

MR. DOODY'S WHOLLY-SUBJECTIVE COMPARISON

F355 SPIDER –VS– 550 MARANELLO



*Now remember, tell your mother it was buy one, get one free
or I'll make you wear that jacket all summer!¹*

INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, these are not entirely rational cars to compare. In retrospect, now that the document is completed, it might be downright silly! While they both share similar heritage, origin, and even some parts, they are really quite different beasts. As I am (incredibly!) lucky enough to own both, and as many folks have pressed me for a comparison of the two, I have put together this overly lengthy document in an attempt to hopefully inform (if not educate) on the similarities and differences between the vehicles.

I am not an automotive expert. What I don't know about cars you just might be able to cram into the Hollywood Bowl. Use this information at your own risk. I will not be held responsible if you acquire any car and decide you do not like it. For all I know, all of the information in here is completely incorrect. Behave appropriately!

Some of the categories of discussion below are included at the direct request of various individuals, so don't rush to shoot the messenger if you have a problem with what is being discussed here.

BACKGROUND

The F355 Spider (hereinafter '355') is a six-speed 1999 model with a May 1999 build date. As of late May 2003, it has 6,400 miles on its clock, of which I am responsible for just over one-third. I am the

¹ Caption courtesy of **Gordo**. All bold italic user names refer to users on <http://www.FerrariChat.com/>, the Internet's finest independent resource for Ferrari owners and fans.

second owner, having acquired it in March 2002. It has been maintained more than properly and has had all relevant recalls applied.

The 550 Maranello (hereinafter '550') is a 1999 model with a June 1999 build date. As of late May 2003, it has just over 5,600 miles on its clock, of which I am responsible for just under one-third. I am the third owner, having acquired it in December 2002. It has been maintained more than properly and has had all relevant recalls applied.

FACTORY DATA

The emphases in the table to the right are my own, and are highlighted to denote that they are topics of specific interest discussed in this document.

The Curb Weight is supposed to be the weight of the car with full fluids, but no passengers or cargo. These numbers are from the user manuals. They differ from the numbers used in the marketing materials (lower) and the numbers on the sill plates (higher). So who knows what's right. Among the three data sources, the differences between the two cars are directionally correct, and that is what is relevant.

The HP and Torque numbers are also from the user manuals, and differ (lower) from the marketing materials.

The fuel economy numbers are from the user manuals, and differ (higher) from the window stickers.

	355	550
Length (in)	167.3	179.3
Width	74.8	76.2
Height	48.1	50.3
Wheelbase	95.5	98.4
Front track	59.6	64.3
Rear track	63.6	62.4
Curb Weight (lb)	3,340	3,902
Cylinders	8 in 90° V layout	12 in 65° V layout
Valves per cylinder	5	4
Compression ratio	11.0:1	10.8:1
Maximum HP	375 bhp @ 8,250 rpm	475 bhp @ 7,000 rpm
Maximum Torque	266 lb-ft @ 6,000 rpm	413 lb-ft @ 5,000 rpm
Front Tires	225/40 ZR 18	255/40 ZR 18
Rear Tires	265/40 ZR 18	295/35 ZR 18
Top speed (mph)	180	199
0-60 mph (sec.)	4.5	4.3
0-1/4 mile (sec.)	13.0	12.6
Gas Tank (gal.)	21.7	30.1
City MPG	10.9	10.0
Highway MPG	18.7	18.0

FEEL

I am not going to say anything extensive in the way of comparing the two vehicles' road feel and driving qualities; in part because I could not figure out how to put it into words well, and in part because they are so distinct and different. You should definitely get some seat-time if you are interested in such data. They are very different vehicles, and behave much as you would expect them to. The 355 is nimble and tossable. The 550 was designed to drive from Rome to Milan ultra-comfortably at 150mph. The 550 is about 20% heavier than the 355, and you can see that its stance is longer and wider. You don't need me to do the math for you ☺.

BUILD QUALITY

I remember a bit of talk on the forum about how the Ferraris were of a higher build quality than the Dinos². My experience does not *per se* bear this out. It does not refute it either, but I have had identi-

² To save **parkerfe** the hassle of clarifying for us, the *Ferraris* being twelve-cylinder 'proper' Ferrari vehicles and the six- and eight-cylinder vehicles being *Dinos*.

cal parts (alarm battery/siren) fail on both cars. These two cars share a fair amount from the Maranello parts bin. Clearly, it is more work to put a twelve-cylinder engine together than an eight-cylinder engine, but I have seen no obvious signals that would suggest that the leatherwork, paintwork, etc. are sub-standard (comparatively) on the 355. I could be convinced that the leatherwork, paintwork, etc. are superior on the 550 due to simply a larger number of hours invested, but that is well reflected in the MSRPs. In general, I do not see much of an argument along these lines, but that is just one man's opinion.

EXHAUST

Personally, I am not terribly concerned with exhaust issues on my cars, except insofar as they affect actual performance. So, consume this data with that context in mind.

My 355 is a stock exhaust. I have heard the Tubi on the 355, and it is nice, but I was not that impressed. I had to bring the 355 in to the shop a few times after I got it for some minor fixes (alarm, cf.). Each visit my mechanic would attempt to sell me a Tubi. On the third or so visit, during which he had to do an extended test drive, he told me mine was the best-sounding stock 355 exhaust he had ever heard and that I definitely did not need a Tubi. That said, the note that matters on this beast is the scream of the engine as you wind it out (cf.)!

My 550 was purchased with a Tubi on it. The Tubi sounds absolutely glorious. When you would start the car up, all conversation in earshot would simply cease. It was dramatic and impressive. The Tubi had its greatest effect at idle and low RPMs. Once you were pushing the beast the Tubi clearly augmented the engine noise, but the engine started to contribute substantially to the symphony. My dealer said that the Tubi robs the engine of some of its low-end power, though I have never seen a before-and-after dyno curve. The Tubi was loud and resonant inside the cabin. The loudness was theoretically manageable; however, it was, in my opinion, anathema to the overall design goal of the vehicle, which, again, in my opinion, is uncompromising grand touring performance in an understated, sleek, stealthy package. This is not your father's Testarossa. The resonance, unfortunately, I could not deal with, as it was literally causing me headaches on some longer drives. The car came with its stock cans, so I had them put back on after 500 miles or so.

I believe that 'neutered' was the word I used to describe the car after said exhaust swap (or re-swap, as it were). The stock exhaust is understated and simple. It does not draw any attention to the car. When you wind the car out, you can hear the engine nearly exclusively as opposed to an engine/exhaust combination in the Tubi.

ATTENTION

A few folks asked about this. In this particular comparison, it is a total no-brainer.

The yellow 355 convertible screams sex. Everybody wants to look at it. It is one of the most un-subtle cars on planet Earth as far as I can tell. I am a married man who behaves (she is a lawyer, so, for starters, I would probably lose both of these cars in any divorce proceeding!), but perfect strangers (and I do mean *perfect*) fawn over the thing. From high school girls to mature women who know better. It is amusing to park it in a high foot-traffic area and just sit a few dozen feet away and watch.

The black 550 might as well be a 1980s Toyota Supra. The majority of the population has no clue what it is. The fact that there are probably fewer than 1,000 in the US does not help any recognition among the general public. I'll bet the Maranello in *The Family Man* had a Bordeaux interior in part so people would notice that it was definitely "something different". Some small segment of the popula-

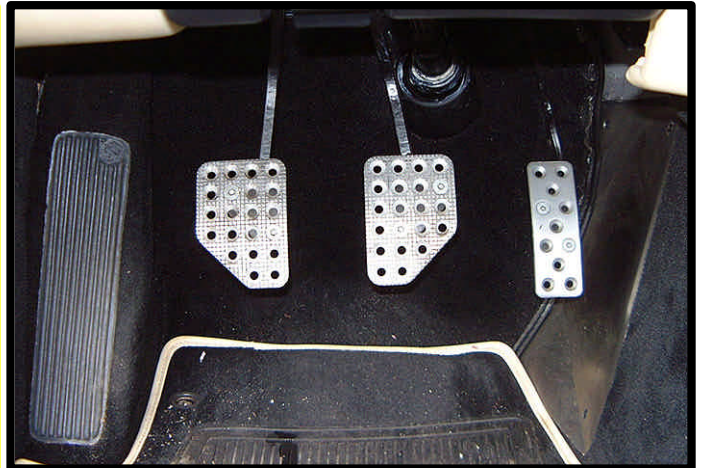
tion recognizes that it is something interesting – though they may not know what it is exactly. Some very small segment of car weirdoes know what it is and those folks are way more juiced to see a 550 than they are to see an F355.

COMFORT

The 355 comes up short in this category for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, the seats are absolutely nothing to get excited about. Every time I see a non-Spider 355 in a showroom, I have to sit in it to revel in the seats, and lament how much the seats were sacrificed in the drop-top. Nearly every time I get in the car I tweak the seats a bit to try a new driving position lest my glutei maximi check out after thirty minutes at the wheel. In contrast, the seats in the 550 are lovely. They are not perfect, but they are damn good. The lateral support is nothing short of wonderful. The only feature missing from the 550 seats is an extendable under-thigh support like the E39 M5 has – I think that would cinch the whole thing up.

Second, the pedal well feels substantially tighter in the 355. In fact, it feels like there is acres more space for your feet in the 550 than in the 355. I cannot and do not wear Piloti every day of the week; though I am not wearing Doc Marten's either.



The 355 well measures just over 13” from the side of the white kick plate on the right across to the side of the dead pedal on the left, measuring across the bottom of the brake and clutch pedals. The 550 well measures just under 14” across the bottom of the pedals. I have not tried to tweak the pedal positions on the 355. Note that the 550 offers more configurability than the 355 for the brake and clutch pedals.

Third, the steering wheel of the 550 tilts and telescopes. The 355 wheel is only capable of tilting. Given the seat tweaking and tight pedal well, a telescoping steering wheel would be a welcome addition, alas...

Fourth, and this might not apply to everybody, when in motion, I find access to the dash, specifically, the radio, annoying. You nearly have to “get up” out of the seat to reach way over to control the audio. That said, the 550 radio, being located just above the shift gate, is hardly optimal either, although it is at least reachable sans gymnastics. When the car is in an odd gear, the shifter will block your view of various parts of the 550 head unit. As an aside, I do not think either car has an audio system proportional to the vehicle cost. They could do better for little to no more money, and al-

though some will argue that you do not need a radio in a Ferrari, the fact of the matter is that they ship the damn things with a radio, so why not at least do it right?

Fifth, and this might be just me, I find that my seating position in the 355 results in the rear-view mirror obscuring my sight line in some turns. I have learned to crane my head variously to work around it for the uncommon situations when it poses a problem.

If you were going to use one of these as a daily driver, and if you had any sort of real commute, then the 550 would be the painfully obvious choice in my opinion – even if you do live in La Jolla. Note that for purposes of explanation herein, I am six feet tall, and my shirtsleeve size is 34 – so your mileage will likely vary vis-à-vis reach and comfort if you are of a different build than I.

MAINTENANCE

I have not had any maintenance issues with either car that I would qualify as extreme. The service histories on both of these cars do not show any excessive issues, outside of big recall-type items.

The alarm units (a shared part, I believe) have failed and been replaced on both cars (the 550 alarm is still not quite right, but the dealer is taking care of it).

On the 355, the alarm unit mess is literally the only problem the car has experienced in its four years in service. That's it. Nothing else. These alarm units are known to be faulty; it is a small unit about 5" by 3" by 3" that contains a little siren and a rechargeable battery. The battery will (not may, apparently) die on you eventually. The replacement part (for both of these cars, I believe) includes a lead back to the main battery so that this battery is kept charged more properly. Both of my 996s had more problems in their combined 30 months of ownership (purchased new) than the 355 has had in its four years on the road. I attribute this to the fact that it was one of the last F355 Spiders built, which is why I desired a 1999 when I was shopping around. Hopefully they had it all mostly figured out by then ☺.

The 550 has had more substantial issues in its nearly identical time on the road:

- The alarm system has in fact been replaced twice. The first time after two years when it presumably was replaced with the old-style unit that did not include the lead back to the main battery.
- Some coolant hoses were tweaked repeatedly. Finally they were repaired “for good” after a few attempts. This may or may not be the subject of a recall.
- The fuel tank had a bad gasket or seal somewhere that caused a fuel odor in the boot (yikes!). Like the coolant hoses, this was tweaked a number of times, until everybody understood the systemic problem, and it was fixed up properly recently. I do not know whether this is the subject of a TSB, but it is at least a “common knowledge” problem with the mechanics.
- Its master cylinder was replaced at about the two year mark
- The front upper shock mounts were replaced recently. Apparently the actuators for the damping system may twist, eventually resulting in a failure of the dampers. Ferrari has redesigned the part so it will not twist, but I do not believe this is the subject of a TSB or recall.

Finally, it is important to note that all of these non-standard-service problems across three owners have resulted in out-of-pocket costs of zero dollars and zero cents. The dealership and/or FNA have taken care of all of it. Some of the costs were undoubtedly worked into the two pre-owned sales, but the point is that Ferrari has stood behind the car, which is now at double its warranty period. We'll see how it goes from here. Fingers are crossed.

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Believe it or not, it seems like the 355 will put me in the poor house before the 550 does. [*Wife: uh, actually, your car habit is going to put us in the poor house – perhaps you might try heroin instead?*] Because the torque does not really kick in until higher up in the power band, you find yourself driving the car as if 4K were 0K on the tachometer (cf. below). As a result, it just eats up gasoline. On the contrary, once you get onto the highway, the 550 pulls from its GT roots and cruises along getting stellar mileage in fifth or sixth at fast highway speeds; not breaking a sweat of any sort.

CLEARANCE & ACCESS

Like most f-cars, these things are low. If you are concerned about your parking garage, office lot, subdivision entrance, or whatnot, you will want to be very careful. Driving over the questionable area at an angle will often take care of it. A number of folks asked for information on this.

I have unfortunately had the displeasure of mis-gauging the height of the 355 a few times. These incidents were almost uniformly on curb cut inclines into (not out of) driveways and parking lots. If you find a 355 for sale with a perfect front spoiler and undertray, you can assume it has been painted/replaced. Nobody is that good! ☺

I have yet to have such a problem with the 550. Either the 550 front spoiler is higher than the 355's, or I have learned a thing or two from my 355 experiences.

Do remember that replacing the undertray on any of these cars is not rocket science – it is just big pieces of plastic. In addition, there are some aftermarket front undertray components that will help a bit with clearance mishaps.

I do not recall any sort of curb clearance issues as it relates to the doors on either car. The doors are nowhere near as low as the undertray or front spoiler. Of course, they *are* lower than the doors in, say, a Jeep, and one must behave appropriately and carefully.

The doors on both cars, at their widest points, are approximately 49” long. Like any two-door car, they are big. I do not park them in tight garages, and at home I have five or six feet between them when parked together.

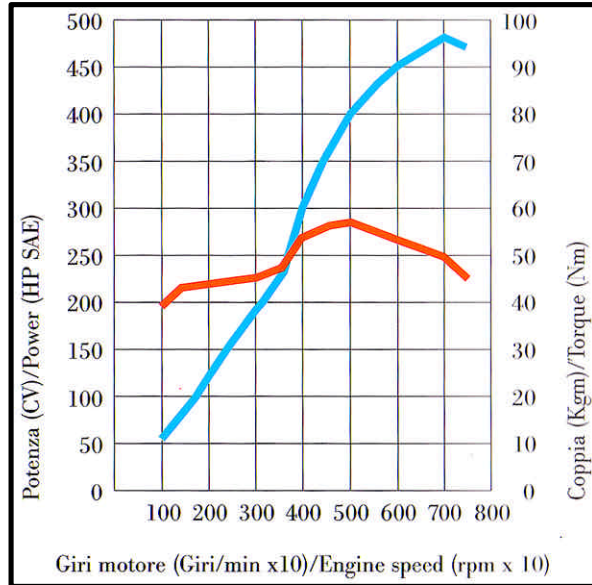
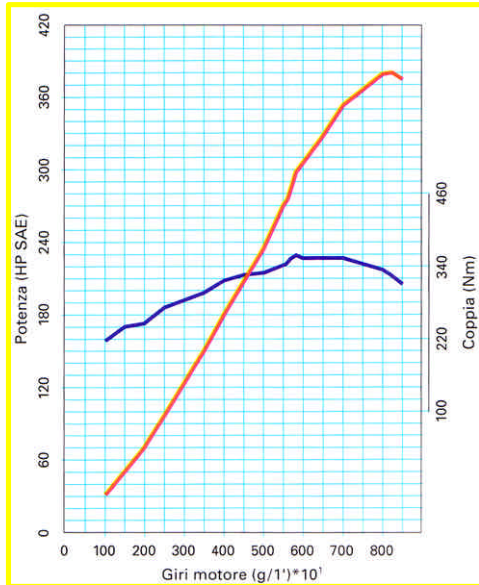
FOUL WEATHER

I cannot really comment extensively on how the cars perform in sub-optimal weather. I have driven both in the rain, but in those cases have never pushed them hard. The effortless torque on the 550 is a wild liability in such situations, obviously, even with ASR. Being a drop-top, the 355 generally gets use on drop-top weather days. While the 550 has seen raindrops, for sure, I tend to not take it out in rainstorms more out of concern of the random moron who doesn't know how to drive in the rain than the car getting wet (hey – it's just rain and it's just a car).

That said, I can tell you that the 550 is not at all well suited for, drum roll please, ice. I had to turn the car around in my driveway in the middle of winter so that the guy hauling it to storage for a couple months could pull the car up into the transport with the tow bolt. Absolutely no dice getting any sort of traction with the Michelin Sport SPs and all that torque – regardless of ASR on or off. I would hate to get caught at the office with the 550 when a freak snowstorm hit. That would not be a fun ride home!

POWER AND THE APPLICATION THEREOF

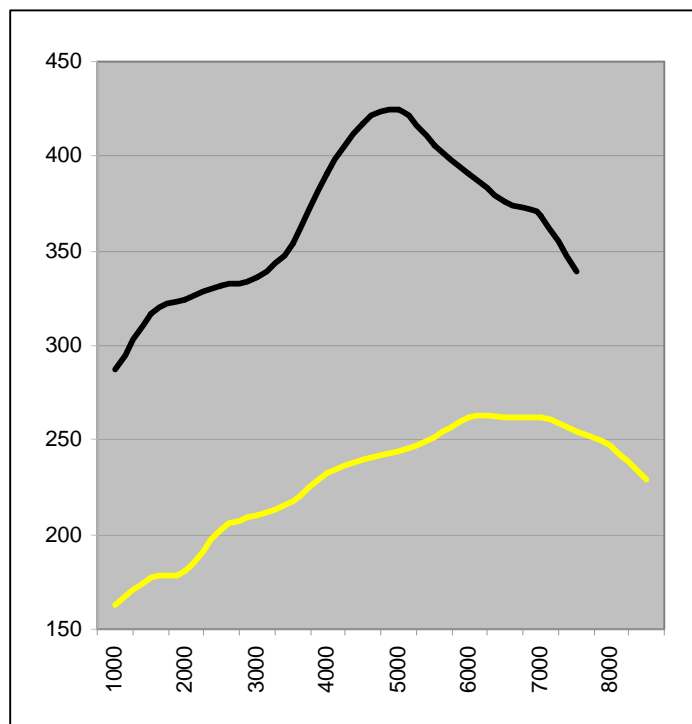
The charts below are from the sales brochures for these vehicles. The left-hand scales show horsepower and correlate to the very steep line. The right hand scales show torque and corresponds to the flatter line. The bottom scales show engine RPM.



It is unfortunate that the factory chose to display their data with the right-hand scale so compressed, as it simplifies, for lack of a better word, the details of the curve. Perhaps the marketing department in Maranello could benefit from a visit with Edward Tufte. I attempted to find better charts for each vehicle, but came up empty. To the right I have created a chart with an approximation of the torque curves for both cars together. Note that the values here are in foot-pounds for the benefit of us silly Americans.

Some people say that the F355 engine simply does not have enough torque. Being a bit of a torque junky myself, I might even agree with them. When you place both torque curves together on the same chart, on the same scale, the difference becomes, shall we say, 'crisp'.

This chart is a big part of why this whole comparison is rather silly. Coupled with the curb weights, it is crystal clear that these are different vehicles manufactured with different goals in mind. The 355's maximum torque at 6000 RPM is less than the 550's minimum torque at 1000 RPM.



This relationship is true for the 360 Modena as well, which maxes out at 275 ft-lbs of torque @ 4750 RPM. The Dinos are different from the Ferraris, just as Enzo intended.

While torque can be endlessly intoxicating, it is rarely the whole picture. I do wish the 355 had more power, but rarely when I am behind the wheel. It's more of an abstract desire. There is no substitute for that screaming eight behind your head when you wind it out. Once you taste that drug, the addiction is real. It is musical magical aural magnificence. Nothing else sounds like it. Please make sure that you experience a Dino's eight winding-out to redline behind your head before you shuffle off this mortal coil.

In part due to the power curve of the 355, and in part due to the aural wonder, many 355 drivers tend to keep the car at higher revs (4000 RPM for starters) all the time. You can drop it into sixth when simply cruising in the passing lane on the highway, but I for one tend to keep the beast in that 4K to 8K space and rarely move beyond fourth gear. As Ferris would say, "if you have the means, I highly recommend picking one up."

While not the lightest car in the world, its weight is quite well managed, and the beast is tastily tossable. When I strap into the 355, I can anticipate a fun, engaging driving experience in a nimble, plenty-powerful car – even if I'm heading into the office. When I strap into the 550, I can anticipate an enjoyable, torque-filled, high-cruising-speed driving experience with lots of great on-ramp acceleration and unlimited highway passing power – especially if I'm heading into the office. While the 550 can certainly take the off-ramps at high speeds and navigate the twisties, it really is an entirely different experience. I have tried to come up with some way to put it into words, but everything I have tried seems to come up far short.

This is an appropriate place to discuss the 550's ASR system. Like BMW's DSC and Porsche's PSM, and everybody else's TLA, it monitors vehicle movement and driver activity to (try to) keep you from screwing up big time. One of the challenges with creating engines like the 550's, with *so* much power, is that the laws of physics become a major issue in simple drivability. The Dodge Neon designers did not have to expend much effort, comparatively, worrying about the coefficient of friction of the tire compounds they used. In the 550, you can chirp the tires in nearly all gears. You can trash your tires in the first three gears, and probably in fourth too if you were willing to also trash your clutch. One might argue that these ultra-high-performance engines are simply more power than any human being can reasonably put to use on the street. In theory, the ASR system helps mere mortals better leverage that power.

I generally keep ASR turned on. I generally kept these systems turned on in my 996TT and E39 M5 as well. Once the amount of power far exceeds the tires' ability to maintain traction, my feeling is that you are better off in a surprise situation with these systems turned on than with them turned off. The problem, as I see it, is that once engaged, the ASR system takes too long to turn off. If you try to accelerate on a sandy road or you kick a corner a bit too fast, you end up at the mercy of the computer for a lot longer than you would like. Do keep in mind that we are talking about a fraction of a second or two seconds – but it is still too long. Porsche did this system (PSM) impressively. It lets you slide, it lets you spin, it lets you do all sorts of things before it steps in to play Mommy. BMW's system is junk because it kicks in much too early. In my opinion, ASR does not kick in too aggressively, it just doesn't let go fast enough. Some 550 owners mostly leave ASR turned off. As I put more miles on my car and get even more comfortable with it, maybe I will do likewise. Time will tell.