

# QUARTER MIL CLUB

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by JAMES GENT

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*In a world already bursting at the seams with luxury GT machines, is there room for one more? We find out on a road trip with the Ferrari FF, the Bentley Continental GT Speed, the Aston Martin Vanquish, and the new Mercedes S 63 AMG Coupe.*





**I**T'S A RAW, VISCERAL SOUND THAT echoes about the canyon walls, its source as of yet out of sight and the erstwhile low-pitched hum intermittently turning into a high-revving, deep-throated scream as the eight-speed auto downshifts. Soon the Carbon White example – an Aston Martin Vanquish – hoves into view and slows to a halt next to us, the Ferrari FF and Bentley Continental GT Speed also included in today's Luxury GT group test following suit. If the compromised dynamism of a hardcore sports car is not for you, and you'd rather lash out a cool quarter of a million dollars (give or take) on the civility of a luxury GT instead, these are three of the finest examples you could sign on the dotted line for today (and we've yet to introduce our newest contender). Indeed, their drivers are soon stepping out onto the already baking tarmac of Jebel Jais, a mixture of excitement and bewilderment plastered across each of their faces. The "holy hells" that traditionally follow a hoon through the mountains are dealt with accordingly, but there's one question – fired at me by *evo* stablemate David Fernandez – I had not expected.

"Yeah, but is the Vanquish a PROPER GT?"

Well, on the face of it, yes. I mean, it's an Aston, and a Vanquish to boot, the British marque's headline performance weapon since the DBS's retirement in 2012. It's among the most legendary premium models on-sale today, is as British and refined as they come, and boasts a wallet-pulverising price tag of \$325k. How

could a Vanquish of all things NOT be a luxury GT?

And yet several hours later, I'm furrowing my brow at exactly the same question. Which surprises me, since I'd expected the majority of today's comments to focus on the brand new Mercedes S 63 AMG Coupe, the fourth and final contender of our luxury GT group test and, in many ways, today's black sheep.

And on the face of THAT, you're probably thinking I've gone potty. This after all is an S-Class. A two-door, AMG performance-orientated version granted, but an S-Class nonetheless, and thus one of the most influential luxury machines on sale today. Indeed, when we took a spin in the S 63 AMG Coupe on its international launch last year, we were not only staggered by how refined the newboy proved to be, but also how spirited a drive this two-tonne plus luxury grand tourer could produce.

With a stellar reputation and a thumbs up from the team already in its pocket, how could the S 63 of all things be considered today's black sheep? It's not like the Merc receives a thumping from a performance standpoint either. Boasting 577bhp from a twin-turbo V8, the Merc slots neatly between the 651bhp V12 FF and 626bhp W12 Bentley, and the 565bhp V12 Vanquish, while barely half a second covers all four on the sprint from zero to 100kph. A slouch the S 63 most certainly is not.

Take a closer look at the contenders though: a \$365K Aston Martin; a \$310K Ferrari and a \$268K Bentley. And a \$186K Mercedes. There's no getting away from

it, that is a colossal difference in price, and that's got us curious. Could the 'cheapest' luxury machine of the four actually topple an Aston, a Ferrari and a Bentley? We were keen to find out.

With David and fellow *evo* supporter Romain Lutter (who's also a Radical Middle East Cup ace, by the by) busy arguing over the keys to the Aston and the Ferrari, I make a beeline for the GT Speed, the fastest production Bentley ever made. Okay, the additional 10bhp gained from drivetrain tweaks mean this title is claimed by the skin of the molar and will be noticed only by the most ardent of Bentley supporters at a horribly illegal 331kph, but it's yet further proof of the potential lying beneath that enormous kerb weight. At 2320kg, the Bentley is easily the heaviest GT here, and with origins dating back to 2003, it's also the oldest. However, tweaks, updates and various abbreviations attached to the bumper mean it remains one of the finest luxury GTs on the planet, and quite possibly, the benchmark of the segment.

Alongside some cosmetic fine tunes – including a new front splitter, rear diffuser and some bespoke 21-inch 'Speed' design wheels – the revised GT comes with a reduced ride height, and both a stiffer chassis and anti-roll bar for improved cornering. These alone have not turned the two-tonne Bentley into a whippet-like Caterham, but on our first run up the hill, the Continental is no wallowy bag of understeer. There's balance and precision through the higher speed turns, even if feedback through the steering is not quite up to the task. It's remarkable how



'I'd expected most comments to be on the Mercedes S 63 AMG Coupe, today's black sheep'



**Above:** On looks alone, the Aston Martin Vanquish would walk today's group test. Things a little more complicated than that though...

well this behemoth hides its considerable mass, weight transfer only becoming excessive as we hit the tighter turns, that bulk giving the carbon-ceramic brakes some serious work to do. Aston, Ferrari and Mercedes-like specks in the rearview – now that the boys have saddled up – start getting bigger.

Out of the corners though, it's a different matter, the sheer pull from that 6-litre twin-turbocharged W12 and 607lb ft of torque is almost beyond belief. Distances are devoured in mammoth gulps as a solid wall of torque hustles the Bentley forward with insistence. Pull that, rather bizarrely, does not affect comfort in the cabin. Re-adjust the suspension from Sport to Comfort (realistically you won't feel a huge difference between the two anyway), and energetic driving has rarely been this luxuriating, good lumbar support working in tandem with bags of legroom and superb ride quality. Once this part of the test is over, it's the Bentley's silky smooth cruise we're all clamouring for on the 90-minute jaunt back to Dubai.

By the time we hit the top, both the Aston and the Ferrari have caught the Bentley, though Yazan in the Mercedes has wisely opted for discretion over valour on his first run up the mountain and is still on the climb. Pity. Having seen the impressive benchmark already laid down by Crewe, I'm tempted to jump straight into Stuttgart's latest to see how it compares. Incredibly though, David and Romain – having driven both – are still talking about the Aston Martin: "I can't believe how well this thing handles"; "it's incredible, I mean, I knew it would be good but it's just brilliant"; "what do you think about the V12?"; "great noise, but I think the Ferrari's is better"; "no no, you can't possibly say the Ferrari's V12 makes a better soundtrack than the Aston's", etc and etc. Time to see what the Aston brings to the Luxury GT table.

A trendsetter the Bentley may be for luxury cruising, but for sheer handling the Aston leaves its fellow Brit for premium dust. Updated since its 2012 release with a new front splitter and carbon rear spoiler, a new interior, improvements to the bonded aluminium chassis and a whole 1kg(!) lighter, the Aston is – there's no other word for it – spectacular.

As the only front mid-engined rear wheel drive model in our quartet, the Vanquish is without question the liveliest through the turns, the insanely grippy front tyres holding firm as 565bhp encourages the rear wheels to twitch into oversteer. It's all business on the long sweepers though, an über low centre of gravity and magnificent balance negating the concept of body roll entirely, the front end darting from apex to apex. Turn-in response is simply beautiful, mid-corner feedback from the front wheels a revelation after the rather hesitant feel in the Bentley, though on pure accelerative drama, the GT Speed still has the edge. From the off, pull from the V12 is not as 'kick you in the back teeth' aggressive as one might expect, the drama and joie de vivre being saved for that mid-corner

**Right:** In direct competition with a Ferrari FF, a Bentley Continental GT Speed and an Aston Martin Vanquish, the Mercedes S 63 AMG Coupe is pulling no punches

‘The sheer pull from that 6-litre twin-turbocharged W12 is almost beyond belief’





balance and handling, and – naturally – the emotive V12 soundtrack that only an Aston can produce. It is a truly gorgeous sound and yet, ironically, not my favourite from the day. But I'll come back to that.

Hands down then, even despite solid efforts from its contemporaries, the Aston offers the best handling of the three, though David's earlier words – as the road starts to open out and long stretches of road span out before us – keep on coming back to me. It's true the Aston is a fabulous machine, but even I am wondering whether its more sports car than true GT.

The interior, though gorgeous and a vast improvement over the out-dated layout found in the DB9 and the Vantage, remains a little too snug for prolonged journeys. The driver's seat for instance is mounted much higher than I'd expected for such a weapon, leaving barely an inch of headroom. That glorious V12 soundtrack I'd happily go deaf to, but road roar and wind noise is a trifle too excessive. And while the seats prove superbly supportive when being thrown from side-to-side on the mountain run, the ride itself when we've calmed down and started driving Miss Daisy is just too stiff. The Aston may have ruled the mountain and won everyone over with both its looks and its soundtrack, but as a luxury GT it's got some serious catching up to do to match the Bentley. And, for all

we know, the black sheep Mercedes. Two runs down, two to go, and our next contender is the one I've been looking forward to the most, the Ferrari FF.

Given the enormous grin Romain has plastered on his face after a couple of runs in the FF (plus the combined force that's required to prize the prancing horse key from his vice-like grip), I think we can safely kybosh the idea that this is 'not a proper Ferrari', as so many have suggested of Maranello's first ever four-wheel drive model. Granted, given the 'breadvan' body styling and enormous boot space, we're unlikely to experience 458-levels of aggression and poise back up the hill. But that certainly doesn't mean the FF is a slouch.

Indeed, it's the responsiveness of the steering that catches me off-guard when I first jump behind the wheel, the speed and lightness a far cry from the more weighted setup in the Aston and slightly woolly response in the Bentley. Like Ferrari's systems before it, the steering in the FF is almost unnervingly quick and takes me a few corners to get used to. Once I have though, the feeling is incredible. Unlike most four-wheel drive systems, the setup in the Ferrari utilises two gearboxes, one allocating full power to the rear wheels, the other diverting to the front should they lose traction. I'd need several extra pages and a doctorate in engineering to explain the

**Opposite, left:** The Vanquish's revised cabin is an enormous improvement over the outdated design found in the Vantage, but it still doesn't hold a candle to the Continental



‘I’d need a doctorate in engineering to explain the FF’s four-wheel drive system in full’

technical idiosyncrasies in full, but suffice to say traction from the 4RM system is such that whopping great power slides are a no-go. Though lacking a 458’s aggression through the turns, the FF is nevertheless impressively agile, the nose almost dart-like as it changes direction, the responsiveness of the steering easily tricking you into forgetting that sizeable 1880kg kerb weight, and a low centre of gravity eradicating body roll altogether.

It’s the gearbox though that truly impresses, the Formula 1-inspired seven-speed dual clutch gearbox offering uninterrupted acceleration and a tangible kick between shifts. Just in front of me, red lights illuminate on the steering wheel the higher the revs rise. It’s a red flag to a bull, the gearbox receiving more and more punishment the further up the climb we go, the speed of each change never less than spectacular. Though the Aston’s setup is impressive, the thrashing the FF’s ‘box withstands as revs are taken well past the 8000rpm mark is immense. And with high revs and 651bhp being unleashed comes that familiar, spectacular Ferrari soundtrack. It fills the extended cabin, growing more high pitched and beautifully furious the further up the rev range I go: it’s all I can do to prevent myself laughing out loud. Until I realise that my associates probably won’t hear me even if I did. So I do.

Make no mistake, the FF is a truly stunning piece of kit, and anybody who’s heard that soundtrack and still insists the FF is ‘not a proper Ferrari’ can leave their gearhead card at the door. And yet, even despite the glorious soundtrack, the stellar handling, awesome gearbox setup, Pininfarina styling and beautiful balance, something is still not quite right. Lacking the ballistic dynamic edge of a 458, the FF is easily the most comfortable Ferrari I’ve experienced, but the ride quality – given the more rigid lightweight chassis and sports car-derived suspension – is not quite up there with the Bentley’s. It’s not jarring or needlessly uncomfortable, plus decent room for four and intuitive infotainment system controls (not counting the minefield that is the multi-function steering wheel) mean prolonged journeys are not a prospect to quiver in terror at. But still, the body-hugging seats – perfect for lumbar support through the turns – do start to leave me with a stiff back, while intermittent issues with the air conditioning leave me wondering if I’m playing with fire.



It comes close...the FF comes so very, very close...but comfort and practicality can't quite match the Bentley.

Which brings us, eventually, to the black sheep. The Mercedes S 63 AMG Coupe. Amidst the furore of the Ferrari’s character and soundtrack, the Bentley’s civility and almighty acceleration, and the Aston’s gorgeous looks and devastating handling, the Mercedes thus far has barely got a look in. To our eternal folly it turns out.

With the new S-Class, Mercedes has worked hard to improve cabin comfort and practicality, a longer wheelbase both increasing rear legroom and offering greater stability through the turns, while the revised dashboard is amongst the most spectacular interior designs we’ve come across yet. Unsurprisingly they’ve made a big difference, noise levels in the cabin whisper-quiet, ride quality superb and the ease with which the kilometres are eaten up from the adjustable (AMG-monikered) leather seats just magnificent.

It’s not the comfort that surprises me though. It’s not the balance, the handling, the practicality or the civility. It’s the speed. Holy hell, this thing can shift. I mean, PROPERLY shift. Effortlessly the Mercedes – while still in Comfort mode – has launched its way to the ton thanks to 664lb ft of torque shifting the earth on its axis. It’s similar in pick-up to the Bentley, and yet bizarrely, doesn’t have quite the same dramatic ‘whomp’ as the GT Speed. Dramatic, but pillowy. It’s an odd and amazingly effective combination. And we’ve only just started.

Still the rev needle continues to rise, sprinting past 120kph into figures I shouldn’t mention in print, 577bhp being delivered effortlessly and insistently. The numbers tumble and still there’s no sense of the Merc’s composure starting to give. Even as we enter high speed corners, the AMG is beautifully composed, the realization that I’m travelling at this speed so easily, boggling my mind. One key factor in this endeavour is the AMG Magic Body

**Below, left:** The Ferrari’s design, although complicated, is a thing of beauty... **Above:** ...and if anything, the Merc’s is even better

Control, a world first when it made its debut. Basically suspension with 'eyes', the system scans the road ahead and automatically adjusts the dampers, allowing the Merc to effectively lean into the corners to reduce lateral load. Don't think this is to improve cornering speed either. This is a system that's actually been designed to improve cabin comfort. It's working, and the Aston, the Bentley and the Ferrari are well out of sight before I finally lose my nerve and start to slow up. This thing is just astonishing.

Back to group test speeds, the civility of the ride has not reduced even when I slip into Manual for a blast through the slower corners. Once again, the Mercedes handles itself impressively. Though there isn't the same precision through the turns as the Aston or the Ferrari, there's limited body roll to affect momentum, good – albeit slightly woolly – feedback through the wheel when you press on. Massive stoppers meanwhile help bring the 2070kg brute to a stop without squirreling under load. Helpful when you're hitting speeds that will send you straight to jail.

Truth be told though, the S 63 – like the Bentley – is not a thrilling driver's car (though the speed might trick you into believing otherwise). The steering is not quite as precise as the Aston, the V8 rumble not as characterful as the Ferrari, and the acceleration not as dramatic as the Bentley. Even the balance, magnificent as it is for a car of this size, is still not on a par with the Aston, the Ferrari or

even the Bentley, a realisation that surprises all of us.

Indeed, it's not quite enough to win over Romain, who though impressed with the Merc can't bring himself to vote against the Ferrari, the combination of its performance and civility - and THAT soundtrack - winning him over entirely. David and Yazan meanwhile, though mightily impressed with the Aston's handling, admit that as Luxury GTs go, the Bentley still rules the roost, it's breathtaking acceleration and refinement finding the perfect balance.

And yet, there's something drawing me to the Mercedes. Though bested in almost all areas by its rivals, I can't honestly say there's anything overly WRONG with the S 63. As a luxury GT machine, I'd expected more civility and a smoother ride from the Aston Martin, despite its formidable handling prowess. Ditto the FF, which handles as any self-respecting prancing horse should, but can't quite let go of that sports car DNA. And the Bentley, though superbly comfortable and refined, doesn't quite handle the turns as a GT machine should.

And then there's the Mercedes, superbly weighted for impressive rather than spell-binding handling and cornering ability, magnificently built and designed both inside and out, and amongst the most luxurious and civilised rides in the world. Part of me wants to choose the \$365K Aston. Part of me wants the \$268K Bentley. And part of me really, really wants the \$310K Ferrari.

But I can't. All of me wants the \$186K Mercedes. ❌

### BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT SPEED

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Engine</b>           | W12, twin-turbo, 5998cc   |
| <b>Power</b>            | 626bhp @ 6000rpm  |
| <b>Torque</b>           | 607lb ft @ 2000rpm  |
| <b>Transmission</b>     | Eight-speed automatic   |
| <b>Front suspension</b> | Four-link double wishbones, anti-roll bar                                 |
| <b>Rear suspension</b>  | Trapezoidal multi-link, anti-roll bar                                     |
| <b>Brakes</b>           | Carbon ceramic, cross-drilled and ventilated, 405mm (front), 335mm (rear) |
| <b>Wheels</b>           | 2x21in front and rear   |
| <b>Tyres</b>            | 275/35 ZR21 front and rear, Pirelli                                       |
| <b>Weight</b>           | 2320kg  |
| <b>Power-to-weight</b>  | 270bhp/ton  |
| <b>0-100kph</b>         | 4.2sec  |
| <b>Top speed</b>        | 331kph  |
| <b>Basic price</b>      | \$268,000   |

**evo rating:** ★★★★★

### ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Engine</b>           | V12, 5935cc  |
| <b>Power</b>            | 565bhp @ 6750rpm   |
| <b>Torque</b>           | 457lb ft @ 5500rpm   |
| <b>Transmission</b>     | Six-speed Touchtronic 2 automatic                            |
| <b>Front suspension</b> | Independent double wishbone                                  |
| <b>Rear suspension</b>  | Independent double wishbone                                  |
| <b>Brakes</b>           | Ventilated carbon ceramic discs, 398mm (front), 360mm (rear) |
| <b>Wheels</b>           | 9J x 20in (front), 11.5J x 20in (rear)                       |
| <b>Tyres</b>            | 255/35 ZR20 (front), 305/30 ZR20 (rear), Pirelli P Zero      |
| <b>Weight</b>           | 1746kg   |
| <b>Power-to-weight</b>  | 324bhp/ton   |
| <b>0-100kph</b>         | 4.1sec   |
| <b>Top speed</b>        | 285kph   |
| <b>Basic price</b>      | \$365,000  |

**evo rating:** ★★★★★

### MERCEDES S 63 AMG COUPE

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Engine</b>           | V8, twin turbocharged, 5461cc                                   |
| <b>Power</b>            | 577bhp @ 5500rpm  |
| <b>Torque</b>           | 664lb ft @ 2250-3750rpm   |
| <b>Transmission</b>     | AMG SPEEDSHIFT MCT automatic                                    |
| <b>Front suspension</b> | Four-link   |
| <b>Rear suspension</b>  | Multi-link independent  |
| <b>Brakes</b>           | Internally ventilated and perforated disc brakes front and rear |
| <b>Wheels</b>           | 8.5 J x 19 (front) / 9.5 J x 19 (rear)                          |
| <b>Tyres</b>            | 255/55 R19 Y (front) / 285/40 R19 Y (rear)                      |
| <b>Weight</b>           | 2070kg (kerb)   |
| <b>Power-to-weight</b>  | 279bhp/ton  |
| <b>0-100kph</b>         | 4.3sec  |
| <b>Top speed</b>        | 250kph  |
| <b>Basic price</b>      | \$187,100   |

**evo rating:** ★★★★★

### FERRARI FF

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Engine</b>           | V12, 6,262cc                               |
| <b>Power</b>            | 652bhp @ 8,000rpm                          |
| <b>Torque</b>           | 503lb ft @ 6000rpm                         |
| <b>Transmission</b>     | Seven-speed double clutch                  |
| <b>Front suspension</b> | Magnetorheological suspension              |
| <b>Rear suspension</b>  | Magnetorheological suspension              |
| <b>Brakes</b>           | 398mm x 38mm (front) / 360mm x 32mm (rear) |
| <b>Wheels</b>           | 8.5 J x 20" (front), 10.5 J x 20" (rear)   |
| <b>Tyres</b>            | 245/35 ZR 20 (front) / 295/35 ZR 20 (rear) |
| <b>Weight</b>           | 1880kg (kerb)                              |
| <b>Power-to-weight</b>  | 347bhp/ton                                 |
| <b>0-100kph</b>         | 3.7sec                                     |
| <b>Top speed</b>        | 335kph                                     |
| <b>Basic price</b>      | \$321,200                                  |

**evo rating:** ★★★★★

‘The Aston, the Bentley and the Ferrari are well out of sight before I finally lose my nerve and back off’