

TOUR DE FORCE

**Ferrari's stunning new GT, the Roma, is
nothing less than la dolce vita on wheels**



In the Roma, it felt as if the whole car in all its super-powered glory was accessible to the average driver without being overwhelming or risking loss of control

What kind of car is that?" asks the man at the next petrol bowser as we both wait for our tanks to fill.

"It's a Ferrari."

The man, who is filling a huge luxury SUV, raises himself on his toes to get a better look at the sleek hunk of low-down metal at the next bowser and says, "No way that's a Ferrari."

After I assure him it is indeed said make, pointing to the iconic yellow prancing horse logo on the wheels, he looks positively astonished. "That's the most beautiful Ferrari I've ever seen."

He's not alone in his reaction. This is a Ferrari Roma, the latest addition to the supercar maker's line-up and the company proudly says it was conceived to be a F1 car in an evening suit. Bloomberg called it "the most beautiful new car" of the year; *Top Gear* said it was "a progressive-looking, beautifully proportioned car"; and even the design bible *Architectural Digest* chimed in on the Roma, labelling it "gorgeous".

Flavio Manzoni, design director at Ferrari, has said his goal with the design of the Roma was to produce a car of "understated elegance", a vehicle that made retro relevant again, and to "reanimate the classic idea of *la dolce vita*" in a motorcar.

Federico Fellini's three-hour epic *La Dolce Vita* is universally acknowledged as the most stylish film ever made, and when it premiered it lit a creative and cultural spark in Italy that is still glowing today. As Italy emerged from the devastation and consequent poverty of World War II to grasp a new prosperity (*il boom*, as the Italians call it), the country also came to symbolise a fresh, carefree and fashionable existence with Rome as its epicentre. Not only did *La Dolce Vita* win the Palme d'Or at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival, its title entered the English language to denote a new libertarian and glamorous lifestyle.

Accordingly, Rome became the most desirable destination in Europe, and with that an influx of American movie stars descended on the city to work in the film studio Cinecittà, built by Mussolini on the outskirts of the city. It became known as Hollywood on the Tiber. As well as Fellini's star, the Swedish actress Anita Ekberg, Orson Welles, Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando, Ava Gardner, and perhaps most famously, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, made Rome their playground. The ancient city turned into a mecca for the rich, famous and beautifully dressed. Rome, in the public consciousness, became a world centre for the good life, a home to those who appeared to know innately how to enjoy themselves at a leisurely pace, surrounded by beautiful things. It's this spirit that Ferrari is trying to evoke with its new grand tourer.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the rich and fabulous in Rome in the 1960s got about the Italian countryside in equally beautiful vehicles. It was a period that saw Ferrari produce some of its most stunning cars.

There have always been two types of Ferraris: those designed to perform on a race track and those that are meant to be enjoyed on the road. While Ferrari won the Le Mans 24 Hour endurance race seven times between 1958 and 1965, market demand at the time was actually for grand tourers – cars that married the glamour of Italian design and luxury with the performance cred of a race car.

Essentially, a grand tourer, or GT, is a road car, and a rather special one at that. It has a big, powerful engine up front (horses pull a Ferrari GT rather than push it), a comfortable and luxurious interior that can often accommodate four people, and a decent-sized boot, as these cars are designed for travelling long distances in comfort. Grand tourers,



where style and elegance in design were prioritised above all other elements (performance is a given with a Ferrari), have existed as a car category since the 1920s, but it was in the 1960s that they hit their peak.

Ferrari has been a leader in the GT business pretty much from its inception. Enzo Ferrari, who founded the company in 1947, quickly realised that the global rich would pay handsomely for road-bound versions of his race-winning cars. But something happened in the mid-1970s and the trend in sports car design moved towards pure performance, which, given the aerodynamics needed to achieve it, dictated the shape of the cars.

The Roma, however, is a return to form for Ferrari's road cars – it's an elegant and stylish grand tourer brimming with character. Its design, however, is far from retro for the sake of nostalgia. While the overall look of the car, with its long front, echoes the design of classic Ferraris from the 1960s, the side contours that sweep from the front to the back give it an almost monolithic feel. The side lines culminate in horizontal LED headlights and a unique perforated grille that finishes the car like an arrow or a shark's nose. The rear is truly a thing of beauty. The lines of the short deck rear with the tail lights set like jewels have an almost minimalist purity.

Ferrari calls this a two-plus-two car when it comes to the seat configuration. Technically it means the car has two rear seats, but you're unlikely to find an adult who can fit into them. You also won't want to. Sitting in the front passenger seat is a thrilling experience as close to driving the car as you can get without actually driving it. The two front seats have been created like separate symmetrical cells – one for the driver and one for the passenger – in a



dual cockpit design that has the effect of making the passenger feel like an active participant in the driving. An optional touchscreen in front of the passenger can be used to interact with some of the car's on-board driving systems, such as the music, navigation and seat functions. The front seats are oriented so far back that you feel like you're positioned over the rear wheels with the huge hood extending out in front.

The interior is thoroughly modern, with nearly every button replaced with a capacitive touch surface, from the starter to the mirror adjustments. The steering wheel is packed with functions in keeping with Ferrari's "eyes on the road, hands on the wheel" philosophy. You can operate many functions without taking your hands away from the driving position on the wheel. The instrument cluster is now entirely digital, and the display screen can be personalised and is easily navigated by the steering wheel controls. One retro touch to the interior styling is the centre gear shifter, which has been designed to look like an old-fashioned metal-gated shifter, but each gate in the "shifter" is a button that you push to engage drive, reverse, and so forth. The gears can also be operated manually with the steering wheel paddles. Even getting in and out of the car has been stylishly considered – the exterior door handles are flush with the panels and a push button on the inside opens the door.

We decided to put the Roma to the ultimate grand tourer test and drove from inner-city Sydney with its traffic-clogged streets to the open roads of Exeter in the NSW Southern Highlands, a leisurely two-hour, 150km drive. It's exactly the sort of excursion and lifestyle the car was designed for. Our destination: a chic, modernist house designed by Intermode, a division of the Melbourne based architecture and design firm Carr. Intermode is as unique in the architect-designed house world as Ferrari is in the grand tourer realm. It's a modular home design system (as distinct from pre-fabricated construction) that offers clients high-end design that can be delivered in a predictable timeframe and at a predictable cost without sacrificing detail, finish or function. We thought the clean and simple lines of the house would be the perfect complement to the Ferrari Roma, and the sort of house that evokes an Australian version of the *la dolce vita* lifestyle.

While the Roma, powered by a 3.9-litre twin turbo 611-horsepower V8 engine, really comes into its own on a highway, it is equally at home on busy city streets with their stop-start traffic as well as on winding country roads. Of course it has the distinctive Ferrari bark when you start it up, but it quickly settles into a subtly powerful gurgle. The steering is so smooth around every corner, while the turbocharged engine quickly delivers plenty of power when needed. Driving a car built for performance often feels like playing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* on a Stradivarius: it sounds nice, but you're all the while aware that you're not using the instrument to its fullest capacity. In the Roma, however, it felt as if the whole car in all its super-powered glory was accessible to the average driver without being overwhelming or risking loss of control.

Fellini once told a reporter that his mother wanted him to be an architect or a doctor rather than a filmmaker. "But I'm quite happy being an adjective," he said. *La Dolce Vita*, now similarly evokes an elusive concept more than an actual lifestyle. "Owning" the Ferrari Roma for a mere 48 hours, though, was enough to convince this driver that the closest one can get to experiencing the good life in Italy might actually be touring the back roads of Australia. ☺

The Ferrari Roma starts at \$409,888

The centre gear shifter, bottom, is a retro touch. The steering wheel, below

