
MY OTHER CAR'S A QASHQAI

You don't have to own a Ferrari to turn heads on the highway – you can hire one for the day. *Duncan Craig*

tests the ultimate upgrade

Car hire. Probably the two least-sexy words in the entire holiday lexicon. Hidden charges, insurance hard-sells, suitcases crammed into footwells to save £17 a day on the next class up. Yep, it's been a while, I'm guessing, since a hire car got you hot under the bonnet.

It doesn't have to be that way. A new company called, annoyingly, Vroomerz, promises to introduce you to a parallel automotive world that's less supermini, more supermodel.

It works by bringing scores of disparate luxury car-hire firms across Europe under one umbrella, removing some of the "not

for the likes of us" mystique and putting hundreds of head-turning vehicles at your fingertips.

There's no pesky extra charge for dropping your car off at a different location from where you picked it up; you get the exact car you choose, rather than something "similar"; and the website couldn't be simpler: pick-up location, drop-off location, dates, hit "search" and start fantasising.

They're not giving them away, obviously – expect to pay anything from £100 a day to more than 12 times that, depending on model and time of year. But here's how you are going to rationalise it: you're making one of the worst bits of your holiday – the A to B tedium – the best. The car is the holiday.

So, for instance, you could have a Ferrari waiting for you at Milan airport, spend a leisurely couple of days driving it down through the ravishing Piedmontese countryside to the coast, swan along the Italian Riviera to Monaco, then drop it off at Nice airport before flying home.

I say "for instance" ...

"Welcome to Milan," says a beaming Oto, handing me the keys to the scarlet Ferrari California T parked behind him outside arrivals: £169,000 worth of exquisite Italian craftsmanship with a 3.9-litre, twin turbocharged V8 engine, 552bhp and a top speed of 196mph.

It's both beauty and beast. It's also – according to the editor of the Sunday Times Driving website – "the Ferrari for people who know nothing about cars". Sounds about right. At home, I drive a Nissan Qashqai. Not so much prancing horse as obstinate donkey.

Oto, an amiable Latvian who works for Prime Rent, the Italian agency handling my booking, spends 20 minutes patiently showing me the features: paddle-shifter gears; one-touch

retractable hard-top roof; Turbo Performance Engineer display (no idea). Music? "You can connect to your iPhone via Bluetooth, if you wish," Oto says. Pause. "But, trust me, you won't want to listen to music."

Vroomerz goes big on the personal touches, offering 24/7 support via your phone or WhatsApp, and inviting customers to make special requests. I've asked for some panettone, the sweet Milanese bread prepared and enjoyed at

Christmas. It's August. A vacuum-sealed

loaf is duly waiting for me on the passenger seat. Vroomerz has passed its test; now, how will I get on with mine?

I turn the California's key, the steering column descends into my lap like something from a Nasa shuttle simulator and I hit the start button. There's a primordial roar that has everyone this side of the Dolomites turning my way, then I'm inching out of the airport car park, silently chanting "Don't crash, don't crash".

My first 20 minutes is unlikely to feature in any of the Fast and the Furious sequels. I nurdle my way through Milan's cluttered suburbs, sheepishly acknowledging the waves and nervously nibbling my panettone. But suburbs give way to A road, A road to motorway and soon I'm easing back into the custom-made leather seats, a big fat smirk on my face.

Fiat Pandas and Nissan Micras wheeze and whine their way past in the outside lane, provoked by my mere presence. I'm content to idle in the middle lane, like Anthony Joshua calmly sipping his pint during a pub brawl.

The sound when I do unleash goes right through me. AA Gill, reviewing the California T for this paper, described

the noise it makes as "like a troll pleasuring a bronchial badger".

I drop the roof as I swap autostrada for rustic back road and delve into the rich green folds of the Piedmont wine region. I'm booked to stay at La Villa hotel, a stylish *agriturismo* in the village of Mombaruzzo. They're no strangers to supercars. "We once had eight Bugatti Veyrons here at the same time," the owner, Nicola, tells me.

Glass of silky smooth Barolo in hand, Ferrari in the car park, I settle down in the star-lit courtyard for the most romantic dinner for one I've ever had.

I stick to the scenic route the next morning, growling through sleepy hilltop villages and winning admiring glances from the old boys outside the *pasticceria*. About midday, I'm swapping a palette of greens for one of dazzling blues as I hit the Riviera dei Fiori coast road, taking regular, protracted pit stops for gelato, espressos and shameless posing.

Then I'm burrowing through the

Maritime Alps, dropping down into Nice and creaming up the bald spot for one last top-down hurrah along the Promenade des Anglais to the airport.

Oto is waiting for me (have they cloned him?). "You enjoy, right?" he asks, with a glint in his eye. You could say that, Oto, you could say that.

Will you? Well, you're going to need deep pockets. The thoroughbred I pranced around in costs from about £1,000 a day. Insurance is included, but there's a £7,000 deposit to cover damages. Note, you will probably have to upgrade your zero-excess insurance policy.

There are plenty of less expensive options – in terms of both rental and excess – though none of them is remotely like a Nissan Qashqai (see box).

You'll also need nerve. I never fully got over the fact that I was driving a car worth more than my mortgage. It was not the high-speed crashes I feared, more the Milanese and Niçoise scooters with the personal-space issues. Next time, I'm going to do the pick-up from an abandoned airfield.

Those points aside, it was, by some margin, my most memorable short break and my most epic road trip. There's something about looking down and seeing that badge on the wheel, having that spine-compressing power just a pedal dab away, that makes you want to eke out every mile. When a crash on the autostrada had my sat nav mapping out a two-hour detour, my first thought was "excellent".

There are other luxury car-hire companies out there. They just tend to be tricky to navigate and big on whimsy-evaporating restrictions, conditions and punitive "one-way" fees.

We're back to that passion-killing thing, and this is where Vroomerz scores big. G&T in hand, a few days of holiday on the horizon, I know which website full of sexy models I'll be furtively browsing.

Duncan Craig was a guest of Vroomerz, which has access to more than 300 prestige cars across eight European countries (vroomerz.com). He was also a guest of La Villa hotel, which has doubles from £197, B&B (lavillahotel.net); and British Airways, which flies to both Milan and Nice (ba.com)

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ROARSOME
Duncan in 'his' Ferrari California and, left, in the hills above Nice



OR YOU COULD HAVE BORROWED...



**Porsche 718
Boxster**
From £235 a day



**Mercedes-Benz
E-Class Cabrio**
From £142 a day



**Maserati
Ghibli**
From £320 a day