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Capsule Review: 1958 Maserati 3500GT

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See, this guy in Lexington, KY died of cancer around 1962, and he left a Maserati to his only remaining relative, an uncle in his '80's living in Louisville. Uncle hadn't driven a stick shift in 30 years but had just bought a new Cadillac, so he goes back to the dealer and says, "Get rid of this thing for me, willya?" The Cadillac salesman looks at the Maserati, they look at each other, and one of them says, "Hey, I bet

Dr. Dean would be interested." And that's how my father picked up a Maserati 3500GT for about two grand.

The car was built like a brick shit house. It had a steel space frame like the legendary Birdcage Maserati: light, but rigid as a bridge girder. Indeed, the 3500GT was all but bolted to the ground. With its stiff suspension, you needed a football mouth protector when surmounting a curb or highway expansion joints. The payoff came at speed. You could cruise in a 3500GT at 100mph and think you were doing 60.

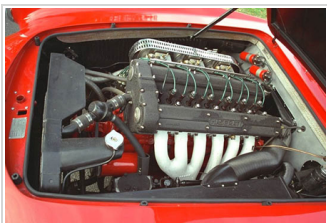


As the brand's first foray into a limited production sedan, the 3500GT was meant to reclaim Maserati's fortunes. You can take the car out of the sport, but... The interior was luxurious. But anything that didn't directly relate to touring at speed had extremely rough edges.

Maserati developed the passenger car's powerplant from an F1 engine. The clutch came down like a hammer, either on or off. Forget about getting started on snow and ice. The coolant temperature sensor was an afterthought, inserted in a little can in the upper radiator hose. As a result, the 3500GT wanted a long, winding, open road.

I got stuck in traffic one day and nervously watched the coolant temperature climb... and then fall. Much relieved, I didn't realize that the coolant had boiled off to the point that the sensor was dry. Then the oil pressure started to drop.

Finally, I farked out, stopped and nervously opened the radiator cap. Nothing there. Like the teenaged idiot I was, I quickly got water and poured it in. Out came the inevitable, searing steam geyser. But the engine had been built well, the Fates were feeling kindly toward idiots, and nothing warped.



The GT3500's engine was a DOHC straight six, mated to a smooth, tight, ZF gearbox. The straight-through glass pack muffler was quiet at idle, roaring at full bore. If you took off the air cleaner cover off the early cars- and why wouldn't you- you found six velocity stacks all in a row atop the three double-barrel side-draft Webers. Oh, the symphony of all that valve gear spinning and ringing in resonance.

There was gobs of push and a pedigreed assurance that the 3500GT was a car that knew what it was about. Which was not so much sports racing (like Ferraris) as true grand touring- with luxury, effortless speed and absolute self-possession. Even so, I eventually realized I didn't have the stuff to drive this car at much more than 40 or 50 percent of what its potential (some 145 MPH). But like the Bugatti T40, it had no glaring

vices, and brought you back to base safely.

And I crunched it.

Oh the shame; nailed by a farmer at a dead stop! Blinker on for a left into a drive way, I was waiting in the left lane on a four lane main suburban road just after a long slow bend. I looked up at the rear view mirror and all I could see was GRILLE.



The next thing I knew, I was 150 feet down the road, in the car, on my back. The pedals were gone and there was an awful grinding noise coming out of the rear. The impact had broken the seat back off, and the left rear fender pressed against the tire.

The offending '53 Chevy was totaled. The Maserati had one bent space frame tube and some crunched bodywork. Everything else seemed OK. I pried the tire free and drove it home.

Funny thing: aluminum bodywork doesn't just smash at the point of impact like steel. It had deformed with a standing wave four feet long all the way up to the driver's door. Didn't we have fun finding someone who could do aluminum body work. We eventually located an old timer who was a dead ringer for the Wizard of Oz.

Going in to the shop, the car was a putrid dirty green. Coming out, she wore a lovely Mustang Poppy Red coat that just *screamed* "Ticket me, please!" But that's another story...
