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Fiat X1/9 + 500 - fun in small packages



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The first mid-engine Fiat is still an exemplary sports car, and ain't it cute?



The Fiat X1/9, launched in Europe in 1973, is one of the most interesting cars we have covered in Neoclassics. Amazingly, this little Italian sports car was produced in Europe for 17 years; it was available in Australia from 1978 until 1989.

Again I find myself writing about a car which found its way to Australia through the ill-fated LNC organisation in the 1980s; and again we see a classic example of wasted opportunities.

The X1/9 was a fun car which simply never had the marketing and sales support required to make it a real success. At about the same time that it was taken off the market in Australia, the Mazda MX5 arrived with an amazing marketing campaign, and became the chic car to have.

Despite the passing of 23 years since the Bertone-designed two-seater hit the Italian streets, it still has style, flair and a reasonably contemporary look. Fiat stopped making the X1/9 in 1982 after producing just over 150,000. Bertone believed it still had a future, however, and took over manufacture for the next eight years.

It first came to Australia in April 1978 at a price of \$9250. This was a year after Fiat began building right-hand-drive models for the UK, although rhd conver-

sions were made by Radbourne for the British market before then.

A difficult birth

The Fiat X1/9 had a difficult birth, with Nuccio Bertone battling Fiat executives to get his preferred concept approved. Fiat wanted an 850 Spider replacement, in the 128 family as the sports or spider variant. Fiat also wanted fwd; Bertone had other ideas. The battle raged for some time before Bertone's design was shown to Gianni Agnelli, the head of the Fiat empire. Agnelli approved it immediately.

Subsequently, however, there was never a lot of love for the little car in the corridors of power in Turin.

The X1/9 was never considered to be a part of the 128 line-up - it retained its original development code as a title - even though it featured the 128SL engine, gearbox and steering. When first introduced both here and in Italy it had the 1290cc transverse sohc four. This was mated to a four-speed all-synchromesh gearbox mounted in a transaxle. There were also had power-assisted disc brakes on all four wheels.

The car went into production during 1972 in Italy at Bertone's works in Turin, along with other illustrious cars including the Alfa Romeo Montreal, the

Lamborghini Urraco and Fiat's Dino Coupé.

An indication that Fiat wasn't 100% behind its first mid-engined car came at the launch - after the important Turin Motor Show of 1972 rather than at the show itself. The rest of the world liked it, though; US magazine *Motor Trend* voting the X1/9 the best-styled car in the world for 1974.

In 1979 the X1/9 was fitted with a 1500cc engine and five-speed gearbox from Fiat's Ritmo/Strada model, equipped with a small twin-throat Weber carburettor with a vacuum-activated secondary throttle butterfly. Power output rose from 51kW to 58kW.

1980 marked the peak of the X1/9's production life, with just over 20,000 produced. In 1981 the total dipped to 14,993; the tally for its entire production life ran to 140,500. Fiat was in trouble: in 1982, it handed over the entire assembly operation to Bertone; the X1/9 dropped its Fiat nameplate, although Fiat promised to maintain parts supply for the car. The upheaval meant production dropped to just over 4000 in 1982.

Bertone's ability to develop the X1/9 was limited, and Toyota arguably took over the X1/9's market in 1984 when it introduced the mid-engined MR2. But despite its long slow death, the X1/9 had



gathered a strong following around the world.

Fiat's purchase of Lancia and then Alfa Romeo meant that those marques filled the performance niches while the giant Italian parent company concentrated on the volume-selling sedans and wagons.

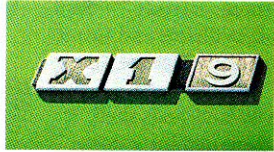
X1/9: good then?

Both of the X1/9 engines are relatively short-stroke, large-bore (oversquare) powerplants, allowing them to run at high revs without undue stress or wear on the lower end of the engine. But most testers agreed that the X1/9 was under-powered, particularly in its first 1300cc incarnation.

The mid-engine layout, independent suspension and quite wide-footed stance for a car with such a short wheelbase, gave the X1/9 superbly predictable handling and amazing balance. This was what stood out in the press reports of the time. In *Sports Car World Quarterly* for February/April 1978, Steve Cropley wrote, "For all its practicality, it is the superb dynamics of the X1/9 that make it memorable. It has super, light, sharp steering, roadholding levels which are right outside the expectation of most drivers."

Cropley's opinions were backed up three years later when Mike McCarthy tested the then-newly-arrived 1500cc five-speed version in the July 1981 *Sports Car World Quarterly*. "To Fiat's eternal credit the X1/9 has always had...one of the best rolling chassis ever to come from a production line. None of that has changed except for the better in the latest model...the Fiat X1/9 is good value, think of it as a little Ferrari and it's a genuine bargain."

Despite the praise, the X1/9 was never a big seller in Australia. Price was one of the major factors in deterring buyers, the



other was Fiat's ordinary reputation for reliability and backup Down Under. At around \$14,000 in Australia in 1981, the X1/9 was not a cheap buy.

Good now?

Ian Allison is in charge of the X1/9 register at the Fiat Car Club of NSW, and is a confirmed fan of the little Italian sports car, having owned a late 1979 model for the past eight years.

According to Allison, the decision to buy an X1/9 was dollar driven. "Finally the X1/9 was within reach, and for about \$8000 I got a reasonable 1300cc four-speed," said Ian. There are about 25 X1/9s on the books of the Fiat Club's register, although Ian Allison admits that determining the exact number brought to Australia is hard.

Ian's X1/9 is a hybrid model which came to Australia for a couple of years, featuring the later crash-compliant bumpers but with the 1300cc engine and four-speed box. It was too expensive for Fiat to make the 1500cc Ritmo/Strada engine comply with ADR pollution requirements. It wasn't until the 1980 Strada that volume was sufficient to homologate the larger engine.

Ian Allison uses his X1/9 for club events including motorhokanas, hillclimbs as well as putting it through its paces in the 1995 Dutton Grand Prix Rally. Although he has fitted a 1500cc engine, Ian has stuck with the four-speed gearbox - five-speeds are expensive and hard to find.

Like just about every other Fiat ever built, the X1/9 is susceptible to rust, but it has some particularly terminal corro-

sion points. As well as the sills and bottom of the doors, hidden areas such as the deep wells on either side of the engine bay can gather moisture and prove terminally expensive to repair.

Similarly, one should pay particular attention to the pipes which carry coolant between the front-mounted radiator and the engine. Corrosion in these means a very pricey repair, as both pipes are welded into the bodyshell.

A broken ball joint on the rear lower locating arms can cause disconcerting handling. When the riveted ball joint goes, it is hard to spot and just as hard to pick in slower city traffic, but at high speeds it produces wobbly handling in bends which could prove dangerous.

The engines are pretty bulletproof if well maintained. Although the gearboxes are reasonably strong, third-gear synchros tend to wear out first - an expensive rebuild.

Ian Allison reckons that you can pick up a reasonable X1/9 needing a bit of work for \$5000-\$6000. Cars advertised for as little as \$3000 should only ever be considered for spares.

Concours X1/9s can cost up to \$10,000, particularly late Bertone-badged ones which featured fuel injection. Very few of these were imported; catalysts and unleaded petrol limited any performance boost.

All in all, the X1/9 is a fascinating car which is currently undervalued; it could represent a very sound investment.

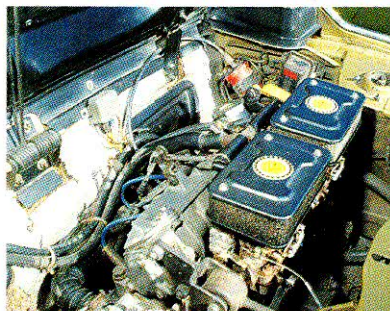
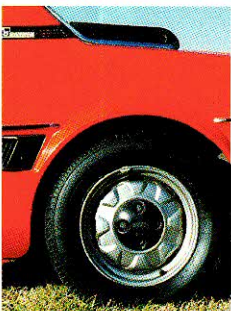
JON THOMSON
PHOTOS BY
DARREN RAYMENT



Above, the Fiat X1/9 register achieves a record turn-out for our phoyo shoot!

Below centre, engine isn't the easiest to work on

Below right, cosy cockpit - make sure you fit the X1/9 before you buy one!



**To collect or to crush?
VERDICT ******

Key:
 Buy one *****
 Good potential ****
 They might laugh now ***
 Wait ten years **
 Are you kidding? *