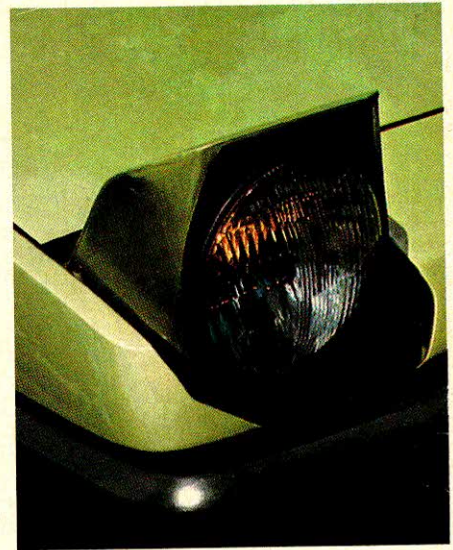


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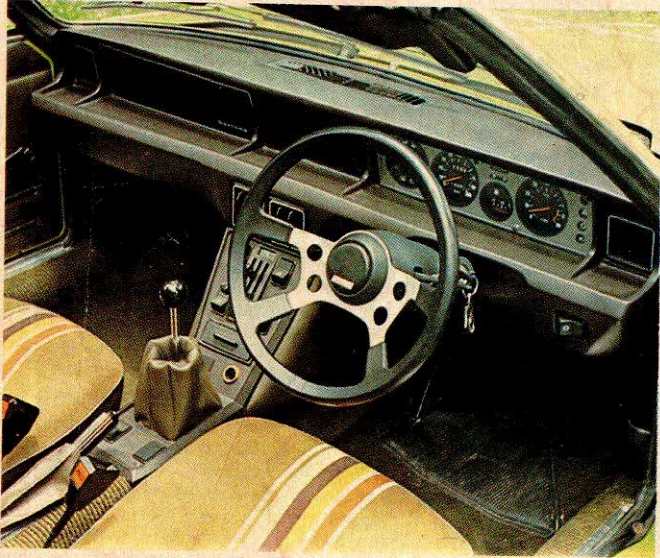
Fiat's X1/9 isn't perfect; maybe it isn't even great: but we'd be happy to have one sitting in the garage, just so we could pore over the genius of the Bertone design . . .



MOTOR
Test



Ferrari



MR FIAT'S HELL-DRIVING

HE'S the No 1 target for Italy's stop-at-nothing terrorists. Yet he drives himself to work in an "ordinary" Fiat X1/9, a sitting target for a gunman.

His protection is the way he drives — Gianni Agnelli, the head of Fiat, hurtles through Turin at more than 80 km/h, screeching round corners in controlled four-wheel slides.

His dark-blue car weaves through the rush-hour traffic, crosses into opposite lanes, jumps traffic lights.

No one can keep up with him. No terrorist could possibly get him into a gunshot.

As Italy reels from the shock of the terrorist murders of such public identities as ex-premier Aldo Moro, Agnelli simply thumbs his nose at the "enemies of democracy".

In a country where even small businessmen and minor civil servants have at least two bodyguards, he goes about unprotected.

"It's impossible to live a normal life surrounded by a battalion of guards," he says. "If I wanted a public life, I would have gone into politics."

But he is prepared for capture. His ultimate weapon is a cyanide pill which kills instantly; he carries it with him at all times.

Agnelli is a proud man, determined to avoid the humiliation of capture. He could not face coming back after the ordeal.

"Come back for what?" he says. "One couldn't run a company again. One would have lost every vestige of prestige."

"And one cannot have fun any more, the world is in too sad a state. I'd feel a fool running around night clubs like Gunter Sachs. And I'm getting old. No, they'll never have that pleasure."

His company, the giant Fiat group, is a \$2400-million combine which takes in *La Stampa* daily newspaper, Cinzano, Juventus soccer team, the Turin-Milan motorway, retail department stores, book publishing, cement and clock-making as well as Fiat, Lancia, Autobianchi and Ferrari vehicles.

It has factories in 28 countries spread across five continents. Agnelli's personal fortune is estimated at \$480-million — and that doesn't include his priceless art collection and five homes.

In a recent Italian magazine opinion poll, he was reckoned to be the most powerful man in Italy. Communist Party leader Enrico Berlinguer came second . . .

Agnelli is an aristocratic-looking 57-year-old with crinkly white

hair and a deep tan. He is handsome, always immaculately dressed, and married to a princess.

Before taking charge of Italy's largest industrial empire, he won a reputation as a playboy. He spent his annual income of more than a million dollars on girls, yachts, houses and Ferraris on the St Moritz-French Riviera-New York social circuit.

The turning point came in 1952 with a car crash that nearly killed him. He was having an affair with Pamela Churchill, ex-wife of Randolph Churchill, and had set up home with her.

One evening, Pamela returned home unexpectedly to find Agnelli in bed with a younger girl. It was after taking the girl home that the crash happened.

He was driving his Ferrari at 200 km/h along the Corniche above Monte Carlo and slammed it into the back of a meat truck.

Miraculously, he was pulled out alive. But one leg was broken in six places and he still walks with a limp.

It was, he says, the jolt that changed his life. Within a year, at 32, he married the beautiful Neapolitan Princess Marella Caracciolo, and took his place behind the vice-president's desk at Fiat. He became president in 1966.

Agnelli is the grandson of Giovanni Agnelli, the founder of Fiat. Giovanni, a former cavalry officer, opened the first *Societa Anomina Fabbrica Italiana di Automobili Torino* factory in 1899, five years before Henry Ford set up shop in Detroit. The name Fiat, from the company's initials, was adopted in 1918.

In World War II, Agnelli was exempt from military service because he was considered essential to industry, but he volunteered and spent five years in the army. He fought on the African and Russian fronts and was awarded the War Cross for valour. Towards the end of the war, he switched over to fight with the Allies.

Agnelli is still a brave man. In the face of daily kidnappings and terrorist attacks, many of his rich countrymen have fled to Switzerland or Monte Carlo, or at least sent their money out in readiness for flight.

But Agnelli he says he has resigned himself to the collapse of democracy — that he is determined to hold out as long as he can.

He has instructed his family and colleagues that on no account



BEATS THE TERRORISTS



must he be ransomed, no matter what he is forced to write by his kidnapers.

Meanwhile, he dares to enjoy life flamboyantly. He lives in Turin in a tasteful, opulent house stocked with Picassos and Renoirs, Gobelin tapestries and Roman statues.

He enjoys the nightlife of Rome, and has a flat there on Quirinale Hill.

Despite his leg injury, he goes winter-sporting every year, wearing a specially-made brace on his lame leg when skiing.

He is a leader of style — he has set a trend for wearing wristwatches over shirt cuffs and ties outside sweaters.

His face is one of the best-known in Italy. Last year, he appeared on the covers of 11 national magazines.

Yet the terrorists have left him alone. He believes that is partly because of his well-publicised readiness to die rather than become their pawn.

It is also because the way he drives makes it impossible to catch him.

In 1977, Niki Lauda, then Ferrari's No 1 and the World Drivers' Champion, said being driven by Agnelli was one of the most frightening experiences of his life.

Agnelli reckons that's a compliment . . .

WAY BACK in 1972, when Fiat announced its assault on the once-lucrative sports-car markets of the world with the all-new targa-topped X1/9, Australian youth could hardly wait to get its hands on it.

After all, it was *cheap*, designed by Bertone, mid-engined . . . and looked just great!

But wait they had to, for the demand was so great that Fiat could not afford to hold up production of the 100 left-hand-drive units per day to build any right-hand models. And when it did finally get around to it, the Australian Design Rules prevented any serious thought of the X1/9's release on to the Australian market until May 1978 . . .

Before announcing the \$10,000 price-tag that it takes to drive an X1/9 off the showroom floor, the men at Fiat's Australian headquarters swallowed hard, feeling more than a little put-upon by inflation and the government policy which turned the planned "low-cost" sports car into an up-market item.

But at least no local manufacturer had ever ventured into the sports-car market, and as the same import problems assail Fiat's competitors — the *status quo* is therefore maintained — there seemed no need for this apparent hand-wringing.

The X1/9, like Triumph's TR7, could be said to suit the poseurs among us — it is

certainly eye-catching and, what's more, reasonably priced on an over-priced market — but it also has a lot of practical advantages, points which suit not only the Australian climate and way of life, but the nitty-gritty of driver satisfaction as well. And then there are those among us who would be perfectly happy to have one sitting in the garage just to pore over the genius of the Bertone design.

So much has been incorporated in such a tiny package that it takes time to assimilate it all — in fact, the design seems wasted when mated to the under-powered, hard-revving 1.3-litre overhead-camshaft four-cylinder engine, an engine which gives credence to its "toy" image.

The motor takes a long time to warm up and gather its pistons into a smooth scream. And unless travelling at anything but a crawl, maximum revs are the norm — which means a fairly constant intrusion of that engine noise into the passenger compartment, which is just in front of the mid-mounted engine.

City running and uninterrupted country touring are a joy, but look at a hill or try overtaking in a hurry and you find this to be the Achilles' heel of the X1/9.

But with the ideal proportions of the targa, it is a pleasure to drive through city traffic, stirring it with lots of revs and gear-changing as it whips in and out of

traffic jams like a fox looking for cover; though normally crying out for revs, one of the contradictory sides to the X1/9's nature is the way it can virtually idle through slow-moving traffic at 30 km/h in top gear.

To gain good performance from such a small engine, the gear ratios through first, second and third are close, with the jump from third to fourth fairly lengthy to allow for a comfortable maximum touring speed.

However, the large gap becomes most annoying when tackling lengthy hills, or even rises, and overtaking vehicles. This requires a complete change of driver attitude because, if at all balked, it takes three times the normal passing distance for safe overtaking.

The suspension, both front and rear, is independent by MacPherson struts, lower wishbones and coil springs. The car's suspension set-up, allied with the excellent weight distribution of 41.3 percent over the front wheels and 58.7 percent over the rear, results in quite predictable handling. The only real problems arise on wet roads, when cornering requires a little throttle steering through power application.

Under dry conditions, it's dead easy to induce rear-end breakaway through a fast-corner entry with throttle lift-off, but care must be taken to gather it all back through use of the steering wheel — the engine just hasn't got any power in reserve

to force the rear to "follow the leader".

Having a touch of understeer as its over-riding characteristic, the Fiat X1/9 becomes very touchy in wet weather, through an increase of this understeer. Once again, a light touch on the steering wheel — combined with judicious cornering speeds — is the answer.

The steering is very precise at speed, requiring only a little movement to get through most corners, and the car has a tight 9.6-metre turning circle.

To get from lock to lock takes just three turns of the wheel, a truly delightful 356 mm-diameter metal/vinyl-covered four-spoke affair which, on one interstate trip, caused our testers a great deal of trouble through over-zealous preparation.

Sydney's Morrison Motors prepares all the Fiat and Lancia test cars, which are always turned out immaculately: but, running late as usual, we jumped in the car and headed directly for Winton race track in Victoria and James Hunt Esq., only to discover — too late — that, apart from everything else, the steering wheel had been polished to a high shine. As a result, grip on the wheel was all but non-existent!

Being a pitch-black, wet and miserable night, that trip re-acquainted us with a few small problems in the Fiat, all associated with night-driving.

Reflections, particularly, were most wearing. We found it to be much more comfortable to switch off the dashboard lights and trust to luck as far as speed limits were concerned because of the bad reflection they caused on the windscreen.

But even more annoying, especially travelling through built-up areas, was the reflection of the engine louvres in the rear screen, a peculiarity which made use of the rear-vision mirror's "night" setting almost mandatory.

The headlights proved adequate when clean but, because of the X1/9's height, or lack thereof, vehicles travelling in the opposite direction, or immediately in front, throw dust and spray on to the lights and they quickly lose their effectiveness.

When contemplating long night-driving sessions, strong, non-flinch eyes are a necessity because, once again, the height of the X1/9 allows following vehicles to bounce their headlights directly into both the interior and exterior mirrors . . . and if you want rearward vision, there ain't nothing you can do!

Spotting a fully-laden fast-approaching semi when travelling in a small car is normally cause for momentary alarm, but — incredibly — the Bertone design and weight distribution is so good the passing is hardly noticed.

On the subject of height, at 1168 mm the X1/9's roof barely reaches the navel and when seated, one's derriere has but 230 mm of ground clearance. Everything, but

everything, is bigger and when you find yourself sitting beside a smoke-belching Mack truck inspecting brake dust on its wheel nuts — at eye level — it's easy to snap into instant paranoia! But familiarity breeds contempt — well, nearly — and the inferiority complex soon passes.

On a clear day, the X1/9 is on its own! Off comes the roof — one person is quite capable of carrying out this operation — and into the front storage area it goes, flush with the bonnet. Once again, the Bertone design is quite ingenious because there is no loss of space in this storage system and, what's more, even though the removable roof is a hardtop, it's in the vehicle ready for a change in weather conditions.

With the roof off and both windows wound up, there is no buffeting within the passenger compartment. However, with the windows down at low speeds, the wind catches on the rear screen and causes a little disruption.

Defying the small-car critics' cries of "unsafe" and "too susceptible to impact", Fiat has paid particular attention to both strength and safety in the design of the X1/9.

To create an extra-strong passenger compartment, the rear window is surrounded by a roll-over bar, extending down to stiff box-section sills which are connected to a stressed central tunnel by particularly-strong front and rear bulkheads.

The interior is tastefully Italian, with a pair of the most-comfortable cloth-covered bucket seats to be found in a sports car. They have front and rear slide movement but, because of the lack of space, are non-reclining.

Generally, we find supporting bucket seats are designed for side-show contortionists because of the way one has to wind and unwind into them but, despite the X1/9's lack of room, getting in and out is an easy operation.

Lack of space in the footwell area is a problem for all but Cinderella-size feet and we found it quite easy to accidentally pounce on both the accelerator and brake pedals . . . together!

Clutch travel is extremely long — and if seating is set to permit easy clutch movement, it's at the expense of comfort of the arms and the right foot.

The dashboard has been described as "useful to place oddments" but our experience was that the "oddments" whistled from one side to the other because of the ill-defined compartments and the slippery nature of the vinyl covering. There is no glovebox, merely two under-dash containers.

Instruments are simple, but tastefully, set in the dash, doing away with any need for a raised vision-robbing binnacle.

The indicator, wiper and light-setting

stalks are steering-column-mounted, with the headlight on/off switch on the dash.

Sharing the dash are two air vents which, combined with two centrally-mounted vents above the console, form the cooling and heating outlets.

The centre console houses the handbrake, gear stick (which is beautifully placed beside and below the steering wheel), cigar lighter, ashtray, heater controls and the switches for rear-window demister, interior light, fan and dash lights.

The spare wheel is found behind the driver's bucket in a nicely-concealed compartment, but it's easy for a thief to get at if the car is left unlocked.

A radio is not standard equipment and was sorely missed on our sortie into Victoria; also missing as standard equipment on the Australian version is the pair of rear luggage bags (made of matched seat material, they're designed to fit neatly into the little boot between the engine and the back of the car). Alloy wheels and fog lights, too, are absent, probably to keep the showroom retail price below \$10,000.

The front luggage-compartment lever is found under the dash, while the lockable rear-luggage and engine-compartment levers are cunningly hidden in the passenger-door frame — that's one of the disadvantages of having a car originally designed for left-hand-drive.

Engine accessibility is very good when you consider it has to nestle between the rear-wheel arches to the sides, the fuel tank to the front, and the luggage area to the rear.

Seemingly, the only real drawback to this neat little package is in the get-up-and-go department, with an urgent need for more power and another forward gear. However, it appears this will be rectified in another 12 months, perhaps less, with the Australian release of the 1500 cc five-speed model.

It must be that we right-hand-drivers are born with heavier right feet because the 1500 X1/9 is being produced only in right-hand-drive configuration. At present, anyway . . .

The capacity of 1485 cc has been achieved by lengthening the stroke 8.4 mm to 63.9; the bore remains unchanged at 86.0 mm. This stroking has succeeded in boosting the power output to just over 62 kW, a 13 percent increase on the 1.3-litre's 54 kW. Torque, too, is up by 13 percent, to 113 Nm.

The only major alteration in the 1500's transmission ratios — apart from the addition of a fifth cog, of course — is in the fourth gear. The ratios are:

First gear3.583:1
Second gear2.235:1
Third gear1.454:1
Fourth gear1.042:1
Fifth gear0.063:1

The differential ratio remains unchanged at 4.076:1.

Figures so far released by Fiat show that the 1500's speed in fourth remains fairly constant at 24.3 km/h at 1000 rpm, with a fifth-gear speed of 29.4 km/h. The standing 400-metres falls to 17.8 seconds, with 0-100 km/h coming up in 11.7 seconds.

So, instead of sitting back and chewing their gum, the men at Fiat are blowing a bigger bubble — one which, thanks to Bertone, will take a long time to burst! □

“The only real drawback to this neat package is in the get-up-and-go department”