

"UNLEASH THE BELLOWING CAVALLI, ALL 440 OF THEM"

Red tape kept Maserati's stonking Group 4 Bora away from Le Mans but, as Marc Sonnery discovers, it could have been a real contender at La Sarthe

PHOTOGRAPHY: WARM-UP PHOTO



By the early '70s, motor sport was a distant memory inside the tall, black Maserati factory. Remnants of the last effort, the F1 Coopers-Maserati, were gathering dust elsewhere when Jean Thepenier, the French importer, made an unexpected request for a pair of racing Bora to take to Le Mans and to the 'Tour de France'.

Guy Mulleret, then Citroën's man in charge at Viale Ciro Menotti, wasn't sure what to make of this demand. Faced with Thepenier's passionate insistence he relented, but not before specifying in a letter to the importer that this was to be a strictly privateer effort and not to be portrayed in any way as an official factory entry.

Thus, two Group 4-spec Bora were built in 1972-73: AM117-3000 and AM117-3001. This was a bold step, because none of the new generation of Modenese sports cars – those with their muscle in the back – had been raced. Ferruccio Miara lacked rigidity, Alessandro Mangozzi had a 70% rearward weight bias, while Enzo's 365GT4 BB, with its engine perched high atop the gearbox, proved ill-handling and only became competitive much later as the BB LM. The De Tommaso Pantera would eventually be a viable Group 4 proposition, thanks more to its grunt than its dynamic abilities.

The Bora, however, was by far the best-handling of its ilk. It had a non-threatening character at the limit, artfully sorted according to ingegner Giulio Alinari's vision, with initial understeer turning into predictable oversteer in the hands of the competent. The late Alfieri, speaking in 1995, reflected on the workload at Maserati during the early '70s: "These racers were a big project. The two were essentially the same, but the first was a little different, particularly with the body and the suspension geometry. The biggest difficulty was the transformation of the body to accept the big wheels."

Starting with two standard Bora, the factory's tiny R&D department, led by chief technician Cino Grandi, started the vital task of shedding as much weight as possible. All superfluous luxury equipment – of which the Bora, as a GT rather than a Spartan sports car, had plenty – was culled as the Maserati lost 400 of its original 1650kg. The pop-up lights made way for fixed, covered lamps, steel for alloy, glass for Plexiglas, plus the chassis and panels were systematically drilled wherever rigidity allowed. The single most spectacular loss, however, was 100kg for the engine cover – which was singled out for attention after one blew off at Monza. Using a dry-sumped 4.9-litre block, engineers added four 461DA Webers, a 42mm diameter bespoke exhaust and an oil cooler assisted by two small fans. Power was up from 220 to 318bhp, but would later reach 428bhp with the addition of 301DA high-compression pistons, Ghilbi 4.9 carburetors, plus improved intake and exhaust manifolds. The brakes, after a review of what Ferrari fitted on its Group 4 Daytonas, consisted of big discs and Girling calipers – as fitted to the Lotus T70 MKIII and Ferrari 512M – but retaining the Citroën hydraulic power assistance. From beefed-up suspension pick-up points and hubs, stiffer springs and Koni shock absorbers hung far Campagnolo main shafts with 11in 26-15 Michelin up front and 13in 35-15s to the rear. Other than wider wheelarches to accommodate those gargantuan tyres, the body had



no modifications, and no spoilers were fitted. First to drive '3000', the completed Group 4 Bora, was ex-Le Mans winner Paul Prieré. The motoring journalist carried out a number of tests for Alinari, ostensibly for articles but in reality to help the ingegner get around the increasingly contrary attitude of tester Guerrino Bertocchi, who remained stuck in the leaf-spring era and was averse to mid-mounted engines. Despite having gear ratios more suited to faster circuits, the Bora's raw potential impressed the Belgian around the tight Modena Aerodromo. It was clear that the oil cooling needed to be improved, and Prieré's comments about an excessively stiff back end were duly noted, with a thinner rear anti-roll bar improving lap times. An unscheduled test soon afterwards by zinger Aedilio Cappel, head of the side motor (engine dyno room), who wanted to see for himself how the car ran, ended in the scenery with considerable damage to the Bora's nose. It was soon sorted, in time for French driver-journalist José Rosinski to sample the car for French magazine *Sport Auto* at Le Mans' small Bugatti circuit.

After being driven around by Frenchman François Migault, Thepenier's chosen driver for La Sarthe, and once he'd got used to the sensitive yet powerful brakes, Rosinski was impressed by its solid, user-friendly competence. How did it fare against the opposition? At a Monza test day, Migault outpaced Group 4 Daytonas – "We really had them worried," he says – with the advantage compounded by the Maramello charger's notorious brake fade, which allowed the Bora to brake far later thanks to its Citroën system's consistency. "Our car always braked at the same spot," says Grandi, "whereas the Ferrari braked earlier and earlier the more they ran." With the Bora's torque by then exceeding 360lb ft, Migault adjusted his driving style to brake a touch earlier and exploit the car's grunt on the exit. Guy Ligier, then collaborating with Citroën-Maserati by using SM engines in his JS2, also sampled the Bora while Jean-Pierre Jaussaud, a future double winner at La Sarthe, was selected as the team's second driver. The entries were filed for Le Mans in 1973, then everything began to unravel. Firstly, GT



Muscular wheelarches cover vast 11in-wide front and 13in rear tyres. Below: left interior remains civilian; '3000' is one of two Group 4 Bora built



'AT MONZA, MIGAULT OUPACED THE GROUP 4 DAYTONA, THE CITROËN SYSTEM ALLOWING THE BORA TO BRAKE LATER'

homologation required a minimum of 500 cars to be produced per annum, a figure the Bora could not achieve. According to Grandi, what blocked homologation at that point was not the ramoured political opposition by Ferrari, concerned about the potential of its rival from up the road, but the refusal by Maserati's Citroën management to be creative with the trash in the Italian motor sport tradition. The risk of a loss of face for Maserati in case of a protest by rival manufacturers was not an option. There was, however, special dispensation from the organizers of the 'Tour de France, who were keen to see these impressive beasts take part and agreed to let the Bora race in the prototype class. But more bad news was to come as Migault, returning home late at night after a day of Tour de France reconnaissance in a standard Bora, was involved in a nasty crash and suffered a broken knee when a drunk driver pulled out in front of him. As if that wasn't enough, Thepenier's business partner then vanished with the team's budget. The plucky outfit's career was over before it had even begun. Migault tried to put together a programme for the Bora to race in the USA, with Maserati importer Bob Grosman – himself a former driver – keen to get involved to boost sales, but it all came to naught. Thepenier's financial difficulties spiralled into bankruptcy and one of his backers, Frenchman Philippe Cornet Epinat, took ownership of '3000'.

With its completion by then no longer a priority, '3001' was not ready until August 1973. Thepenier was neither in the position nor any mood to pay, so arranged for it to be sold and the car was sent – still unused – to Saudi Arabia, where it sat idle for a number of years apart from the odd outing on the beach. It was freed from this fate by US enthusiast and connoisseur Bob Rafkin, who took it home to Long Island, New York and repaired it silver, before finances made him reconsider the restoration and sell it to Marseilles dealer Jean Guikas.

The Bora was cosmetically sound but in need of a rebuild, which was completed in 1991 by Simon de Launour and his team at Paul Ricard. Guikas campaigned '3001' on the '91 Tour Auto with compatriot François Fabre who, despite not



Here: carbs, hot cams, high-compression pistons and improved manifolding transform '3000' into Bora's torquey 428bhp V8 into a 428bhp/crasher



Leading engine cover saved 100kg. Bora notes sweet handling with huge grip. Below: Cornet's front wing, Mignault's helmet (right) and Mignault's Bora at Mugello.

being comfortable with the brakes in the wet, bought the car after the event. In contrast to '1000', which has led an eventful life, '1001' remains largely original, down to its powered brakes and Le Mans door number lights.

Back to '1000', however, and in the early 1980s Cornet E-pinat repainted the car red, had the engine detuned and began to use it on the road around Paris, plus once for a track day at Dijon-Prems. Then a schoolboy, I used to see '1000' every morning as my bus passed Theprier's premises and I would often visit the showroom. Its nose had rudely met a kerb and the grille incident had become a 'widet'. I asked to buy the last such insignia to adorn a racing Maserati for a long time and the badge was removed, but – typical teenager – I never collected it and to this day no new crest has been fitted.

In 1996, diehard Maserati enthusiast Guikoa once again appeared in the Group 4 Bora story when he bought '1000' from Cornet E-pinat. "It was still red and the engine barely creaked out 3000rpm," says Guikoa, "so I hardly used it. Then in 1999 the Ferrari Challenge became the Ferrari-Maserati Challenge. I asked Ferrari if it was eligible and it was, so I raced in 1999 at Spa with the detuned engine and came fourth behind the Group 4 Daytonas of Carlos Monteverde. Back from Spa, my mechanic, Bertholon, rebuilt the motor to original specification – you could then pull 7200rpm." That's significantly higher than the somewhat low-revving 'street' version, for which 5500rpm is the limit with occasional bursts to 6200rpm. An additional radiator was also fitted at that point to improve cooling.

Guikoa then took '1000' to the Nürburgring, where he led early on and finish third, before



winning both heats of that year's finale at Vallelunga. Naysayers were silenced, history was avenged, and a Swiss-German gentleman driver, Dominik Ellenrieder, begged Guikoa to sell him the car. Ellenrieder had it further tuned by Bertholon and removed the Citroën assistance, with the unfortunate result that he crashed first time out, on the first corner of the first lap. Once repaired '1000' was used sporadically before being traded back to Guikoa in summer 2004 against an ex-Filippinetti Ferrari 275GTB/4. Since then the car has used a replacement engine brought up to race spec – Guikoa still owns the original motor and will one day get it rebuilt.

A crash in a Ferrari on the 2004 Tour Auto took Guikoa out of action and '1000' was put away in his cavernous garage. "In 2007, Ferrari wanted the car to race again and contacted me," recalls Guikoa. "I took it to the Bugatti circuit at Le Mans but, having not driven it since 1999 and buying it back with its modifications, I realised that it did not brake at all. The engine ran well, but the rear suspension was too soft and I had an 'off' – the traces of which are still visible – but



somewhat qualified fifth. In the Saturday race I was fourth, but on Sunday it rained and I won very easily. The lack of brakes was not a handicap in the wet and, despite the eight-year-old rain-cut tyres, the competence of the Bora allowed me to win with something like a 22-second lead. It is quite an extraordinary car in the wet."

The car then languished in Guikoa's Marseilles collection until earlier this year, when he fitted an adapted servo and some more appropriate rear springs ahead of C'GSC's test session at Paul Ricard High Tech Test Track.

There is no time to get misty-eyed over the momentous occasion of driving the car I used to gawp at in Theprier's showroom 27 years ago, because the light is green and we only have an hour of track time. Guikoa does a few laps to ensure that all is as it should be, then it's my turn to wedge myself in. The bucket seat holds you in place well enough, but sits noticeably higher than the unusually long shell seats of the road version, which extend to below your knees. Here, it puts your helmet uncomfortably close to the roll-over bar that runs along the top of the

windscreen, with your knees bent to the pedals even with the seat in its rearmost position.

The steering column is hidden by the oval shroud from a Citroën SM – early examples of the Bora's V6-engined little sister Merak used SM dashboards – and the other unexpected sight is a leather gaiter on the gearlever. The gate beneath remains unchanged: first to the left and back on a dog-leg, then second to fifth in a conventional 'H' pattern. The brake pedal sits higher than the throttle, which Mignault – who has joined us to share his memories – says was not the case in period. Oh and yes, he was able to heel-and-toe with the Citroën system.

The dash is well laid out, with even a gearbox oil temperature gauge and the rev counter moved to the right into the spot occupied by the speedometer on road cars. The latter has been relocated to the bottom of the centre console rather than being deleted entirely, its presence explained by the need to avoid penalties during public-road sections on the 'Tour de France'. It is quite impractical to look at down there, though, so I was far too busy to even see if it worked.

Flick the plethora of ignition cut-off switches to 'On', push the starter and the V8 wakes with a mighty but not overbearing rumble. The sound has a lot of presence in the pits, yet even without carplugs it never gets excessively loud on the track. As it eases out of the pitlane for an exploratory lap the Bora feels surprisingly placid, the clutch not too heavy and the ZF gearchange requiring precision but aided by a good linkage that makes it neither heavy nor slow. The steering is light, not the most direct, but accurate, and the quad-cam engine's torque peaks noticeably

Ricard reloaded

Built in 1970 by the eponymous drinks maker, Paul Ricard has always been a great circuit for both drivers and spectators. After the death of its founder in 1992, the track was bought by Excalibur, which carried out extensive modernisation to relaunch the venue as the High Technology Test Track in 2002. New concepts in safety included abrasive asphalt run-off areas in place of gravel traps (below right) and Tecpro barriers instead of traditional tyre walls.

Homologated by the FIA in 2006, Paul Ricard HTTT became a safety reference point. After a change of management, 5000 grandstand seats were built over the winter of 2008/09 and the first public event was the launch of the 2009 Le Mans Series on 8 March. In November came the Grand Prix Historique de Provence, organised by Patrick Quintou. Safe and low-stress yet still exciting to drive, Paul Ricard is ideal for classics at events such as the 100 Tours du Castellet in March and the V de V races in April. It is also regularly used for club track days. For details or to book tickets, see www.circuitpaulricard.com



'THE PLIANT NATURE OF THE CHASSIS AND THE INCREASE IN AGILITY ARE OBVIOUS WITHIN THE FIRST FEW BENDS'

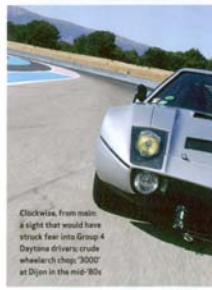
higher up the rev range than in its more docile road-going twin. It's at its best from 4-7000rpm, below that the hot cams bog down.

After a couple laps of familiarisation both with the controls and the vast, flat surroundings – the old Nürburgring or Cadwell Park is not – there is a chance to explore the potential of this mysterious chapter in Modenese history. The pliant nature of the chassis, allied to the huge increase in agility generated by the weight loss, are obvious within the first couple of bends. Decide to turn in and it obeys immediately; adjust your line mid-corner, even clumsily, and it remains unmoved, pushed like a sumo wrestler, daring you to plant it harder. Through the Beausset double right-hander it is perfectly poised, with masses of grip from the combination of perfectly tuned suspension and sticky Avons giving the confidence to unleash the bellowing *scavalli* earlier and earlier, all 420-440 of them.

The new brakes have an initial dead spot, then bite hard and become easy to modulate. Press the middle pedal firmly and you sense a distinct weight transfer that would demand caution when braking under steering load or in the wet. Rosinski mentioned the nose getting light at speed, but on the Mistral Straight it feels secure.

There have been any number of rule-bending racers that should never have been allowed to compete, so it is a tragedy that we were deprived the sight of a winning trident at La Sarthe. The Group 4 Bora is a compelling case of 'what might have been', and a quintessential example of the misfortune that dogged Maserati's racing history. Ultimately, the gear ratios are too tall for the short track we are using today, but it's easy to imagine what a formidable weapon this car would have been at Spa or Le Mans and the alarm it would have caused Panteras, Daytonas and 911s as it roared up in their mirrors. With good reason. No surprise, then, that Guikoa is reluctant to part with the Bora and is already looking ahead to next year's Le Mans Classic.

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Clockwise, from main: a sight that would have struck fear into Group 4 Daytonas drivers' crude wheelchairs 3000' at Dijon in the mid-70s