them could cost more than you pay for the car.

The 308GT4, manufactured between 1973 and 1980, actually had a helluva lot going for it. It was the first roadgoing Ferrari to feature a V8 engine, the engine that would go on to power the 308GTB; it had classic Ferrari all-wishbone

● Look hard and you might just spot a 220bhp, 3-litre V6 hiding behind the spare wheel

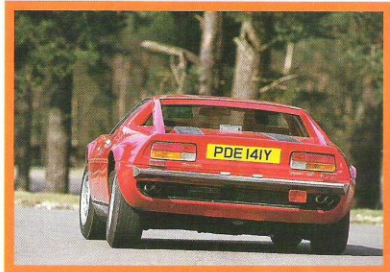




suspension, and it had the added practicality of two rear child seats. It was no slouch either. The quad-cam V8 was good for 255bhp, which translated to a 0-60 time of 6.5 seconds and a 154mph maximum—genuinely quick, even by today's standards.

And these Dinosaurs do look spankingly good value today. A concours example might fetch £25,000, but genuinely good cars can be had for under £20,000 and sound runners for considerably less. Don't believe us? The 1977 car you see on these pages, supplied by long-established Ferrari specialists Hendon Way Motors (081 202 8011), was for sale at £12,950

● **Giugiaro-penned Merak is low and wide and curves in all the right places**



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● **Ferrari has classic feel inside, and is surprisingly practical for a supercar**

at time of going to press. Admittedly it needed a loving home and money spending on it, but the body looked straight and sound, there appeared to be little wrong with either engine or gearbox, and the interior would take but a little work to look presentable.

Our final car, the Urraco, makes a stark contrast inasmuch as this particular example is probably the finest in existence. Barrister Matthew Collings has lavished a fortune on it in the last six years and its condition is almost certainly better than when it left Sant'Agata in February 1974. Which makes it difficult to attach a price tag to this one, but first-rate examples may fetch £25,000, sound runners in the mid to late teens. This is the P250 2.5-litre version; 3-litre cars are more sought after.

The Urraco was in production from 1970-79, and as with the Dino its angular styling was the work of Gandini. The 2.5-litre V8 was a relatively simple design with single overhead camshafts per bank (the P300 went quad-cam) but even so produced a more than adequate 220bhp, which gave a genuine 150mph maximum and 0-60 in

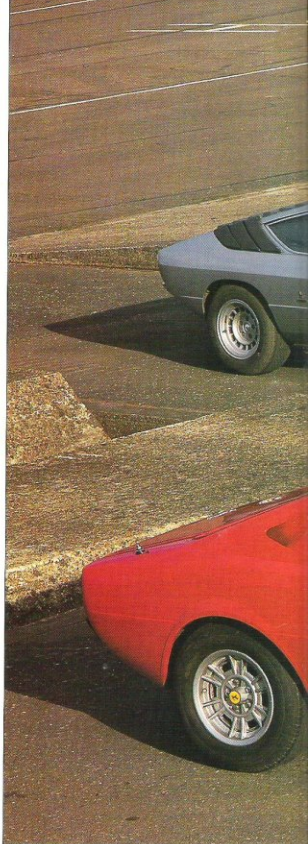
around seven seconds, depending on which road test you believe. It looked startling then, and it still does today, by some margin the most dramatic of our assembled trio. Collings is clearly deeply in love with the car — he drove it 2500 miles to Bologna and back for Lamborghini's 30th anniversary party last year — but don't imagine he must have owned a string of supercars. His last steed was a Renault 5.

Collings allows roughly £1000 a year for routine maintenance and repairs — his car has been fettled by Portman Lamborghini in Surrey (0784 473002) — and the other specialists we spoke to confirmed it's a realistic figure for any of these cars, assuming they're being used as a second car and annual mileage doesn't exceed 5000. Insurance on that basis is surprisingly reasonable, providing the driver is over 25 with a good record and the car is garaged. You should certainly get comprehensive cover for well under a grand.

So far, so good. But there'd be no point if the cars weren't a blast to drive. Each of them was spawned almost a quarter of a century ago, let's not forget, and the rose-tinted spectacles should be shut away in the glovebox when you slide behind the wheel. Can they still live up to the dream?

You sit low down in the Merak, on big, comfy though not terribly supportive seats, the high scuttle and waistline and the acres of shiny vinyl trim in contrasting dark brown and tan making the cockpit feel just a mile oppressive. The dramatically sculpted fascia — like rock carved by wind, as road test ed Barker put it — and the abundance of dials and switches tell you you're sitting in something special, and it's a good driving position — there's even a left foot rest — spoiled only by limited headroom which leaves a six footer with his hair brushing the pleated leather headlining.

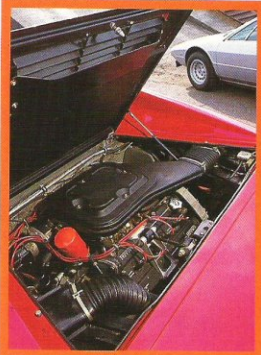
All three engines are carb-fed; all were well warmed through when we tried them and started with minimal fuss. Indeed, it was surprising just how easy it was to settle into each car and begin to enjoy their performance after just a few minutes' acquaintance. The Maserati's V6 sounds relaxed, almost languid, certainly not highly strung like some Italian



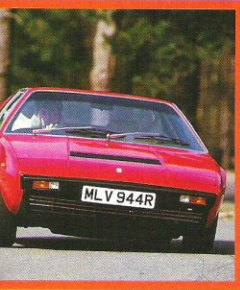
machinery, and it puts in a solid rather than a dazzling performance. Peak torque of 199lb ft is at 4000rpm and partly out of deference to owner Peter Earl we kept the revs below 5500rpm, though it's redlined 1000rpm higher.

In fact the V6 seems to enjoy being revved, sounding in no way strained at 5500rpm, the mellow exhaust note finally making itself heard with a muted snarl, but really all the punch is there in the mid-range and it's adequate for cutting and thrusting through modern traffic, if not truly exhilarating. The clutch is light, thanks to those hydraulics, but just a touch snatchy; the gearshift deft enough if lacking the precision feel of its rivals.

The Maserati rides well, its all-wishbone and coil-sprung suspension proving adept at soaking up ridges and small bumps and providing fine composure at high speed. Where the Merak disappoints is on tightly twisting roads. Initial steering response is promising, a flick of the wrists sees it turn-in nimbly enough, but beyond half a turn it weights-up quite



● **Dino GT4 has mid-engined V8 with 255bhp and makes the glorious wailing noise that you hoped it would**



**Dino chassis is marvellous; it's used, fluid and rewarding**

alarmingly, making it feel less than wieldy. It feels like a heavy car, and it rolls more than the others; push on and it begins to roll into lazy, well-telegraphed but rather uncomfortable oversteer. The truth is, the Merak doesn't really want to whoop it up on twisting, twining secondaries, being more at home on fast, sweeping A-roads, where the driver can savour its civility and easy-going nature. What comes as a shock, even when you've been warned what to expect, is Citroën's hydraulic braking system. The pedal really is more akin to a switch; with practice you learn to brush it, but the required delicacy doesn't come naturally and we'd prefer conventional servo assistance.

How very different is the Ferrari. The interior looks almost stark after the Maserati, but its simplicity, typified by the matt alloy dash with clear black-on-white instruments, is nonetheless appealing, and it is certainly more airy — rearward visibility is quite excellent for a mid-engined car. It's also the only one of the three whose rear seats look more than tokens, though

they're still strictly for kids. The driving position isn't great — pedals offset to the left, knees bent, arms stretched — and the tiny bucket seat is neither particularly comfortable nor especially supportive, but you can forgive it almost everything the moment you fire up the quad-cam V8 and slot the gearstick into dog-leg first in that open chromed gate.

After the Merak, the 308 feels almost viciously accelerative, and as you clack your

● **Chiselled Dino shape lacks usual Ferrari swooping curves but still has tremendous presence**



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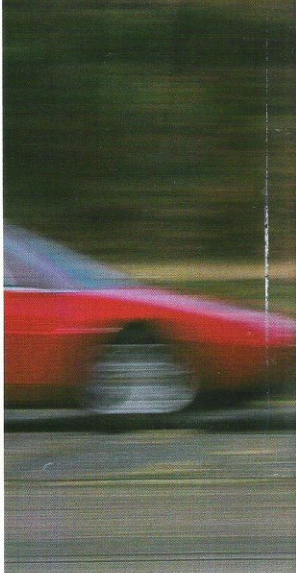
● **Outrageous Lamborghini interior doesn't work very well, but still feels special**

way up through the tightly stacked ratios, left foot lunging down onto the meaty but progressive clutch, right flinging the tach needle into the lightly shaded red at 7500rpm every time, the engine wails its heart out and you know this is the real thing — Ferrari's pocket supercar has been touched by Maranello's magicians, and you can't help but give it its head.

The steering's not especially quick, nor very communicative for that matter, but there's no doubting the class of the Dino chassis. Grip

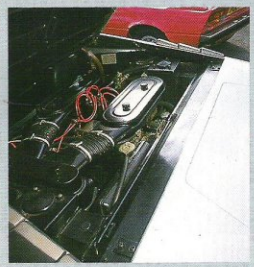
isn't great but the handling is — poised, fluid, all the things you'd hope for — and it falls gently into oversteer that's neatly gathered up with a dab of reverse lock. Just beware snapping the throttle shut, for then the rear moves out of line very quickly indeed. The ride feels almost racer-raw after the Maser, and the Dino jinks and darts over poor surfaces, but this is a car you really have to drive. I couldn't get enough of it.

The Urraco, in metallic silver, is like a Seventies time capsule, especially with those



SPECIFICATIONS	DINO 308GT4	URRACO P250	MERAK SS
ENGINE	Mid-mounted transverse V8	Mid-mounted transverse V8	Mid-mounted longitudinal V6
CAPACITY	3 litres	2.5 litres	3 litres
CYLINDER HEADS	dohc per bank 2 valves per cyl	dohc per bank 2 valves per cyl	dohc per bank 2 valves per cyl
FUELLING	4 Weber carbs	4 Weber carbs	3 Weber carbs
MAX POWER	255bhp @ 7700rpm	220bhp @ 7500rpm	220bhp @ 6500
MAX TORQUE	210lb ft @ 5000rpm	166lb ft @ 5750rpm	199lb ft @ 4500
GEARBOX	5 speed manual	5 speed manual	5 speed manual
SUSPENSION	Double wishbones front and rear	MacPherson struts and lower wishbones front and rear	Double wishbones front and rear
STEERING	Rack and pinion 3.25 turns I-I	Rack and pinion 4.25 turns I-I	Rack and pinion 3.5 turns I-I
WHEELS AND TYRES	14in alloys Michelin XDX 205/70 VR front and rear	14in alloys Michelin XWX 205/70 VR front and rear	15in alloys Michelin XWX 195/70 VR front 215/70 rear
UNLADEN WEIGHT	2800lb	2500lb	2911lb
POWER TO WEIGHT	204bhp/ton	197bhp/ton	169bhp/ton
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>			
0-60MPH	6.5secs	7.2secs	7.7secs
MAX SPEED	154mph	149mph	145mph
<b>COSTS</b>			
MINT CONDITION	£25,000	£25,000	£20,000
ABOVE AVERAGE	£18,000	£19,000	£15,000
FAIR (BUYER BEWARE!)	£13,000	£10,000	£10,000
ESTIMATED ALLOWANCE	£1000	£1000	£900
FOR SERVICING, 1 YR	£587.50	£1547.16	£881.25
REPLACEMENT CLUTCH INC FITTING AND VAT	£117.50	£185.38	£229.13
REPLACING BRAKE PADS INSURANCE 1 yr*	£800	£800	£850

\* Insurance quote from Allen & Allen Hyperperformance (tel 081 941 7551) for classic car policy, annual mileage limited to 5000, used as second car. Quote for male, lecturer, 30, living Cambridge, 3 yrs NCB, clean record, car garaged



● **Urraco's 2.5-litre V8 has the power but the glory lies in the noise it makes**

outrageous louvres and slats over the rear deck. Like the original Countach it has aged well; unlike the Countach, it wasn't around long enough to have its purity of line wrecked by bulging wheelarch blisters and other addenda. Its interior is quite outrageous, the designers untroubled by ergonomic niceties — with the speedometer at one extreme of the broad dash and the rev counter at the other, only Marty Feldman would have made any sense of it all. The driving position leaves plenty to be desired, too: pedals offset to the left and too close in relation to the wheel, and a seat that offers all the support and grip of a camping stool. But it looks and feels special, and that's what really matters.

Glance over your right shoulder, and rear three-quarter visibility's pretty poor. Glance



**Lamborghini's design is a wonderful combination of the Seventies supercar**

your left and there's the slightly disturbing sight of a Lamborghini V8 pressing its nose up against the rear window. It looks like an exhibit in a glass case and, oh boy, what a jewel of an engine it is. It'll see off those annoying hot hatches in a tight line fight, though it's not quite in the same league as the Dino's V8. And it revs every gear keenly, right round to 7500 if you like. But what really sets this engine apart is the noise it makes, quite unlike anything else you're ever likely to hear in a road car. Somewhere between a Formula 1 car and an Italian aerobike, it pounds out a woofing bass beat and builds to a yowling crescendo as the revs wing into the red yonder. It might become tiring on long journeys, but in short bursts it's truly spellbinding.

The rest of the car, hardly surprisingly, can't quite live up to the engine. The gearlever clacks around its gate like the Dino's without ever feeling quite as satisfying as it slots home. The brakes don't bite with the same conviction. The ride, however, is more supple than the Ferrari's without feeling any less taut when hussled, but the Urraco's chassis, with MacPherson struts and lower wishbones, can't match the Dino's fluid responses and at the limit of grip it's prone to plough on. Matthew Collings reports that the tail can be provoked into a slide but once it's gone past a certain point the car spins like a top. You should treat all of these cars with the respect you would an old Porsche 911 (and it has to be said, none of them communicates with the clarity of a 911.)

For a trio of cars with such superficial commonality, their true characters could hardly be more different. The Maserati is the smoothy, the GT of the group. It would be the one to take on long journeys on sweeping primaries, where

its strong mid-range, compliant ride and cosseting interior would come into their own. It is a car of great style and genuine charm, but its lack of brio leaves us wanting more.

The Lamborghini has the most startling looks, inside and out, and one of the most exhilarating engines you'll find anywhere. It shouts 'supercar' more loudly than the other two, and for many that will be enough. Barker called it 'fabulous — a boyhood dream that lived up to my expectation' and that speaks volumes.

But in the end we were both agreed. The car we'd buy if it were our twenty grand would be the 308GT4. Even if you took away the Ferrari badge, the combination of that powertrain and that chassis would make a convincing argument. The ability to see off the hot hatch brigade, the usable rear seats, the excellent visibility, all these things add fuel. But throw in the prancing horse and suddenly there's no need to argue at all. ○

● **Lambo needs respect — it's the most intimidating of the three and if provoked will tailslide past the point of no return**

