



# Italian Time-Warp



It is rather ironic that, simultaneously, Bertone's X1/9 is both timeless and outdated. The 15-year-old design still has a sharpness that says it's modern and it still turns a fair share of heads. But in several areas the vehicle, once described as a "mini-Ferrari", shows its age.

Many will remember the X1/9's introduction to Australia in the '70s when it was launched under the Fiat marque. For the re-launch, and with Fiat's presence decidedly low-key, the makers have used the famous designer's name to attract attention.

Three quite different *Sports & Classic Cars* testers tried their hands behind the wheel and came away with differing impressions. But all questioned the

wisdom of re-launching such a car when the Toyota MR2 is already here, the Mazda MX5 is on its way and Ford's Capri is (allegedly) in the not-too-distant future.

Not that the X1/9 will be here in any large numbers — because international demand remains so high, fewer than 100 will be up for grabs in Australia this year. If you are interested, it will cost you around \$32,250 to drive one away. This includes a 12 month/unlimited mileage warranty, but not on-road charges.

There is no doubt the importers will sell their quota — the mid-engined, targa-roofed car still exudes a certain something, at least while it is stationary. Like all classics, its good looks are

timeless. And while its handling capabilities remain of a very high standard (it is one of the most "chuckable" cars we've ever driven) it just doesn't have grunt. It gives more of an apologetic cough when it comes to performance.

It is still powered by the familiar Fiat 1.5 litre, four-cylinder overhead camshaft engine, placed east-west in the centre of the car. Power output is 55kW at 5500rpm and transferred to the rear wheels via a five-speed gearbox.

Our team gave it the thumbs down when it came to get up and go — typical of the comments was that a modern two-litre family sedan with the kids and the dog in the back would see it off in a traffic light derby. But then



**Roof on, or off, the Bertone's classic lines are eye-catching. The interior is snug, but well appointed, though the gauges are poorly placed and difficult to see through the steering wheel.**

Fiat admitted in its press blurb that "most people won't buy an X1/9 for its straight-line performance."

Still, one of our testers managed from rest to 60kph in a sliver under 4.6sec, saw 100kph come up in 13.2sec, 140kph in 26sec, and managed 160kph in 36.2sec. However, he would not sign an affidavit on the times, complaining that the speedometer was hopelessly optimistic even at 60kph and appeared about 10kph out all the way up the speed chain.

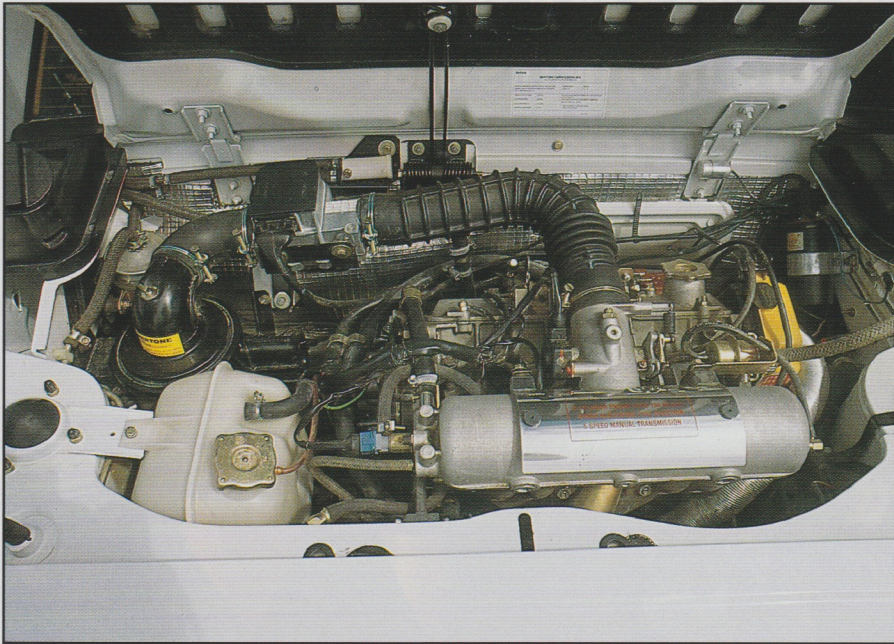
**A**nother tester found similar inaccuracies with the fuel gauge, saying it got the "staggers" at one stage in the middle of nowhere. He also questioned the choice of a battery gauge over one for oil pressure. His rationale was that he would rather fit a new battery than a new engine.

But if there were worries about how the new X1/9 went, there were none about how it stopped. At the original '70s launch test I was able to set the brake pads/linings smoking after a chase down the hills out Healesville way. But the disc/drum system on the re-launched X1/9 were up to the mark and impressed all our drivers — a stop from 100kph took a mere 3.3sec and even after a long work-out there was no fade to speak of.

While the testers disagreed on many points, they jointly condemned the dashboard as being "poor" as far as ergonomics are concerned, and dated in its general design.

You don't actually travel in an X1/9, you "wear" it. The cockpit is snug, too snug for anyone with ample frame, OK if you are slender and slight. This came





The X1/9 is powered by Fiat's ever-reliable engine (top). One area where the car excels, in comparison to its rivals, is in the surprisingly generous baggage space in the front and rear boots.

through in our testers' comments with the smallest of the trio being the most complimentary, saying that the contoured seats were excellent and gave ample support in all the right places.

The compact cabin certainly exudes an air of luxury, those contoured seats are trimmed in high-quality cloth, while the steering wheel and gearshift knob are trimmed in leather. Electric windows are standard and you are given a top-quality Clarion stereo/cassette system with four speakers.

If you keep those windows up, normal levels of conversation can be had even when the roof is off. And this is where the car is pleasant — roof off on a fine day, burbling along at the legal speed limit.

Family sedans may leave the X1/9 wallowing in their exhaust gases in a straight line, but throw in a few curves and it is a different story. This is the little car's forte. MacPherson struts front and rear and a finely-honed, perfectly-geared rack and pinion steering system, without power assistance of course, enable you to zip round corners extremely quickly — and safely.

Part of the handling story is due to ultra-sticky Pirellis P6s carried on some very stylish alloy wheels, exclusive to the X1/9. Combine this with the mid-engine layout and the handling is superb.

While on the subject of safety, there are no problems in this respect as far as the X1/9 are concerned. While other open cars have failed to pass safety tests, the X1/9 sailed through. The rear roof support doubles as an integrated roll bar just in case you do something extremely foolish. Structural rigidity is provided by a network of floor rails and body supports and there is no scuttle shake, nor body twisting.

To sum up, the X1/9 has been a success story for Fiat in that 170,000 have been sold world-wide. In some ways it offers a lot, in others it isn't quite up to the mark - a diversion rather than a super sports car.

But it will sell. And when you're driving down the freeway and see one scoot past in the opposite direction, you will turn your head for a look. Bertone's design brilliance has made sure of that.



Report: Peter Gavaghan  
Photos: John Murie

