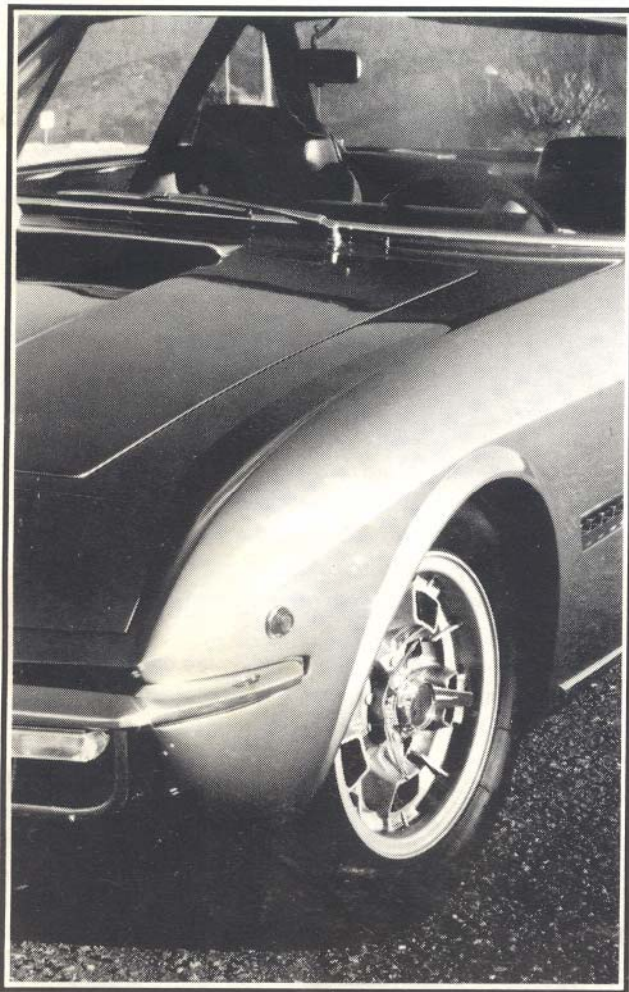


# GRIFFON

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**VS.**



# ISO VS. LAMBORGHINI

by Winston Goodfellow



W. Goodfellow archives

*The 2+2 Iso Rivolta GT is seen at its public debut at the 1962 Torino Show*

W. Goodfellow photo

Lamborghini and Iso were two of the most exclusive gran turismo manufacturers of the 1960s and '70s. How do the products compare? As the old, pre-war ad of Jordan automobiles would say, there is no better way to find out than to "Ask the man that owns one."

I have always admired Lamborghinis, and have been lucky enough to drive several. Talking about "baptism by fire", the first I piloted was a Countach, which was followed up by two or three more. Inbetween were a Miura S, and then a Jarama. Despite numerous drives, Lamborghini ownership always alluded me until recently. Due to the starting of a new business, I was required to sell one of my Isos. In exchange for my car, I took a 1969 Lamborghini Islero S and some cash.

The Islero S always had a hold of me, and, in fact, has remained one of my favorite Lamborghinis. Produced in limited numbers, it was the culmination of the 350/400 series, and, from what I can determine in researching and talking with owners and knowledgeable people, it is probably the best of the bunch. First introduced at the Geneva Show in 1968, the Islero's debut was overshadowed by the more

avant garde Espada. Once in production, over the course of the following year, 125 Isleros were built.

During this time, the quality of its construction was reported to be spotty, and there was supposedly criticism of the minor controls, even though I have never seen this mentioned in a roadtest. Regardless, to make the model better, Lamborghini commissioned a new version, the Islero 400 GTS. The "S", of which just 100 were built, was first seen in the spring of 1969, and received numerous minor updates over the normal Islero. On the exterior, the most noticeable changes were the new, sculptured wheel arches, which gave the car a more aggressive look. Also unique to the 400 GTS were louvres in the front quarter panels, a revised front valence pan, a scoop in the hood, and the addition of an oil cooler.

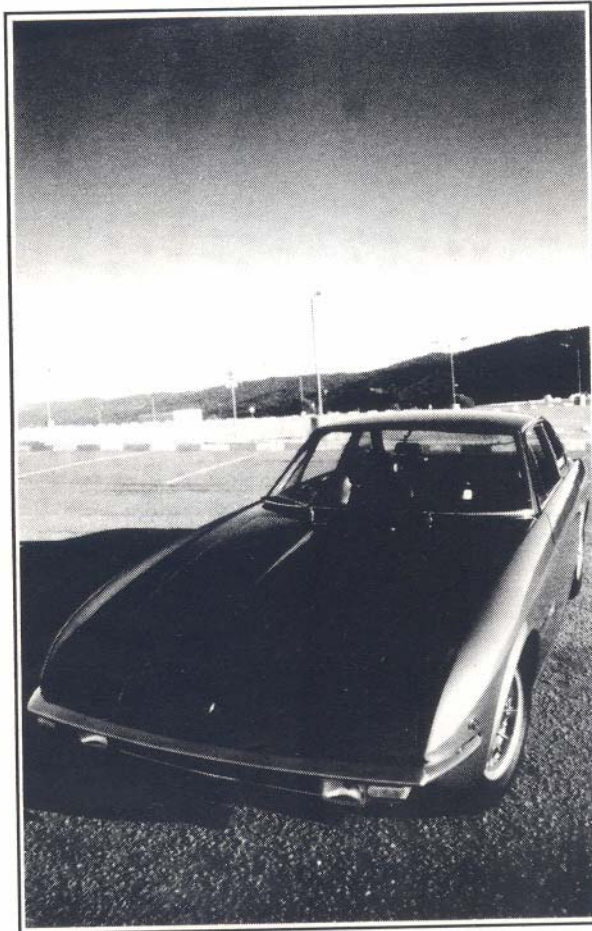
The interior also underwent change.

New seats were used, and the dash and supplemental controls were completely redone, giving better ergonomics and visual appeal.

Mechanically, the engine gained an additional 30 horsepower when compared to the predecessor Islero 400 GT's powerplant. And what an engine it is! Like all previous production Lamborghinis, the Islero features a four cam V-12. With a bore and stroke of 82 x 62 mm, total capacity is 240 cubic inches, or 3929 cc. Both the engine block and cylinder heads are made of light alloy. With two valves per cylinder, six horizontal Weber twin barrel carbs, and a single distributor, depending upon what source is quoted, this magnificent piece of prodigious power produces 350 hp at 7,500 or 7,700 rpm. Torque is rated at 290 ft at 5500 rpm.

All this is mated to a five speed gearbox of Lamborghini's design and con-





W. Goodfellow photo

*The Islero has more angular looks than either the Grifo or Rivolta GT*

struction. Fifth gear is overdrive, and surprisingly, synchromesh is fitted on reverse. Power is transmitted through a single, dry plate clutch.

The Islero's chassis is tubular, and the front and rear suspension are independent with wishbones, coil springs, shocks and an anti-roll bar. Brakes are outboard discs on all four wheels, with a diameter of 11.81 inches up front, and 11.02 inches in the rear. Easing pedal pressure is a dual circuit servo system.

When the Islero's dimensions are compared to the Isos of 1969, the Lamborghini fits between the Grifo and Rivolta. The Lamborghini's wheelbase is 100.39 inches, while front and rear track are 54.33 inches. Overall length is 178 inches, width, 61 inches, and height measures in at just over 51 inches. Ground clearance is listed at just under five inches, a figure I must admit I regard with skepticism when one looks at how close to the

ground that Ansa exhaust system lies. Dry weight is 3,219 pounds, with a weight distribution of 48/52%.

For comparison purposes, the Rivolta GT has a 106 inch wheelbase, a height of 56 inches, and an overall length and width of 187 inches and 69 inches. Dry weight is listed at 3,352 pounds. The Grifo, on the other hand, has a wheelbase of 98 inches, overall height of 47 inches, and length and width of 174 and 69 inches. Dry weight is 3,043 pounds.

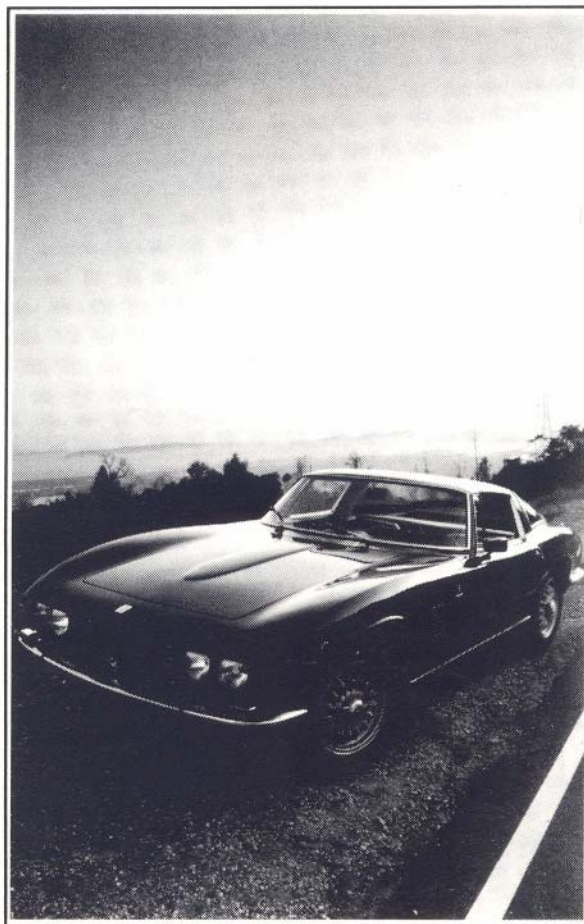
Both the Rivolta and Grifo had pressed steel platform chassis to which the body was welded. Front suspension is independent, while the rear utilizes the de Dion tube. Large discs were fitted on all four corners, and inboard at the rear.

Engine and transmission choices were great on the Isos. While the Islero offered that V-12 mated to a five speed, in 1969 the

Grifo and Rivolta let the customer choose between 300 or 350 hp 327 (with the 390 hp 7 Liter also available in the Grifo), and an automatic, four speed or five speed transmission.

Amenities between the two marques were similar. Leather was standard, as were power windows. Optional were items such as air conditioning and rear window defrosters.

When one plops down behind the wheel of the Islero S, you are greeted with a comfortable seating position. The dash, with its wood, proper instrument layout, and row of rocker switches, conveys the necessary information in a simple, elegant manner. The wood rimmed steering wheel is perfectly sized, its smooth, gloss finish offering a lovely, silky-smooth sensation to the touch. Ditto for the wooden shift knob, which has two "cut outs" for the driver's fingers. Pedal placement is excellent, and heel and toeing is not difficult.



W. Goodfellow photo

*Surprisingly the two-seat Iso Grifo has more interior and trunk room than the 2+2 Islero*

In spite of this, the car's packaging is somewhat of an anomaly. While it is a 2+2, the Islero really should have been a two seater with a small bench behind the seats. Since there are four seats, the travel of the front seats doesn't go back as far as I would like. This detracts from the comfort that the car offers, and I feel cramped when I am behind the wheel. On long distance trips, I am good for about two hours, and then things get bit uncomfortable. This, unfortunately, goes right against the spirit and *raison d'etre* of the true GT.

The Iso line up, on the other hand, exhibit much better conception and execution in this respect. For example, while the Rivolta's wheelbase is six inches longer than the Islero's, these few inches make all the difference inside, as Iso's 2+2 comfortably carries four people and their baggage (the Islero's trunk is a good

deal smaller than the Rivolta's). Additionally, you should see my poor six foot-plus friends when they sit in the passenger seat of the Islero, all contorted up, head and knees appearing that they might hit each other if we should cross an unexpected bump.

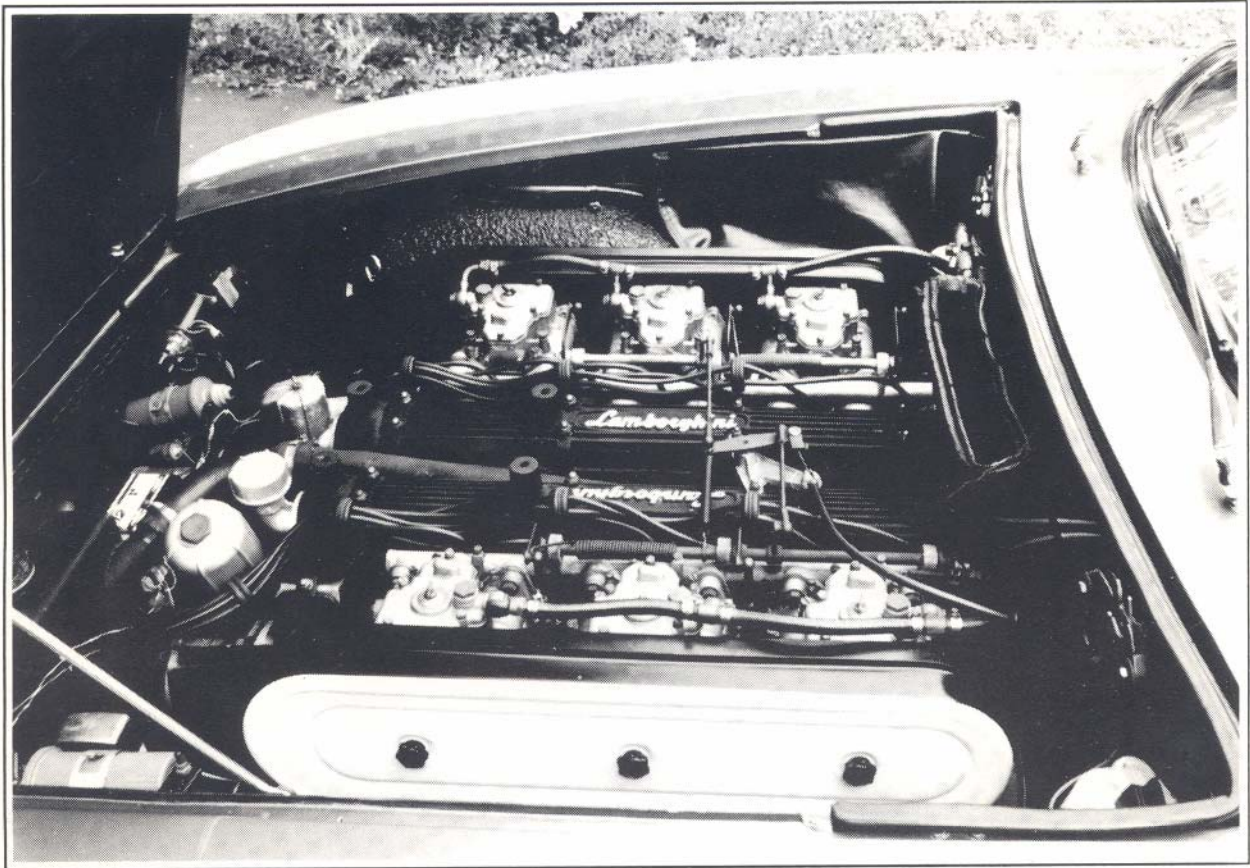
Even the Grifo is better in the sense of packaging. With a wheelbase that is two inches shorter than the Islero, an overall height that is four inches lower, two six footers and their baggage can travel in more comfort than that found in the Islero, even if the Lambo's back seats do make for a useful location to store those items that don't fit into the trunk.

Now for a confession that may shock a number of people: For the past several months, I have been using the Lamborghini as my daily driver! I must admit I was initially quite paranoid about such a concept, given the reputation that Lamborghinis have. But real world

driving—much of it in town—has completely changed my opinion. In retrospect, I think Lamborghini's reputation for unreliability comes from several things, and should not be applied across the company's range of offerings. First, because of strong demand, several models—most notably the Miura P400—were put in the hands of the public before they were properly sorted. Thus, the public often acted as test drivers and found them to be unreliable cars. Second, the number of people that call themselves Lamborghini *experts* are anything but, and those who *purport* to be one vastly outweigh those that could realistically carry this title. Finally, when one reads roadtests of the era, the company's quality control may not have been as uniform as Ferruccio Lamborghini would have liked, and thus the cars probably fall short of Isos in this regard.

My Islero was given the once-over





W. Goodfellow photo

*Like the Italian V-12s, the Lamborghini engine is a sight to behold and to hear when the foot is on the gas!*

by one of the best in the business (Al Burtoni at Milano Imports in Gilroy, California; Al is now quickly becoming one of America's Iso experts). After this initial sorting process (which was more expensive than it would have been on an Iso), the car was pressed into daily service. What a pleasant surprise it has been to be able to say, based on the experience I have had, that Lamborghinis are reliable cars! There isn't nearly as much plug fouling as one gets with the V-12 competition from Maranello, and the docility and tractability of the engine left me amazed. Additionally, this car does not over-heat! This was a warm summer in California, and the Bay Area saw at least eight days with 100+ degree temperatures. The Islero was used on all of these days, pottering around in mid-town traffic. Not once did it boil over! Most impressive.

Only twice has the Islero let me down.

Fortunately, both times were relatively close to home. The first time a U-joint coupling broke, and the second time the fuel pump conked out. Other than that, this car has been fairly reliable. Yes, a window switch quit working, and the oil pressure gauge let's me know when it wants to work (which seems to be about 50% of the time), but these type of things are to be expected in a car that is 24 years old.

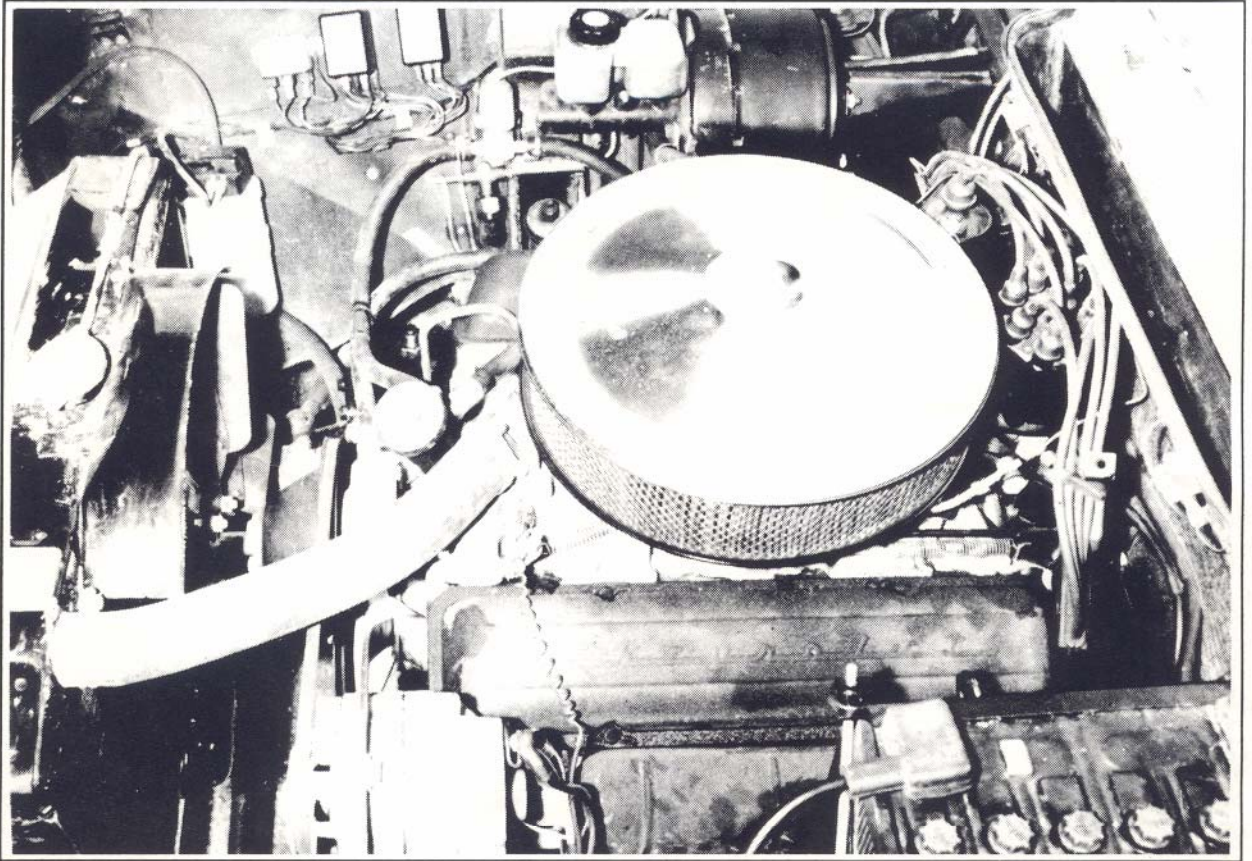
Comparatively, I feel an Iso is a more reliable car, and less prone to such gremlins. This, if nothing else, can be traced to the mentality of the two companies. Of all the 1960s manufacturers, Lamborghini has to be the most "artisan" of all. When one looks at how certain items are machined and/or constructed, at certain engineering solutions for the packaging of the occupants or ancillary components and systems, it is done on a different, more homespun level than Iso. This all gives the

Islero considerable charm, for it is still an acceptable package.

Look at how an Iso is put together, how supplemental controls, packaging, ventilation systems, etc, are laid out, how much less creaking comes from the body, and it is obvious that Iso was always thinking (even when they went to the "artisan" mentality in late-1965) in terms of larger numbers and production efficiency. Such items were completed with better forethought than that exhibited in the Lamborghini, and, in their own way, also give the Iso a distinctive personality or spirit.

Of utmost importance in the great GTs is how they drive. Since the Islero seems to fit between the Iso model range, generalities are more appropriate than the use of the summary comparison table seen in the Grifo/Ghibli match (*Griffon*, V.8, N.1). This Lamborghini, and all of the Isos, save perhaps





*While not as pleasing to the eye as the Lamborghini's engine, Iso's 327 power plant gets the job done. The black "crinkle" paint was put on by Iso's English importer in an attempt to dress up the engine's appearance*

a 7 Liter, are quite tractable around town. As mentioned previously, the docility of the Islero's V-12 is most impressive. Its steering remains relatively light at low speeds, and is quicker geared than that found in Isos. Brake pressure is well weighted, the car's maneuverability excellent. Even throttle response, which requires quite a push on the accelerator to feed those six Weber carbs, is quite quick to allow instantaneous bursts through holes in the traffic.

Isos, of course, are perhaps the most tractable and non-temperamental of all 1960s and 70s exotics. The Chevrolet engine, coupled to Iso's own cooling system, are a model of reliability that other manufacturers of the era could have easily used as a benchmark. The steering, while lighter than the Islero's, has one more turn lock-to-lock. All this twirling makes it considerably less pleasant than the Lamborghini's. Turning circles seem compa-

rable, and all the cars give excellent all-around visibility.

Touring in a grand manner— i.e., *fast*— is what these machines are all about. Packaging has already been examined, and the Iso range is ahead by a considerable margin. As a driver who likes to hear an engine, the Lambo's is a beauty. While not as symphonic as a single cam Ferrari V-12 at higher ranges, the Islero's four liter motor makes a lovely noise that is never obtrusive, but always pleasantly noticeable so that one never need turn on the radio. Hearing its crescendo build as redline is approached as one uses that delightful five-speed gearbox is an experience that invites constant flooring of the accelerator.

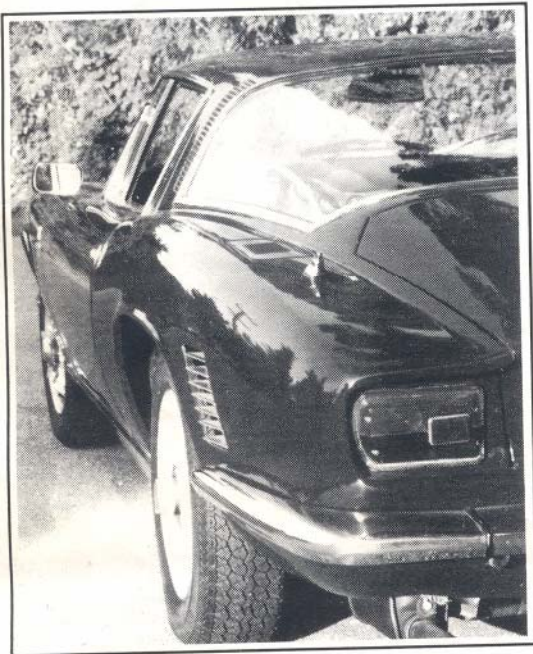
The chassis and road dampening at speed are equally impressive in the Lamborghini. The fastest I have seen so far is an indicated 220 kph at 5,200 rpm (interestingly,

the Islero's redline is at 6,500 rpm, even though power peak is 1,000 rpm higher), and the car was stable as could be, the engine humming away, obviously relishing the time spent in its natural element of travelling at speed. In fact, this is one of the most appealing things about the Islero, the way it seems to lap up fast motoring. When you are motoring along at 140 kph, it wants to be at 160 kph. When you reach that plateau, it makes it clear that it wants to be at 180; it is certainly enjoyable that no matter what rate you are travelling at, as the Islero is quietly whispering, "Let's go even faster!"

Directional stability is excellent, the steering perfectly weighted and properly quick to facilitate smooth switchback maneuvers. The driver's compartment, other than an obtrusive wind-whistle from the A pillars, is commendably civilized.

Isos are much the same way. The





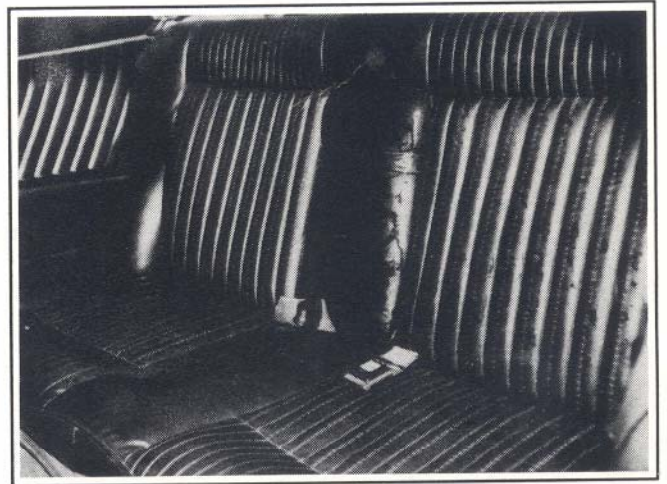








*The Lamborghini's rear seats (above) are much more confining and not nearly as usable or practical as those in the Iso Rivolta GT (right)*



last one I ran at speed was my Le Mans Rivolta, and its comfort at cruising at 130 mph (210 kph) were phenomenal, obviously indicative that it was capable of easily sitting at an even greater rate of speed. It was in its element, and because of its competition heritage, perhaps just that little bit moreso than the standard Rivolta. Regardless, whether you are behind the wheel of a two seat Grifo or a four-seat Rivolta, Isos are competent mile eaters. While I must admit it has been a while now since I have had an extended stint at speed behind the wheel of an Iso (so my memory might be just a little foggy), perhaps the only difference between the two marques is the way the Lambo seems to egg you on to go just a little bit faster, while an Iso says, "I am comfortable at whatever speed you choose to go."

In terms of out-and-out speed, there is no question that a proper Islero S is not only faster— but also quicker— than a standard Rivolta GT, something substantiated by contemporary road tests. Up against a smallblock,

five speed Grifo, it would be an interesting race. The Lamborghini's gearbox is definitely preferable to the Iso's more bulky, clunky ZF five speed, and that V-12 engine pulls better at upper rpm than the 350 hp Chevrolet. However, the 365 hp Corvette that was available in some Isos also has that upper rpm pulling power and wonderful, musical noises to accompany it.

Unfortunately, I have not had the time to take the Islero down some of my favorite backroads. So, in terms of neutrality and nimbleness on a windy stretch, I really can't offer an opinion.

What has been most surprising about Lamborghini Islero ownership is how easy it is to live with the car. This is something I was not anticipating, for the car's tractability, docility, and reliability of major mechanical components have come as complete and most pleasant surprises. This is especially interesting because this is something I have taken for granted for years in Iso ownership.

In truth, to drive an Iso is much like driving a front-engined Lamborghini. They are civilized cars which handle around-town duties well, but truly relish the high speed domain for which they were conceived. Assuming cash flow could handle any type of repair or gas bills (the Lamborghini is an impressive guzzler), when choosing between a standard Rivolta GT and an Islero S, I would take the Lamborghini in a close and difficult decision. But, to make the car truly ideal, it would be necessary to move the seat rails back to give me some extra room. Regarding an Islero and a Grifo, the Grifo would win that choice quickly. What can I say? As much as I have become enamored with the Islero, its V-12 music, surprising reliability and understated appearance, I have always been a sucker for the Grifo's sleek shape and its exciting performance that is uniquely coupled to impeccable road manners and superb chassis dynamics. □



