

# love at first DRIVE



By Mark Porter

PASTEL coloured medieval villages perch precariously on rugged clifftops high above the Med, while below elegant seaside towns flirt with the shoreline. Fishing boats and pleasure craft sit silent in the slack tide while lunch is taken in the shade of a lazy Ligurian afternoon.

Terracotta roofs and green shutters block out the heat while pine forests rise steeply from the hillside and disappear into the cool of the mountainous hinterland. This was a coastline for rich Brits in the 19th century: Imperia, Alassio and Savona were the places to be seen before Lord Bougham and his caravan upped sticks and took their business to the Côte d'Azur instead. This fabulous drive along the Italian Riviera remains unaffected by the tragedy at Genoa as there is an alternative motorway west of the Morandi bridge taking you to the great port before reconnecting with the autostrada.

We are admiring the scene from the cockpit of the Maserati Ghibli as we speed along the autostrada in the direction of Tuscany and Florence. These tantalising

vistas are cruelly punctuated by sodium lit concrete tunnels and Pierre-Marie and I count no fewer than 234 of them between Nice and Florence. They may be great feats of engineering opening up the Corniches of the French and Italian Riviéras, but they are boring to drive through as you have to keep taking your sunglasses off, only to put them on again as you emerge into the blinding sunshine.

"The engine sounds great in the tunnel," says 11 year-old Pierre-Marie. He has a point. A team of engineers at Modena, where big brother Ferrari build the engines that go in the Maserati, have sculpted and tweaked the tubes and valves in such a way as to create an Ode to Joy for the petrolhead. I know this because I have dined with the engineer responsible. He was with Maserati's top brass in Monaco last November, when they launched the new Ghibli.

When you ease off the accelerator a high-pitched scream coupled with a low rumble, and accompanying burbles emanate from the darkest recesses of the engine. It is a sound that turns heads.

We are testing the Ghibli S GranLusso, which at 430bhp is 80bhp more powerful

than the baseline V6 twin turbo: the difference in 0-60 performance is 5.5 seconds, with the S taking 4.9 seconds. The result is a comfortable road tourer that is also a performance car. Our model was as quick but more refined than the F-Type Jaguar convertible I had previously driven from Cannes to Paris, on the famous Route Napoléon (though for fun the Jag marginally pips it).

On a hill looking down on the Renaissance capital of Florence lies the small and ancient city of Fiesole. Dating back to 300BC, it is less ravaged by the madding crowds than the ancient home of the Borgias. On the edge of the city is a 15th century former monastery, some of whose architecture and carvings are attributed to Michelangelo, no less. This is the Villa San Michele, now a temple to five-star comfort.

From its vine clad terrace you can look south and 10km below you in the shimmering heat you can see the Duomo and the rest of Florence spread out like a giant canvas. The Villa's sacred spaces have become an art gallery, luxury suites, a restaurant of fine standing and a discreetly tucked away swimming pool

## The Maserati Ghibli proves the perfect vehicle for an immersive, all-senses discovery tour of the French and Italian Rivieras



ON A HIGH: Florence, above, is a grand destination for a grand tour; Villa San Michele, left and far left, is a temple to five-star comfort.

of near Olympic dimensions. Terraces of vegetation are immaculately tended, but the monks have given way to big spenders.

The Villa San Michele, one of the exclusive Belmond group that includes the Orient Express, is one of those places where the scent of money mingles with the jasmine and honeysuckle on the warm night air. You can imagine F Scott Fitzgerald here, chronicling not the Jazz Age, but the Age of Plenty. Whoever the

guests are, they seem to be as stylish as they were silent. Even their children played quietly, and I am pleased to report that Pierre-Marie and Alexandra followed suit.

It was one of those occasions when I was grateful to hand over the Maserati fob rather than the battered one from my old Jag. We took some photos at the front of the hotel and 10-year-old Alexandra, an ace snapper, suggested doing one of me in mid-air. So I jumped, but unfortunately my

gammy right knee gave way and I fell into a rose bush. Before I could get to my feet the concierge and two others were standing over me, fearing the worst.

The drive down had been great fun, stopping for lunch in Portofino at the Hotel Splendido. We had stayed here before and ate once again on the terrace that overlooks the island where Domenico

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GLORIOUS: The view from Cenobio dei Dogi.



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Dolce and Stefano Gabbana have their holiday palace. A backdrop of countless films, Portofino is where Richard Burton and Liz Taylor twice tied the knot.

I had tested the whole range of Ghiblis on the Route Napoleon and the roads around Monaco late last year and noted that the Ghibli and Quattroporte are the first Maserati models to adopt the Integrated Vehicle Control (IVC) system by Bosch, which helps to prevent (rather than simply correct) vehicle instability.

This enhances safety, improves driving dynamics and delivers an even more thrilling performance. In other words you are a damned sight safer than you have any right to be when driving too fast.

Though I had had a splendid two days of driving around Monaco I had not had the chance to take one on a "Grand Tour" before. And where better than Florence?

I met Dr Laurence Aventin, a French art historian from Visite Florence, who took

me on a whirlwind tour of the Duomo and Ponte Vecchio, also showing me some of the fine artwork done by today's goldsmiths and jewellers in their tiny botteghe (workshops) on and around Florence's oldest bridge (built 1345). Afterwards we crossed the river Arno for a beer in the quiet streets near Brunelleschi's Santo Spirito Church, a quieter spot well worth visiting.

The next day we took an excellent tour, ArtViva, visiting the Accademia (Michelangelo's David is weirdly proportioned when you're up close), the Uffizi and just about as much as we could cram in. If you have only one day in which to do the culture then their "Florence In One Glorious Day" is the tour to go on.

On our third and last night we had a large family apartment in the via Tornabuoni, where all the A-list fashion houses are and where Guccio Gucci and Salvatore Ferragamo set up their original boutiques in the 1920s. Tuscany is renowned for its food and wine and one of the best places to

sample both is the Coquinarius, a trendy restaurant and vinotech in the via delle Gehe. Beef cheeks with caramelised onions and flageolet beans with a Macchiole red ... Brothers Luca and Igor Bettarelli are names to watch out for. The wine pairings are as interesting as the menu.

On the way back to Cannes we stopped half-way at Camogli, the handsome Ligurian port for a night at our favourite hotel there, the Cenobio dei Dogi, a 16th century palace built by the Doges of Genoa. Magnificent and yet informal, we swam from the private beach and dined on seafood in its restaurant overlooking the Golfo Paradiso. It was a glorious end to a glorious trip. ■



#### FAST FACTS

**Make:** Maserati  
**Model:** Ghibli S GranLusso

**How much:** £73,840  
**How fast:** 177mph  
**0-62:** 4.9 seconds  
**Economy:** 29.4mpg combined  
**Emissions:** 223g/km

#### TRAVEL

Mark and family travelled from Portsmouth to Bilbao with Brittany Ferries:  
[brittany-ferries.co.uk](http://brittany-ferries.co.uk)

#### ACCOMMODATION

Hotel Cenobio dei Dogi, Camogli, Liguria.  
[cenobio.it](http://cenobio.it) +39 0185 7241.

Belmond Villa San Michele, Fiesole nr Florence.  
[belmond.com](http://belmond.com) +39 055 5678200.

Tornabuoni Suites Collection, Florence.  
[tornabuonisuites.com](http://tornabuonisuites.com) +39 055 2346865.

Lunch in Portofino: Belmond Hotel Splendido.  
+39 0185 267801. [belmond.com](http://belmond.com)

Dinner in Florence: Coquinarius, via delle Gehe 11R, 50122 Florence. [coquinarius.it](http://coquinarius.it)  
+39 055 2302153.

#### TOURS

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