

# NUMBER

The Vallelunga marked De Tomaso made its debut as a sports car manufacturer. Although the first model wasn't a bestseller, it caused quite a stir among Italian sports car makers. SPIRIT took the first production model for a spin to see if the Vallelunga lives up to what it promises visually.

**Text by** Patrik Hellmüller | **Photos by** Manuel Schmid

DE TOMASO VALLELUNGA





**E** It was around the turn of the millennium. I was 16 or 17 years old and attended the Mille Miglia as a spectator with my father and a group of Alfisti. We were staying at the Hotel Canalgrande in Modena. That evening, we had dinner in the hotel's magnificent dining room. Suddenly, the lively conversation fell silent. When I turned toward the entrance, I saw

I saw a man in a wheelchair whose health was already severely compromised: Alejandro de Tomaso. Despite his condition, his eyes were alert. I remember how he welcomed our Swiss group with a lively speech, as the Hotel Canalgrande had once belonged to the de Tomaso family. Even back then, I was familiar with the cars of the Argentine-born race car driver, designer, and entrepreneur. I had also heard that Alejandro de Tomaso was often referred to with a kind of admiration as a "sly fox," having not only brought remarkable race and sports cars to the road but also closed some daring deals.

#### **THE FIRST ROAD SPORTS CAR**

Twenty-five years later, I find myself in an anonymous commercial building. A Swiss car collector and connoisseur is showing me his De Tomaso Vallelunga. This is the manufacturer's first road car. The model in which I

The car I'm taking a test drive in is also the very first production model. It bears chassis number 0101 and was built by Carrozzeria Ghia.

The collector, who prefers to remain anonymous, suggests I take it for a test drive right away—that way I'll get a feel for the car. I can hardly say no! I turn the ignition key and the tuned Ford engine roars to life right behind me. I shift into first gear via the open gearshift and carefully roll out of the hall. Weighing in at around 700 kilograms, the car is so light that maneuvering it with the tiny steering wheel and without power steering is effortless.

#### **ITALIAN JOY OF LIFE DESPITE ENGLISH GENES**

As I drive out of town, the engine warms up to operating temperature. When the centrally mounted water temperature gauge turns green, I shift down to second gear at the town limits and floor the accelerator. The 1.5-liter engine, which had been quiet up to this point, revs up with full Italian zest, accompanied by a robust sound—you could almost forget that it's based on the middle-class English Ford Kent engine. The next gear engages precisely and quickly thanks to a short shift travel. It costs

#### **Seek, streamlined, racy**

The Vallelunga was De Tomaso's first road sports car.  
It is named after the racetrack of the same name near Rome.  
Only 60 were built; 45 are still known to exist today.





### Vallelunga History

The Vallelunga was De Tomaso's first production sports car. Originally unveiled as a Spider in 1963, it went into production as a Berlinetta. The cars were built between 1965 and 1967. There are varying figures circulating regarding how many units were actually built. That's why we asked leading Vallelunga specialist Janosch Jurowski, who recently published a book on the model. According to his research, it is highly likely that 58 vehicles and two additional bodies were produced.

- ⇒ Three Fissore prototypes with aluminum bodies and fully hinged rear sections
- ⇒ Two additional aluminum bodies, which were later destroyed
- ⇒ A pre-production model by Ghia with an aluminum body, but without a folding rear
- ⇒ Four Ghia pre-production models with fiberglass bodies, but featuring the rear suspension of the Fissore prototypes, which were primarily intended for motorsports
- ⇒ Fifty Ghia production vehicles with fiberglass bodies without a hinged rear section, bearing chassis numbers 101 through 150, although it is not entirely clear whether the last car was actually was built

We also learned from Jurowski that Ghia did not manufacture the fiberglass body itself, as the company had no experience with this material at the time. Instead, the Turin-based boatbuilder Cigala & Bertinetti was commissioned. After completion, each body was hand-painted with a green body number, which was affixed to the partition between the passenger compartment and the engine compartment behind the driver's seat. However, during final assembly, attention was not always paid to ensuring that the body and frame numbers matched. The production of the tubular frames was handled by Marchesi & Co. of Modena. The company still exists today.

There is only fragmentary documentation regarding where the Vallelungas were delivered: three vehicles went to Spain, two to the United States, and the model shown here presumably remained in Switzerland after its debut at the Geneva Motor Show. The majority of the remaining models were likely sold within Italy. It is also worth noting that sales were handled directly by Ghia. Further details on the Vallelunga can be found in the books by Janosch Jurowski and Marcel Schaub.



### Small but mighty

The Vallelunga weighs just 700 kilograms and sits on 13-inch wheels.

It takes self-control not to rev it up and shoot far past the speed limit. I ease off the gas, and the little sports car roars with such joy.

Thanks to its consistent use of lightweight construction, 105 hp is enough to make it really fast. However, the Vallelunga isn't underpowered. The suspension could easily handle additional power. The driving experience is strongly reminiscent of a go-kart or race car. You can take corners with razor-sharp precision; the tiny 13-inch wheels literally stick to the road. At the same time, the De Tomaso leaves an astonishingly solid impression—actually atypical for the Vallelunga. After all, lightweight construction and outstanding driving characteristics clearly took precedence over impeccable workmanship or robustness during its development. In our case, however, De Tomaso's talent as a designer meets Swiss precision.





#### **DE TOMASO VALLELUNGA**

**Year built:** 1965 | **Engine:** 1.5-liter 4-cylinder engine | **Power:** 105 hp at 6,500 rpm  
**Torque** 175 Nm at 3,600 rpm | **Transmission** 4-speed manual  
**Length/Width/Height** 3840/1600/1080 mm | **Weight** 700 kg (curb weight) | **Top speed** 210 km/h  
**Acceleration** 0 to 100 km/h in 8 s | **Production** 60





### A SWISS CAR

The Vallelunga shown here has been based primarily in Switzerland since at least 1969—and almost certainly since 1966. There is strong evidence to suggest that this very car was presented at the 1966 Geneva Motor Show and remained in Switzerland thereafter. For most of its life, 0101 was owned by Marcel Schaub, who passed away in 2023 and was one of the world’s leading experts on De Tomaso. He meticulously researched the company’s history and resolved many inconsistencies with detective-like intuition, perseverance, and thoroughness. His findings culminated in the highly acclaimed book “De Tomaso – Racing Blue Blood,” which he published together with the Argentine Alejo Perez Monsalvo through McKlein.

Schaub, whom I unfortunately never met in person, is described by his colleagues as an affable perfectionist—the polar opposite of Alejandro de Tomaso. De Tomaso was considered difficult to deal with personally, as well as being as visionary as he was erratic. No sooner had he launched a project than he was already turning his attention to his next adventure. Minor problems with his cars hardly interested him. In the mid-1960s, when the Vallelunga was struggling with teething problems, the boss had long since

### Technology well hidden

While the entire rear end could be lifted on the first prototypes, access to the engine is more difficult on the production vehicle: the glass panel and another cover must be opened.





### **Fits like a glove**

Although designed as an uncompromising sports car, the Vallelunga's cockpit impresses with exemplary ergonomics. The open gearshift gate is an eye-catcher; you wouldn't expect the wood trim.

Mangusta with a V8 engine. Schaub was a different kind of guy in this regard—one who got to the bottom of things. That's why our Vallelunga feels so robust. Over the course of two years, Schaub restored it down to the last screw with a great deal of idealism. Photos show that the car was in terrible condition when he took it on in 1993. Among other things, Schaub had to rebuild the entire central tube frame and parts of the suspension because everything was eaten away by rust. A project that posed challenges even for the experienced restorer, as we can read in an old interview.

### **AUTHENTIC AND IN GOOD CONDITION**

But the effort was well worth it. Today, we can safely assume that this Vallelunga has been restored as authentically as possible. At the same time, worn-out parts were refurbished or remanufactured with Swiss precision, and Schaub treated the car to a few detail enhancements to improve its robustness. As a result, this is likely one of the finest Vallelungas ever—a fact confirmed by the jury of this year's Zurich Classic Car Award (ZCCA), which honored the car.





### **Alejandro de Tomaso (1928–2003)**

The Argentine Alejandro de Tomaso was a race car driver, designer, and entrepreneur. He founded his company in 1958, financed primarily by his second wife, the race car driver Elisabeth Haskell, granddaughter of General Motors founder William C. Durant. Until around the turn of the millennium, de Tomaso was considered one of the most colorful figures in the Italian automotive industry. At its peak, his empire was considerable and included companies such as Vignale, Ghia, Benelli, Moto Guzzi, Maserati, and Innocenti.

Alejandro de Tomaso was difficult to get along with and constantly oscillated between genius and megalomania. Not all of his business ventures have been fully documented, and rumors persist that he often operated in the gray areas of the law. He annoyed many of his business partners—and yet he achieved great things. This is evident not only in De Tomaso's cars but also in the fact that Maserati would likely no longer exist without him.

In contrast, many Vallelungas have been heavily modified over the course of their lives due to their fragility. For example, a few years ago, a model was sold in the U.S. that had been retrofitted with a supercharger. In addition, several vehicles are known to have been fitted with a Lotus engine later on—according to Schaub's records, this configuration originally existed only once.

### **MID-ENGINE RACING CAR FOR THE ROAD**

Even though the build quality back then was rather slapdash, the Vallelunga was based on an extremely advanced concept. Alejandro de Tomaso is often portrayed as a big shot and a braggart—and there's certainly some truth to that—but the man also delivered, as all his creations prove. Moreover, he was a gifted designer.

The Vallelunga was a race car for the road. No wonder, since de Tomaso had previously designed nothing but race cars—including even a Formula 1 car, albeit an unsuccessful one. With the Vallelunga, he wanted to offer a production model that would generate funds for racing. A concept that Ferrari and Maserati had already successfully implemented.

### **Lateral support included**

Although you sit far to the outside, the tiny seats offer sufficient lateral support. However, you shouldn't be too corpulent to fit comfortably.



Our car is the first production vehicle and bears the chassis number DT0101.



Technically, the Vallelunga is based on a central tube frame. A welded cross member is bolted above the transmission, supporting both the upper rear suspension arms and the body. De Tomaso's racing experience also influenced the chassis design. The Vallelunga features independent suspension with wishbones and coil springs, rack-and-pinion steering, and disc brakes on all four wheels.

The Ford Kent engine was tuned to a whole new level of performance. Thanks to higher compression, two Weber carburetors, a new cylinder head, and modified valves, it now produces 105 hp instead of 78 hp. This power is transmitted to the rear wheels via a four-speed transmission sourced from Volkswagen.

The Vallelunga can even be considered the first Italian production sports car with a mid-engine. Only the ATS 2500 GT already featured a mid-engine in 1963, two years before the Vallelunga went into series production. However, the ATS was built in significantly smaller numbers than the Vallelunga—so it would be an exaggeration to call it a series. The Lamborghini Miura didn't follow until 1966. Only in France had the Matra DJet been unveiled as early as 1962.

#### **Fantastic Plastic**

Franco Maina, the longtime chief designer at Fissore, was responsible for the Vallelunga's design. The body is made of fiberglass.

#### **INSPIRATION FROM MARANELLO?**

The Vallelunga was not only technically advanced; its design was also impressive. The resemblance to the Ferrari 250 P and 250 LM models is unmistakable. It is quite possible—or even very likely—that newcomer De Tomaso drew inspiration from the top dog in Maranello. The timing would fit: The Ferrari 250 P was unveiled on March 4, 1963, and the Vallelunga prototype in the fall of that same year. It should be noted



However, it should be noted that the Ferrari mid-engine models were designed exclusively for racing. De Tomaso, on the other hand, adapted the spectacular concept—with its flat front, headlights behind Plexiglas, and extremely low waistline—for a road car for the first time.

Franco Maina, Fissore's long-time chief designer, was responsible for the Vallengunga's design. What is certain is that he designed the Berlinetta—that is, the production model. The Vallengunga Spider prototype was designed and built in Modena by the small subcontractor and coachbuilder BBM on behalf of Fissore. Whether Mario Fissore was also involved in the design remains unclear to this day.

#### **THE SWITCH FROM FISSORE TO GHIA**

From the German specialist and author Janosch Jurowski, who has studied the Vallengunga like no other, we know that a total of five aluminum bodies were manufactured at Fissore. However, only three roadworthy cars were produced from them. The remaining two bodies were destroyed. One by Fissore himself, the second by Ghia in Turin, after it was used as a template for the production of the negative mold for manufacturing

had been used for the fiberglass bodies of the production model. Alejandro de Tomaso had not entrusted production to Fissore, but had instead commissioned Ghia. There—but that is another story—he would go on to become a defining figure in the years that followed and would soon take over the historic carrozzeria.

#### **A UNIQUE CAR**

I could spend hours racing the Vallengunga through the Zurich countryside—but I don't want to overdo it with the owner's generosity. Back in the hall, he presents me with a thick folder containing all the documentation on the Vallengunga 0101. Particularly eye-catching are photos taken in Modena in 1996. They show the then-owner Marcel Schaub and Santiago de Tomaso, Alejandro's son, together with the Vallengunga.

Its well-documented history, combined with its driving dynamics and the quality of its restoration, make this first Vallengunga with a fiberglass body truly unique. It is a landmark vehicle in De Tomaso's corporate history and an important milestone in Italian sports car manufacturing as a whole.

#### **A Source of Joy**

SPIRIT author Patrik Hellmüller has a soft spot for rowdy sports cars from Italy. Accordingly, he thoroughly enjoyed the test drive in the Vallengunga.

