

# DARK HORSE?

by JAMES GENT

PHOTOGRAPHY by HARISANKER.S

*While the new Ferrari California T might handle better than the car it replaces, how will it get on against an Aston Martin Vanquish Volante?*



**CONSIDER IF YOU WILL** the most successful Ferrari of the last decade, for surely it is the award-winning 458 Italia, or its more track-orientated alter ego, the Speciale...?

Actually no. In purely financial terms, it's the California.

Hard to believe, right? During the original model's five-year life cycle, Ferrari's grand tourer sold

to more than 10,000 customers, 70 per cent of whom had never before owned a sports car with a prancing horse on the bonnet. Much of this came down to not only cachet (it was a Ferrari, after all) but also – by sports car standards at least – practicality, it offering four(ish) seats, lower fuel consumption and a boot capable of holding slightly more than a goldfish. It was, naturally, a model that made Ferrari purists baulk much as the Cayenne did with Porsche fans almost a decade earlier. For Maranello's accounts department though it was a godsend, offering a wider appeal than Ferrari had managed hitherto, and providing a more lucrative market share as a result.

Phrases like 'versatility' and 'fuel efficiency' similarly littered the company's official press garble when the second gen California made its debut last year. Unlike its oft-criticised predecessor however, the newboy came with sharper looks, more performance-orientated aerodynamics and – of course – an all-new twin-turbo V8, the first such unit fitted to a Ferrari since the F40 in 1987. Boasting 100bhp and nearly 200lb ft more than the outgoing naturally aspirated unit (but retaining the impressive L/100km figures), the new California

T promised improved dynamism but also marked the dawn of a new forced induction era at Ferrari. Purists once again were unimpressed, even if the technological significance for the company's future was hard to ignore.

By comparison, the all-new Aston Martin Vanquish Volante was welcomed with open arms. The first convertible version of Aston's top drawer grand tourer, the new Vanquish – now free of its Die Another Day stigma – featured Aston's new lightweight VH architecture, a revised – and sharper – Touchtronic 2 six-speed automatic gearbox, brakes lifted from the One-77 hypercar, and a retuned 6-litre V12. Moreover, it was also the first fully carbon fibre-skinned Volante in Aston's 100 year history, making it among the stiffest GT convertibles on the market. And possibly, the best.

One does wonder though if, with a new performance-orientated Ferrari California T on the prowl, the Aston Martin Vanquish Volante is still the sportiest convertible grand tourer available today. Only one way to find out...

It's approaching 5.30pm in our traditional Hatta hunting ground, and so far every razor sharp bodyline – regardless of angle – has offered yet more 'money shots' for photographer Hari as the sun in the sky begins to dip: indeed, so struck is he with our \$560K pair that we are still shooting when midnight has been and gone.

But now that we've come to the interior, the Aston has thrown up a problem. No matter what angle Hari tries, no matter how he folds himself into the passenger footwell to 'try something different', he's just not happy with the True Teal leather and upholstery. And I can't say I blame him. There are, I hasten to add, a further 31 upholstery options alongside this for any aspiring Vanquish owners out there. But unless you're particularly partial to smurf vomit, you'll probably want to avoid True Teal...



**'IT WAS A MODEL THAT MADE FERRARI PURISTS BAULK MUCH AS THE CAYENNE DID WITH PORSCHE FANS'**

Fortunately on the outside, both the Aston and the Ferrari offer our now slightly dulled corneas a look more befitting their famous badges. The sleek yet aggressive design that's been an Aston Martin crown jewel since the early 2000s has translated impressively from the Vanquish coupe to its sister convertible, and while I'll admit the rather awkward looking fabric roof is not the Volante's finest quality – the Ferrari's retracting hard top is far more elegant – the Vanquish Volante is up there as one of the finest looking sports cars on the planet. There's a marked difference between the new California T and its more rounded, 'cutesy' predecessor, but the bonnet grooves, borrowed 458 headlights and the pinched look at the rear is not what you would call elegant either.

While the Aston may have the looks though, it does have one colossal sticking point: at \$323K, the Vanquish Volante is \$15K more than its coupe sister and nearly \$90K more than the Ferrari. Admittedly the California's price more closely rivals that of Aston's V12 Vantage S, a car we've driven several times at evo Middle East. As a performance machine, it's a triumph. But a rock solid suspension setup, markedly less refinery and a gearbox that could rip a driver's sanity clean off the bone means that as a sporty GT, the Vantage just doesn't cut it against

either the Ferrari or the Vanquish. As a more rounded model, and even with that enormous price tag, we're more interested to see how the California T takes on Aston's top dog.

And on paper at least, pretty well. Take a gander at their respective cribsheets and you'll find the California has much more to offer than polarising looks: the Ferrari's new twin-turbo V8 – which we'll come back to – punches out 552bhp, the Aston's 6-litre naturally aspirated V12 producing only 13bhp more. Dropping 219kg to the Aston though means the Ferrari hits 100kph half a second faster (3.6 seconds to the Aston's 4.1) as well as a higher top speed, 316kph to 295kph. Astonishing then that, even despite this, the Ferrari doesn't really feel that fast...

The acceleration – thanks to snappy changes through the Formula 1-inspired dual-clutch seven-speed automatic – is certainly not lacking in punch. It does, as you would expect, lack the fury and insistence of a 458 Italia, but even so, the acceleration is remarkably conservative for a Ferrari of all things. This boils down to the Variable Boost Management, a system that adjusts torque delivery to suit both the revs and gear engaged, meaning the full 557lb ft is not delivered until we hit seventh gear: doing so in second would not only ruin

**Opposite, left:** Twin-turbo V8 marks a new era for Ferrari **Opposite, right:** We recommend you avoid the smurf blue interior...

that 10.5L/100km fuel consumption figure but, in all likelihood, the rear tyres too.

In much the same way, that twin-turbo V8 does not offer quite the rousing soundtrack of the California's shouty brothers. Stirring perhaps, but not very, well, exciting. It's a marked difference to the Aston's V12, which utters each gear change with a thunderous crack. Which, given the sheer fury of the Aston's 565bhp being unleashed, is quite apt. The initial 'punch' for instance under heavy acceleration in the Vanquish is far more abrupt than that offered by the Ferrari, the latter's acceleration more linear than the Aston's and as a result, less uplifting. Though the California may nail the Aston in a straight line, it's the Vanquish that evokes the most character whilst doing so.

Through the corners – up against Ferrari's gelding – we again expect the Aston to lead the way, and certainly during our initial sprints this is the case. Steering for instance is beautifully accurate on turn-in, those grippy tyres and a low centre of gravity (even with that heavy roof mechanism) offering wonderful precision through even the tighter corners: I had expected the square-like steering wheel to make this more awkward. Granted

it can't be felt under acceleration (we're too transfixed with the soundtrack for that), but that 1844kg kerb weight is still evident under turn-in. It's not enough to throw out the delicate balance and destroy the whole run in a torrent of understeer and body roll: the lightweight VH subframe is too stiff for that. It means the Volante doesn't offer quite the nimbleness of the coupe though, and it's a similar story under braking: that third generation Brembo Carbon Ceramic Matrix offers impressive stopping power, but there's a visible nod at the nose as the front axle loads up.

If there's one thing in particular that's needling me with the Aston, it's the ride. Like the coupe, the Vanquish Volante comes complete with independent double wishbones and three-stage adjustable damping for improved road holding, and there's very little to criticise there. This has though – like the coupe – knocked the ride comfort somewhat. It's not an uncomfortable experience – I cannot express enough how much better the ride is compared with the V12 Vantage S – but the lumbar-supportive sport seats and limited headroom (with the roof down at least) is a stark reminder that at the base of the Volante is a more-performance focused

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setting – is mighty. With 53 percent weight over the rear axle, and even with 1729kg to work with through the turns, the front end doesn't feel anything like as front heavy as the layout would suggest (those turbochargers do pile on the kilos, y'know). There's a precision through even the tighter turns aided immensely by those grippy front tyres, traction from the rear enabling me to tuck the nose in at even ambitious speeds. Ferrari's seven-speed dual-clutch is blink-of-an-eye fast, and though a little more travel in the pedal wouldn't go amiss, the brakes offer some mighty stopping power.

Consider all this. Then consider that the ride quality is still utterly superb. A refined setup means the suspension, as well as neutralizing both understeer and body roll, rounds out imperfections in the road surface to avoid any jarring sharpness to the ride quality: a 'bumpy road' setting under 'Sport' damping mode is similarly impressive, retaining enough body control without unsettling the comfort of its occupants unduly.

I'll admit the cabin's convoluted layout could start to grate on a day-to-day basis (the idiocy of the indicator 'stalks' being mounted on the steering wheel means that after a while I abandon them altogether) and, like the Vanquish, the rear seats are beyond useless. Head and legroom though, even with the roof down, is considerable, the pseudo bucket seats offering both good lumbar support and cushioned give. Save a couple of niggles – the passenger window button is so loose I worry about it breaking off between my fingers – build quality is an improvement over the Aston's stylish design.

Ultimately it's a tough decision, for both of our contenders – in one way or another – offer flaws to their design. The Aston for instance offers the grip, the panache and the engagement we've come to expect from a Vanquish. But even with the roof down and that V12 soundtrack blaring, the effect is still not as GT-esque as we'd hope, the ride quality slightly stiffer than the Ferrari and the more 'driver-focused cabin' consequently a little more claustrophobic. Similarly the California T, though fast and agile, lacks some of the character we've come to expect from the prancing horse, the soundtrack less emotive than the Aston's, the steering less engaging, and the whole experience lacking in Italian gaiety.

Having said that, while the Volante will ultimately lean more towards performance over comfort, the Ferrari – in many ways – focuses more on everyday usability than outright speed. But that doesn't mean the California T isn't a marked improvement over its predecessor. Yes, the drive is lacking a little in excitement and only when we get behind the wheel of the similarly engine 488 GTB will we know just how evocative that twin-turbo V8 really is. But the balance is mightily impressive, the speed – if not perhaps the sensation – is monumental, and the gearbox is the benchmark of precision.

If it's apex you're looking to nail, get your deposit in for the Aston Martin Vanquish Volante (they also do the True Teal leather with yellow stitching). And as a properly dynamic Ferrari, the California T falls a little short. But as a sporting convertible GT that just so happens to have a prancing horse on the bonnet, it's a revelation. 🐎



**Below:** The California T offers significantly improved handling over the old model. But the Aston is still better

sports car. Granted one whose day-to-day versatility is impressive. Still, as a replacement to the DBS, the Vanquish by its very nature is Aston's mass-market performance flagship, and though the refinery of the interior and that booming V12 soundtrack mean the Volante is still a superb GT car, a stiffer ride quality and poise through the turns means the Aston is always going to do handling better than comfort. And that's a key box left unticked for a sporty convertible grand tourer.

Compare that with the California T. Don't forget that beneath those chiseled new looks there lies a tauter chassis, honed double wishbones (multilink at the rear) and a stiffer aluminium bodyshell, all for the sake of 'more Ferrari-like' performance over its predecessor. Which it delivers in spades, there's no doubt. Once again, there isn't the 458-esque level of urgency through the wheel, although – as is the case with most of Maranello's current range – the steering does feel almost alarmingly quick, this rate of response a direct result of the new steering box and its 10 per cent quicker rack. Connection to the front wheels is consequently a little vague and the steering sensation itself somewhat remote. Compared with the weightier, more intuitive setup found in the Aston, these 'unsettling' vagueries could be considered disappointing.

Having said that, balance – regardless of damper

## 'IT'S A TOUGH DECISION. BOTH OF OUR CONTENDERS OFFER FLAWS TO THEIR DESIGN'



**ASTON MARTIN  
VANQUISH VOLANTE**

V12, 5935cc  
565bhp @ 6750rpm  
457lb ft @ 5500rpm  
Six-speed Touchtronic 2 automatic  
Independent double wishbone  
Independent double wishbone  
Carbon ceramic, 398mm (front), 360mm (rear)  
9J x 20" (front), 11.5J x 20" (rear)  
255/35 ZR20 (front), 305/30 ZR20 (rear), Pirelli P Zero  
1844kg (kerb)  
306bhp/ton  
4.1sec  
295kph  
\$323,000

★★★★★

**Engine**  
**Power**  
**Torque**  
**Transmission**  
**Front suspension**  
**Rear suspension**  
**Brakes**  
**Wheels**  
**Tyres**  
**Weight**  
**Power-to-weight**  
**0-100kph**  
**Top speed**  
**Basic price**

**evo rating:**

**FERRARI  
CALIFORNIA T**

V8, twin-turbo, 3855cc  
552bhp @ 7500rpm  
557lb ft @ 4750rpm in VII gear  
F1, dual clutch, seven-speed automatic  
Double wishbone  
Multilink  
Carbon ceramic, 390x34mm (front), 360x32mm (rear)  
19in front and rear  
245/40 ZR19 (front), 285/40 ZR19 (rear)  
1625kg (kerb)  
340bhp/ton  
3.6sec  
316kph  
\$239,500

★★★★★

**‘AS A SPORTING CONVERTIBLE GT,  
THE CALIFORNIA T IS  
A REVELATION’**

