

Ford GTX1

NOT MY EVERYDAY RIDE

Using any measurement standard, it's been an exceptional year for this writer. For starters, I was able to drive Chrysler's driver-focused 330-horsepower Crossfire SRT6 Roadster from Paris to Geneva to Genoa and back while covering the Geneva Auto Salon last March. Then I had the trip of a lifetime, flogging a thousand American horsepower in the form of a Ford GT and Dodge Viper, from London to Maranello and back this summer followed by a track test of the Ford GT with the all-new Viper Coupe this fall at Willow Springs Raceway here in California. But this weekend that all served as a prelude to another treat, being the first journalist to get behind the wheel of the Ford GTX1 concept car, quite honestly, one of the real stars of this November's SEMA Show in Las Vegas.

Words & photos: Richard Truesdell



For one night, an ordinary garage
welcomed an extraordinary car.





The Coupe already had performance and sex appeal. The Roadster manages to push the second term beyond any imagination.

THE FORD GTX1 IS WHAT can be best called a production-ready prototype, the by-product of the combined efforts of Kip Ewing, an insightfully talented supervising engineer on GT program at the SVT Group at Ford in Dearborn, Michigan, and Mark Gerisch from Green Bay, Wisconsin (www.vgdauto.com), a metal bender of undeniable ability who plies his trade by performing radical roof surgery on Bentleys and Rolls Royces for the mega-rich, Hollywood celebrities and professional athletes. Kip's design, first rendered on a napkin at a local hot dog stand and realized on a 1/18th scale die cast, makes an outstanding car just about perfect with Mark's execution in metal, fully realizing all of the potential inherent in the basic design of the Ford GT.

Before some purists start screaming travesty, you should realize that the original Ford GT from 1964, the car that ultimately vanquished Ferrari on its home turf, race tracks across the continent, was built in a number of open or roadster configurations, chassis numbers 108 to 112, the precursors to the run of "production" GT40s, starting with the 13th chassis fabricated for P/1000 in March of 1965. (The first original Ford GT encountered on my trip this past summer, see Supercar, October 2005, was in reality chassis number 112, the 12th chassis constructed and was in its original incarnation, a roadster.)

But the new GTX1's heritage is even more blue-blooded as chassis 110, an other roadster, was dispatched

originally to Bruce McLaren racing in early 1965 where in a white/blue livery and a long nose, it fitted with a 7-liter V8, the first Ford GT to be thus fitted and was driven by Chris Amon on four occasions without success. For Sebring 1966, it was refitted with a near windscreen and roof/roll bar structure, sprayed red and with Ken Miles and Lloyd Ruby at the wheel, won the 12 Hour race.

In a well-documented trail that followed, after Sebring the chassis was shipped to the Shelby American facility near Los Angeles International Airport where it sat in storage until 1970 when the US Customs Service showed up on Shelby's doorstep with an order to pay the necessary duty (it was imported as a racing chassis back in 1965) or destroy the chassis. Shelby took option number two and under the watchful eye of US Customs marshals, cut up the chassis and buried the pieces on a construction site near the Shelby plant. Subsequently an apartment building was constructed above its earthly remains. (Given the value of a fully restored MK II 7-liter Ford GT, it might be financially worthwhile to excavate its remains and reconstruct a "new" GT-X1 around it. Don't laugh, some of the cars currently on the rolls as original GT40s owe their existence to even more unusual circumstances.)

All of this puts me in the seat of the GTX1 on a glorious Sunday morning in November, meeting Mark Gerisch at his hotel in Beverly Hills, his post SEMA Show base of operations as he makes the rounds of the many automotive publications

based here in Southern California. Mark and I stow the top, part of the center T-section stowed between the seats, its stripe moving in concert with the strip on the rear deck, the two smaller roof panels which once formed the top of each door behind each seat with the final panel stored under the new carbon fiber front hood with the added Sony Xplod amplifier. (Full details on the Sony system are contained in the audio sidebar.)

After all was stowed, we took off

north, destination Santa Barbara, 100 miles up the coast, where we planned a stopover at the luxurious Four Seasons Resort, the Biltmore. I've known Mark for five years and have utmost respect for his ability as both a designer as well as a magician fabricating unique and functional exotics in metal but he cautions, "Rich, I have almost a half-million dollars invested in this car. For God's sake, be careful." I had to remind him that I have already driven two different Ford GTs, almost 3,500 miles in Europe and here in California with no so much as a stone chip to either. (Both press fleet Ford GTs have led star-crossed lives in the US and the UK; both are currently on their way back to Dearborn for refitting after recent serious shunts at the hands of ham-fisted auto journalists and TV personalities on both sides of the Atlantic.)

SURFACE STREETS, Pico Blvd. to be exact, through West LA got us to the San Diego Freeway northbound, which skirts Los Angeles and on to US 101 north. What was remarkable is that with the roof panel removed, there was almost zero turbulence in the cabin; if the sun was shining so brightly you wouldn't know the roof was out. The lack of the tornado effect is due in part to the flying buttresses that serve as the mounting points for the 4-piece roof system which takes less than two minutes to install or remove in the current prototype form.

Unfortunately, Mark, who hails from Wisconsin, in America's dairy land, was ill equipped for all the sunshine, his shaved head was being baked by the mid-day sun as on this sunny November Sunday, the thermometer was over 90 degrees necessitating a stop at a mall where he was able to purchase a crimson and gold USC Football cap. "Do I look like a native Rich?" Mark quipped.

Back on the 101 we motored northward and Mark explained that for the prototype the suspension was lowered two inches, and quite frankly, this seriously hindered its drivability as traversing every driveway and speed bump was an adventure, the real danger of high centering the car

NEW ENTRY

While the GTX1 was not in the Sony booth at the 2005 SEMA Show, it's apparent that it is an important part of its plan, going forward in 2006, to reassert itself as a player in the hyper-competitive ICE marketplace. The reason? It features Sony's all-new single-DIN MEX-1GP, turning the receiver's detached faceplate into an MP3 storage device. The "Drag and Drive" faceplate features a high-speed USB 2.0 adapter built-in along with 1GB of storage for MP3 and WMA digital audio files. In the GTX1, Gerisch has downloaded MP3 song files from his computer to the MEX-1GP by simply remove the faceplate and hooking it to his laptop via the USB connection, then dragging and dropping the files into the faceplate. Once transferred, the faceplate snaps back into place in the vehicle and he can listen to his favorite MP3 and WMA files in the GTX1. Yet the unit isn't perfect. The



faceplate lacks a built-in rechargeable battery and a headphone input, two features that would have turned it into a true portable digital music player (I've been espousing the virtues of such a design for more than two years) and made it a true iPod killer. Hopefully the next generation will include this capability. The rest of the system is upgraded with Sony components, an amplifier mounted under the hood, integrated 5-inch separates in each door, ambient tweeters flanking the head

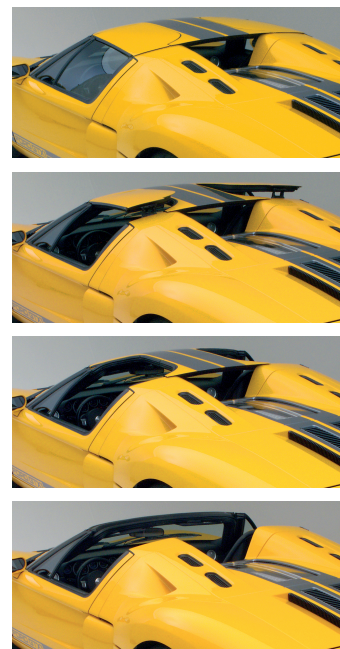
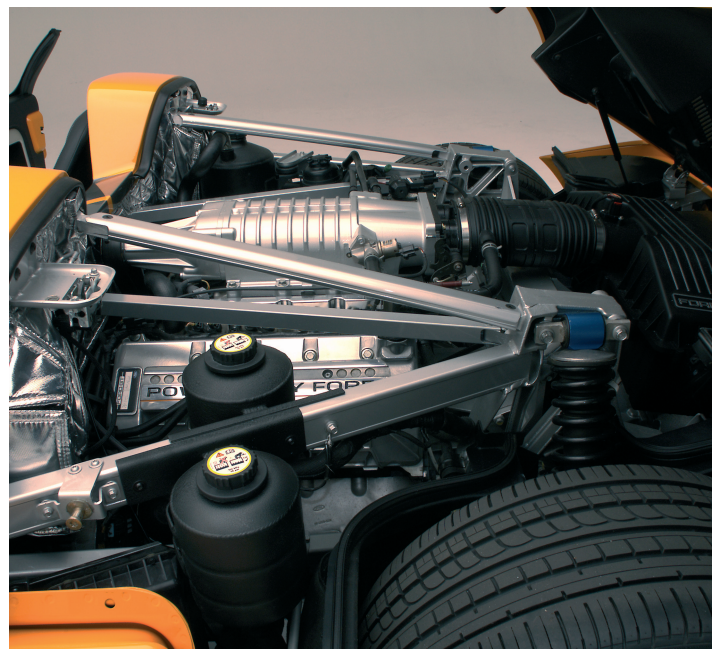
unit and a subwoofer between the seats. The huge subwoofer/enclosure employed in the optional McIntosh system, mounted between the seats is replaced by a much smaller enclosure housing a Sony 8-inch woofer. This is essential as part of the roof system, when removed, stores behind the seat. Mark will have to figure a way so that the roof, in the final production configuration, can be fully stored in GTs equipped with the premium sound system, an obstacle I'm sure he's already sorting out.

was always on my mind, something that I didn't worry about in Europe as the roads, especially the Autobahns and Autostradas, are in much better shape than our freeways here in the US. Mark commented that the suspension is a coil-over design with adjustable dampers but since the SEMA Show, there just hasn't been the time to get the car up on a lift and properly readjust the suspension. Mark plans to dial in at least a half inch additional clearance but if my opinion means anything, and if it was my car, for the more carefree way I tend to drive, I'd return it to close to the stock ride height, thus eliminating the possibility of costly damage, especially to the front clip and the rear defusers.

WITH ALL THAT being said, even with the reduction in suspension travel and compliance, the GTX1 rode as comfortably as any stock Ford GT, which means that it has more in common with the comfort level of a Lincoln Town Car than an out-and-out supercar. As in a GT coupe, tire, not wind noise, was more annoying, a byproduct in this case to the Pirelli P-Zeros fitted to the custom wheels (19-inch diameter up front, 20-inch in the rear,) designed by Kip Ewing and fabricated by 6061 Alloy Corporation especially for the GTX1. They have a certain Hallibrand look that works well with the Valencia Orange with Titanium stripes of the show car.

While the rubber nibbled at the expansion joints and the lane bots (reflectors that denote each lane's boundaries), what was remarkable was the complete absence of cowl shake. While Mark noted that the chassis was reinforced in some places, the area around the A-Pillar was not. "There's no need to," says Mark. "The A-Pillar structure on the GT is very robust. We looked at reinforcing the A-Pillar area but quite frankly, it wasn't necessary." On our 250-mile drive, we heard nary a squeak or rattle, just like my experience at the wheel of the GT Coupe.

Given that we were driving a half million dollar production-ready prototype, track time was strictly out of the question, as were speeds above 80 MPH, as there was still work to be done sorting out several elements of the design, which will retail for \$38,000 plus the cost of the donor Ford GT,



Top manufacturers supplied different parts for this one of a kind vehicle. Under the hood, same fabulous engine delivering 550 HP.

before production starts in the late spring or early summer of 2006. Gerisch has 46 firm orders already in hand in the three weeks since the SEMA Show and his 20,000 square foot facility in Green Bay, Wisconsin (home of the football Packers) has the capability to convert up to five cars per week, once all the facilities are up and running. He also noted that while the current four-piece top looks and stores as a production-ready part, the final version will be further refined and will steal less of the Ford GT's most valuable commodity, luggage and storage space. As with the GT coupe, luggage space is strictly limited to a pair of toothbrushes and a box pregnancy prevention devices. (Actually there's a bit more space but only for very soft sided luggage of three cubic feet or less.)

Finally, north of Ventura, we were finally able to air out the GTX1 a bit, still staying under the self-imposed

80 MPH limit. This means that even local high schoolers in rice-powered econoboxes were passing us but in reality, what did it matter? We were cruising up the California coast in a one-of-a-kind supercar, the only open, street legal Ford GT in the entire world. By the time we cleared Ventura and caught up with the famed Pacific Coast Highway, the sun was beginning to set and the oppressive heat had diminished measurably, making the drive that much more enjoyable.

Reaching the outskirts of Santa Barbara, we exited the PCH for a predetermined photo location just to the north of the Four Seasons Resort, the Biltmore on Channel Drive. I've used this location in the past as the Four Seasons is a favorite with many auto manufacturers whenever they launch a vehicle anywhere along the central California Coast. While we expected the GTX1 to stop traffic, which it did, what was unexpected in

that among the crowd it attracted, several people knew exactly what it was, and saying that they had seen it on the Internet in the three weeks since it had been unveiled in Las Vegas. The level of cooperation was great as several onlookers controlled of blocked traffic while we took advantage of a spectacular California sunset.

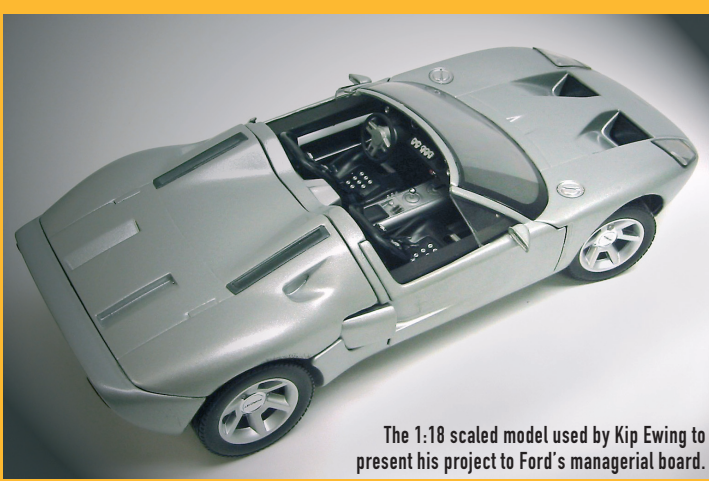
DRIVING A FORD GT, any Ford GT, is not an every day occurrence, even for me, and driving a one-off roadster was an even more special pleasure. The starting point for all of this madness still remains a limited-production car with a \$151,000 sticker price (at this time Ford GTs currently sell for about \$10,000 - \$15,000 over sticker) and the projected price of GTX1 status upgrade is \$38,000. This means that out the door, a well-heeled enthusiast must be prepared to part with something close to \$200,000 to realize this particular automotive wet dream. With the new Ferrari 430 Spyder carry a sticker price here in the US of \$201,000 with currently a \$50,000+ premium, the GTX1 does make a very compelling argument for itself.

Beyond the obvious, the appeal of an American open-air supercar motoring along in a state where the sun shines between 330 and 340 days out of the year, the move to a roadster cures the Ford GT of its second most egregious shortcoming, the need to find extra wide parking spaces (not that many GT owners have this problem) as the doors need to open extra wide to provide ingress and egress due to the door cutting into the roof. From my limited time behind the wheel, and given my past positive experiences with the GT coupe, I know if I win the California Lottery any time soon, \$200,000 of the winnings would be dispatched in a FedEx envelope to Green Bay, Wisconsin. And four weeks later I'd expect a GTX1 to be delivered to my doorstep, 2,000 miles west.

INFOTECH

Engine: V8, Supercharged # Displacement cu in (cc): 330 (5410) # Power bhp (kW) at RPM: 550(410) / 6500 # Torque lb-ft (Nm) at RPM: 500(678) / 3750 # Redline at RPM: 6500 # Brakes F/R: ABS, Brembo Alum. mono-block/two-piece rotors # Tires F-R: 245/40 ZR19 - 335/30 ZR20 # Driveline: Rear Wheel Drive # Exterior Dimensions & Weight # Length / Width / Height in: 182.8 / 76.9 / 40.5 (adjustable)

The Ford GTX1 features several SEMA-member company products, including:
Wheels: 6061 Alloy Corporation 19-inch front/20-inch rear
Seats: Sparco Carbon fiber Ford GT custom
Brakes: Brembo Alum. mono-block/two-piece rotors
Tires: Pirelli P-Zero Rosso
Dampers: Dynamic Dampers Adjustable coil-overs
Trunk: Multimatic Carbon Fiber
Exhaust: Ford Racing - Borla
Interior trim: WK Industries
Paint: Debeers
Roof latching: RMD
Clam shell cassette: Manitowoc Composites



The 1:18 scaled model used by Kip Ewing to present his project to Ford's managerial board.

