

AUSTRALIA'S TOP SELLING MOTOR MAGAZINE

WHEELS

\$1.00*

AUGUST, 1978

Silver Jubilee Year - 1953-1978

SURVEY THE \$5000 CHOICE



WE DRIVE...

SCORPION

TRIUMPH TR7

TORANA 6-CYL

RENAULT 18

LANCIA GAMMA

BREAKDOWN INSURANCE—THE NEWEST PAINKILLER

- FIAT X 1/9
- LANCIA GAMMA
- LANCIA BETA AUTO

ITALIAN INDIGESTION

Take three fine new Italian models, a racing circuit, a horde of keen drivers — more drivers than cars — and you have the components of dissatisfaction. The cars were great, the circuit was fine, but we'd have liked more time with the cars. About a week each.

IN THE more "Boys Own" of motoring magazines you can read volumes about how a motoring journalist's life is pretty idyllic. He appears to step from Lancia to BMW or to go from a Grand Prix to a tour of the Rolls Royce factory in a short step.

Don't believe all you read. A scribber's bum is just about as shiny as that of any office worker since he spends just about as much time wearing out an office chair as the average office worker. And when he IS out road testing it might be in a Skoda or Datsun 120Y, in which case he deserves sympathy, not envy.

When something nice happens to your average road tester it is a surprise, a bonus, no matter how blase he chooses to be in print. That was the case recently when all the usual crew of motoring editors and ragged hangers-on were invited by Fiat to drive three fine new Italian cars — Fiat X1/9, Lancia Beta auto and Lancia Gamma — around Warwick Farm short circuit, with a fine barbecue lunch chucked in. The attendance demonstrated that everyone felt it was a good idea.

Any of the three cars would have been worth a day on its own had it been entirely new to Australia, but the X1/9 has already been driven in Australia by WHEELS (it was in our December '77 issue), the Gamma won't be on sale until "the second half of next year" and the Beta automatic is scheduled for "early in '79".

Both of those quotes are from Fiat's national advertising manager, Bob Neave. The day was, Bob told us, an opportunity for those that hadn't driven the X1/9 to drive it now, and a chance to drive a pair of fine Italian cars which wouldn't be in the showrooms yet but would be coming here eventually.

FIAT X1/9

The X1/9 was as delightful as we expected it to be. On the Warwick Farm billiard table

Lancia Gamma is obviously closely related in styling to the Beta, but bigger. Lights have two reflectors grouped under a one-piece lens.

it was tenacious in corners, sensationally accurate to steer and despite ADR27A it had a responsive little engine. There wasn't power to burn, however, and it seems apparent that extra ergs from the coming 1.5-litre engine will be a help. There were also times when the third gear was rather too short for corners but top gear didn't allow the driver to apply enough power to take maximum advantage of the roadholding of the car. A five-speed is in the mill.

In a nutshell, the X1/9 needs more gears and more power to complement its sensational roadholding and steering. Brakes were fabulous, needing more effort than expected for such a light car, but beautifully progressive. The ride was hard to judge on the smoothness of Warwick Farm but it appeared that the flat, firm quality and eery lack of bump-thump which we encountered on the first car to come to Australia were as good as they seemed last December.

It's a great car — and it really is on Fiat showrooms at \$9500. Fiat says it would have been here sooner if it had not been for the "innumerable and complicated tests" needed to prove that the X1/9 is a car that can be driven on Australian roads.

Fiat, through Bob Neave, was as severe on Government car design controls as any car company we've ever heard here. "I don't think," said Neave, "the average consumer appreciates the extra he has to pay to buy the unique car which the Australian authorities demand.

"In the case of the X1/9 the buyer is paying some \$300 to \$400 more to increase his petrol consumption and reduce the performance of his car, ostensibly to obviate environmental problems which exist at a couple of places in the centre of Sydney and Melbourne, on certain days of the year." Tough stuff.

On the subject of import quotas, Fiat feels it is "suffering for the sins of others". The company feels it is "about time that the Government looked carefully at the basis of quota allocations to ensure the viability of European manufacturers who have done so much to improve design and efficiency of motor vehicles generally". Food for official thought, although it is very unlikely to prompt any action, the government having just made a firm decision on the size and allocation of quotas after months in the deciding.



LANCIA GAMMA

Fiat obviously has special reason for being anxious about quotas, since its two forthcoming Lancia models can be expected to increase demand for its cars considerably. The addition of an automatic option to the Beta can be expected to widen that car's appeal considerably, and the Gamma when it arrives will appeal to the Audi 5E, Volvo and small BMW buyer.

It is hard to form a lasting impression of a car when clambering hurriedly in and out and driving fairly hard on a short racetrack, but within those limits the Gamma seemed a thoroughbred front-wheel drive motor car — quiet through the air but having an appealing mechanical whirr from its 2.5-litre flat-four. It's not a big car to drive but surprisingly roomy, especially in the back. Overall length is a compact 4580 mm compared with the Audi 5E's 4700 mm, but the thing weighs 1320 kg which is considerably more than the Audi's 1170 kg.

The engine output claimed for the Lancia is 103 kW, only three kW more than the Audi. We feel that the Italian kilowatts are of a more vigorous kind than the German, since the Lancia seemed a pretty lively car — at least off the mark — whereas the Audi was a lukewarm performer on test a few months ago.

The Gamma we drove had a standard five-speed gearbox with the familiar light, smooth but faintly-rubbery shift that has become familiar in the Beta 1.8 and 2000. The car is obviously related to the Beta in many ways, in fact it feels simply like a bigger version of that car. Price isn't available yet, of course, but on today's levels we'd see it selling for around \$16,000 — in other words, competitively.

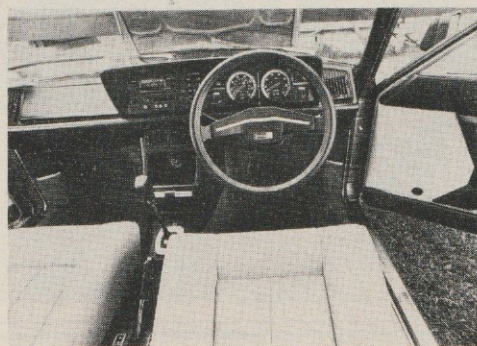
The Gamma seems to be long on equipment and comfort. There was air conditioning in the car we drove and we understand that Lancia is looking hard at making it standard equipment. Certainly it would sell at \$16,000 in present terms. Australia is to have another really good car.

BETA AUTOMATIC

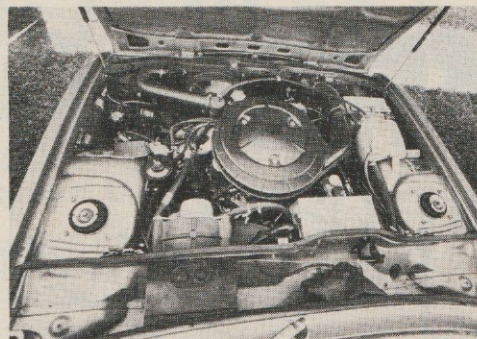
The Beta is a familiar car — soft-riding, fairly quiet and comfortable with a transversely-mounted DOHC Fiat four-



Above: Tail view of Gamma is not the car's best angle. Rear vision won't be a strong point, either. Love that "FA" number plate . . .



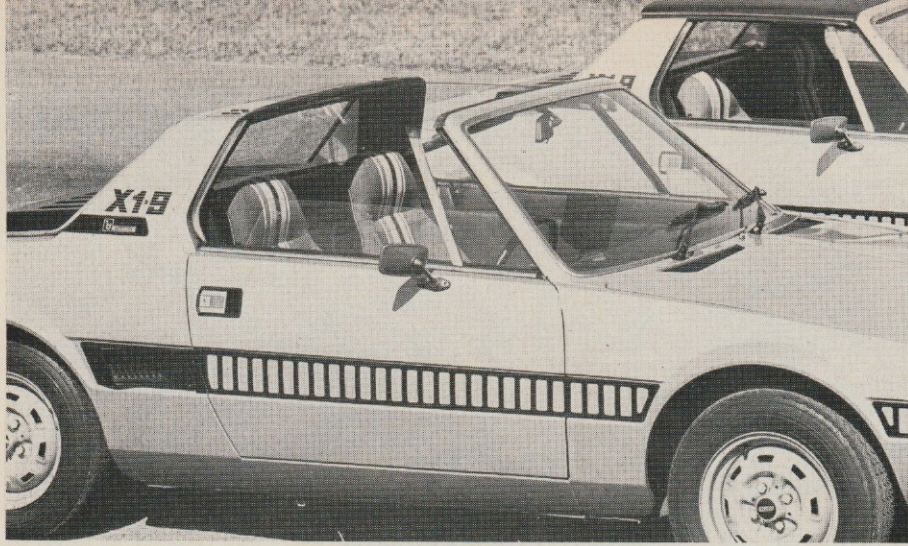
Left: Beta relationship continues inside the Gamma, though cockpit is considerably wider, more plush. Instruments look businesslike but are hard to read — at least until you get used to them.



Left: Under all the plumbing there is a 2.5-litre flat-four. It must be about the biggest-capacity four you can buy in Australia, but it's smooth and responsive. Car we drove was a test bed for ADR gear.

Below: Lancia isn't really low enough to fit under a Warwick Farm guard rail. It just looks like it. Profile is sleek but from other angles the car looks a little fussy. Glass area is generous.





Above: A pair of X19s — one with roof, one without. The lift-out glass panel fits just under front boot lid and does not intrude into luggage room.

Right: Exuberance in a Fiat sports car. At last, Australians with \$9500 are to find out how good it feels.



ITALIAN INDIGESTION

cylinder engine driving the front wheels. New is the British-designed three-speed automatic gearbox which will widen the appeal of the Beta a lot.

The transmission complements the car's enthusiastic engine surprisingly well, which makes you think that perhaps the blurb in the press release that the transmission was "subject to severe and extensive testing" might be more than just words. The car gets away from a standing start unexpectedly well and changes very smoothly. Its operation is almost silent whereas the manual transmission generates some gear whine, especially in the indirects.

The important thing is that even though the auto transmission makes the Beta more of a convenience machine, it does not destroy the sensitivity or performance of the manual car, which Lancia lovers will regard as a relief. The auto option hasn't been priced yet; it's not on the market. But it ought to add \$500-\$700 to the price of a manual Beta.

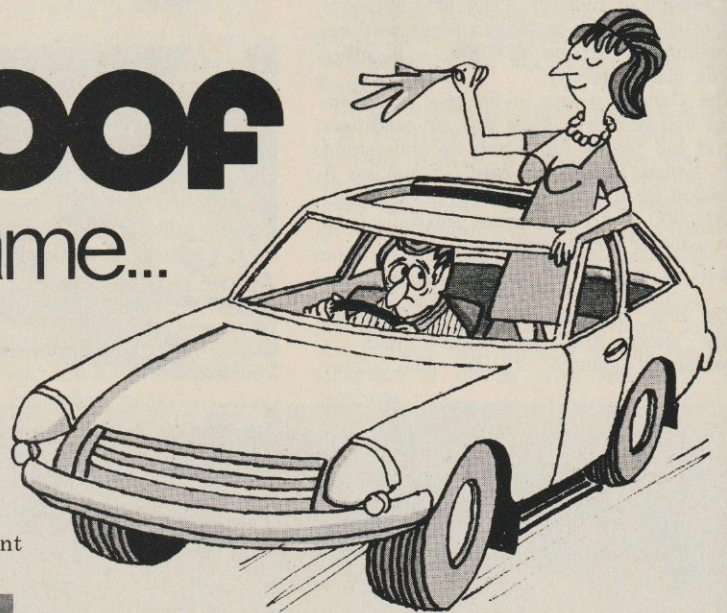
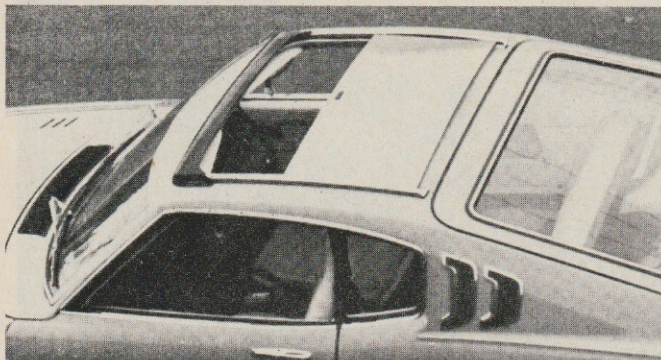
Top right: Beta auto doesn't look different and shouldn't perform much differently from manual, either. Gearbox and engine are well mated.

Right: Only change to Beta auto interior is console. Seats are still soft and comfortable, ride is still supple, performance is still lively.

SPORTSROOF

It's more than a name...
it's a feeling.

Give your car that regal touch — a SPORTSROOF will open up a whole new dimension of driving enjoyment. Winner of the coveted Australian Design Award, the SPORTSROOF is completely waterproof when closed — no worries about leaks and drips, just drive and relax. In summer you can enjoy the gentle breeze of an open roof. Night driving becomes a new experience with the enchantment of the city lights filtering through your tinted glass sunroof.



Upgrade your car in an exciting and different way. Your SPORTSROOF can be completely installed in one day and what a difference it will make.

SPORTSROOF, it's more than a name . . . it's a feeling.

AUTO SUN & AIR PTY. LTD.

33 Alleyne Street, Chatswood, 2067, N.S.W.
Tel: (02) 407 0258.
N.S.W. Islington (049) 61 3624, Wollongong (042) 29 4593; A.C.T. (062) 95 1133;
VIC. (03) 55 0633; S.A. (08) 51 5647;
W.A. (092) 75 1222; QLD. (07) 341 2796;
TAS. (002) 34 2822.

