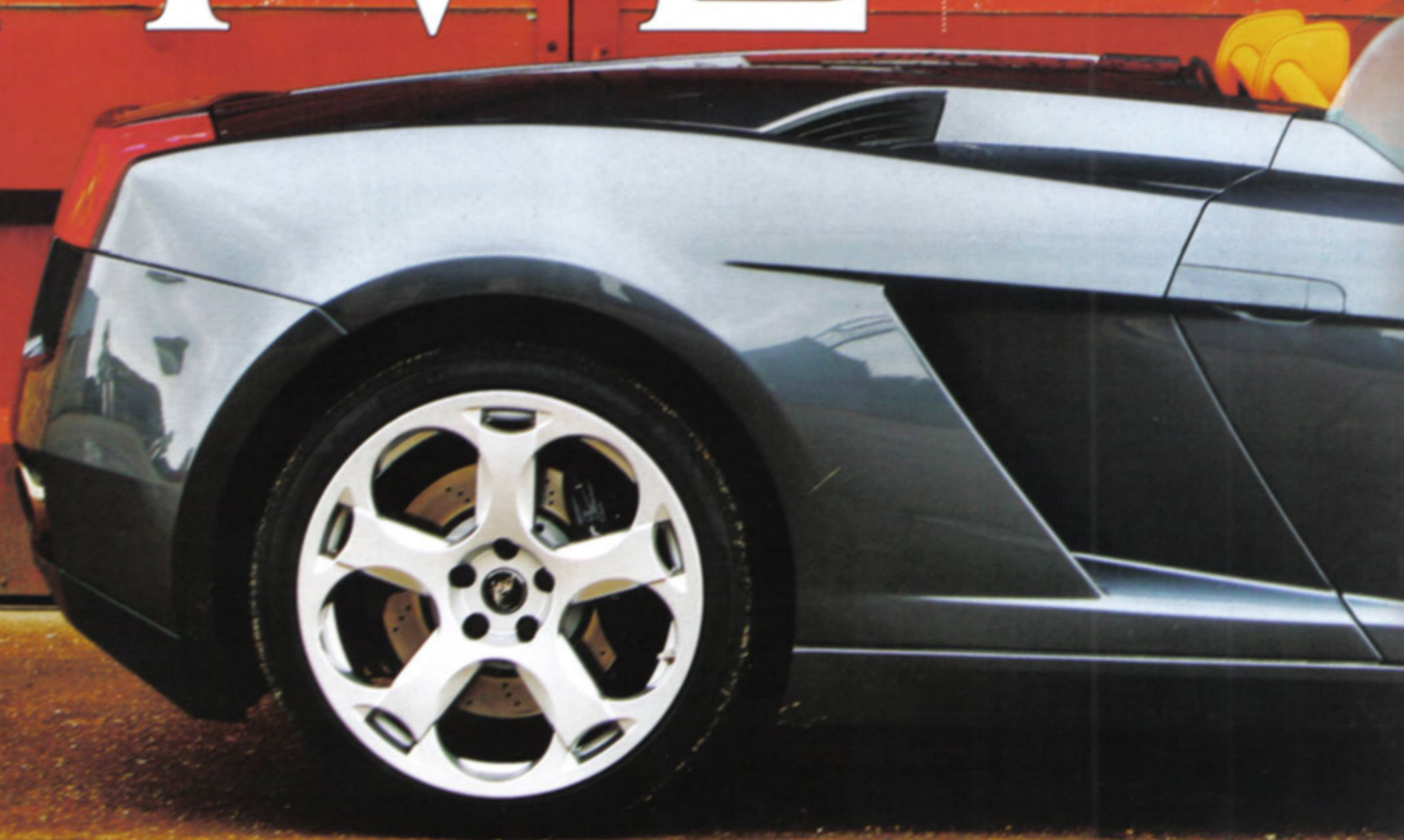


# ECURIE TWENTY FIVE

Based in the City of London, one fractional ownership Supercar club has a huge selection of cars to choose from. **Oliver Walston** samples a Lamborghini Gallardo for the weekend to see what all the fuss is about.



→ Ok, I'll admit it before any of you readers figure it out for yourselves. I am a snob. Not the sort of snob who prefers dukes to dustmen, but the sort of snob who feels that if you can't afford to buy a particular car, then you'd better not drive that sort of a car. Which is a roundabout way of saying that I disapproved of those clubs which provide their members with supercars for the weekend. It seemed to me that they enabled poseurs to pose with their Ferrari on a Saturday in the hopes that the other members of the golf club thought they owned the damned thing.

So much for the supercar clubs. Now how about the supercars themselves? These are a very different matter indeed. The word "lust" best sums up my feelings about Ferraris, Lamborghinis and Maseratis. My Dad owned a succession of Aston Martins and I myself managed to get through three Porsches within a decade, but, because I was familiar with the marques, neither of these brands quite cut the mustard for me.

So imagine my feelings (no, on second thoughts you'd better not) when the editor told me he had arranged for me to have a Lamborghini for the weekend this summer. Come Saturday morning I was so excited I couldn't eat my muesli. Instead I made my way to the city of London where, in a large but slightly dingy garage, I found myself among some of the sexiest bits of machinery I had seen in a decade or two.

I had been allocated a gunmetal grey convertible Lamborghini Gallardo, but before I could play with it I had to be taken out on a training mission in the mean streets of London. And this was no pushover due to the fact that (a) I had never before driven a car with a paddle shift gearbox and (b) visibility through the ludicrous rear window was nil. Fortunately the weather was good so we lowered the roof. This event meant that I suddenly benefited from two exciting phenomena. The first was that I had a rough idea of where the traffic was behind me, and the second was that I myself became very visible. I said a silent prayer that one of my friends (most of whom prefer to be called acquaintances) might actually see me behind the wheel of a Lamborghini Gallardo.

The introductory course of Lamborghini-manship was eventually completed and I was allowed to fly solo down to my vast country residence some fifty miles north of London. To do so meant spending almost an hour in heavy urban traffic. This was no fun at all. In fact it was pretty horrible. The Gallardo is very low and very wide, which means it

takes up a lot of road. The paddleshift gearbox does, I admit, have an automatic function but I ignored this and insisted on pretending I was Lewis Hamilton, which was all very well but it involved some amazingly bumpy and abrupt gear changes. It soon became clear that those lovely people at Sant'Agata had not really spent much time trying to make their car into an urban runabout. On the contrary; a Lamborghini Gallardo is definitely the least satisfactory town transport it has ever been my misfortune to drive. No ifs and no buts. It just ain't any good in cities.

Eventually I hit the M11 and all of a sudden I realised that this hairy monster heap of metal was not so bad after all. Indeed it was pretty damned good. And after ten more miles I had to admit that the words "pretty damned good" did not begin to describe my feelings. It was delicious and delightful and scary and splendid. My pumpkin had turned not into a carriage but something more akin to an F-15 fighter. There was, however, one remaining major – indeed massive – problem. It was something called a speed limit. In a Lamborghini 70mph feels like a stroll in the park. And what was even more exciting, was the exhaust note which seemed to be goading me to go faster and faster and faster.

I eventually reached my chateau where one of the liveried servants was waiting to open the door, extract me from the driving seat, wipe my brow with eau de cologne and hand me a mug of Bourn Vita.

After three hours in a cool and dark room, I emerged ready to take on the Gallardo again. This time, however, I would show no mercy whatsoever. Summoning an assortment of peasants, most of whom had long since lost their forelocks after years of tugging, I selected the bravest among them and set off in search of an empty rural road. This, fortunately, was not hard





to find. The sun was shining and there appeared to be no policeman in sight – though any constable within five miles would inevitably be in earshot.

By now I had become used to the paddleshift, although I still did not like it. I aimed the car towards the horizon and pressed my right foot down as far as it would go. The first bits of me to register any sensation whatsoever were my eyeballs, which appeared to be being dragged through my skull. My ears remained attached to my head but within a millisecond or two had ceased to function due to the sound of ten cylinders trying to escape from an aluminium block.

The rev counter was equally blurred as the needle covered the red line. And here those damned paddleshifts really came into their own. My gearshifts were faster than I had ever imagined possible and, with no clutch to worry about, I became a superb driver. Within the first ten seconds I realised that this is what the Gallardo had been designed to do. Everything now made sense. What had recently been an unwieldy handful with a clonking gearbox and no visibility suddenly became the most exciting thing I had ever driven in my life. Not surprisingly, the plodding peasant beside me, whose normal mode of transport is a rusty Raleigh bicycle with a three speed Sturmey-Archer gearchange, became rigid with fear as he saw the speedometer touch 130mph.

I repeated this process many times that afternoon, becoming more skilled and less frightened with every lift-off. By the time dusk fell man (i.e. me) and machine were as one in perfect harmony. You can forget sex, alcohol, intergalactic travel. They all pale into insignificance when compared to a convertible Lamborghini Gallardo on a sunny afternoon.

And now for the serious stuff. No longer did I think that my gunmetal grey Gallardo was a pain in the bum and a waste of time. Au contraire. It is the finest toy money can buy. Except that you'd be an idiot to buy it. Not only would you have to face a bill of £140,000, but you would also endure the sort of depreciation which makes the north face of the Eiger look like a gentle slope. And as if that were not painful enough, there is also the minor matter of servicing costs, which must amount to well over £5000 per annum – even if nothing has actually gone wrong.

No, I have seen the light. I have not the slightest desire to own a Gallardo. I would be far happier paying Ecurie 25 a mere £9,950 per year and let them worry about servicing and depreciation. In the summer, when the sun shines and an old man's thoughts turn to raw speed and white knuckles, I'd pop along to Old Street and do what I did the other day – take a Lamborghini for the weekend. I might, I must admit, get them to deliver the car to my chateau so I would never again have to drive through London traffic. But then – unlike some of you people out there in readerland – I am not a masochist. ←

