

AUSTRALIA'S TOP-SELLING MOTOR MAGAZINE

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DECEMBER, 1979

WHEELS

PETER BROCK: HOW I WON BATHURST

**Driving
Toyota's new
Holden-
powered
Corona ➔**



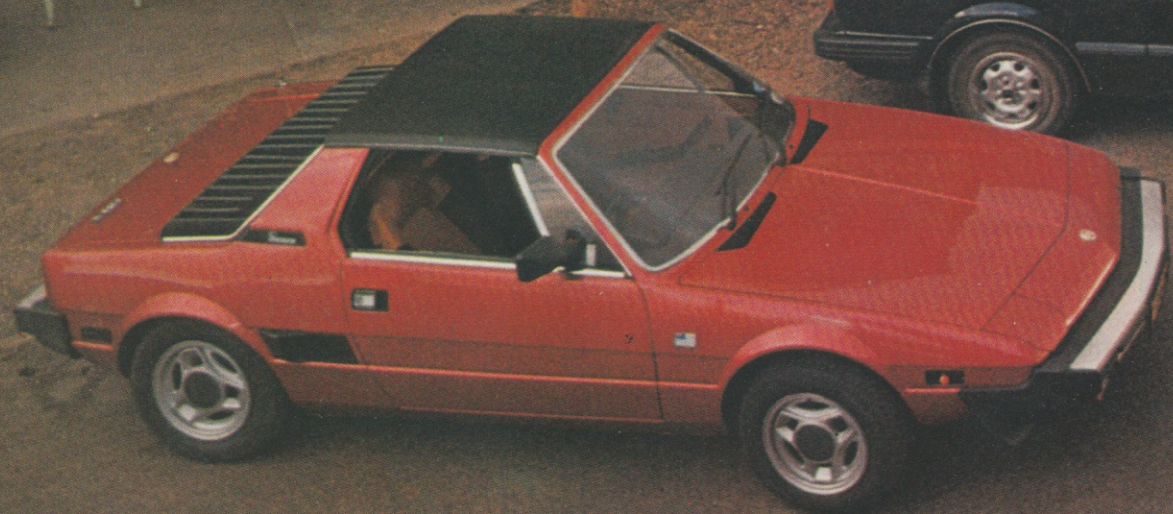
Full test: 1980 Subaru

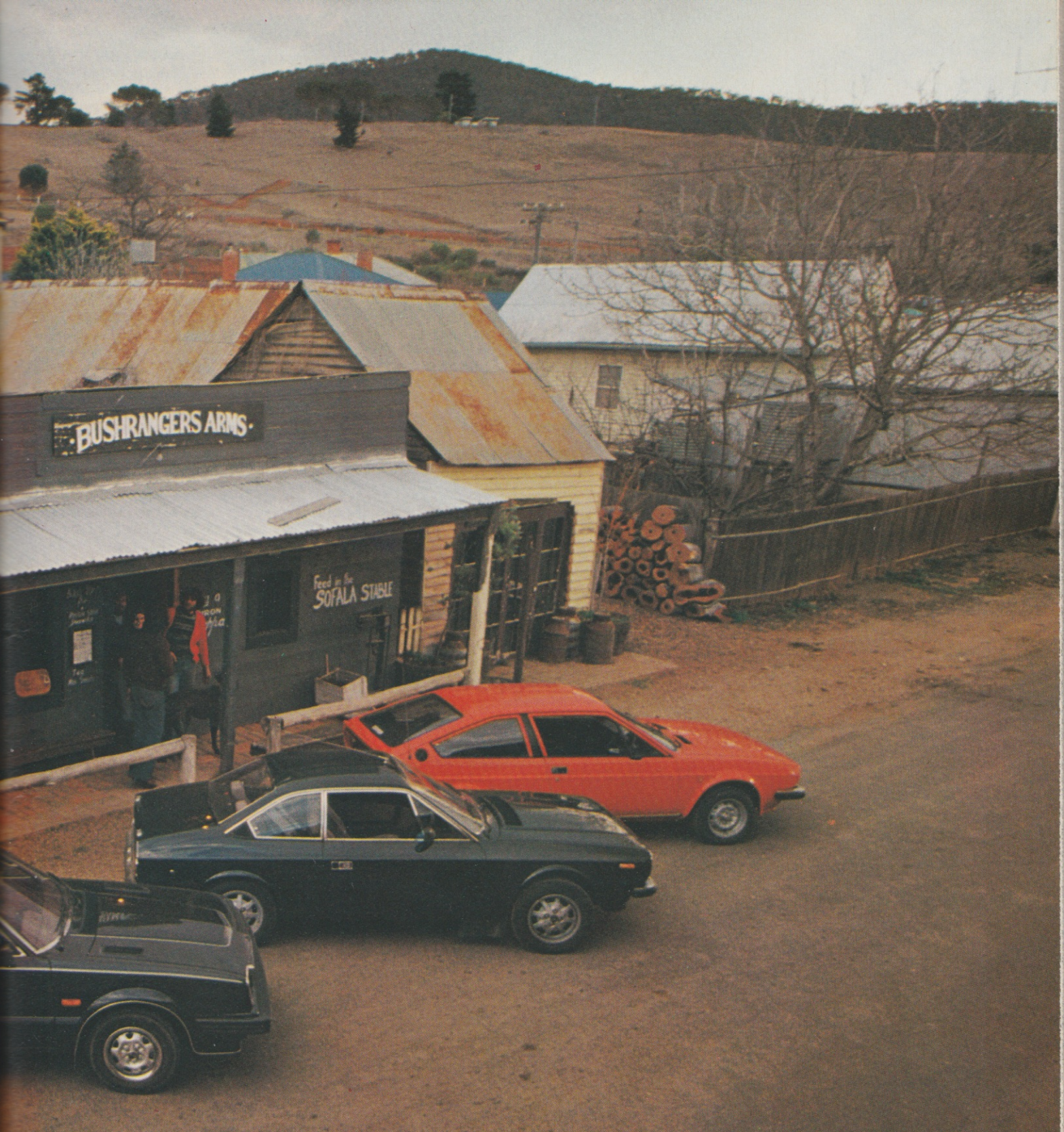
**Comparing: Honda Prelude
Alfasud Sprint
Fiat X1/9
Lancia Beta**

GENERAL STORE

SOFALA GENERAL STORE

THE
DIGGER





THE SPORTING LIFE

ALFASUD SPRINT / FIAT X 1/9 / HONDA PRELUDE / LANCIA BETA COUPE



AFFORDABLE SPORTS cars make the world go around. Family cars do the big business, luxury cars mirror the upwardly mobile, and exotics set the pace. Yet small sports cars keep the world turning through their curious blend of elements that make them not quite anything but exactly what they are. They are not quite luxury cars, not quite exotics and, in most cases, not quite family cars (read, anything but family cars). So they have a lot going for them in that most esoteric and intrinsic area of car ownership, appeal.

People can aspire to luxury and/or staggering performance but they can own a small sports car. And if that car feels balanced, predictable, and very much a part of its owner then he or she will be in the lap of luxury, away from the madding family car crowd, and in the realms of performance driving in an affordable express. Smiling. It is as much a deliverance of dreams as it is a reaction against conservatism. The fact that most good small sports cars come from Europe is so much seasoning.

Sports cars are fuel-frugal dynamic small packages and they are mostly performers in an age of emission-strangled cars. Their performance is relative, of course, but firm ride and a low centre of gravity coupled with a wide stance and light weight means the thrill is still there.

And so it is with the four sports cars in this comparison. Three represent state-of-the-art small sports car design and philosophy; they are front-wheel-drive coupes — two from Europe and one an intelligent and worthy Japanese — that are low fuel consumers for the sheer driving pleasure they deliver. The fourth is very much an individual, the targa-topped Fiat X 1/9 — the car which, with its mid-engine and trans-axle layout, has been dubbed everything from mini Ferrari to the world's most affordable exotic. Each has its charisma. The Lancia and Alfa Romeo have their racing heritage, the Fiat its roadholding reputation and out-and-out intrinsic appeal, and the Prelude its high equipment levels and links with the proven Civic and Accord.

Each is an open road car, an enjoyable conveyance to the places where your senses are heightened by being there, primed by an exhilarating drive en-route. You can do that in a sports car. Hence the Hill End trip. The drive offered some favorite bitumen roads mixed with remarkable dirt roads which included the formidable and beautiful Bridle Track — the "back way" from Bathurst to Hill End. All in all, the driving mix to best test the Alfasud Sprint, Lancia Beta Coupe, Fiat X 1/9 and Honda Prelude.

These are cars that can take you to the good places while they exhilarate you along the way. They shouldn't be city cars. Toll collectors and the like should bar them from commuter queues — though the Prelude is probably the closest in this quartet to a city-country sports car and the X 1/9 in its present form falls short of its open road potential — and order their drivers to explore country roads. Fascism, maybe. Idealism, certainly. But the way it should be.

The reason so many sports cars spend the greater part of their lives in traffic queues is their appearance — their looks. They promise speed and severance from the mundane: The great stylists work with sports cars, the great show cars are sports cars; young men dream about sports cars; they must look the part.

Of our quartet, two cars are offspring of the great stylists. The X 1/9 comes from Bertone and in its facelifted current form (no 1.5-litre, five-speed but the 1.3-litre four-speed in the 1.5-litre car's body and revised interior) it's autographed "Nuccio Bertone" and numbered in a small plate on the driver side front fender. The Alfasud Sprint was styled by Bertone-protege and stylist-of-the-moment, Giugiaro. The Beta Coupe was styled in-house at Lancia, similarly, the Prelude at Honda. David Bentley's styling appraisals elsewhere expand on the subject but from a driver's point of view each car looks the part, even the Prelude, which hasn't benefited from an Italian stylist's pen.

The fact that Australia got the 1.5-litre-trim X 1/9 with the old engine and gearbox long before the bigger engine and five-speed box is something of a disappointment. As we'll explain later, the 1.3-litre with its four-speed box is the limiting factor in what is otherwise a great little touring car. Not that it isn't a good car now. It has so much potential as an open road car it's just a shame there isn't a true open road gear and more performance.

The new-trim X 1/9 looks better than its predecessor in that the questionable "tiger" stripes along the flanks have gone and the larger, wrap-around bumpers (some testers thought them too large) include an integrated front air dam. The engine cover is bigger and Bertone-styled wheels are now available to bring tyre size to 165/70 on five-inch rims, a half-inch bigger than the standard rims. Instrumentation

is changed, a lockable glovebox and new steering wheel included, and the X 1/9 now gets the Fiat Ritmo's unique rocker switch gear. Intermittent wipers are new, as is a cockpit-adjustable exterior mirror and bigger ventilation outlets.

The Beta coupe is also a revamped version of a car that has been around for some time. Main changes are less-fussy instrumentation, a new steering wheel and new seat coverings. All of which we consider improvements. The speedometer could still be less complicated (and we found it difficult to read when we needed accurate readings on the dragstrip).

The newcomers are the Prelude and the Alfasud Sprint, both introduced here in 1979 with the Honda preceding the Sprint by only a couple of months, though the Sprint was first introduced in 1.3-litre form in Italy in September, 1976. The Prelude is a sales success in America and is quickly disappearing from showroom floors here. The Sprint should do the same, despite the announcement of a twin-carb version in Europe and the arrival of limited numbers of Sud Tis with the 1.5-litre flat-four in Australia. The Sud Ti at time of writing was to be around \$2000 cheaper than the Sprint but the Sprint's rakish good looks will ensure sales.

Which leads us into the first question on most people's lips, the price of all this freedom and exhilaration.

PRICES

Honda almost contemptuously undercuts the Europeans, with the Prelude on the market at \$8549. For the money you get such owner-pleasers as the three-way sunroof, digital clock, compact Prelude radio and a host of other Japanese car extras. A Prelude with automatic transmission will cost you \$8799.

Closest to the Prelude, price-wise, is the Alfasud Sprint. It starts at \$10,790 and although it doesn't have the plethora of Prelude extras, it is fairly well equipped.

The X 1/9 is next, at \$10,998 (without the expensive and very good Jensen sound system fitted to our test car). The Fiat gets a digital clock, heated backlight and hazard lights.

It's a fairly big jump to our next fwd sports car contender, the Lancia Beta Coupe. It starts at \$13,198. Before you jump, realise the Beta is a two-litre car with a very high standard of finish and equipment though you still pay more for a radio.

PERFORMANCE... On The Dyno

Not surprisingly, the Beta Coupe's two litres showed on the dyno, with a healthy-57.9 kW materialising at 5500 rpm after a smooth and willing climb. Maximum torque of 113.8 Nm was delivered at 3500 rpm.

The surprise, though, was the Alfa's flat-four which developed a strong 41.6 kW at 5500 rpm and 81 Nm at 4500 rpm — when it stayed on the rollers long enough to take readings. Both the Alfa and the Prelude jumped off the rollers despite the best efforts of the operators; the only thing we could put it down to was the steering which was lighter in those two cars than in the Beta Coupe which was no problem on the rollers.

Next best was the Prelude. Its 1.6-litre four put out a best of 39.4 kW at 5000 rpm and 90.1 Nm at 3500 rpm.

The X 1/9 power and torque curves showed best results between 3000 rpm and 6000 rpm, with maximum power of 34.2 kW at 6000 and maximum torque of 62 Nm at 4000 rpm. A strong engine for such small capacity.

PERFORMANCE... On The Road

In open road driving the Beta Coupe romps away, its twin overhead cam two-litre engine revving freely whenever you ask it to and delivering to the front wheels through a slick and satisfying gear-change. Its gearing, however, feels too low. So it was no surprise that the Beta was quick on the dragstrip. Its passing acceleration times were also impressive, indicating a strong and willing engine. The Beta was quick off the line, too, with little tyre squeal.

There wasn't much separating the Sprint and the Prelude in the standing start-to-400 metres times, though the Alfa was quicker through the gears. The Sprint gets away with a chirp from the front tyres and is quick from the moment the tyres gain traction. From then it's just a matter of reeling in the bitumen behind that marvellous, throaty flat-four, aided by near-perfect gearing. The Sprint engine is strong, tractable and free-revving — so strong, in fact, that you find yourself driving through corners a gear higher than you normally would, as Peter Robinson noted when we first drove the car (WHEELS, September).

The Prelude engine, too, feels strong and willing on the road,

though it doesn't have the sheer urge of the Sprint. Like everything else about the car the Prelude engine feels "light", not weight-wise but touch-wise. The Prelude requires only a light touch in everything from steering, braking and accelerating to use of the clutch and engine revs. The 1.6-litre alloy-headed four revs freely but doesn't transmit its torque as obviously to the driver as does the Alfa and Lancia engines; though its gearing is well chosen.

The Fiat wasn't quick on the dragstrip by any stretch of the imagination though it held its own up to 70 km/h from the standing start. Competent is what it was, helped no doubt by good gearing — up to third gear, anyway. Ratios are close between first, second and third but then comes fourth — and an almighty gap. In open road driving you virtually have a choice between too many revs in third or next to none in fourth. Which makes overtaking tricky. And fast cornering.

FUEL ECONOMY

You won't be surprised to learn the Fiat was the least thirsty of our quartet but the fact that the Prelude was only a whisker behind may raise an eyebrow. The X 1/9 gave a best of 12.8 km/l (36 mpg) during fast open road driving and worst of 8.8 km/l (24.7 mpg) in the city and with the performance testing tossed in. The Prelude gave a best of 12.5 km/l (35.25 mpg) in the country and worst of 7.6 km/l (21.5 mpg) for city driving and performance testing. Both pretty good, whichever way you look at it.

Not far behind, and very respectable indeed, was the Sud Sprint, with a healthy 11.2 km/l (31.5 mpg) best in the country and a worst of 8.1 km/l (22.8). Not bad.

Unlikely surprise number two was the Beta Coupe's best of 9 km/l (25.5 mpg) and worst of 6.7 km/l (18.8 mpg). The worst figure came

up after around-town driving and running performance figures and the best, like that for the other cars, was on the last leg of the trip — across the mountains to Sydney.

Touring range is respectable in all four cars but the Beta Coupe's greater thirst means you will be looking for a service station a good 100 km sooner. The other three cars should travel close to 500 km before their tanks run dry. Be warned though that the Beta Coupe had the most optimistic fuel gauge of our comparison cars: it reads half-full after about 250 or 300 km and nose-dives from there.

TRANSMISSION

You can't have a real sports car without a good manual gearbox. Of our quartet, three cars have five-speed boxes while the fourth, the X 1/9 remains a four-speeder. All four have conventional gates and are floor or console-mounted.

Polling the testers resulted in a big vote of confidence for the Sprint gearbox. Like all Alfa gearboxes, you treat it gently for the first 10 kilometres or so, until the transmission oil warms, then change as smoothly as you like. Then the Sud box is as sweet as you'd like — smooth, precise and agile — with particularly good second-third and fourth-fifth changes.

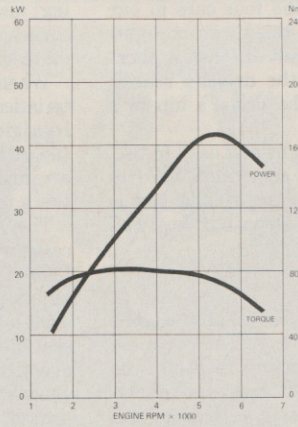
Marginally behind the Alfa box was that Beta Coupe's. It, too, rewards the serious driver with fast changes, though it is a more rubbery change than that in the Sprint. A not-so-good point is the way you have to find first, then find first again as the location of that gear is vague: At times you are sure you have found first then let out the clutch and have the gear lever bang back into neutral. Disconcerting at traffic lights until you have the hang of it.

The X 1/9 box is quick to use but unforgiving if you don't take it seriously. Changes must be precise or there is gear-grating punish-

PERFORMANCE

	ALFA	FIAT	HONDA	LANCIA
ACCELERATION				
0-50 km/h	3.4 sec	3.9	4.2	3.2
0-70	6.5	6.7	7.4	5.6
0-90	9.6	11.7	11.4	8.6
0-110	15.0	17.7	16.6	13.0
0-130	23.2	27.4	26.9	18.4
Standing 0-400m	18.6	19.1	18.5	17.4
PASSING ACCELERATION				
Second gear				
30-60	4.0	3.8	3.4	3.1
40-70	3.9	4.0	3.6	3.2
50-80	4.5	—	—	3.5
Third gear				
30-60	6.3	5.9	5.6	6.5
40-70	6.2	6.3	5.8	6.0
50-80	6.3	6.5	5.8	5.7
60-90	6.3	7.0	5.6	5.9
70-100	6.3	7.5	6.5	5.0
80-110	7.3	8.2	8.1	5.8
Fourth gear				
30-60	8.1	11.4	8.8	12.3
40-70	8.5	9.8	8.6	12.6
50-80	8.5	10.2	8.6	12.0
60-90	8.8	10.3	8.9	12.0
70-100	9.0	10.5	9.6	12.5
80-110	9.7	11.0	9.7	13.8
90-120	10.6	12.2	10.0	14.4
100-130	11.9	14.3	11.2	15.4
Fifth gear				
30-60	—	12.1	—	6.6
40-70	—	10.9	—	10.6
50-80	—	10.6	—	6.6
60-90	—	10.5	—	10.2
70-100	—	11.2	—	7.0
80-110	—	11.6	—	10.0
90-120	—	12.2	—	6.8
100-130	—	13.3	—	9.6
Speed in gears				
First	50 (6500 rpm)	45 (6900 rpm)	43 (6000 rpm)	54 (6500 rpm)
Second	86 (6500 rpm)	71 (6900 rpm)	78 (6000 rpm)	84 (6500 rpm)
Third	118 (6500 rpm)	109 (6900 rpm)	116 (6000 rpm)	121 (6500 rpm)
Fourth	160 (6500 rpm)	156 (6500 rpm)	155 (6000 rpm)	160 (6500 rpm)
Fifth	165 (5500 rpm)	—	165 (6000 rpm)	180 (5500 rpm)
FUEL ECONOMY				
Overall	10 km/l (28.2 mpg)	10.8 km/l (30.3 mpg)	10.8 km/l (30.3 mpg)	7.8 km/l (22 mpg)
SPEEDO CORRECTIONS				
50	48	46	48	47
70	69	65	68	67
90	86	85	88	85
110	105	103	106	105
130	124	125	125	123

ALFA



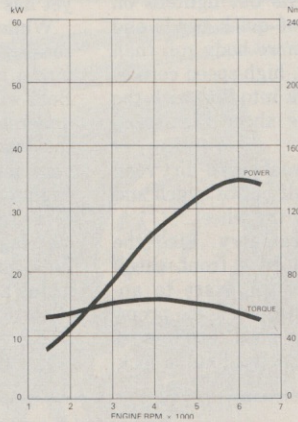
RPM	kW	Nm
6000	40	66
5500	41.6	71
5000	41	78
4500	37	78
4000	32	80
3500	30	81
3000	25	81
2500	20	78
2000	18	62

Maximum power: 41.6 kW at 5500 rpm

Maximum torque: 81 Nm at 4500 rpm

Comments: The Sud boxer flat-four is flexible and an impressive performer on the dyno. It's also an engine that sounds *mean* for its 1500 cm³.

FIAT



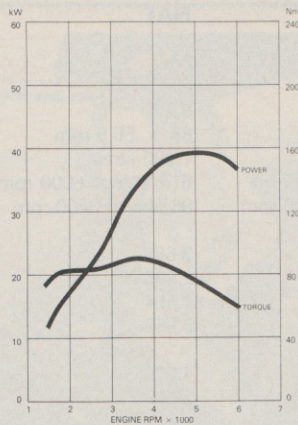
RPM	kW	Nm
6000	34.2	54
5500	34	57
5000	31	60
4500	28	62
4000	26	62
3500	23	62
3000	18	60
2500	14	57
2000	13	43

Maximum power: 34.2 kW at 6000 rpm

Maximum torque: 62 Nm at 4000 rpm

Comments: Not as flexible an engine as you might wish for but strong for its 1300 cm³.

HONDA



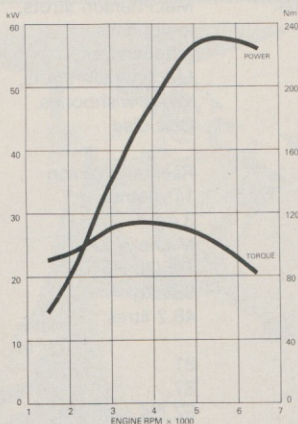
RPM	kW	Nm
6000	36	60
5500	38	68
5000	39.4	77
4500	38	85
4000	36	88
3500	33	90.1
3000	27	85
2500	21	82
2000	17	82

Maximum power: 39.4 kW at 5000 rpm

Maximum torque: 90.1 Nm at 3500 rpm

Comments: A surprise performer. The Prelude's 1600 cm³ pumps out useable power and torque over a wide rev range and is strong the whole while.

LANCIA



RPM	kW	Nm
6000	57	91
5500	57.9	100
5000	56	108
4500	53	111
4000	47	112
3500	35	113.8
3000	35	110
2500	25	100
2000	23	80

Maximum power: 57.9 kW at 5500 rpm

Maximum torque: 113.8 Nm at 3500 rpm

Comments: Power rules. This is a classic engine which ran away in the power stakes and produced an enviably smooth torque curve. A marvellous engine.

ment. It has the shortest throw of the boxes in the four cars in our comparison and all changes, especially the second-third, can be lightning fast. It does, however, have an unusual fault in that a short driver will have trouble using the gearlever if the driver's seat is brought forward. The gearlever is then behind the driver's hip in a near-impossible place.

Like the rest of the Prelude, its gearchange is light and easy to use, except the change from fourth to fifth, which is sometimes hard to find. Once you've mastered that change, though, the Honda box is nice to use — not as satisfying as the Alfa or Lancia box but well matched to the rest of the car.

HANDLING/ROADHOLDING/STEERING

Italians know their handling and roadholding. They know a good steering geometry when they see one, too. But at least one Japanese isn't too far behind. For all its lightness in so many respects, the Prelude scores well in this category. Honda used rack and pinion steering to mate with its fully-independent suspension with front and rear anti-roll bars. It works very well. The steering has a strong self-centring action at parking and around-town speeds but lightens on the open road. Put the Prelude through a series of quick bends and there won't be too much to surprise you — only more body roll than the Italians and that the car handles well. In hard, high-speed cornering the Prelude will understeer, being brought back into line with the throttle. The Prelude, however, doesn't have the sheer high-speed stability of the other comparison cars.

The Prelude misses out, too, in its handling of washboard dirt road surfaces. Over washboards the suspension gets itself out of synch and the steering column sends its vibrations straight to the wheel.

The Alfa is the out-and-out winner in this category. Like the Prelude, its steering is lighter than you'd expect in a front-wheel-drive car once you are underway. It's then that you start to appreciate just how well engineered the Sud Sprint really is. The promise is confirmed on the open road. The chassis is so good that it is, if anything, under-engined. And that's not to say the flat-four is lack-

ing; just that the chassis is superb. The Sprint will understeer in hard cornering. But it is a mild and entirely predictable understeer that is more an addition to the sparkling character of the car than a detraction.

When you are comfortable with the Sprint's roadholding characteristics you realise it is a car that truly deserves its "sports" prefix. Its rigid axle and Panhard rod rear axle is a delight, letting you know the attitude of the rear wheels at all times. There is that most happy arrangement in which the steering is light and precise, the throttle is there to be used, and the chassis is up to anything you throw at it.

The X 1/9 may lack performance but its real trump card is in this category. The little Fiat weighs 20 kg less than the Sud Sprint but feels like it weighs next to nothing on the open road. And the combination of a low-mass car with its engine centrally-mounted and the consequent excellent front-to-rear weight distribution means this is a seat-of-the-pants driver's delight. Rather than front-end plough or an oversteer snap, the X 1/9 will drift in hard cornering. Not a tyre-squealing slide but a gentle drift that will have sporting drivers enthused; if only there were more power available at the throttle.

The little Fiat has quick steering that is as precise as you'd want, yet has very good feel at the wheel.

While the Beta Coupe has high levels of roadholding it can require a sensitive and knowledgeable driver to appreciate the car. If you rush into a tight bend in the same fashion as the Sud Sprint or X 1/9 the Beta will more than likely plough straight off the road. It has enough understeer for two cars in some situations. Yet it has the power and throttle response to get a sensitive driver out of trouble. It sounds very much like *the* formula for the sports car driver who likes his engine in the front. It would be but for steering that loads up mid-corner and keeps you aware that the car is front-wheel-drive. The steering is so heavy at parking speeds that you can't mention the Beta and most other contemporary fwds in the same breath: it remains a first generation fwd car.

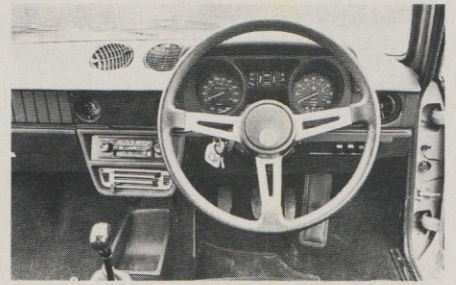
RIDE

The Prelude has the softest ride of the cars in our comparison, yet

SPECIFICATIONS

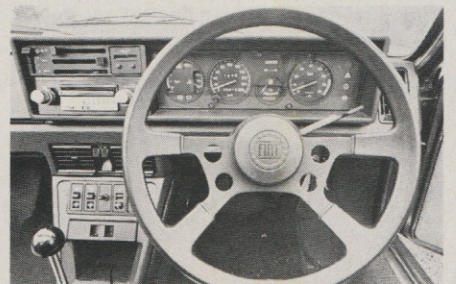
	ALFA	FIAT	HONDA	LANCIA
ENGINE:				
Cylinders	Four	Four	Four	Four
Valves	Two SOHC	OHC	OHC	DOHC
Comp ratio	9:1	9.2:1	8.4:1	8.9:1
Bore × stroke	84 × 67.2 mm	86 × 55.5 mm	77 × 86 mm	84 × 90 mm
Capacity	1.490 litres	1.290 litres	1.602 litres	1.995 litres
Max power	58.8 kW at 5800 rpm	51.5 kW at 6000 rpm	59 kW at 5300 rpm	84.6 kW at 5500 rpm
Max torque	117.6 Nm at 3500 rpm	96 Nm at 3400 rpm	126.5 Nm at 3500 rpm	175.5 Nm at 2800 rpm
TRANSMISSION:				
First	3.545	3.580	3.181	3.500
Second	2.048	2.235	1.842	2.235
Third	1.452	1.454	1.200	1.522
Fourth	1.114	0.959	0.896	1.152
Fifth	0.921		0.718	0.925
Final drive	3.888	4.076	4.384	3.785
Km/h per 1000 rpm	28.7	26.6	31.9	31.9
SUSPENSION:				
Front	Independent, MacPherson struts.	Independent, MacPherson struts, lower links.	Independent, MacPherson struts, coils, anti-roll bar.	Independent, coils, MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, anti-roll bar.
Rear	Rigid axle, Watts linkage, Panhard rod.	Independent, MacPherson struts, lower wishbones.	Independent, MacPherson struts, coils, anti-roll bar.	Independent, coils, transverse links, anti-roll bar.
BRAKES: Front/rear				
	Disc/disc	Disc/disc	Disc/drum	Disc/disc
STEERING:				
Type	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion
Turning circle	10.4 metres	11 metres	11 metres	10.2 metres
Turns lock to lock	3.6	3.4	3.25	3.5
TYRES:				
	Pirelli Cinturato P3 165/70 SR13	Michelin ZX 165/70 HS13	Yokohama GT Special Steel Super Rib 155 SR13	Michelin XVS 175/70 HR14
Kerb mass	900 kg	880 kg	913 kg	1100 kg
Fuel capacity	50 litres	48.2 litres	50 litres	52 litres
NOISE: dBA				
Idle	76	81	76	77
60 km/h	83	87	80	82
110 km/h	88	92 (94 roof off)	87	88
0-100 km/h	93	96	92	96

ALFA



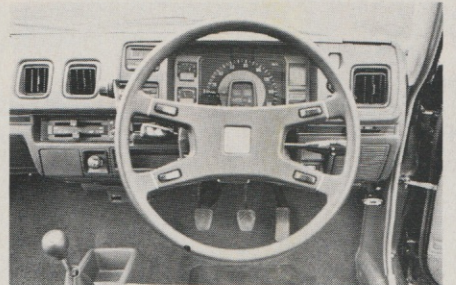
Above: Sprint instrumentation is legible and housed in a neat nacelle in the low dash. Steering wheel is height-adjustable though foot controls are offset to the left. Sud Sprint has best rear seats and legroom. Headroom isn't bad either.

FIAT



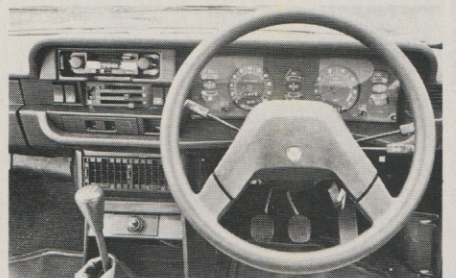
Above: Fiat X 1/9's new wheel, tidied instruments and switchgear are all improvements. Digital clock is new. Footwell space is limited. Neat spare wheel storage in the X 1/9 saves on boot space.

HONDA

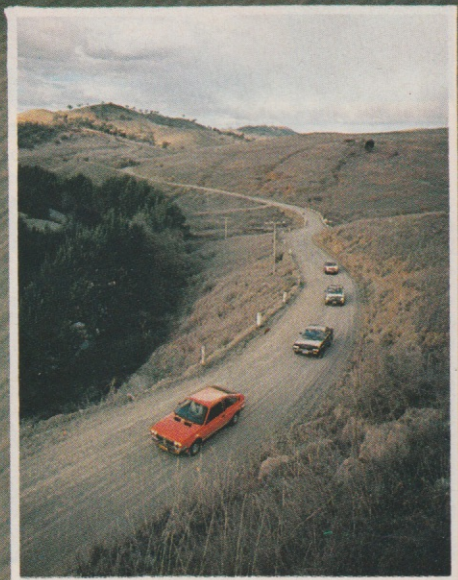


Above: Prelude's integrated speedo/tacho is loved by some and loathed by others. Ergonomics are good but the dash is too high. Prelude rear seats are good, headroom is at a premium, as is legroom.

LANCIA



Above: The Beta Coupe's tidied instrumentation is better (no pun) but still not good. There are too many gauges and the speedo calibrations are confusing. Beta Coupe's rear seats are "rear buckets" that are very comfortable.







it has trouble over washboards. Similarly the Beta Coupe: though its ride is firmer, it too has problems with washboards — even vast problems in that the front suspension and engine mountings feel they want to part company with the rest of the car and the argument makes itself painfully obvious at the vibrating steering wheel. The X 1/9 has a firm but remarkably good ride for this type of car and the Alfa has the best ride compromise. That's the easy part, as one person's good ride is another person's nightmare.

The best all-round ride of the four cars was from the two cars that should have been those with the firmest ride. In other words, the Alfa and the Fiat came out on top because they offered the best of both worlds on bitumen and dirt surfaces. The Prelude was terrific in most open road situations — though it tends to float over undulating bitumen surfaces — and it had trouble with the washboards. The Lancia's ride was next best in that it was close to sedan standards, though it too had problems in the rough going.

While the X 1/9 would be too firm for most sedan buyers it came through all our ride tests with flying colors. The person who buys an X 1/9 will expect a firm, even sensitive ride, anyway. But he or she may be surprised. It is good.

The winner here is the Sud Sprint, not because it lulls you on the highway or goes through bends like a Bathurst car but because it provides more than adequate sports car ride and Alfa handling with good rough road manners. That is a winning combination in this class of car.

BRAKES

The Alfa wins again. The Sud Sprint has tremendous stopping power that is delivered through a pedal which gives progressive application and plenty of feel. No lock-up problems, either.

Next is the Fiat; its pedal having similar feel to the Alfa's and its discs all round hauling the little car down from highway cruising speeds commendably.

Though the Lancia pedal feels spongy at first its braking system is only a hair's breadth behind those in the Alfa and Fiat. There is progression there once you become accustomed to it and the Beta Coupe stops in a straight line whenever you ask it to do so. No lock-up problems.

The Prelude's rear drum, front discs system works well enough but it's a shame about lack of feel at the pedal. It doesn't offer you progressive braking — especially in the company of such famous stoppers.

NOISE

Not surprisingly, the Prelude was quietest in all our noise tests. What was surprising was that there was so little between noise levels in the Fiat at 110 km/h with and without its sunroof. That is a credit to Bertone's aerodynamics if ever there was one. There remain a few

snarls and some clatter from the X 1/9's engine but nothing that will scare away a wind-in-the-hair fan. There is plenty of wind noise, however, with the roof in place — too much for a true touring car.

The Prelude is quiet just about everywhere, the only engine noise to ruffle the sensitive being at high revs, when there is a turbine-like howl. In dirt, though, there are vibrations that resonate through the body — just as they do with most sedans. There is windnoise from the sunroof edges over 80 km/h. Apart from that, top marks.

Next best was the Alfa, though the throaty roar from its boxer four will upset some. If you like the sound of a smooth and powerful small engine, though, you won't be able to get enough.

Similarly, the Lancia — though it doesn't have the same engine noise; the same amount of engine noise maybe but not the same noise. The Beta suffers badly from body resonances and scuttle rattles over road roads, though. Windnoise from the tops of the windows, too.

ACCOMMODATION

The Alfa clearly wins this category mainly because it has such good seats front and rear — with the word "rear" being all important — and it is space efficient. The Fiat, of course, doesn't have rear seats and the Alfa, Honda and Lancia are all classed as two-plus-two coupes. That's what the manufacturers say, anyway. When you look at the dimensions chart you'll notice the Prelude has 10 mm minimum rear legroom. All but one of our test drivers drove with the seat as far back on its runners as it would go which means that the seat behind the driver is virtually unusable: even compromising our driving position for short trips would be uncomfortable and the only real use you can make of the space is for stowage or even to cart a baby seat.

The Lancia looked little better for rear passengers and lost more points for scrimping on headroom.

The Alfa's adequate-for-a-2+2 rear room was surprising in some ways. We remember the Bertone GTV front seats actually touching the rear seat and the Giugiaro coupe disappointing. For its size, the Sud Sprint has room.

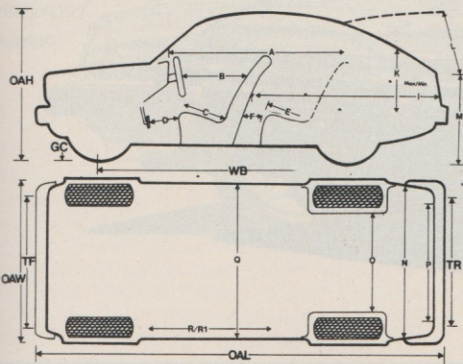
The Alfa also boasts the best seats front and rear; those at the front offering good under-thigh, back and lateral support and the rear "dished" seat offering the best use of available space. Because the rear seat has a high leading edge you sit with your knees high — which is partly why rear legroom is good.

The Beta's cloth-covered seats are good but lack shoulder support. The Prelude's cloth seats lack under-thigh support and offer a flat and none-too-comfortable squab. While the Fiat has hugging seats that unfortunately push your shoulders forward.

(Continued on page 114)

DIMENSIONS

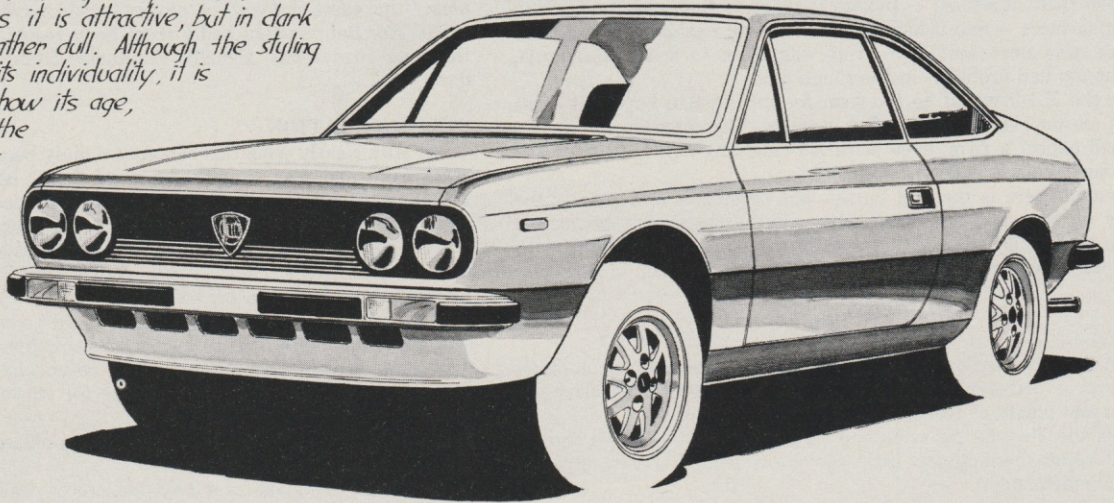
	ALFA	FIAT	HONDA	LANCIA
WB Wheelbase	2455 mm	2202	2320	2540
TF Track, front	1381	1335	1400	1406
TR Track, rear	1351	1343	1410	1392
OAL Length	4019	3830	4090	4295
OAW Width	1610	1570	1635	1706
OAH Height	1260	1170	1295	1400
GC Ground clearance				140
A Dash to rear seat	1520	940	1470	1450
B S/wheel to front seat; min/max	590/725	505/695	520/730	550/720
C Front cushion depth	485	530	470	500
D Pedals to front seat; min/max	370/580	305/470	360/550	375/545
E Rear cushion depth	500	—	460	450
F Rear legroom; min/max	185/375	—	10/260	70/210
G Cushion to floor height; min/max	225	230	220	255
H Rear cushion to floor height	270	—	345	260
I Luggage floor length (seat down)	—	—	—	—
J Luggage floor length (seat up)	840	430	915	695
K Floor to lid/roof; min/max	400/440	380/500	295/410	370/535
L Lid/door opening	790	935	460	550
M Loading lip height	920	735	750	800
N Rear floor width (max)	1370	—	1505	1435
O Rear floor width (between arches)	940	870	980	890
P Opening width	875	1290	1325	1160
Q Shoulder width	1290	1280	1340	1275
R Front door length	1705	1040	1000	1120
R1 Front door height	865	805	880	850



STYLING ANALYSIS

WHEELS stylist/designer David Bentley gets things in perspective.

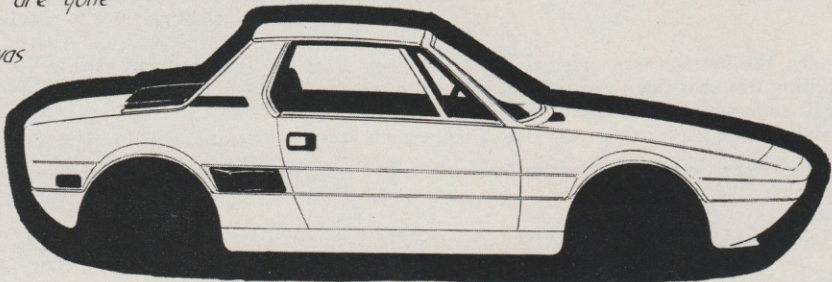
The visual impact of the Beta's styling is strongly influenced by the paint colour. In light colours it is attractive, but in dark colours it is rather dull. Although the styling has retained its individuality, it is beginning to show its age, particularly in the context of this comparison.



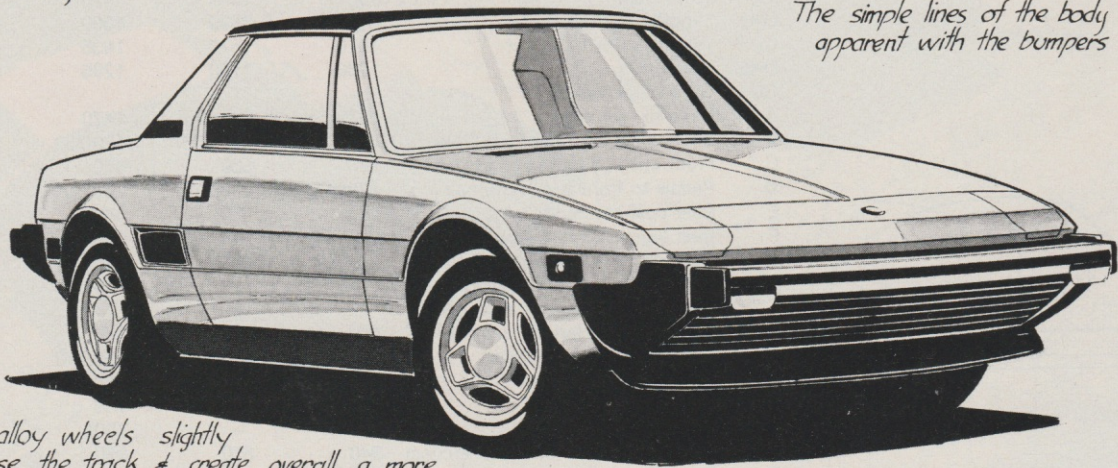
A Bertone masterpiece, the X1/9 is one of the few sharp edged wedge forms that has retained its freshness & will continue to do so, because the defining lines & the surfaces are quite curved.

In its original form, however, it was spoiled by uncharacteristically poor detailing :- the bumpers were not integrated & the front apron beneath the bumper looked unfinished.

The latest bumpers may be more functional for such a small car, but are visually overpowering



The simple lines of the body are more apparent with the bumpers removed.



The alloy wheels slightly increase the track & create overall a more solid appearance as more of the tyre is visible

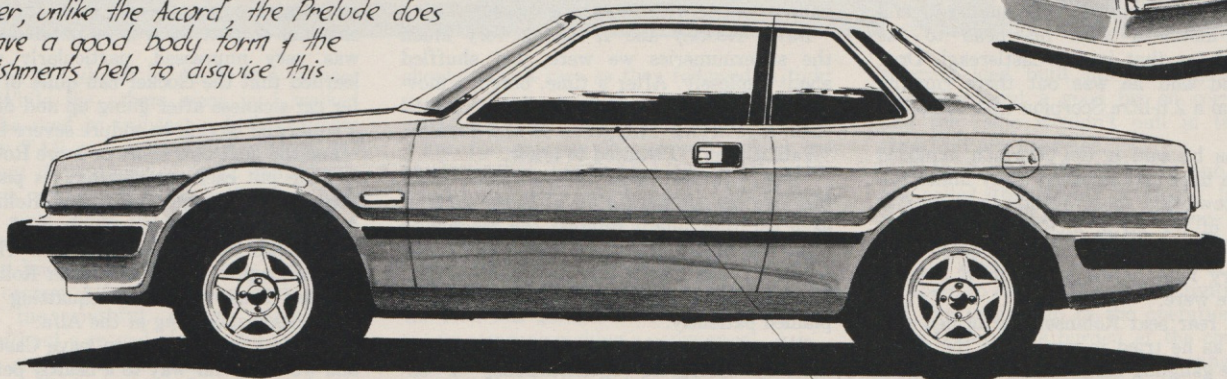
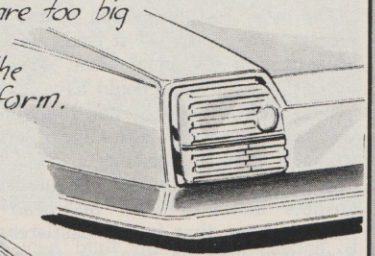
The Sprint is simply a very attractive car appealing to a wide variety of tastes, whereas the Beta & the Prelude have limited appeal. Fitting between the ti & Alletta GTV in price, the styling reflects this position with remarkable precision.

The styling is pretty & is also indicative of the cars driving characteristics, an unusual combination today when so many 'driver' oriented cars are excessively aggressive in appearance.



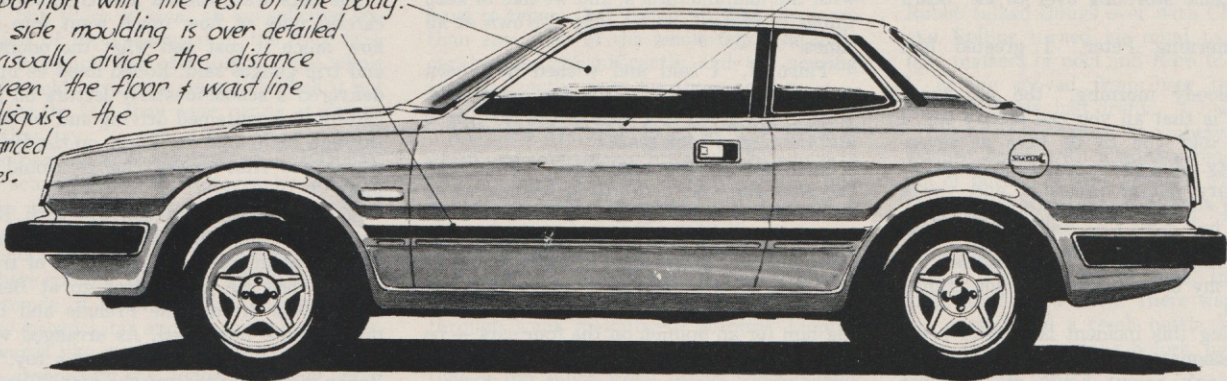
Compared to previous Hondas the Prelude styling is typically Japanese with excesses of cosmetic details. This may be necessary for the Japanese market but unfortunately basically clean well balanced designs are often spoiled. However, unlike the Accord, the Prelude does not have a good body form & the embellishments help to disguise this.

The rear lights are too big & out of character with the general styling form.



The high waist line & small glass area create a greenhouse which is out of proportion with the rest of the body. The side moulding is over detailed to visually divide the distance between the floor & waist line to disguise the unbalanced masses.

Window line needs to be lowered to increase glass area.



TWO DAYS ON THE ROAD

Donald Hogg joins the WHEELS Road Test crew

IT WAS just after eight when I arrived; the others were already there. Rollins had the top off the X 1/9 and an Eric Clapton cassette on the Jensen stereo. David Bentley and Chris Gribble stood, hands in warm pockets, watching my approach in the Alfa. Warwick Kent was rummaging in his photographer's lucky dip and Kara the model sat next to Rollins in the Fiat soaking up 461 Ocean Boulevarde.

The other test cars stood in line with the mobile rock concert — it could have been a still from a TV commercial showing you what the young man could have if only he'd save with The Wales — and the whole scene was covered with a light August early-morning mist. Jesus it was cold.

Where was Robinson, I enquired, and Gribble motioned with his head to the length of tar that is the Castlereagh Drag Strip and said he was out there running figures on a 2.6-litre Scorpion with Mike McCarthy.

Just as he said it the Scorpion exploded from the mist and squealed away under full brakes toward a most substantial fence at the end of the strip, McCarthy driving. It wheeled 25 yards short of what could have been very loud noises and ambled over to where we were.

In the rear seat Robinson performed contortions as he tried to get out of the thing. Once the gangling editor had separated himself from the Scorpion (if you've seen the fallen entrants in a three-legged race trying to get back to their feet you'll know what I mean) he came storming over to me, beard acquirer.

"Good morning Peter," I greeted him brightly.

"Good bloody morning," the old thing screamed, "is that all you can bloody say. I thought I told you to be here at seven-bloody-thirty. This whole operation has to go with military bloody precision and you're bloody late." Scowl, grumble, mutter, carp, winge, moan!

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," I apologised . . . and under my breath, Sieg Heil you cranky old bastard.

Considering this incident later, and being the compassionate chap I am, I decided to put Robinson's recent bouts of ill-temper down to the sad fact he's had only two overseas trips this year and his football team, the once-great Hawthorn, is this winter going like a gaggle of old tarts.

Anyway, during this liverish display the editor's soldiers had sprung into action and were now going about a variety of mysterious tasks.

Gribble had armed himself with a tape measure which he was applying to parts of the Fiat and reading off his findings to Rollins who was noting them on a sheet of paper fastened to a clip board. Warwick Kent, the rummaging behind him, had erected a tripod and was now peering through the Nikon atop it and mumbling to himself.

Robinson and McCarthy had disappeared in the Scorpion and Kara the model sat still listening to 461 Ocean Boulevarde and wondering whether Gribble and Rollins might pounce on her with their tape measure.

David Bentley and I, feeling very much the supernumeraries we were, just shuffled about aimlessly. After a time, bored, I moved to the measurers who had now turned their mysterious attentions to the Prelude. "Watcha doin'?" I wanted to know.

"Well, you see," said the ever-polite Gribble, "we are measuring all of those parts of each car that might interest the readers so that we might let them know. Like the depth of the boot, the distance between front and rear seats and so on . . ." he explained patiently.

"Why don't you just take the figures from the manufacturers specifications," I enquired.

"Well," he said with a patient smile, "sometimes we find our figures disagree with the manufacturer's, and we like to keep things consistent, so we take our own at all times."

"Fairnuff," I said and wished he'd been around with that measure a few years back when I was given to a little of the old Angus and Cooting in back seats.

Meantime Bentley had installed himself in the Alfa and was just sitting holding on to the wheel and staring blankly into space. It was then I remembered he was a long-time Alfa devotee, a one-time Alfasud Ti owner and now the possessor of a Spyder. He was away with the Italian fairies. No good asking him for an opinion on the four cars — be a bit like asking the Pope whether he's a Catholic!

Kent was crawling in, out and under the cars going click click and the Scorpion was still going up and down doing I know not what and I began to wonder when I might

begin to be useful. I couldn't even get a stimulating conversation going with Bentley. He had the Alfa's bonnet up and was hunched over just staring in there, stupefied.

Finally Robbo turned up, the Scorpion's figures finished, and ordered me into the passenger's seat of the Prelude. He drove us out to the strip and then proceeded to drive up and down between white lines while Gribble in the back called off figures and clocked stop-watches.

"We are checking the accuracy of the speedo over a measured quarter-mile," Robbo explained. "No good doing performance tests if we don't know exactly how far out the speedo is." Then he explained how it is important that the clocker sits in the back and watches the speedo over the driver's shoulder so that there is no parallax error. I was very impressed, particularly when I learned that the clocker can quite often suffer car-sickness after going up and down for a while and having to endure severe braking.

For the next two hours or more Robbo and Gribble put each car through its paces and then Kent photographed them. Rollins was despatched to buy a huge bag of toasted sandwiches and I struggled with The Australian cryptic. Kara went with Rollins and Bentley spent the time squatting on his haunches just looking at the Alfa.

The time came for us to leave Castlereagh and we made our way to a nearby petrol station to top up. McCarthy was no longer with us — he'd taken the Scorpion, and gone back to the office.

The cars were fuelled and Gribble took a careful note of how much went into each, how much it cost and what the odometers and trip gauges said. Robbo lined us up and delivered a school-masterly lecture on good, careful and contained driving and we set off through Richmond for Bilpin on the Bell line where the first driver change would take place.

So off we went in convoy, with Robbo leading in the little Fiat. Our progress to Bilpin was impeded by quite a bit of traffic, but at least we got a clear go at Bellbird Hill. I was driving the Prelude and found myself quite impressed. As arranged we all swapped cars at Bilpin. "Bit of a toy," said Robbo motioning toward the Fiat. "Great little car for round town I suspect, but you wouldn't want to drive it too far." How he'd got that gangling frame in and out of the thing I'll never know.



Then on to Lithgow for lunch at a Chinese place. While the others went in I walked down the road to transact a little business with the TAB and on the walk back to the restaurant I witnessed a most remarkable event. A group of black-uniformed high school girls were approaching, sunning themselves in the lunch-hour. They walked past the line of parked test cars. Past the bright orange Alfa, the classy dark green Lancia, the youthful, sporty, zany little X 1/9 without a second glance. But the black Prelude stopped them dead. It was all oohs and ahs and giggles and Jeez, it's real nice isn't it!

I entered the restaurant and reported the incident. The rest were as stunned as I had been, but there it was, an un-solicited expression of the eye-appeal of the four cars. And, I pointed out to Robbo, the whole thing would have gone un-noticed had it not been for the fact they were racing at Pakenham that day.

Another driver change and on to Bathurst with some formation photography planned on the way. This leg found me as a passenger in the Alfa with David Bentley driving. That man was in Heaven in that car. He just sat there smiling and humming away to himself (made it a bit difficult to hear the course broadcasts) and occasionally muttering words like wonderful, great or magic.

We stopped on the divided highway about 32 km from Bathurst and Rollins and Warwick got into the white Prelude which was to serve as the photography car. Warwick was to stand up through the sun roof and

shoot the test cars as they followed in tight pairs at first and then fanned in a quartet across the road.

For the exercise Warwick borrowed his hands and face must have bloody near frozen as we went through that 20-minute act. Passing motorists were intrigued by the performance and it went through my mind that they must have been wondering what the Hell was going on. I'll bet they thought it was someone making a commercial.

More fuel at Bathurst where it was raining and then on to Sofala. This leg I got to drive the Fiat and as we prepared to begin David Rollins warned me of the little car's strange behavior under brakes in the wet. I have to report that I enjoyed that run more than any other of the whole trip. The little car handled magnificently and the gearing seemed exactly right for those conditions — I had a ball!

At Sofala Warwick was busy with pictures again and there was a little time in which to admire the old world beauty of the pub made famous by Drysdale and the damp charm of the surrounding hills.

Our destination for the night was the Hill End Historical Site, about 32 km further on along a rutted, dirt road that wound crazily through some magnificent scenery. I opted for the Fiat again but we hadn't gone more than a few miles when Robbo called a halt and a driver change and I wound up in the Lancia. I must say I'd been looking forward to a trick in this car, but on those surfaces it suffered a great deal against the Fiat. The

steering load built up on tight bends, it shifted around a good bit on corrugations and the radio wouldn't pull in the races. Now that is a bit much.

We arrived at the Hill End pub (I think it's called the Royal) in fading light and repaired to our rooms and thence the bar. There was a cheerful fire burning in the billiard room adjoining the bar and we moved there to discuss the day's activities. Gribble, the quiet man of the operation — perhaps because the burden of the comparison rested with him — kept producing a notebook and writing little notes to himself. Bentley just stared into the fire and when someone asked him what he'd like to drink I'm sure I heard him say, "Alfa, please." Robbo talked things over with Chris Gribble and Rollins turned his mind to the important matters of pool and Kara in that order. I, having moved from beer to port, my favorite tipple, just drank.

Then it was a good old country pub dinner washed down with adequate red and a couple of bottles of vintage port. Then back to the billiard room where Rollins took on the locals at pool and beat them and then added me to his conquests. One by one our party drifted away to their rooms, tired from a long, hard day's work. There was only Robbo, myself and a fresh bottle of port left. Even the fire, dancing before, had tired and was burning low.

* * *

The morning dawned clear and mittens cold. I emerged from the pub to find the

TWO DAYS ON THE ROAD

cars washed (by Robbo and Gribble) and ready for more photography. Warwick Kent was on the rampage having cars placed here and there and snapping them in their quaint surroundings. Bentley and I were props. Then breakfast and off along the Bridle Track to Bathurst.

This is one of the most interesting drives I know in Australia. The track takes you along the Turon River past rapids, broad, stony stretches and deep, green pools. Here men came a century ago on their ways to Hill End and Hargreaves in their search for gold. Now and then we stopped in convoy in some dramatic photographic situation or other for Warwick to do business with the Nikon. Across a ford and more pictures here, then into a cutting for even more exposures, then on to a place where the side of the road dropped away perhaps 800 feet for still more shots.

The road surface eventually changes from dirt to tar and the track straightens and broadens. Here Peter and Chris found an appropriate twist for photography of the cars cornering at speed. Then the rest of us sat huddled chilled in the cars for an hour as Chris took each car four times through the corner for a frozen Warwick standing there

in a gale right off the mountains. It made me realise what a comfortable job I have.

Then followed an uneventful drive to Bathurst for lunch. If I could remember the name of the Chinese restaurant in which we were unfortunate enough to eat I would repeat it here as a warning to you all — it was without doubt the worst Chinese hashery in the world!

From Bathurst to Lithgow it was my go in the Alfa, and that run confirmed my view that of the four cars the Alfa was the one I would most like to own. My second vote goes to the Prelude which I found quiet and comfortable while at the same time surprisingly willing.

On the hill out of Lithgow Rollins decided to do a Moss and cleared out from the rest of the convoy in the Lancia. Robbo had ordered a driver change at Bilpin, but when we arrived there there was no sign of Rollins. We came upon him 10 minutes later, waiting for us at the side of the road. I have little doubt the wayward Rollins would rather forget what happened then.

That man of military precision, Sergeant-Major Robinson, bounded from his car and over to Rollins. "What do you think you're doing, son?" he yelled. "You know we don't just get away on our own like that. We stay together for very good reasons — you just behave yourself or you won't be doing any more driving." There was plenty more. Got right up Rollins, he did, right there in front of everyone. To my mind the felony had

everything to do with being 21 and posing in a Lancia with an impressive 18-year-old in the passenger seat. Anyway, Robbo's delivery melted the frost on the hills.

Then a sedate drive to Amaroo Park where Chris and Robbo conferred for a time on technical matters, and then on to Northbridge for a final fuelling and consumption check. Forty-eight hours of high pressure work with thousands of notebook entries, hundreds of camera clicks and millions of spoken words were over.

I got home that night tired and worried what I was going to write about. After all, all we'd done was drive around in four smart cars for a couple of days. Then I remembered Gribble trying to lift a wheel of the Alfa for Kent's camera in a chilling mountain wind and Robinson and Gribble out of their beds at an indecent hour washing cars with finger-numbing water at Hill End; the tape measure and the dry retching at Castle-reagh. There probably was something to say after all.

I went on the thing as the eyeball and the ear — the detached observer. I had not the faintest idea what to expect or what not to expect. At least I know now . . . it's all hard work carried out at a pace far harder than its participants would wish. Yes, it does have its moments of fun, instants of excitement, but for Robinson and Gribble and Kent it's just a case of doing what they've done before and will do again, and again, and again . . . *



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