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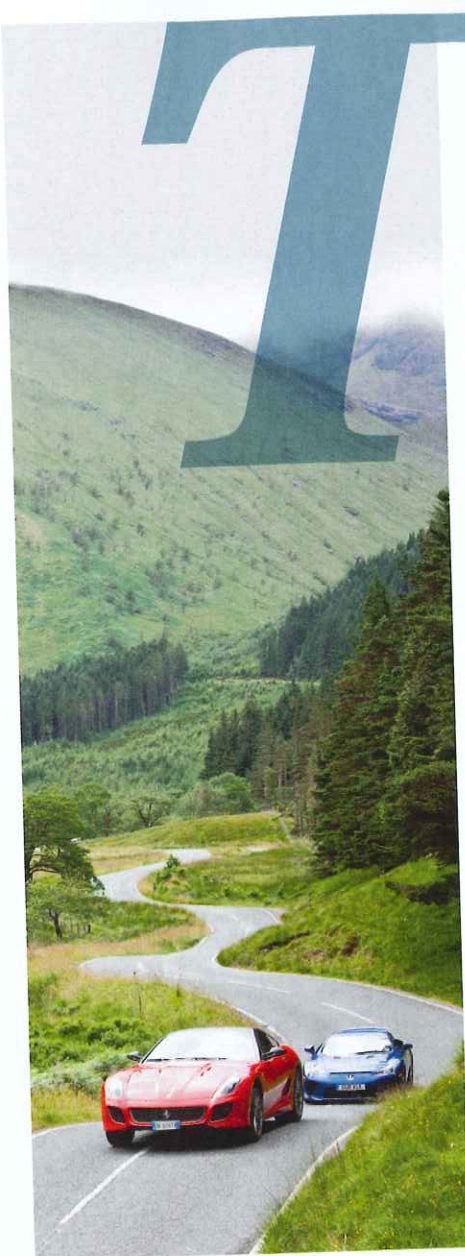


SCREAM MACHINES

*Two high-revving supercars, V10-engined Lexus LFA and V12-engined Ferrari GTO, lock horns in the Scottish Highlands. **Richard Meaden** savours an assault on the senses*

Sound
OF
Speed 10 v 12 CYLINDERS
LFA v GTO





Epic supercars deserve an epic setting, and they don't come any more spectacular than Glen Nevis

The Glasgow Airport Travelodge has never witnessed anything quite like this. At one end of the car park, an Italian-registered car transporter pulsates to the beat of a barely silenced V12 as it disgorges a scarlet Ferrari 599 GTO; at the other an inky-blue Lexus LFA yelps into life and backs slowly from a covered trailer.

We first discussed getting the LFA and GTO together for a head-to-head in the autumn of last year, but it's taken this long for the planets to align. Seeing these two shards of exotica roll out into a car park full of regulation grey and silver Audis and BMWs is a bit like Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie walking into your local boozier. Roger Green and I honestly can't remember feeling this excited about a test in years.

Such high anticipation is with good reason, for the GTO and LFA make a fascinating pairing. Culturally and historically they couldn't be further apart, yet glance down the spec sheets and there's no question the pair stand toe-to-toe in the front-engined supercar stakes. Both cost in excess of £300,000 as tested (we insured the GTO for £330K, the LFA £350K), boast front-mid-mounted V12 and V10 masterpieces mated to six-speed, single-clutch paddle-shift gearboxes. Each channels drive to the rear wheels only, will accelerate to 60mph in comfortably less than 4sec, 100mph in 8sec or less and hit a top speed of more than 200mph. They are, as my old granny used to say, the Doberman's danglers.

Mother Nature seems wholly unimpressed by our 22-cylinder, 1213bhp, £680,000 duo, treating us to a sky blanketed with grey cloud and some light drizzle as Green and I head out of Glasgow. It's a strangely humdrum start to what promises to be an epic three days, but the succession of urban dual carriageways provides an easy, challenge-free getting-to-know-you phase in which to dial in to the cars' responses. Bypassing the city, we eventually cross the Erskine Bridge, heading due north towards Loch Lomond and Crianlarich, gateway to the Scottish Highlands and some of the most spectacular roads in the world.

I've elected to take the Ferrari, not least because I haven't driven a 599 GTO before. On first acquaintance it's everything you'd hope it to be: much more aggressive-looking (and sounding) than a regular 599, with plenty of silky carbonfibre on the inside to reinforce the notion that this is a no-nonsense, pared-back road car. When it comes to sending a message of intent, the 599 GTO is as explicit as a flick-knife.

Pulling down on the shoulder-straps of the four-point harness is always a good way to focus your brain on driving, and this, coupled to the busy, bassy, barrel-chested sound emanating from beneath the GTO's vented bonnet, completely engages your senses. Indeed it's not until we're midway between Glasgow and Loch Lomond that I realise there's no radio or satnav. As I don't have a map and there's no hands-free phone connection, I'm soon concentrating on

'THE GTO'S AGGRESSIVE DYNAMICS AND EXPLOSIVE PERFORMANCE'



not losing sight of the LFA's bluff tail and the mesmerising high-rise wing that elevates into the airstream at 50mph, then sinks back down at 30.

Given that the GTO's 6.2-litre V12 develops 661bhp, it's remarkably tractable, lugging without protest at low speeds and shuffling satisfyingly up and down the single-clutch paddle-shift 'box in Auto mode. Of course it's no chore to flip the long-eared carbon paddles – especially once Loch Lomond hoves into view and the road becomes more interesting.

In true 21st century Ferrari style, the mood of the car is dictated by the little red manettino switch, mounted on the right-hand side of the steering wheel. By toggling between Wet, Sport, Race,





HAVE PROVED POWERFULLY SEDUCTIVE. THE LFA HAS A LOT TO DO...'

Left and below: both cars have excellent sound systems. Lexus's three-pipe set-up offers the more complex sound effects but GTO's four-pipe system is one louder



CT and CST settings you can soften the GTO's attitude for inclement weather or particularly poor road surfaces, or ramp everything up (and disable the electronic safety systems) to the point where it's so angry you half expect a gloved fist to spring from a compartment in the dash and punch you in the face.

You don't mess with a car like the GTO. Any hint of mickey-taking on cold tyres and it sends a message in the form of a warning squirm from the rear Michelins. Scroll through the dashboard display menu and there's a graphic that shows engine, brake and tyre temperature. You'd be amazed at how long it takes for those four little contact patches to go from blue to green in normal driving, but you'd also love the

sense of anticipation, focus and respect it brings to your driving.

Our target is Fort William and the roads that run around the foot of Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain. To get there we follow the A82, passing up and across the stark, exposed panorama of Rannoch Moor before craning our necks at the humbling scale of Glencoe. I stick with the GTO until we reach Crianlarich, revelling in the sense of both it and the LFA limbering-up like athletes, gradually, imperceptibly lengthening their stride as our pace increases.

By the time we stop and switch cars I feel connected to and hugely impressed by the Ferrari. As you'd expect – and perhaps hope – it's noisy over a prolonged period of time, but it's not

too physical, either in terms of damping or driver effort. Pleasingly it has a tremendous sense of coiled, pent-up energy that proves harder and harder to contain as the road becomes increasingly inviting and my self-control buckles under the sustained onslaught.

Regular readers will know that I'm a huge fan of the LFA, but stepping from Ferrari's ultimate front-engined road car presents an unexpectedly stern test of my love for the Lexus. Not so much on first impressions, for I think this particular LFA looks spectacular in purply-blue metallic with smoked chrome wheels, but simply because the GTO's aggressive dynamics and explosive performance have proved powerfully seductive. The LFA has a lot to do...



Bruntingthorpe the venue for the drag race and the smoky cornering shots

The Highlands might be the perfect stage on which to compare the on-road performance and characters of the LFA and GTO, but to really explore their absolute capabilities you need the freedom to hoon in a spacious and speed-limit-free environment.

Ordinarily we would have nailed them around Bedford Autodrome, but both are so loud they'd make Jonathan Palmer's noise meters twitch from the comfort of the evo office car park. So we head instead to Bruntingthorpe Proving Ground, both to see how fast they'll go down the runway and also to get a feel for their on- and over-the-limit handling with all stability systems disabled.

'THE LFA SLIPS INTO BALANCED, EASILY INDUCED OVERSTEER FROM APEX TO EXIT'

On the road, both have such epic reach you can only explain their relative performance in emotional rather than empirical terms. Here the GTO wastes no time in asserting itself as the rocketship of the pair. The concrete surface doesn't offer perfect traction and it's slightly uphill for the first half of the runway, so the figures are not definitive. But they illustrate the Ferrari's ferocity, the GTO growing a 0.4sec advantage at 60mph (3.8 plays 4.2) to 0.7sec by 100mph (7.7 against 8.4) and a gob-smacking 3.6sec at 150mph (16.5 for the GTO, 20.1 for the LFA). By the end of the runway the GTO is still pulling at 193mph, LFA trailing in its wake at 179mph.

Though it gives best in a straight line, the LFA feels magnificent through the corners, exhibiting awesome stability under braking and on turn-in. It's neutral enough to allow you to carry big speed into the corner – it really feels like that rear wing makes genuine downforce – from which point it'll remain neutral, or progressively slip into balanced, easily induced oversteer from apex to exit. By contrast the GTO is ultra-edgy. The super-quick steering and zero-understeer front-end makes for electric turn-in, but the rear feels loose and immediately wants to – and does – oversteer. The throttle is also hyper-sensitive, and all that torque makes it very easy to break traction. That's fine into and out of a slow second-gear corner, but not so enjoyable tipping into a 90mph curve when the car is already sliding before you're on the power. It is possible to find a balance point, but it's a high-risk, unforgiving quest and one that would make serious track driving pretty hair-raising.

Doing smoky cornering shots isn't exactly scientific, but it does reveal whether a car is intrinsically benign or malevolent. While hardly a pussycat, the LFA is huge fun, gives plenty of confidence and never feels like it wants to give me a mid-corner mauling. The GTO is a handful and more than happy to bite, as evidenced by a trio of 100mph spins. There's no arguing with its straight-line fireworks, but ironically giving the GTO such edgy on-limit handling detracts from the on-track experience. Though not overtly track-focused, the LFA feels mighty from the moment you turn-in. RM



'THE RUN ACROSS RANNOCH IS ENHANCED BY SEEING THE FROWNING FACE OF THE GTO DUCKING AND DIVING IN MY MIRRORS'





It's testament to the depth of ability of both cars that they simply eat up roads like this. GTO feels hyper-alert, LFA more measured but equally effective

Opening the door to the LFA reveals stark contrasts. The white leather interior is the biggest clue that the Lexus is not a track refugee, but the exposed structural carbonfibre beneath the A-pillar, complete with chunky weave and functional finish, is a very cool riposte to the GTO's dashboard plaque proclaiming 31 Formula 1 World Titles. I'm sure Toyota's top brass had visions of attaching a similarly boastful badge to the LFA's dashboard, but it wasn't to be. Still, the fact they've built an all-carbon supercar that weighs 125kg less than the GTO, despite the leather, satnav and Mark Levinson hi-fi, is a victory of sorts.

Like the GTO, the LFA starts with a prod of a starter button on the steering

wheel. There's no manettino, but you can choose from Wet, Normal and Race modes via a rotary switch on the right of the instrument binnacle. There's also a smaller rotary switch to adjust the gearshift speed. The Lexus V10 doesn't command your attention the way the Ferrari does, yet still you feel its power coursing through the car.

It's perhaps a characteristic of the carbon chassis, but there's a greater variation in road noise in the LFA. Changes in surface dressing are transmitted through the car, with coarse granite chippings in particular generating more of a din than you might expect given the LFA's luxurious surroundings. The trade-off is a structure with a

tangible sense of anvil-like integrity that allows the suspension to work with no distractions. This feeling is enhanced by the steering, which lacks the GTO's hyper-alert, think-and-you've-turned-in responsiveness, instead preferring to deliver a satisfying sense of measured, consistent weight and tactility.

The run across Rannoch, through Glencoe and beyond to Ballaculish and the shores of Loch Linnhe is a fabulous drive, enhanced in no small way by seeing the frowning face of the GTO ducking and diving in my mirrors. Despite enjoying a number of previous encounters with LFAs, it's still a great joy to re-discover just how special this engine is. Displacing 4.8 litres and



Ferrari lives up to GTO billing, from carbon-ceramic brakes to howling V12. Listen to it and other 12-cyl legends here...



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developing 552bhp, it is comfortably out-gunned by the bombastic Italian V12, but in terms of specific output it's even more special, screaming out 115bhp-per-litre versus the GTO's 106.

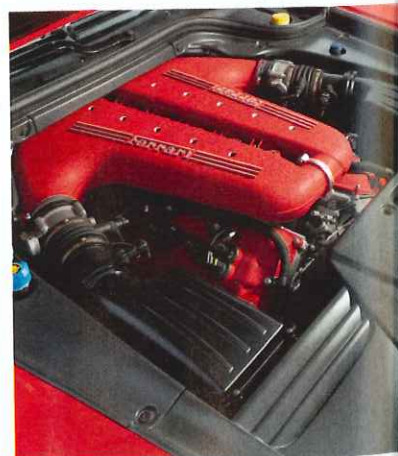
Perhaps because it has to work harder, over a screaming 9000rpm rev-range, it's a more complex, multi-faceted experience. It has a dry, metallic timbre that hums and sings and snarles and snuffles as the needle graphic dances round the tacho. Outside the car it sounds pure, clean, almost synthesized, but from behind the wheel it has a grittier, dirtier edge. Hard and steely with unmistakable purpose, the noise builds and evolves with throttle opening, revs and load. Unlike the Ferrari,

'IT HUMS AND SINGS AND SNARLES AND SNUFFLES'

which gives you the full Nessun Dorma virtually from tickover, you have to goad the LFA's V10 into baring its teeth. Your reward for digging deep into the rev-range is a fire that lights at 7000rpm and builds to an inferno at 9000. It's quite unlike any other road car engine and utterly addictive.

It takes self-control to negotiate the magnificent ascent through Glencoe

and on towards Fort William, for these long, open straights and endless high-g corners are made for cars like the LFA and GTO. There's no question you could explore the full extent of their performance envelope if you chose to fully depress the throttle and disengage your brain. We don't see any police cars and there's less traffic than you might expect for the holiday season, but the potential consequences don't bear thinking about, so we content ourselves with 'making progress' rather than making headlines in the evening news reports. Even so, it's clear those earlier impressions are crystallising into a more detailed picture of each car's character, the GTO always the more expressive





and visceral machine, the LFA measured and cerebral, but no less exciting and right with it for public road pace.

If Scottish Highland roads are amongst the best you'll find anywhere, the selection of hotels is rather less inspiring, especially when you arrive in Fort William without reservations. We eventually find beds for the night, but the hotel ambience is a nightmare blend of cut-price cruise ship and old folk's home. We wreak our revenge at 6am next morning, the Ferrari and Lexus kicking into life with a seismic snarl and a feral whoop. I picture false teeth pulsating in bedside glasses, ripples radiating across the Sterident-infused water like the T-Rex scene from *Jurassic Park*.

Our destination is Glen Nevis and an entirely different road from the open, sweeping A82. It leads to some of Britain's highest mountains, including the McDaddy, Ben Nevis. It's a writhing, rollicking ribbon of tarmac that squeezes umpteen dips, crests, blind corners and inviting combinations of twists and turns into just a few miles. Not natural supercar territory then, but proven superstar territory, having been used as a backdrop for scenes in *Harry Potter* and *Braveheart*. It also works brilliantly for Dave Smith's Nikons and Sam Riley's Sony, so we make the most of our early start and a blissfully traffic-free few hours.

I came here nearly 15 years ago in another 550bhp supercar – Aston

Martin's behemoth twin-supercharged Vantage – but back then the two-ton monster didn't so much attack this tricky, unforgiving road as negotiate it. Slowly. By contrast the LFA and GTO are happy to go to work on it, shimmying carefully over the most severe yumps, but piling into the more gradual crests and compressions with confidence approaching disdain. Both cars feel sensational, but it's the Lexus that displays the greater body control, traction and progressive on-limit breakaway, never once grazing the road with its belly, despite countless pre-emptive grimaces from Green and myself. The Ferrari is a wilder ride, uttering the odd *skrrrrsssb* from a few bits

LFA is unlike anything else. Extraordinary 552bhp 4.8-litre V10 revs all the way to 9000rpm, as you can listen to here...



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 >> Why all cars should have a centre-seat and an overhead intake. And a BMW V12 designed by Paul Rosche.



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 >> Harry's a little happier now the Zonda's in. Cinque Roadster best showcase for AMG V12.



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of sacrificial plastic and breaking traction with greater ease and less warning, but it's still grin-inducing fun.

If there's one area Ferrari has Lexus licked it's the gearshift. It's not shift-speed that's the issue, although there's no question the GTO's light-switch-quick up and downshifts leave the Lexus 'box breathless, but the toothy chatter that accompanies every gearchange in the LFA. It's not clunky and antiquated like a Lambo e-gear system, but it can be harsh and never has the refinement of the Ferrari. Given it's mated to an engine with a throttle so sharp and precise you could perform surgical procedures with it, that's a shame, and perhaps betrays the LFA's protracted gestation.

The final pieces of this twin test puzzle are the brakes. Both cars feature carbon ceramic discs – sometimes tricky when it comes to finding the sweet spot for consistent braking feel. It seems the Lexus and Ferrari engineers have come at the problem from opposite sides. The LFA's initial pedal response feels over-sharp, but soon settles to deliver a beautifully firm and consistent pedal. By contrast the GTO has a very brief dead phase, where the pedal travels a few millimetres with little bite, before delivering the stopping power you crave. It's hard to drive around either trait, and ironically it's more of an issue when you're driving at modest pace; when you're going for it you tend to push straight through into the meat of the pedal, rather than search for subtle shades of retardation. Neither set-up is perfect, but for us the LFA brakes get the nod by a slim margin.

By the time we have to end our Highland odyssey both cars have made a big impression. The GTO is a proper, full-blooded Ferrari, with a louder bark and a greater propensity to bite than the regular 599 or 599 HGTE. Those 661 horses make for a wild ride, and the reduced weight and aggressive chassis set-up guarantee to get your heart pumping – and on occasion your palms sweating – but it also has surprising manners if you can resist the constant urge to make a rumpus. No question, the GTO is an unforgettable car.

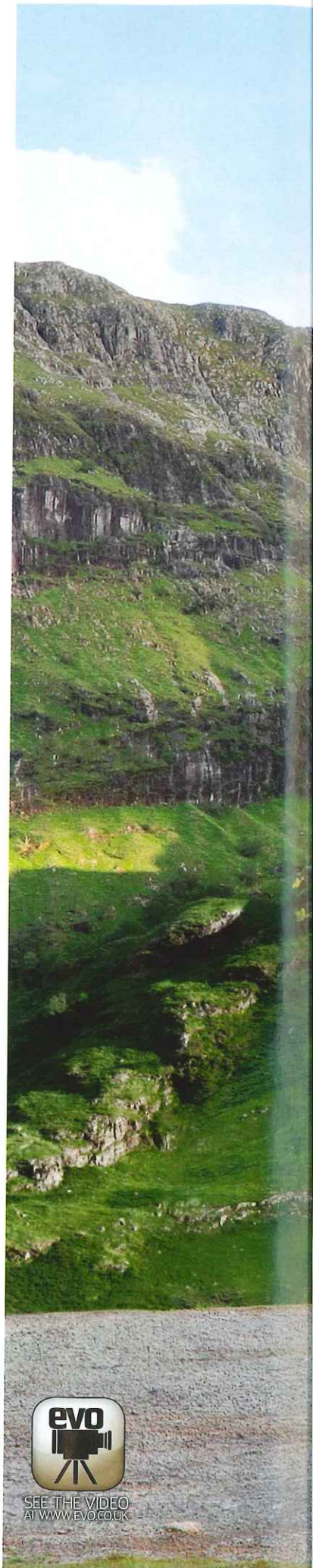
Privately I'd wondered in the days prior to this test if the GTO's extrovert character would simply overwhelm the LFA, but with each passing day the Lexus has proved itself to be a worthy and formidable adversary. What it lacks in outright accelerative savagery it makes up for in deft dynamics and the sheer musical quality of that extraordinary V10. What marks out the LFA for particular praise is its bravery and originality; for Lexus to create such a car from scratch, with no evolutionary engineering or existing basis from which to work, is a remarkable achievement. Innovative, extreme, immaculately executed and exquisite to drive, it's the greatest high-performance car Japan has ever produced.

Get hung up on the badge and you'll be blind to its magic. Revel in its rarity, its rare abilities and the fact we're unlikely to see its like again and you'll understand why the LFA is one of the greats, and why this test ends with three unexpected, hard-won and thoroughly deserved words: Lexus beats Ferrari.

SPECIFICATIONS

	LEXUS LFA	FERRARI 599 GTO
Engine	V10, 4805cc	V12, 5999cc
Location	Front-mid, longitudinal	Front-mid, longitudinal
CO2	379g/km	411g/km
Power	552bhp @ 8700rpm	661bhp @ 8250rpm
Torque	354lb ft @ 6800rpm	457lb ft @ 6500rpm
Transmission	Six-speed automated manual gearbox, rear drive, limited-slip diff, VSC, TRAC	Six-speed automated manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive, limited-slip diff, F1-Trac
Front suspension	Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, magnetic adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	Multi-link, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, magnetic adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar
Brakes	Ventilated carbon-ceramic discs, 390mm front, 360mm rear, ABS, EBD	Ventilated and cross-drilled carbon-ceramic discs, 398mm front, 360mm rear, ABS, EBD
Wheels	9.5 x 20in front, 11.5 x 20in rear	10 x 20in front, 11.5 x 20in rear
Tyres	265/35 ZR20 front, 305/30 ZR20 rear	255/35 ZR20 front, 295/35 ZR20 rear
Weight (kerb)	1480kg	1605kg
Power-to-weight	379bhp/ton	418bhp/ton
0-60mph	3.6sec (claimed)	3.4sec (claimed)
Top speed	202mph (claimed)	208mph (claimed)
Basic price	£352,000	£305,676 (£338,688 as tested)

★★★★★ **evo RATING** ★★★★★



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*'WITH EACH PASSING DAY
THE LEXUS HAS PROVED ITSELF
TO BE A WORTHY AND
FORMIDABLE ADVERSARY'*

