

\$1.00*

WHEELS

RETREADS
A CHEAP TYRE
CHOICE?

YOUR DRIVER'S XMAS- PRESENTS TO BUY



NEW CELICA - WE DRIVE DATSUN 200B

AT LAST —
at last — Australians
can buy the beautiful
Fiat X1/9, widely viewed as
the finest small sports car in
the world and one of the best
pieces of car design for many a
long day. We've driven one of the first
X1/9s in the country and we're rapt . . .



THE SPORTS



YOU WOULD think that the coldest Melbourne day for three years — complete with mandatory horizontal rain, snow, icy, gusty winds and four horizons-ful of leaden clouds — would do something to deaden your appreciation of any open sports car. I mean, apart from Morgan enthusiasts and other irrational people, we all prefer balmy summer evenings and crisp spring mornings to be exposed to the elements, don't we?

Fortunately Fiat's X1/9 is not *any* open sports car. It is probably the finest modern "sports" car in the world and it is about to be released in Australia and WHEELS has driven it! And that last fact, more than most of the others in



CAR OFFENSIVE

FIAT'S X1/9 BEARS THE STANDARD

FIAT'S X1/9

this issue, is just cause for an exclamation mark.

On the face of it, Finest Modern Sports Car In The World is a weighty tag for a small 1.3-litre two-seat car which is about half the size of the sedan your \$8750 could buy and probably not as fast in a straight line. And everyone from Enzo down knows that there are sports cars about which can put another 130 km/h on top of the X1/9's 160 km/h top speed and are quicker across the ground as a result.

But the X1/9 is one of the true sports cars. It is built in volume for people who like to *drive*. Relative to other genuine drivers' cars it is cheap. It

is refined in design, it is downright beautiful to look at and despite the apparent limitations of its mid-engined mechanical layout it is easy to own and service. It is one of those cars which the Italians make which surpasses, in the flesh, even its designers' intentions.

The focal point of the X1/9's design is its mid-engine. Few cheap sports cars — and it must be remembered that the X1/9 is Italy's Sprite or Spitfire — have their engines set inside the wheelbase because there are engineering and design problems which make the cars more expensive to build. The car the X1/9 replaced, the 850 Spider, had its engine hanging out behind the rear wheels just like the 850 sedan (on which it was based).

(Continued overleaf)

THE SPORTS car isn't dead, it has just been lying dormant waiting to be rediscovered by the Italians. It is Fiat, through the brilliant X1/9, Lancia Beta Spider and Monte Carlo and Ferrari 308GTB Spider, and Alfa Romeo, with its soon to be released Sud and Alfetta Spider, who are showing the rest of the world that soft top motoring is a worthy and profitable exercise.

While the renaissance is being led by the Italians the British, who invented and maintained the sports car realm for so long, are sinking back into the dark ages as the once proud MG works at Abingdon are reduced to building the antiquated MGB and Midget with only a badge-engineered, targa-topped version of the Triumph TR7 in the wings to stave off ultimate death.

In Australia — surely a country that invites the use of topless cars — the sports car practically died out completely in the mid-'70s. Leyland killed the MGB in 1973, Alfa Romeo the 2000 Spider in 1976 and Jensen the Healey when it went under in '76. All that remained was the Triumph Stag — and it's hardly a genuine sports car — the Morgan and the Porsche Targa. Nothing else. The E Type has gone, the Triumph TR6 and Spitfire lingered for a while but were killed by Leyland's decision that they weren't worth the effort of meeting the ADRs.

But now Fiat is about to release the X1/9, with the Monte Carlo a distinct possibility late in '78 and both the Alfa Spiders — Sud and Alfetta — will come to Australia if the quotas are lifted and probably even if they remain.

The TR7 is a pure two-seater coupe but it's the closest Leyland has come to replacing its aging sports car range and will enliven the scene and provide Datsun's 260Z with some serious opposition. Porsche's 924 will probably appear in targa form soon and get the much needed five-speed gearbox. Rumors from Britain insist that Leyland will do a V8 version of the TR7 and offer both the four and eight in open form. But it seems there won't be a replacement for the Midget/Spitfire.

In the long term both Ford and GM can be expected to enter the field. Ford with a sports version of the Fiesta and GM with, not only the targa topped T-car (Gemini) but also of its forthcoming XP903 front wheel drive mini car.

So the sports car is far from dead and at the beginning of a giant resurgence of interest that will see more new open cars in the next few years than in the previous 10. *



Three very different cars but they all deserve the title sports cars, though in varying degrees. Fiat's X1/9 shows the way all small sports cars should be, Porsche's 924 is a closed two-seater and Morgan's 4/4 the last link with the way things used to be done.

FIAT'S X1/9

Fiat says it adopted its X1/9 layout because of racetrack experience where the "indisputable superiority" of this arrangement has been demonstrated. Just that. No beating about the bush. Can you imagine another car building giant being so candid, so uncompromising or so succinct.

The X1/9's components come from the front wheel drive 128 sedan which has a 1.3-litre engine mounted transversely ahead of the front wheels. In the X1/9 the whole unit — engine, transmission and most suspension components — simply moves to the rear so that the engine sits across the car behind the occupants' backs and ahead of the rear wheels. The X1/9's engine slopes forward slightly, apparently to lower the bonnet line in the front wheel drive 128, but this helps the X1/9 application by keeping the weight of the mechanicals mainly inside the wheelbase. The car has 56.5 percent of its weight on the rear wheels, 43.5 percent on the fronts.

The X1/9 is very small in the flesh, much smaller even than it looks in photographs. It's a little longer than the three-door Honda Civic but far, far lower — almost knee high. Bertone styled the body (and builds it for Fiat) using very obvious wedge principles, yet despite the fine, low nose that this mode of styling dictates, the car has a remarkably deep and roomy boot at the front. There is another smaller but similarly uncluttered luggage compartment at the rear end of the car, behind the engine.

To get to the engine you open a hatch behind the rear window and you get surprisingly easy access considering that the unit is surrounded by tin (bodywork, that is) at all points of the compass. The engine itself is a 1290 cm³ single overhead cam unit, fed by a Weber dual-throat carburettor and producing a healthy 56 kW at 6000 rpm and 84 Nm of torque at 3400. At least that is the output position in Italy and England. In Australia the outputs — whether stated so or not — will be lowered somewhat by the anti-pollution plumbing required by ADR27A.

The car WHEELS drove was an English-spec car with only about 80 km on the clock and no concessions to Australian law, not even seat belts. But it WAS also equipped with a cavernous (non-standard) flat spot which came in at around 3500 rpm and went out at about 4500 rpm. Since the car had not even had its pre-delivery service and had been sitting idle for some weeks, that wasn't surprising.

All the same, you'd have to be the extreme optimist to say that conditions — rain, cold, tight engine, flat-spot — were ideal for car testing. They weren't. We drove the little car into Melbourne in company with the Morgan 4/4 four-seater which appears elsewhere in this magazine and drove it right into our



Above: Fiat reaches down and grips the road, even though it's wet and speeds are high. The car, cornering here at 120 km/h or so, felt that it was going at about six 10ths...

Right: Fiat's interior isn't particularly impressive but it is certainly functional. It's how you fit into it and how the controls suit you that matter in a driver's car and in the X1/9 that is well, very well.



private mental collection of the best cars in the world.

The X1/9 becomes a part of you — its controls are conventional and mass produced yet they have such a sensitivity that you'd swear that they were equipped with nerve-ends of their own. You sit in a classic Italian driving position with your knees fairly high and the tiny padded-rim four-spoke steering wheel in your lap. The seats — cloth trimmed and attractive in the test car — were fairly thin in the padding (apparently to save space) but deeply shaped to accommodate the bum and back snugly and secure it against the high cornering forces the car can generate. In fact, that's a good description for the whole driving position — snug...

The steering wheel is beautifully small and the main controls (dipper switch, turn indicators, washer/wipers) on stalks in easy reach of your fingertips. The horn button is in the centre of the steering wheel boss.

The dashboard is one of the new generation practical kind which is gradually (and thankfully) taking over from the old-style impress-the-buyer-on-his-trip-around-the-block variety which used to be the goods. Now, instead of a cliff-face of good taste and flash switchery, the X1/9 combines useful top-of-the-dash carrying space, a useful (lockable) glovebox underneath, logical space for a radio/stereo and four fresh air vents which (as far as we could tell considering the Melbourne blizzard happening outside) seemed to have a high volume airflow for the Strine summer.

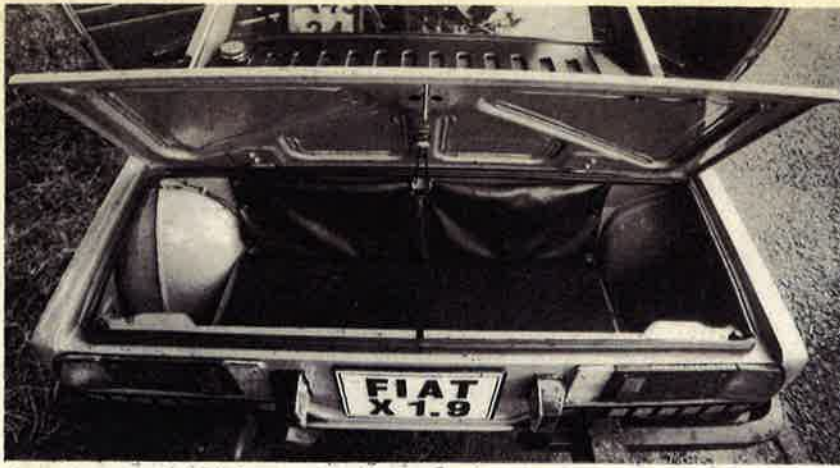
Not to labor the point, the X1/9

does make great use of its space. It has two uncluttered and eminently useable boots, space for gear atop the dash (as well as in the glovebox) plus a parcel shelf behind your head and map pockets in the doors. When you start off believing (as we did) that it'll be a cramped little car, you are very pleasantly surprised.

But driving the X1/9 is what the car was built for. That's its first and last function. All the rest is incidental. So you twist the key and the starter motor sounds Italian. You listen to the engine catch and fire and smooth out as only Italian engines (even cheap ones made by the hundred thousand) do and you slide the gearlever into first with the not-too-light metal-to-metal feel that good drivers' cars have. Already it feels like a junior Ferrari — and the word "junior" implies no disrespect, it just means "smaller".

The engine rasps and spins gutsily as it climbs up into the four and five grand region which becomes its home when you're punting. It was the same in the 128 sedan and coupe. That's how they are — Italians drive them like that for years and years on end. But for all that, the engine is flexible low down — not strong, but flexible. The little engine's greatest claim to fame is not its outright performance against the clock but its throttle response, its obvious attempt to give you what you want at all times.

In most other 1.3-litre cars the last third of the accelerator pedal travel, especially when you're in a high gear, is of use only in causing a minute change in exhaust note and causing an equally minute rate of acceleration. In the X1/9 even when you've opened the second

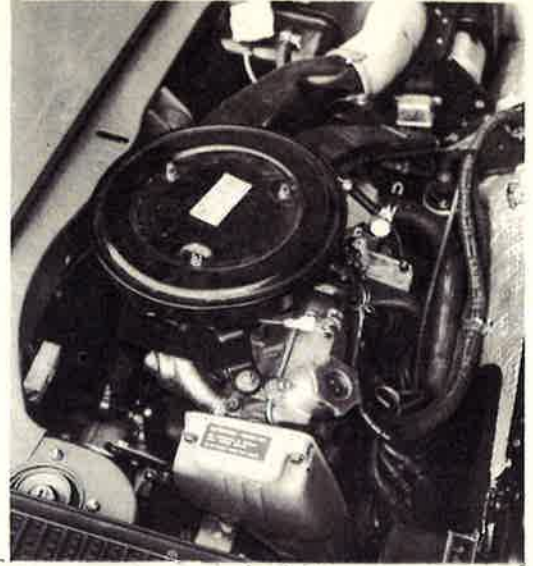


Left: The Fiat's rear boot is small but very useful because it has a regular shape. There is another boot in front which is bigger.

Right: The front boot. Ideal for swallowing a couple of small suitcases with more softer gear packed around and about. The luggage capacity and the snug cockpit make the X1/9 the right car for the two-up touring holidays we all fantasise about.



Below: Fiat engine is willing and gutsy for a 1.3, though there are those who would like more power. A 1.6 is on the way. We'd settle for another ratio in the gearbox. Accessibility is pretty good considering that there is so much metal north and south.



accelerator throat and you think you have all the engine can offer, the last 25 cm of pedal travel makes the donk breathe in, flex its 1.3-litre muscles and haul harder. Willingly.

The gearbox is a piece of poetry, even though the car we drove had a malfunction which at times made it hard to select first and third. It s-l-i-d-e-s from one slot to another, not a long way, but smoothly. It's perfect for timed, rhythmical changes. It makes you a driver. The only problem with the ratios is that there really aren't enough of them. The car could obviously do with a five-speed gearbox — and even six wouldn't be ridiculous. In cruising situations you need something higher but it would need to be very much an overdrive, not for the city. It would also help if there wasn't such a step between first and second. But if the car must have four speeds — and it must because it must use proprietary components to keep costs down, the arrangement it has is just about perfect.

The four-speed gearbox leaves the car rather open to criticism of not having enough power (though a 1.6-litre version IS on the way). If the car had five speeds, we suspect that the criticism wouldn't be there.

Handling and roadholding are hard to discuss in the case of the X1/9. The accepted road tester's practice is to get hold of the car and drive it through different corners at considerable speeds and cornering forces to find out about its ultimate behavior. But in the case of the Fiat we spent most of a day driving around Victoria looking for corners capable of putting its suspension under any kind of strain.

The X1/9 must be one of the sharpest steering, best handling and most tenacious cornering cars about — in any price bracket. Its smallness means that there is always plenty of road for picking a quick line. Its wide stance, strut all-independent suspension and grippy Pirelli Cinturato P3 tyres give it roadholding quite outside the experience of nearly all "normal" car drivers — and nearly all road testers, too.

We had one particularly illuminating experience. We'd searched long and hard for a bend to shoot cornering shots as the rain beat down and we finally had to settle, as the light failed, for a long downhill bend which had rivulets of water draining across it and a bevy of foreboding-looking tree trunks at the place where we might have hoped for a run-off area in case of mistakes. It didn't look good.

The cornering shots entailed accelerating down this big hill, slotting into top gear to keep the revs under 5000 and going through the corner at about 4000 in top — about 110 km/h. Swallowing loudly, we wheeled down for the first run. What happened? Nothing. The car simply went where pointed with an embarrassing lack of body roll or drama. Next run it was 120 km/h, the one after that 125 until the X1/9 was blasting through that bend at bloody near 140 km/h without drama. Finally, our man began trying to twitch it into two or three (ridiculously controllable) little slides in mid-corner bend, just to get some attitude for the camera. And all of it as the rain continued to fall and the water continued to trickle across the road.

One thing is certain. If some person tells you that he/she went off the road in an X1/9 (as people sometimes do as a kind of personal recommendation), you will know that you are being addressed by a fool . . .

Meantime, the Fiat's steering is just superb. It transmits everything about road conditions and grip yet almost nothing of the kickback that bumps generate. It's eerie that this thing, which is just a machine, can be so human in its ability to select.

The ride is fabulous. Firm and flat (as any foundation garment flogger might say), it has none of the pitch you'd expect from such a short wheelbase car, and an amazingly low level of suspension noise and bump-thump. The tyres and suspension combine in a way that the Porsche 924 builders (and we had one of those along for a direct comparison) might do well to emulate.

You will find the price a stumbling block if this is going to be your only car. You'll look at this small thing and the small piece of road it occupies and the fact that it only says Fiat on the badges instead of Porsche or Ferrari and your biro fingers will hover a long time and perhaps they'll end up not signing the cheque.

Forget the size of the car. Forget the prestige of the name. Just drive the car and make up your mind. If you buy you will have a far more responsive, a better car to drive than 99.9 percent of the world's mobile pseudos will ever experience. The X1/9 deserves to be called a masterpiece. If this were another time, it might have been done by Leonardo . . . *