

# Wheels

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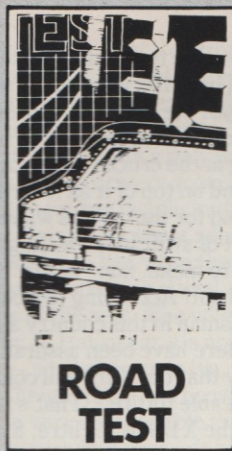


## ALL NEW CELICA!

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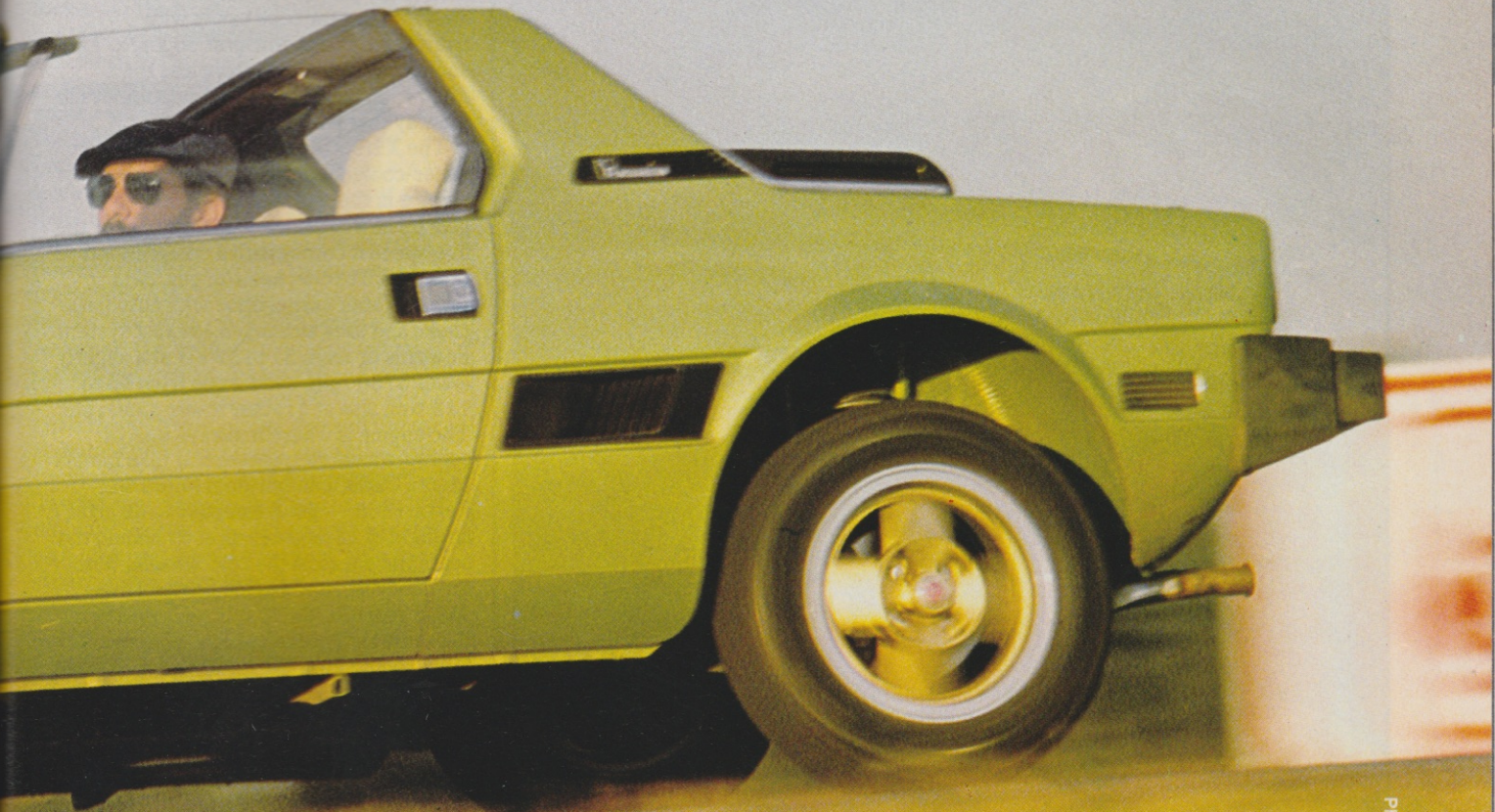
plus 5000km in the world's best sedan. Full test inside





# ***Brio for the baby***

*Give Fiat's delightful X1/9 a 1.5 litre engine and five-speed gearbox and you have a car that's one big step nearer matching its million dollar looks with real mini-exotic appeal*



**I**F YOU believed everything you read in the motoring press about the Fiat X1/9 over the past few years you would be one very confused person. Deadlines for the demise of the world's cheapest mid-engined sports car have come and gone. Irate Fiat blokes have choked on their spaghetti in their haste to reassure the public of the model's continuance. Even new versions have been mooted, based on a scoop picture of a long wheelbase X1/9 which did the rounds about two years ago. Was it a two-plus-two? Or was it a bigger-cabined two seater to overcome the car's biggest drawback: that a driver of above average height or weight has to shoehorned in.

Speculation aside, the X1/9 has had some true-life dramas to cope with. Earlier this year there was a crossing of swords between Fiat and X1/9 builders Bertone, which claimed it was losing out financially on the deal. For a time, it seems — and as Our Man Higgins bears out in

this issue — Bertone actually put up the shutters. There has also been a supply problem with the firm that makes the catalytic converters for fitment to X1/9s competing in the crucial American market. And on top of it all it is reported that demand for the car has waned.

Has a bit of swift blood-letting with the expensive to make, non "family" Fiat been ruled out? According to a confident Fiat spokesman in this country apparently it has: "There have been assurances from the factory that the X1/9 will continue for the foreseeable future." That's terrific news, for the X1/9 in 1.5 litre, five-speed form which goes on sale in Australia this month is a better car than it's ever been.

If you didn't like the 1300 you won't like the 1500. Two hundred extra cubic centimetres and a fifth gear haven't transformed the X1/9, and nor they could. It's still a car in which you run the engine out to the 6900 rpm redline through the gears, and even then chances are you'll be

left behind by some harmless looking sedan. It's still a car in which your chosen cruising speed will be less than that of the sedan, because of the noise of that hard-working sohc powerplant, a not-specially harmonious mixture of whirring and clicking of the Weber's sucking and exhaust's rasping, and the constant wind whistle whether the roof is in use or not.

Where the bigger capacity engine and extra gearbox ratio do score is in making the X1/9 more practical as a long distance tourer and a lot more easy to drive. You can now conceivably cruise the little Fiat at 160 km/h which, while not quiet, is a lot easier on the ears than it would have been in the four-speed 1300. More practically, 130-140 km/h is now an entirely acceptable speed to hold all day: quiet, economical (with "just" 4700 rpm showing on the tacho) and with sufficient urge in reserve to allow painless overtaking. You don't have to use the gearbox so often in the new car, no matter where you are in the speed range. Just as the engine responds well when you floor the accelerator at 130 km/h in fifth, so does fourth gear cope easily with trundling through towns at 60 km/h. The engine will in fact pull from less than 2000 rpm, and there's real smoothness in the way that power is delivered.

The X1/9's old engine, the 1290 cm<sup>3</sup> water-cooled four which also did sterling service in the 128, has been stroked to give its new capacity of 1498 cm<sup>3</sup>. For the five-speed it comes with a compression ratio of 9.2 to one, has a larger, twin throat Weber carburettor with automatic choke and uses a changed exhaust system. Power is up from 51 to 59 kW at a slightly lower 5750 rpm, and torque from 96 to 118 Nm, also at a rather lower 3250 rpm. The engine is where it always was, of course, mounted transversely (like Lancia Monte Carlo, Lanborghini Miura and Ferrari 308 — good company to be in) at an angle of 11 degrees directly behind the seats and ahead of the rear wheels. With the newly spirited engine comes a five-speed gearbox, the first three ratios being the same as those in the four-speeder, fourth being lower at 1.042 to one (to give 24.3 km/h per 1000 rpm) and with the addition of a 0.863 to one (29.3 km/h) fifth. Final drive ratio is unchanged at 4.076, with the overall result that gearing of the new car is far more performance than cruising orientated. Quite right, too.

All of this was news in Europe three years ago. Fiat's Australian importers, LNC, claims it has been busy selling 1300s while the bigger engined car sought ADR compliance. That this costly procedure has now been met is surely an indication that LNC plans to import far more than the initial batch of 150. Incidentally, LNC says some of the cars now in dealers' showrooms were built by



Bertone as recently as July this year.

The cars you see sitting in those showrooms are 24 carat gems. The X1/9 is one of those rare cars you feel you want to share; that should be driven by everyone who claims to have an interest in the automobile. The sedan driving hordes would surely be surprised, for in this \$13,500 two-seater sports car there is real refinement and ability — a combination that makes so many so-called "refined" cars look decidedly sick.

Make no mistake, the X1/9 sits on one of the best chassis around. There's not what you'd call a lot of suspension travel, and the ride itself is firm, but the wheels are so firmly planted and they are so well controlled over bad surfaces, relaying their messages faithfully but never harshly, that it takes but a few kays to feel at ease with the car; to trust it completely. It never lets you down, even over surfaces which in lesser suspended cars would be inciting tyre noise and crashes and bangs from the wheels. Traction is always superb (with the single exception of hard braking on wet roads when the P3s will lock-up at the front), stability seemingly constant. It's a nuggety little car that feels tied down to the road.

Through the corners it certainly feels rooted in the bitumen, and the faster and the harder you drive the greater that impression becomes. The X1/9 has always been agile, with handling that is near as dammit completely neutral, and it would take far more than the eight kW of extra power to change things. It points into a corner dramatically well: the body stays flat and the tyres track with pinpoint accuracy, the front ones moving out in understeer only under severe provocation. You can (and will) pile on the coals through that corner and still the car remains on line, the tyres merely mashing themselves into the road all the harder. The tail will come loose if you have to lift off but it's generally easy enough to catch, though you do need to be quick with the steering: the oversteer can come quickly and surprise you. That's the only time the rear tyres lose their grip, for traction is too good for the rear to come unstuck under power. The brakes, discs all round, have all the power and progressiveness you need, and, on the move, the steering is light and smooth.

All the other controls work well, too. The pedals are on the small side but all have the steering's light, smooth feel to them. The gearchange takes learning to avoid wrong-slotting because its gate is so narrow, but once learnt it's a beautifully precise change. The dashboard, carried over unchanged from the 1300, is neat and workmanlike with a good spread of instruments, although they are not all plain to see and they can catch reflections.

The cabin itself is one of the nicest,

cosiest there is. The seats, narrow, well bolstered and well trimmed affairs, offer good support and do tremendously well at holding their occupants in place. Their only problem is the cabin's only problem: a lack of space. For drivers around 1.8 m and more the seat has insufficient rearward travel and backrest adjustment. That wouldn't be so bad were there more of a gap between steering wheel and the leading edge of the seat. The wheel — unusually for an Italian car it's non-adjustable — sits low in your lap, and even for average height drivers who would otherwise be very comfortable there is a real problem ensuring your left hand does not become trapped between thigh and wheel. Because of this drivers thick of thigh or long of limb can find the X1/9 impossible to drive. If you fit the cabin, count yourself lucky.

There's very little else to criticise. Detailing and build inside and out are top quality, as you would expect of Bertone,

and the detachable roof section, a rigid panel which unclips easily to stow on top of your luggage in the front boot, is one of the best of such systems around. And there really *is* luggage space: roughly 100 percent more than a Boxer . . .

If only some of the other supercars could achieve a better balance between performance and practicality. *Other* supercars? Yes, in its own scaled down way the X1/9 is about as good as the best in the way it handles anything you can throw at it; in the feelings it gives rise to when you're driving at ten-tenths safe in the knowledge that you're not about to break your bank (we saw 12-15 km/l, 34-42 mpg) or your neck. Indeed, that you're not even in imminent danger of losing your licence. It is a classic car, yes, but more than that it is exactly the machine to carry the fun-car flag into the future, for the car is better suited to motoring today than it has ever been, and it is getting more right every day. □

SPECIFICATIONS		PERFORMANCE	
<b>MAKE</b>	FIAT	<b>TEST CONDITIONS:</b>	
<b>MODEL</b>	X1/9 1500 five-speed	Weather	Warm, dry
<b>BODY TYPE</b>	Two-door roadster	Location	Castlereagh Dragway
<b>PRICE: Basic</b>	\$13,500 (approx.)	Load	Two people
<b>ENGINE:</b>		Fuel	Super
Cylinders	Four	<b>SPEEDOMETER ERROR:</b>	
Valves	sohc	Indicated km/h	Actual km/h
Carburettor	Weber twin throat	50	49
	down draught	70	67
Compression Ratio	9.2 to 1	90	87
Bore X stroke	86.4 X 63.9 mm	110	106
Capacity	1.498 litres	130	125
Max Power	58.8 kW at 5750 rpm	<b>FUEL CONSUMPTION ON TEST</b>	
Max Torque	118 Nm at 3250 rpm	Check one	14.0 km/l (39.6 mpg)
<b>TRANSMISSION:</b>		Check two	12.5 km/l (35.3 mpg)
Type	Manual five-speed	Check three	12.0 km/l (33.9 mpg)
<b>Ratios:</b>	Gearbox Overall km/h-1000 rpm	WHEELS test loop	15.1 km/l (42.7 mpg)
First	3.583:1 14.607:1 7.0	Average	13.0 km/l (36.7 mpg)
Second	2.235:1 9.111:1 11.2	<b>MAXIMUM SPEEDS IN GEARS:</b>	
Third	1.454:1 5.927:1 17.4	First	48 km/h (6900 rpm)
Fourth	1.042:1 4.248:1 24.3	Second	77 km/h (6900 rpm)
Fifth	0.863:1 3.518:1 29.3	Third	120 km/h (6900 rpm)
Final drive	4.076:1	Fourth	167 km/h (6900 rpm)
<b>CHASSIS:</b>		Fifth	170 km/h (5800 rpm)
Construction	Unitary	<b>ACCELERATION:</b>	
<b>SUSPENSION:</b>		Through the gears:	
Front	Struts, coil springs	0-50 km/h	3.4 secs
Rear	Struts, lower wish bones, coil springs	0-60 km/h	4.6 secs
	Telescopic	0-70 km/h	6.0 secs
Dampers		0-80 km/h	7.4 secs
<b>STEERING:</b>		0-90 km/h	9.4 secs
Type	Rack and pinion	0-100 km/h	11.4 secs
Turning circle	10 m	0-110 km/h	13.4 secs
Turns lock to lock	3.3	0-120 km/h	16.6 secs
<b>BRAKES</b>		0-130 km/h	21.1 secs
Type	Unassisted discs front and rear	In the gears:	Second Third Fourth Fifth
<b>DIMENSIONS:</b>		30-60 km/h	3.2 4.8 8.1 10.8
Wheelbase	2202 mm	40-70 km/h	3.4 4.7 7.8 10.2
Track, front	1355 mm	50-80 km/h	5.2 7.8 10.1
Track, rear	1350 mm	60-90 km/h	5.6 7.8 10.1
Length	3969 mm	70-100 km/h	6.1 8.2 10.4
Width	1570 mm	80-110 km/h	6.4 8.8 11.0
Height	1180 mm	90-120 km/h	9.6 12.1
Kerb mass (weight)	930 kg	100-130 km/h	11.4 13.2
<b>FUEL TANK:</b>	49 litres	<b>STANDING START (0-400 m)</b>	
<b>TYRES:</b>	165/70SR13, Pirelli Cinturato P3	Fastest run	18.1 secs