

Permission to come aboard...

By Joe Sage

You know what they say: "If you have to ask, you can't afford it." Nonetheless, Rolls-Royce tells us that their buyers typically have to ask themselves for one key thing: for permission to buy.

Our drive of the new Rolls-Royce Wraith departed from The Phoenician, an appropriately tony address. As such, we easily managed to encounter a couple of Bentley Continental GTs in the neighborhood. This in turn is appropriate, as the sporty new fastback Wraith has the Continental GT shopper in its sights.

The Bentley Continental GT is one of our favorites—sharing some of the best underpinnings with Lamborghini and Audi A8 cousins. Its price of about \$179,000 is high, but far from the Rolls-Royce Wraith, which starts at about \$285,000. Bargains are where you find them.

Our 70-mile drive route ran up the Beeline Highway, across the Bush Highway past Saguaro Lake and through the hills into Mesa, then back to The Phoenician via the Loop freeways. The Wraith's navigation system took us to the Beeline via all of Scottsdale Road and the 202, so we ignored it and took the 101 and Indian School back.

The functions of devices such as mirror controls and the electronic parking brake are familiar to any BMW driver. As can happen with the lowliest of motor coaches, we had a few small issues. On our first

departure, the nav was not speaking, so we returned for a quick fix. Next, we had to go back because an alert declared a rear door malfunction: "consult service center." This was attributed to pre-production build, and we were on our way.

You feel an immense presence before you even get in this car, from the classic Spirit of Ecstasy hood ornament, on back. You can't help but feel that the world will make way.

The car was a handful at first, yet creamy and smooth. We drove over heavy metal construction plates and, other than a very distant "clank," you could be utterly unaware. In a kind of inverse logic, the ungainly nature of this car forces a sort of grace and calm upon you. Few can sink you into the level of bliss this Rolls delivers.

On the Beeline, we contemplated what would happen if we really opened up this 624-horsepower twin-turbocharged V12—certainly a magnifi-

cent and memorable experience. Yet with our hands on the wheel and our foot on the gas, we knew that would not be happening—its top speed of 155 mph would be all too easy to hit. But one quick goose of the pedal reveals what is on tap.

You do not need to speed to enjoy the power of this machine. It's so smooth and has so much presence, it delivers immense power and complete isolation at the same time.

We had noted some vagueness to the steering when we first entered city traffic, but on a particularly winding and hilly stretch of rural highway—a real driver's road—the steering's balance felt solid, directed, firm and capable. You might prefer the chauffeur around town, but get your own hands on the wheel on the open road, every chance you get.

It's almost as though a Rolls is designed and engineered for a world that no longer exists. However, if you have the price of entry, you can find ways to make certain that you spend time in that world. You will get used to the size, feel and handling of a machine like this—very welcome in a lot of ways, while at other times it just feels big. This is the nature of the beast.

We're writing about the Wraith in plain and

simple American English. But if you read the company's eloquent British sales materials, you may find their distinctive allure simply irresistible.

In plain English, the options alone on our test car ran almost \$86,000. That included the starlight headliner, with some 1340 tiny fiber-optic points of light, at \$12,925. Yet a 624-horsepower V12 car, approaching three tons, with a 0-to-60 time in the mid-4s, that still achieves 21 MPG on the highway—is quite an achievement. It has to cost. The rest is icing on a very beautiful cake.

You can look an S-Class, A8, 7 Series or executive-length LS, for a third of the price. Or even that Bentley Continental, saving \$100,000 or more. Then again, if you've achieved the Rolls-Royce level in life, you would have to also give yourself permission to buy in, reluctantly, farther down the ladder like that. When the alternative is your own Rolls-Royce Wraith, you just might be unable to make any other compromise. ■

OUR ROLLS-ROYCE WRAITH

ENGINE ...624-hp twin turbocharged 6.6L V12
TRANSMISSION ...Satellite aided 8-speed ZF
WEIGHT5380 lb
ZERO-TO-100 KM/HR (62 MPH)4.6 seconds
MPG13/21/15 (city/hwy/comb)

INCLUDED: Electronically regulated coach doors with power closing assistance; audio system with 20.5 GB storage; voice-activated nav; rotary controller with touch and script recognition; teflon-coated umbrella; self-right wheel centers.

BASE PRICE\$284,900

OPTIONS: Commission Collection paint; starlight headliner; contrast interior; canadel paneling; 21" five-spoke forged alloy wheels; bespoke 1300-watt audio; RR monogram headrests; polished stainless steel treadplates; lambswool mats; color-matched boot trim; Wraith package.

TOTAL\$370,651

