

Opinion: Ferrari gets almost too much right about Calif.

By Joe Mathews

When I got the keys to California, I floored the accelerator until I was driving 100 mph.

I felt exhilaration—and fear. This speed was totally unfamiliar to someone who has spent his life driving beaten-up Toyotas. In California we like to think we can go as fast as our imaginations can take us, but this shiny red convertible named California moved too fast for me.



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Ferrari let me drive the Ferrari California T for four rainy January days. I requested the loaner because I thought it might provide some escapist fun at a difficult time for our country, and because I'm old enough to deserve a mid-life crisis. But for journalistic purposes, I wanted to know whether a car could really embody California. I suspected the folks in Maranello, Italy, where Ferrari makes its cars, might just be using our state's name to sell a pretty automobile.

My suspicions were wrong. The Ferrari California is as wonderful as our state's most kaleidoscopic dreams. The only problem is that Ferrari's California is so damn perfect it keeps reminding you of our state's imperfections.

The Ferrari California aligns with the state on the level of metaphor. California is famously the “Great Exception” among American states, as the 20th century author Carey McWilliams named it, and California is an exception among Ferraris. It is not the most expensive, glamorous or fastest Ferrari. Instead, Ferrari markets the California as practical and versatile.

The California is not a sports car, but a convertible grand touring car—with eight cylinders instead of the 12 of some other Ferraris—that is built for comfort, which makes sense if you’re a Californian often stuck in traffic. It’s got two doors, but also enough space in back to fit two children’s car seats.

“It is a little bit an exception,” Edwin Fenech, the president and CEO of Ferrari North America, told me by phone. “It’s able to be very versatile. You can go to the grocery store with your car.”

Fenech said that versatility shouldn’t detract from the car’s mystique, or California’s. He added pointedly that, as self-driving—or autonomous—vehicles emerge, Ferrari wanted to affirm its support for Californians determined to steer their own cars.

“We are the ones who are going to defend the right to drive,” Fenech told me. “Don’t brainwash the new generation with autonomous driving—it’s so beautiful, driving.”

Today’s Ferrari California draws not just on our love for driving, but on our infatuation with everything mid-20th century. Ferrari produced three different California models between 1957 and 1967. The car became such a valuable collector’s item (some have sold for \$20 million or more) that Ferrari revived the brand in 2008.

The newest iteration, the Ferrari California T, was introduced for the 2015 model year. It’s designed with a dual-clutch automatic transmission and a technologically advanced

suspension, which makes it easy to navigate through dense neighborhoods in America's most urban state. And the T stands for Turbo, as in the twin-turbo, 3.9-liter engine, which can still get the car to 196 mph, but uses less fuel and produces fewer emissions.

The Ferrari representative encouraged me to test its California-ness. So I drove it 90 minutes through bumper-to-bumper traffic to Santa Monica. I navigated potholes in downtown L.A. I went through the In-N-Out drive-through, complete with the requisite in-car consumption of a double-double. I chauffeured my kids to school, and secured in their car seats in the back. And I carted luggage and golf clubs in the trunk.

I felt far safer while driving the Ferrari in a rainstorm than I do with my usual ride, a 5-year-old Prius. With the top down, I loved the way that the car connected me with other drivers and pedestrians, who offered a thumbs-up and asked what the car was. And I've never had an automotive experience happier than driving up Angeles Crest Highway, with the radio playing R.E.M.'s "Electrolite" ("Hollywood is under me. I'm Martin Sheen. I'm Steve McQueen. I'm Jimmy Dean").

Of course, the car, like many wonderful California things, fails the core test of accessibility: the base MSRP of the Ferrari California T is \$198,973. The one I drove costs \$240,000. By Ferrari standards, that's a bargain (the hybrid La Ferrari sells for well over \$1 million), which is by design: half of Ferrari California buyers are new to the brand. But the car I was driving would cost this nonprofit journalist more than three years' take-home pay.

Which is another thing that makes the California very Californian. The good life is highly visible throughout our state. But only a few can afford more than a brief ride.

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