



Lamborghini has been associated with over-the-top mid-engined cars for so many decades now--Miura, Countach, Diablo, Gallardo--it's easy to forget that the company's original stock-in-trade was in very quick GT cars with a traditional front-engine, rear-drive driveline. (Well, Lamborghini's original stock-in-trade was farm tractors, but that's another story.)



The Touring-styled 350GT and 400GT 2+2 had been well-received, in keeping with their initial brief to out-Ferrari Ferrari, but in the face of the revolutionary mid-engined Miura launched in 1966, suddenly nothing else the company did mattered: The 350GT quickly went away, and Lamborghini's other car, the 400GT, disappeared off enthusiasts' radar screens in the long shadow of the Miura. Around the same time (late 1966), Carozzeria Touring, which designed and built the 350GT and 400GT 2+2 bodies, had gone under--and surely this didn't help matters either. The Islero's basic structure (a welded square-tube steel chassis) and fully independent suspension was carried over from the 400GT 2+2 and remained sound, but events conspired toward creating a new body, in order to freshen things up.



Styling chores fell to Mario Marazzi, a newcomer and relative unknown whose workforce consisted mainly of former Touring workers; he penned a new body for the existing 400 GT 2+2 chassis under Ferruccio Lamborghini's own direction. The new styling was far more angular than the 400GT 2+2 and its organic curves, the cabin offered improved visibility, thanks to all-new glass, and the overall effect was rakish, if subdued. The bumperettes that shoot up alongside and over the taillamps were considered a remarkable styling treatment in their day. Bodies were assembled and completed at Carozzeria Marazzi, outside Milan, then transported to the Lamborghini works at Sant'Agata for completion. The interior was completely new as well, offering freshened seats and a well-stocked instrument panel. The resulting new model ditched the alphanumeric titles of its immediate predecessor, as Ferruccio Lamborghini went with his recently established tradition of naming cars for Spanish fighting bulls. He called the new car Islero: the name of a killer bull from the Miura ranch, which had famously gored (and ultimately killed) famed Spanish bullfighter Manolete in 1947.



The engine remained the same Weber-fed, Bizzarrini-developed four-liter V-12 that had powered both the 400GT 2+2 and the sensational Miura, and at launch the Islero had 325 horsepower (more than the 400GT 2+2, thanks to a compression bump to 10.5:1). A wider front track (thanks in part to the Campagnolo alloy wheels; early production models had Borrani wires) and thicker anti-roll bars were among the suspension changes.



Yet the big American car mags--*Car and Driver*, *Road & Track* and *Motor Trend*--never bothered to road-test one. (Car magazine of England dared to put one on its April 1969 cover, however, saying, "this may well become the nicest to drive, and the most consistent in behaviour of all Lambos...", and "we part[ed] with the Islero with real regret, for this breed of bull is obviously very strong and willing.")



Critics have complained that the Islero wasn't flashy enough (even the fawning *Car* opined, "What started out as an insipid body...is fast becoming handsome"), and seen with 40 years of hindsight, it seems remarkable that it wears the charging bull crest at all. This, of course, was the point: Islero was a GT meant for those who wanted all of the performance but none of the glitter and attention. (Years later, it remains nearly invisible in the pantheon of Lamborghinis, and you could well argue that Marazzi followed the old man's brief a little too closely.) Ferruccio himself drove an Islero as his personal car during the years it was manufactured, if that tells you anything.



Turns out, the Islero has something of a bad reputation when it comes to build quality. While the Touring-era Lamborghinis were considered very well-finished, the Marazzi-built Isleros were famously slapdash regarding panel fit inside and out. Fenders rubbed on doors, sloppy welds cut weatherstripping, the headlamp doors wouldn't center in their holes, the rear bumpers couldn't be straightened. The Islero felt handbuilt--but more in a kit-car kind of way than in a bespoke, \$20,000-price-tag way, which didn't go over terribly well with Lamborghini's high-end clientele.





More power to Lamborghini (literally and figuratively) for trying to make things right as quick as they could. For 1969, Lamborghini launched the hairier Islero S, which sported Miura S cams, 10.8:1 compression, and a stout 350hp power rating (though the torque rating remained unchanged). The body received gently flared wheel openings, a hood-mounted air intake and a cooling vent ahead of each door; a new instrument panel and seats perked up the interior. Rocker switches replaced pull-type switches on the instrument panel, and a glovebox was introduced. Build quality was said to be considerably better, though still not to Touring standards, and not nearly enough to lift Islero out of its doldrums; just 100 S models were built before Islero production shut down in early 1970. Published plans to build 12 to 13 Isleros a month never came to fruition, and roughly two per week rolled out of Sant'Agata during the model's short life.

Often, low-production cars are the ones that get everyone's attention today--because they're low production. The more rare, the more valuable, right? But the Islero bucks that trend: It's still rare, and is a fine performer no matter how you slice it, yet it doesn't have the degree of fame that the mid-engined V-12 cars do. And so the Islero is virtually forgotten.

In the classic-car trade, there have been Isleros advertised from years as early as 1967 and as late as 1972; while all were built in 1968, 1969 and the early weeks of 1970, the early date may be the result of some private-import paperwork fudging, while the later dates are probably initial registration dates rather than build dates. Also, the build quality is said to be rough enough that few, if any, unrestored examples are left; rule of thumb dictates that if things fit properly, it's probably been redone.

The 1969 Islero S photographed for this Buyer's Guide, one-of-one in its metallic green paint and white leather hides, is part of the Dr. Perry Mansfield collection; he, along with longtime Italian-exotic guru Rick Cousineau, has opened up Precious Metals in San Diego, California, to cater to a growing clientele. Rick restored this car from a complete-but-not-running hulk, and has rebuilt and sorted out plenty of Lamborghinis from coast to coast--including numerous others in Perry's collection. "The thing is with these," Rick told us, "they made so few of them--just 125 Isleros and 100 S models--that body, glass and trim parts are about impossible to find." It's just as well that there are so few unrestored examples around, then--getting one sorted out could cost more than the value of the whole car. Rick also shared some pointers for anyone who might stumble across an Islero, either in a barn or at an auction.

Specifications

ENGINE

Type: DOHC 60-degree V-12, aluminum block and heads

Displacement: 3,929cc

Bore x stroke: 82 x 62mm

Compression ratio: 10.8:1

Horsepower @ RPM: 350 @ 7,500

Torque @ RPM: 289-lbs.ft. @ 5,500

Main bearings: 7

Fuel system: Six twin-throat side-draught Weber 40DCOE 20 carburetors

TRANSMISSION

Type: Lamborghini 5-speed all-synchromesh gearbox; single dry-plate clutch, hydraulic operation

STEERING

Type: ZF worm-and-sector

BRAKES

Type: Girling four-wheel disc

Front: 11.8-inch

Rear: 11.0-inch

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Wheelbase: 103.4 inches

Overall length: 176.5 inches

Overall width: 67.5 inches

Overall height: 50.7 inches

Curb weight: 2,893 pounds

PERFORMANCE

0-60: 5.9 seconds

Flying kilometer: 14.1 seconds

Top speed: 161 MPH

Source: *CAR* magazine (U.K.), April 1969

Production

1968 Islero: 125

1969 Islero S: 100

Body

This is a case where buying the best you can, right off the bat, will pay dividends. Even from new, the Islero's body suffered from dodgy fit-and-finish issues, and is used as a reason why so few Isleros sold. "Doors could be tight or loose, headlamp doors had gaps, and getting the bumpers straight is about impossible. If an Islero has good fit-and-finish," Rick Cousinneau tells us, "it's been redone." As a bonus, there are virtually no reproduction parts available out there--they built 225 of these 40 years ago, and what parts may once have existed are now dried up. "I've never seen any for sale, ever," Rick says.

Interior

"The instrument panel is the only part that fit decently," Rick says. "But the Jaeger Italia gauges are hard to find. A working gas gauge cost me \$450." Fit and finish woes are spread across the cabin: "The lower rear seat cushions are just kinda laid in there, unattached. The console is a loose fit, it's just kinda screwed into the floor. And the seat hinges rub on the seat cushions and take out the leather. Original leather will be rock-hard now, but even redone seats will show this, especially if they're overstuffed." Increased glass area is one place where the Islero is favored over the 400GT 2+2, but good luck finding replacement windows. "This green car had a broken quarter window, and it took a year and a half to find one; it was NOS and cost \$500, plus shipping."

Engine

"The biggest problem I've seen on these engines is the people who work on them. You wouldn't believe what I've seen people do to these," Rick said. Otherwise, they're largely bulletproof. Good thing too, since they're pricey to redo. "A standard rebuild is about \$35,000; I saw one once where the crank was destroyed, and just the crank cost \$8,000. A set of valves is \$700--my cost." As such, service receipts are essential.

"They've got weak alternators--at idle, the alternator light will come on, but if you get it over 1,000 RPM, you'll be okay. The Weber carbs, once they're dialed in, and if the linkages have no slop, always work. I don't ever use the chokes on these cars--they only choked three of the carbs, which is crazy. If you forget, you'll wash out the cylinders on one side of the engine, and you'll have problems with it smoking only on the left side."

Transmission

The five-speed 'boxes on this era Lamborghini are, like the engines, of the company's own design. "I haven't seen one yet that doesn't have a problem downshifting into second; the synchros and blocking rings are weak at best. They're not bad on the upshift though," Rick said. The good news: A trans rebuild, for about \$6,000, is a bargain compared to the engine. "Parts are available for these, they're just not common. It uses a Borg and Beck clutch disc, so that's easy to source. These also have a tendency to seep fluid, especially with age or if it's been sitting, but it's nothing to get too excited about."

Brakes and Suspension

Girling disc brakes reside on all corners, and are both reliable and easy enough to get parts for, but "the downside is the booster," says Rick. "They can be weak--not quite the boost you'd like to have coming down from speed. The master cylinder is under the hood, but the brake booster is in the trunk." That means, among other things, lots of hard lines going back and forth beneath the car. "It's also small: Hit the brakes a couple of times, and all your vacuum is gone and there's little or no brake boost." The good news is, a new booster should run you about \$400.

The suspension, save the anti-roll bars, is all carryover stuff from the 400GT 2+2, and so the shared U-joints, control arms, tie-rod ends, bushings and the like are more likely to turn up. That's not to say they're as common as Plymouth Duster parts: They're still going to cost you.

Price Guide

Low \$44,000

Average \$58,000
High \$104,000

Parts Prices

Brake pad set \$95 (rear); \$130 (front)
Clutch slave rebuild kit \$120
CV joint boot \$60
Distributor \$470
Ignition wire set (stock) \$775
Intake and exhaust valves \$690
Lower ball joints \$195
Owner's manual/driver's handbook \$80
Transmission mount \$70
Upper ball joints \$100
Wheel spinners \$895

Recent Ads

1969 Islero S. Red, tan leather, factory alloys, good door fit, trunk and hood slightly off, 36K kilometers showing. Well-applied paint with light polish scratches. Later stereo. Clean engine compartment with incorrectly chromed elements. Sold at \$70,434.
1969 Islero. Dark blue, light brown leather, original save for paint, carpet and headliner. Factory A/C. Wavy dash, soiled carpets. Sold at \$203,500.
1969 Islero. Yellow, tan leather. 37,000 miles. Recent engine-out service. Older tires on original alloys. Clean original interior. So-so paint, headlight door fit poor. \$68,200.

Viewpoint

I bought this Islero in 2002, from a collector in Arizona--it was in undriveable, poor condition, but it was complete, and is a one-of-one color combination. It was completed in 2004, and for anyone contemplating a similar purchase, I recommend finding a team with experience restoring these cars. I've never shown it, as this isn't very important to me. It's a fast, nimble car, with great lines--the shape, the speed, agility, sound, comfort...my goal is to progress toward the vision of driving it the way it was meant to be driven when it left the factory.

-Dr. Perry Mansfield

Specialists

Rick Cousineau

Precious Metals
3647 Dalbergia Street
San Diego, California 92113
619-515-2220

www.pmautos.com

Evans Automotive

3440 Morse Road
Columbus, Ohio 43231
614-471-7535

www.evansauto.com

Club Corner

Lamborghini Club America

P.O. Box 649
Orinda, California 94563
Fax: 925-253-9397

www.lamborghiniclubamerica.com or www.lamborghiniclub.com

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