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AUSTRALIAN

SPORTS CAR

WORLD QUARTERLY

\$2.50*
NZ \$2.75*

JULY/SEPTEMBER 1981

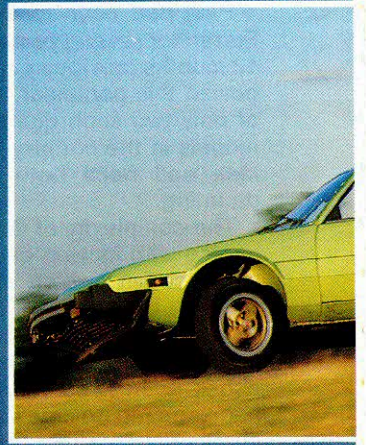


TESTED
X1/9
five speed

275 GTBs - FABULOUS FERRARIS

SPORTS CAR WORLD
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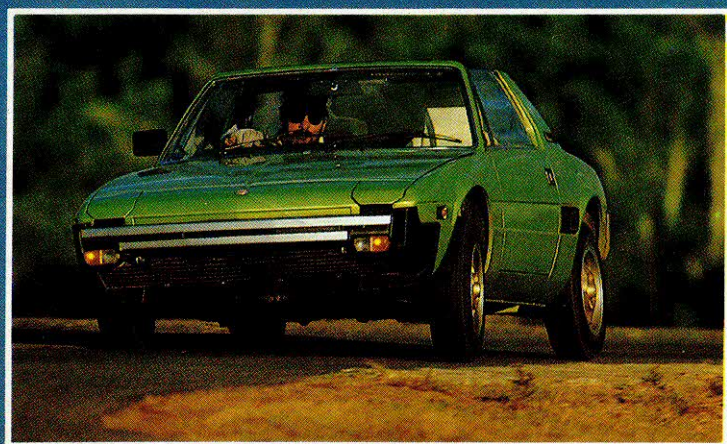
PHOTOGRAPHY: GREG McBEAN



X1/9: Fast at last . . .

FIAT'S FIVE-



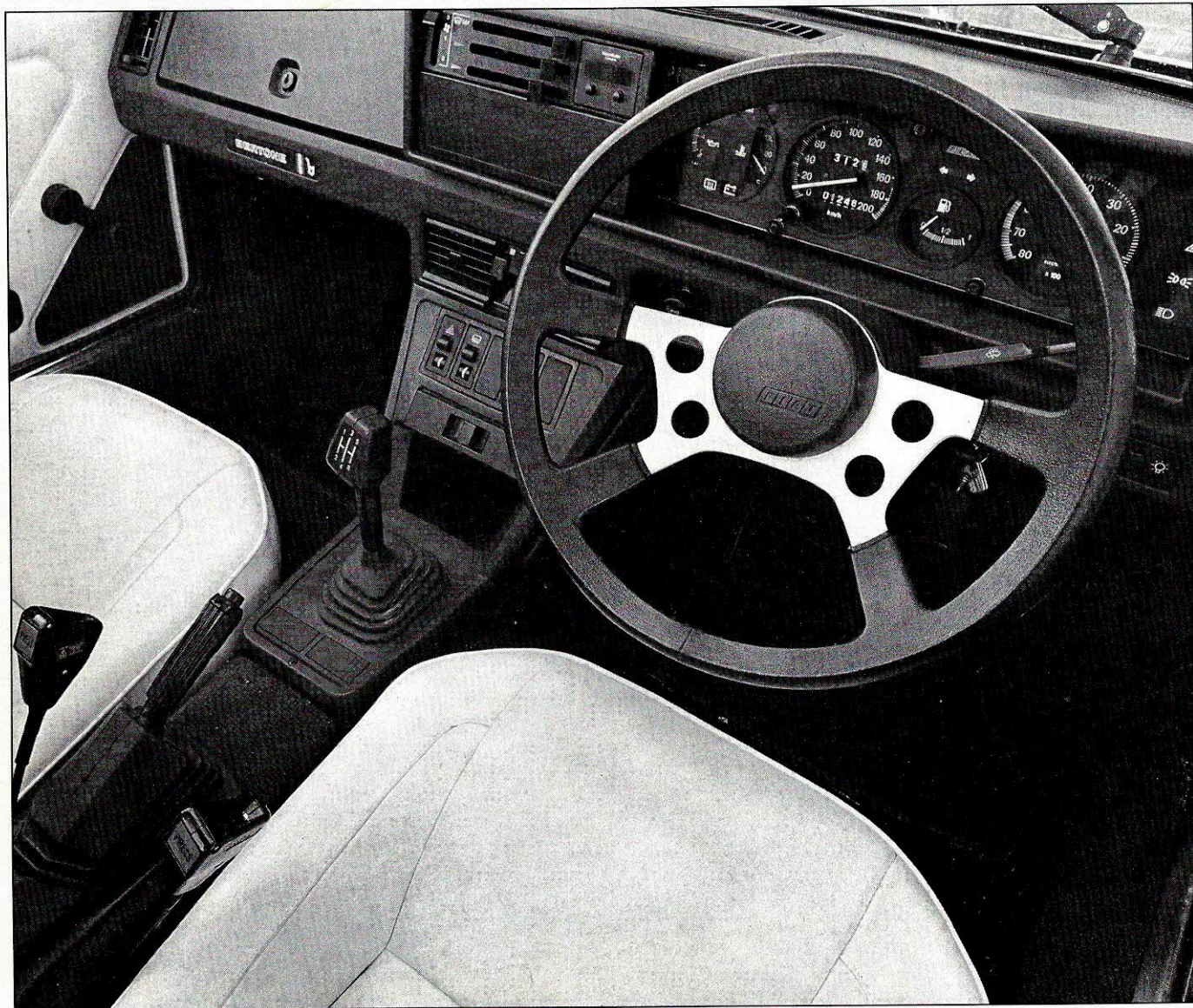


— SPEED 1500



With a bigger engine and an extra gear the X1/9 gets the performance its fine chassis and great handling deserve. More than ever it's a sports car, tried and true.

FIAT'S FIVE-



THE X1/9 is dead. Long live the X1/9.

That variation on the historic call is an apt means of marking a significant new accession to the throne. The X1/9 was, and is, king of its class. Unopposed. It has ruled the small sports car field for almost a decade. It now not only continues to reign but does so with important improvements that renew its unchallenged leadership.

The seat of power has shifted to a more vigorous version with a bigger engine, an extra gear and more sparkling performance. As a 1500 five-speed, the X1/9 has the stronger muscles and longer legs needed to solve what many drivers felt were the two main shortfalls in the 1300 four-speed model. Driving the new X1/9, you now have acceleration and cruising capabilities to properly complement the truly outstanding chassis qualities.

To Fiat's eternal credit the X1/9 has always had, was born with, one of the very best rolling chassis yet to come from a production line. Superb chassis dynamics earned the X1/9 unanimous praise for standards-setting handling, roadholding, steering and ride. A rare and remarkable combination. None of that has changed, except for the better, in the latest model.

The same can be said of the engine. Originally derived from Fiat's front-drive 128 coupe model, the 1290 cm³ four underwent several detail changes to better suit its transposition to the mid-engine rear-drive site. To minimise the length of its compartment while assuring reasonable frontside accessibility, for instance, the engine's forward lean was reduced from 20 degrees in the 128 coupe to 11 degrees in the X1/9. The sports car also received a

new inlet manifold and redesigned exhaust system, together with different sump and camshaft cover. Where the standard 128's engine had the ignition distributor on the frontside of the engine block, driven by skew gears, the original X1/9 moved the dizzy to the left-hand end of the belt-driven single overhead camshaft. Later in the 1300's life (and for the 1500 model too) the direct-drive upstairs location was abandoned and the distributor reverted to its block-mounted placement. Revised gear ratios were also included, but proved ill chosen and were a source of criticism for many testers.

The 1500 engine for the X1/9 was in fact introduced in Europe late in '78, soon after the release of the 1.5-litre front-drive Ritmo/Strada sedan which replaced the 128 series. By then the production of the 1.3-litre X1/9

-SPEED 1500

amounted to more than 130,000 units.

Australia had to wait (and wait) for the 1500 until plans were firm to also bring the Strada to Australia. It will arrive early next year.

The decision to import the sedan meant the cost of proving the 1500 engine's compliance with ADR 27A exhaust emission standards became justifiable spread over two models whereas it was a questionable economic proposition for the X1/9 alone.

The 1500 engine differs from the 1300 in several ways. It retains the 86.4 mm bore but uses 63.9 mm stroke instead of 55.5 mm, so increasing the capacity from 1290 to 1498 cm³. Compression ratio is also increased, 9.2 to 1 for the 1500 against 8.9 to 1 in the 1300. The exhaust system has a new muffler and on the intake side there's a larger twin-throat down-draught Weber carburettor with automatic choke.

Those changes bring tangible improvements to the outputs. Maximum power is up from the 1300's 54kW at 6000 rpm to 58.8 kW at 5750 rpm. (Judging by European specifications, it seems that '27A compliance costs less than four kW.) Where the 1300 X1/9 claimed 98 Nm maximum torque, at 3400 rpm, the 1500 says 118 Nm at 3250 rpm (almost the same as the non-'27A specs).

While it clearly would have been good to have had the 1500 engine available earlier, it's definitely a case of better late than never. The bigger banger is worth waiting for. The 1.5-litre five-speed powerplant gives the Fiat a healthy boost in performance. It's no less a fun car than it ever was, a driver's delight, but it now has the teeth to give some real bite instead of just playful nips.

Where the 1300 four-speed was a sports car thanks to driveability rather than sheer performance, the 1500 five-speed combines both attributes and stands as a Sports Car, a proper one. Exhilarating. Satisfying. The sort of car you drive for driving's sake. A car to make you get in and go. Because it feels good.

Time and again we found ourselves thinking of the 1500 as a mini Dino. Or referring to it in conversation as the little Ferrari. That's the sort of image it evokes, the sort of impressions it makes, because of the way it performs and drives. It's not only what it does, so much as how it does it, that makes the X1/9 1500 such a good thing.

The performance test figures tell some of the story. They show, for instance, that the X1/9 now runs competitively with good one-and-a-half (litres) sedans including Golf and

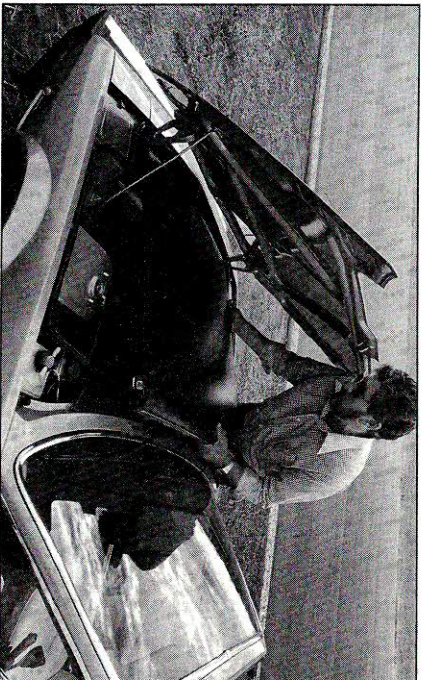
323/Laser, which is what you'd expect since the Fiat's power isn't extraordinary and its weight is relatively heavy. Even the 880 kg 1300 was fairly hefty for its size, and the 1500 somehow manages to tip the scales at 930 kg which is considered pretty solid for medium size sedans these days. Even so, the Fiat can hold its own in mixed 1.5-litre company and has, we believe, the potential to do a little better than our figures.

Overdue deadlines meant we were hard pressed for time and distance. Picked up almost straight from the wharf, run-in during a few nights' country runs, then given its first (1000 km) service, our test X1/9 had covered only about 1100 km when we ran the performance checks. Though it was by then running very freely and sweetly, we don't doubt it would shave its times with a few thousand more kays under its belts. The 18-second mark should be within reach for the 0-400 m sprint. Overseas tests report the slightly more powerful non-ADR version doing the standing quarter and 400 m in the high 17s.

It goes without saying that the 1500 is much quicker than the 1300 on all occasions. The new model takes a second or so less to do the 0-400 m run, is several seconds ahead from rest to 130 km/h, and also is well clear in all the In-gears increments. It adds up to the 1500 being a usefully brisk, nicely responsive performer. That shows even on the dragstrip, and more especially on the road.

In everyday conditions you appreciate the punchy acceleration of the 1500, of course, but that's not the only thing to set its performance apart from the 1300. The larger engine endows the car with excellent flexibility. In the gears it pulls similar to or better than some good 2-litre models, not the least of which is the Triumph TR7. Indeed, at low to middling speeds the X1/9 also shows the way to Mazda's RX-7. Flexibility of that standard helps make the X1/9 a very effective tool, a devilishly sharp little scalpel, in cut and thrust conditions.

But there's more to the 1500 than just more squirt through the gears and in them. Importantly, it also has longer



Far left: Stylish yet functional cockpit is very comfortable for drivers of up to about 1.8 m height, lacks leg length for taller types.

Left and below: There's room for soft bags and oddments in rear boot, plus space for much more up front even when the cockpit roof is stowed.



FIAT'S FIVE-SPEED 1500

legs for easier/faster cruising. The first three ratios in the new gearbox are carried over from the four-speeder. But fourth gear has been lowered to 1.042:1, reducing the wide gap that existed with the previous 0.959 ratio and which sometimes meant you had to choose between revving a bit too high for comfort in third or too low in fourth.

The X1/9 now does about 24.3 km/h per 1000 rpm in fourth against about 26.7 km/h in the earlier model, both with the 4.076 (13/53) final drive ratio. Some 1300s used a 4.416 (12/53) final drive. The lower ratio improved the car's acceleration but meant speeds in gears were relatively short and allowed the engine to redline quite easily in fourth with consequently busy cruising even at moderately high speeds. Press-on drivers could take the higher-g geared 1300 to or over its rev limit with little difficulty.

That's not so with the 1500. Fifth gear is 0.863:1, or 3.518 overall, giving about 29.3 km/h per 1000 rpm. In spite of appearing relatively high, however, fifth effectively isn't an overdrive ratio. Instead it's almost perfectly geared for performance. On roads where the grade, wind and speed limits don't interfere the X1/9 will steadily wind up in fifth until it just reaches the peak-power engine rpm.

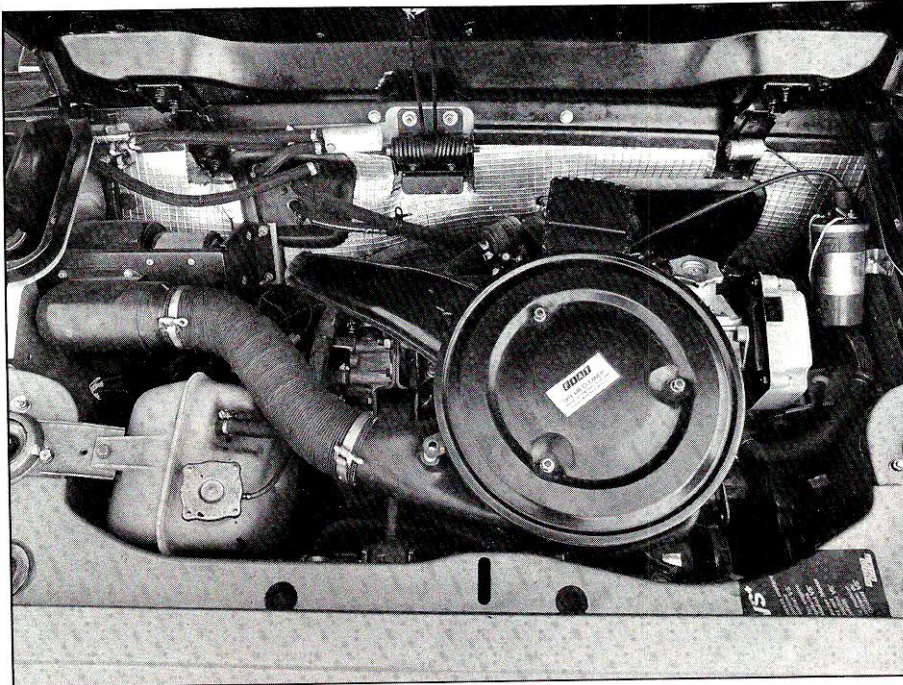
In first, second and third it simply rockets up to the redline when you plant your foot down, and it also reaches that mark in fourth should you insist. But in normal conditions the beginning of the tacho's orange zone at 5800 rpm is as far as you ever need buzz the engine. When running acceleration tests through the gears we scored quickest times by changing up just as the needle reached 6000 rpm. Higher windings brought slower times because the power falls off steeply not long after passing its peak.

Thanks to the bigger engine and taller gearing the improved performance enables you to cruise more easily, at lower revs, at reasonably high speeds. At 100 km/h, for instance, you're doing only 3400 or so in fifth. And the improvements in that way haven't been at the cost of fuel consumption either. In fact excellent fuel economy is one of X1/9's assets.

Even allowing that the test car's first 1000 kays consisted mainly of fairly easy cruising at 100 to 110 km/h, occasionally more, with some peak-hour commuting included, the consumption was impressively thrifty. The Fiat's frugality was established when it achieved more than 15 km/l (42+ mpg) for the 83 km check loop. Most impressive of all was the latter part of the test (after the first service) when we ran the performance figures, followed by an extensive photographic session (with many laps at Oran Park race track), city and suburban runabouting, and generally enthusiastic driving during which the car wasn't babied at all. Even then it gave 12 km/l (almost 34 mpg).



FIAT'S FIVE-SPEED 1500



Above: The 1500 engine gives the X1/9 more muscle, and the fifth gear gives it longer legs, meaning improved performance all round.

Right: When the X1/9 is wide open it's very open by dint of two doors and four lids.

The overall consumption for almost 1400 km averaged 13 km/l (36.7 mpg). That'll probably prove to be a fairly *normal* figure we suspect, and it puts the X1/9 right in the econocar class where consumption's concerned. Don't laugh ... it could help make a convincing case to put to your lady and/or bank manager.

Excellent fuel economy is, however, only a secondary (albeit worthwhile) aspect of the new powerplant, the main function of which is to let you enjoy the Fiat's chassis all the more. If you thought the 1300 good, and it was, the 1500 is great. It does everything the 1300 did, only better (and faster, if you want).

While there may be differences in springs and dampers due to the 1500's extra weight, the only announced changes are the adoption of five-inch rims (instead of the 4½s) and 165/70 SR13 tyres instead of 145s. Suspension is as before: coil-sprung telescopic struts front and rear. There's no anti-roll bar at either end. None is needed.

Such body roll as does occur during brisk cornering obviously isn't detrimental to the roadholding and handling, and only helps you better feel what the car is doing. *Feel*, in fact, is largely what the X1/9 is all about. It's not only an exceptionally competent handling machine, but a car with which the enthusiastic driver feels at one. You drive at ease, with every reason for confidence and enjoyment, knowing you're at the wheel of a car you can trust right up to the limit, and even beyond.

What can be said about the X1/9 to adequately describe how well it handles? That it sticks like glue? Cor-

ners as though on rails? Holds the road like the painted line? Those and similar clichés are quite true of the Fiat, but they don't even tell the half of it. They don't convey how good it feels, how it squats back and gets its power down without a hint of wheelspin when you shift back a gear or two and power through tight turns, while you're being pressed into the corner of the seat. Or being pressed hard against the deeply bolstered side when you hurtle through open sweeping corners.

No, you have to drive the X1/9 1500 to understand, let alone appreciate, how beautifully it handles, how precisely it steers, how it just grips, with mild initial understeer becoming a virtually neutral attitude which can be finely adjusted with the throttle. And if you do push it too hard, nudging it across the limit into oversteer, you'll learn the X1/9 is as controllable as it is predictable. If anything, the 1500 is even better balanced than the earlier model. That's high praise indeed, but thoroughly deserved.

The four-wheel disc brakes are generally impressive too. In normal conditions they give excellent stopping with moderately firm pedal despite the absence of servo assistance. Only in extreme applications (maximum pressure full stops) is there a tendency to lock the lightly laden front wheels.

The X1/9's ride is also better than the car's size might lead you to expect. It's no limousine, of course, for the suspension is biased towards firmness yet it absorbs or diminishes most blows. Vertical movement occurs when irregularities come in quick succession but even then the disturbances are

seldom harshly discomfiting.

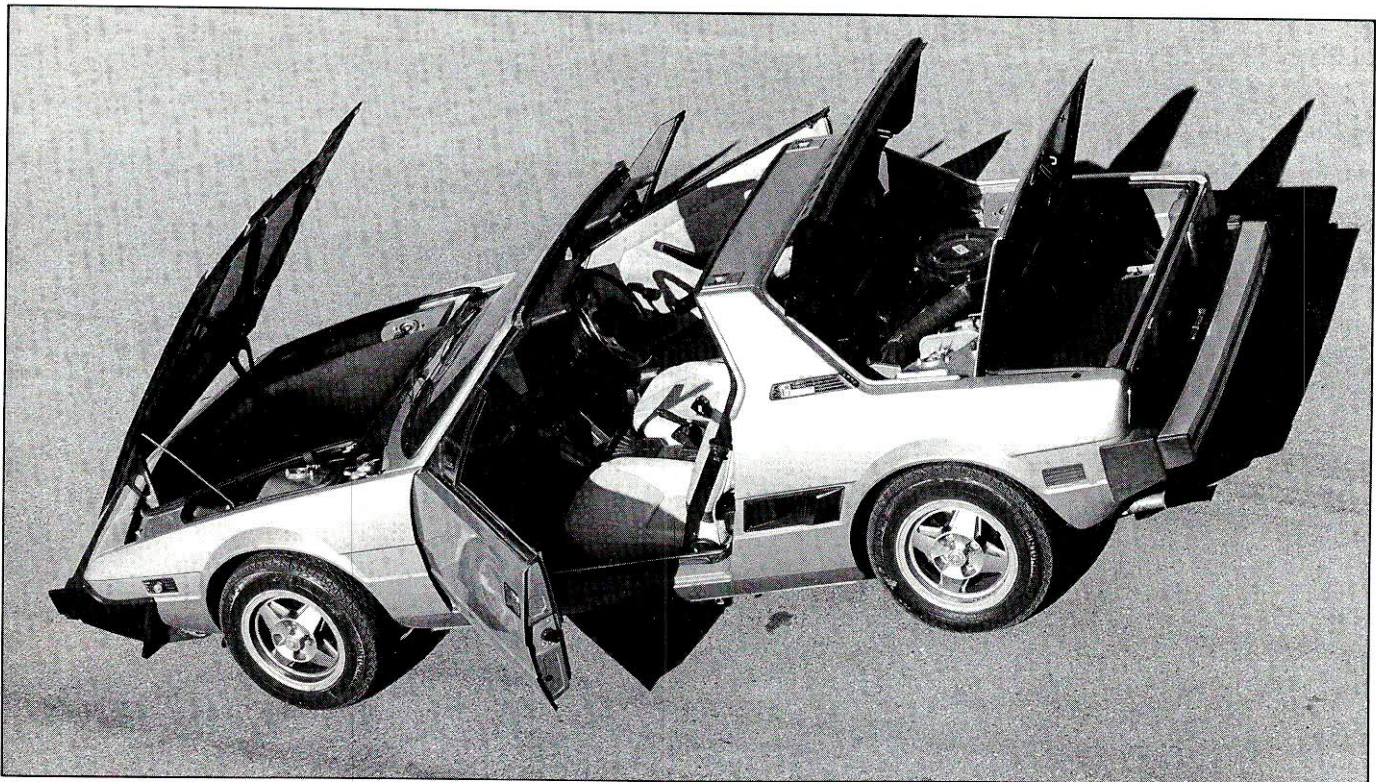
Some of the credit for the comparatively good ride must belong to the seats. Thanks to their deeply bucketed shape they offer more support and comfort than their apparent lowness and seemingly thin cushions might suggest. The only real problem is, as before, that the Fiat really only fits drivers less than 1.8 m tall. There's not sufficient leg and arm length, nor adequate wheel-to-leg clearance, for drivers on the long side of six-foot. Below that mark, no complaints. Just the opposite. Drivers of short to middling height find the driving position excellent. Likewise the arrangement and operation of the controls.

The spacing of the foot pedals is just about perfect for small to medium size feet. The brake and accelerator pedals are positioned so that heel-and-toe downshifts are a natural, and the left foot has a rest where it can reside between declutchings.

The gearshift is mostly very good. It's sometimes a criticism of mid-engined cars that gearshift precision suffers somewhat due to the long, often devious, linkage needed between the lever and the gearbox. Not so in the X1/9. If anything the five-speed shift can be a bit too positive. The gate is relatively narrow, especially between the 3/4 and 5/R slots. Heavy-handed shifts can go wrong, causing the lever to be balked by the narrow entry lanes. Instead, it's a case of *light is right*. When you let the lever's spring-loading take care of the small transverse movements, and you simply pull or push the squared-off knob accordingly, the shifts are as easy, quick and clean as you could wish for.

The instrument panel and fascia continue from the last series 1300. On the column are three stalks, that on the right for wash/wipe and those on the left for turn indicators and headlight dipper respectively. Ahead are the speedo (with trip and total odometers) and tachometer (with needle turning in the wrong direction), either side of the fuel gauge (with low level warning light). To the left is another round face with gauges for water temperature and — obscured by the wheel rim — oil pressure. Though the instruments are well shrouded by their binnacle, tall drivers are affected at night by a strip of reflection high on the windscreen. Another minor grizzle is that it's difficult to find a warm setting for the heater control which tends to be at either cool or hot settings.

The furnishings don't include a radio, perhaps a surprise omission in a car costing this much. How much? The price hadn't been settled at time of writing but will be around \$13,000. Not exactly cheap, of course. But in view of the performance and the handling and the fuel consumption and the still modern lines and the genuine sports car character, the Fiat X1/9 is good value. Think of it as a little Ferrari and it's a genuine bargain. □



SPECIFICATIONS

MAKE	Fiat		
MODEL	X1/9		
BODY TYPE	Two-door roadster		
PRICE: See text			
OPTIONS FITTED	Mag wheels		
ENGINE:			
Cylinders	Four		
Valves	SOHC		
Carburettor	Weber two-throat downdraught		
Compression ratio	9.2 to 1		
Bore x stroke	86.4 x 63.9 mm		
Capacity	1.498 litres		
Power at 5750 rpm	58.8 kW		
Torque at 3250 rpm	118 Nm		
TRANSMISSION			
Type	Five-speed manual		
RATIOS:			
	Gearbox	Overall	km/h per 1000 rpm
First	3.583:1	14.607:1	7.0
Second	2.235:1	9.111:1	11.2
Third	1.454:1	5.927:1	17.4
Fourth	1.042:1	4.248:1	24.3
Fifth	0.863:1	3.518:1	29.3
Final drive	4.076:1		
CHASSIS:			
Construction	Unitary, steel		
SUSPENSION:			
Front	MacPherson struts, coil springs		
Rear	MacPherson struts, coil springs		
Dampers	Telescopic		
STEERING:			
Type	Rack and pinion		
Turning circle	10 m		
Turns lock to lock	3.3		
BRAKES:			
Type	Unassisted discs front and rear		
DIMENSIONS:			
Wheelbase	2202 mm		
Track, front	1355 mm		
Track, rear	1350 mm		
Length	3969 mm		
Width	1570 mm		
Height	1180 mm		
Kerb mass (weight)	930 kg		
FUEL TANK	49 litres		
TYRES	165/70SR13, Pirelli Cinturato P3		
Pressure, front/rear	172/200 kPa (25/29 psi)		

X1/9
five speed

PERFORMANCE

TEST CONDITIONS:

Weather	Warm, dry		
Load	Two persons		
Location	Castlereagh dragstrip		
Fuel	Super		

SPEEDOMETER ERROR:

Indicated km/h	50	70	90	110	130
Actual km/h	48	67	86	105	124

FUEL CONSUMPTION ON TEST:

Check one	14.0 km/l (39.6 mpg) over 536 km
Check two	12.5 km/l (35.3 mpg) over 313 km
Check three	12.0 km/l (33.9 mpg) over 450 km
Fuel check loop	15.1 km/l (42.7 mpg) over 83 km
Average	13.0 km/l (36.7 mpg) over 1382 km

MAXIMUM SPEEDS IN GEARS:

First	48 km/h (6900 rpm)
Second	77 km/h (6900 rpm)
Third	120 km/h (6900 rpm)
Fourth	167 km/h (6900 rpm)
Fifth	170 km/h (5800 rpm)

ACCELERATION:

Through the gears:				
0-50 km/h	3.4 secs			
0-60 km/h	4.5 secs			
0-70 km/h	5.8 secs			
0-80 km/h	7.7 secs			
0-90 km/h	9.5 secs			
0-100 km/h	11.6 secs			
0-110 km/h	13.9 secs			
0-120 km/h	17.3 secs			
0-130 km/h	22.2 secs			
In the gears:				
30-60 km/h	3.2	4.8	8.1	10.8 secs
40-70 km/h	3.4	4.7	7.8	10.2
50-80 km/h		5.2	7.8	10.1
60-90 km/h		5.6	7.8	10.1
70-100 km/h		6.1	8.2	10.4
80-110 km/h		6.4	8.8	11.0
90-120 km/h			9.6	12.1
100-130 km/h			11.4	13.2
STANDING START (0-400m):	18.3 secs			