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ITALIAN BEAUTY BACK IN AFRICA

Maserati is competing for more traction on the competitive South African roads and the stylish Ghibli is leading that charge.

BY DEREK WATTS

Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati. There is an exciting ring to those names, but that ring comes at a price.

And you can expect to forfeit a dowry of more than \$200,000 to marry into the top-end of these Italian families.

But there is a classy cousin with style, performance and the badge that turns heads... coming in at around a third of the asking price – a shade over \$80,000.

The Maserati Ghibli is offering Italian supercar style and status in the luxury executive car segment after an absence of nearly two decades.

Clearly in the sights of the new entry-level Maserati are the Mercedes Benz E-Class, BMW's 5 Series, Audi's A6, the Jaguar XF and a host of other sporty saloons which have a slightly leaner price tag.

If the name Ghibli seems familiar, it was originally a V8 Grand Tourer released in 1967 and then a four-seater coupe in 1992.

It seems that Maserati, now nestling under the massive Fiat Chrysler empire, decided a few years ago to do something special for its 100th birthday and build a scaled-down Quattroporte limo for the moderately well heeled.

And, like the wind it is named after, the Ghibli has blown apart all the tired sales figures for the brand.

In automotive terms it doesn't really make sense, especially in recent years of conservative global growth, and at times decline.

It's hard to comprehend that Maserati sold a mere 6,200 units in 2012 and almost seven times that number last year – with the Ghibli clearly leading the charge for growth.

And that's before the next major model release, the Levante luxury SUV arrives to cross swords with the Porsche Cayenne and Range Rover Sport.

Specs

Type: V6 3.0 litres
Power: 345hp @ 5,250rpm (257kW)
Torque: 369lb/ft @ 1,750 - 4,500rpm (500Nm)
Induction: Turbocharged
Power / weight ratio: 142.1W/kg
Fuel type: Premium
CO₂ emissions: 4,460kg/year
Transmission: 8-speed automatic
Drivetrain: RWD
0-100 km / h: 5.6s
Top speed: 266km/h

Photos by Nattakit Jeerapatmaître / Shutterstock.com

Headly days for the assembly line at the new Giovanni Agnelli plant in Turin and also some extra shifts for Ferrari, in Modena, crafting the Maserati-designed engines.

It's a belated tribute to the Maserati brothers, Alfieri, Bindo, Carlo, Mario, Ettore and Ernesto, who were all involved with automobiles from the beginning of the 20th century.

It was all about racing in the formative years. Then in 1926 the production of two-liter Grand Prix cars for Diatto was suspended and the first Maserati was engineered bearing the now famous marque.

When you see the Ghibli in the flesh you may want to give Marco Tencone, head of design since 2009, a pat on the back.

It may be called an entry level Maserati, but it lines up against the big guns on the showroom floor without any reflection of the smaller dent in your bank balance.

Its eye-catching, flowing lines which radiate from the iconic, but rather daunting, grille hold your breath all the way to the menacing exhausts without ending in a disappointing Panamera-like rear.

What I like about the interior is the classic simplicity. Essentialism rules in this design, where no controls are there for the sake of fashion, the dials are stark and clear and the multimedia screen and system is superbly logical.

But don't mistake a lack of frills with a lack of exclusivity and craftsmanship.

"The fact is that, with Maserati, you bespoke your car. The combinations are endless and it's not a luxury car unless you can personalize and tailor it for the specific customer," says Rens Rademeyer, General Manager at Maserati Johannesburg.

"The focus is on the quality of workmanship and materials."

To be honest, I was expecting a rather sedate drive in the Ghibli S. But the acceleration is rampant and at times it's difficult not to wheel spin at the lights.

All the Ghibli models, including the ground-breaking diesel, are powered by V6 3-liter twin turbo engines. The five-second S gets that extra boost thanks to some fine engine mapping and components.

The Ghibli's V6 3.0 litre engine



On the negative side, there was a perceptive turbo lag which seemed to be minimized in manual and the rather sturdy oversized paddles are a lot more fun to communicate directly with the eight-speed ZF transmission.

That's possibly why the gear selector seemed a tad finicky and seemed to stray into manual if not closely monitored.

The ride is superbly smooth and the Ghibli glides over the plethora of city speed humps without the neck-jarring suspension of some competitors.

And, on a rather personal level, my ungainly two-meter frame felt ever-so snugly cosseted on those painstakingly padded and stitched seats.

Even if you're not behind the wheel of a Quattroporte, there is a distinct brand cachet. Without being too esoteric, beyond the nuts and bolts of manufacture, there is an element of prestige riding behind the trident badge. You notice it in the attention of a petrol pump attendant or even the nod of acknowledgement from a fellow motorist at the lights.

But here's the rub. Even with projections of a ceiling of 75,000 models (across the range), Maserati will battle to keep up with the fast developing technology of the major German luxury trio.

To put it blatantly, you may look like a million dollars in your Ghibli but you will be missing many standard features of the mass produced rivals.

That is the trade-off.

"A lot of these so-called features are gimmicks," says Rademeyer. "We are giving our customers a pure driving experience, we are not selling smartphones."

Rademeyer extends the same personal service to the new showroom, in the plush Johannesburg suburb of Bryanston, where he pilots the Italian coffee machine to turn out a pretty mean cappuccino. All the staff have to train as baristas.

But maybe they should offer customers a Foster's lager after hours. That's because the franchise holders for Maserati in South Africa are now European Automotive Imports (EAI), who are aiming to build on their success with the brand in Australia.

"Our goal is to transform Maserati's position in the South African market to offer a new benchmark for exclusivity and customer service," says EAI Chief Operating Officer, Glen Sealey.

"We have been very successful in Australia and our appointment in South Africa is an outstanding vote of confidence and a clear acknowledgement that we have the people and expertise to succeed."

What this means is that Maserati is no longer under the wing of Ferrari and is flying solo.

Maserati re-enters South Africa with its complete model offering of the Quattroporte, GranTurismo and GranCabrio ranges.

A Maserati dealership has just opened in Cape Town, on the foreshore near the International Convention Centre, and plans are underway to find a partner in Durban.

Perhaps the critical element of the expansion is to ensure that the resale values stabilize and servicing standards are up to scratch.

"Globally, the brand is ramping up all the dealer management and customer relationship systems," says Rademeyer.

"But the systems are there to help us manage relationships with our customers, so we don't depend on automation. But it helps us to manage the personal interaction with our customers. We have volume aspirations but will never be a brand-considered mass-produced [car]."

It's a swaying tightrope that Maserati have to walk between the prestige of the trident badge and bidding for a bigger slice of the market segment.

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