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THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR MEN

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**AUSTRALIA'S
CHANCES IN
WWIII**



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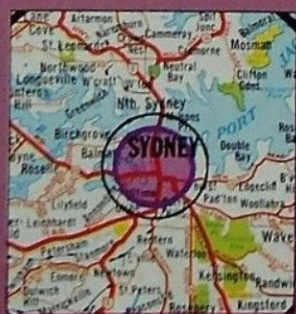
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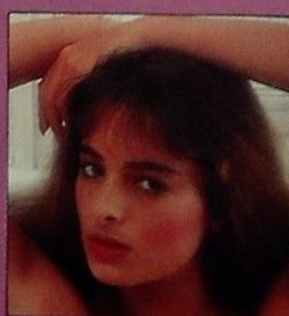
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World War III



Memoirs of a Movie



Pet of the Month



Well Stacked

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Passion is what the Italians are all about. Passion for life, for love . . . pasta — and cars

BORN TO RUN

BY PETER MCKAY

On the road ahead is one of those tatty remnants of the mid-1960s — a smoky six-cylinder Fiat 2300 sedan doing it tough with a full load of five Latins.

The quintet, all dark hair and flashing teeth, spot the chiselled wedge snout of the Fiat X1/9 approaching in their mirrors. The old sedan deliberately slows. Speed drops below the limit. The Latin smiles grow broader.

It's the old try-on, the unspoken challenge.

The chunky, square-knobbed gear lever in the waist-high slingshot bangs back to third. The throttle slams hard into the carpet. In an instant the X1/9 surges forward alongside its aging relative, and then it's gone.

No contest.

Fifty metres back those big, white smiles are still there. Better to have fought and lost than never to have fought at all . . .

Passion is what the Italians are all about. Passion for life, for love, certainly for pasta. Passion for cars.

Consider the design and application of Italian motor vehicles, purpose-built to

set forth and conquer those wriggling, roller-coaster mountain roads that today evoke memories of the Mille Miglia, Targa Florio . . .

Italy has yet to produce an ordinary motor car. Bad ones . . . yes. Undistinguished . . . no, no, no.

To think of Italy is to conjure up the exotics . . . Ferrari, Lancia, Maserati, Lamborghini, Alfa Romeo. Hedonism on four wheels.

Humble Fiat, government-owned leaders in the black art of Italian mass production, adheres (though with increasing difficulty) to the philosophy of mixing the motoring good life with the demands of today's fuel thrifty society. Fiats are born with a barking exhaust. Born to run. But with an eye on the wallet.

The X1/9 is a different Fiat. Different because it was lucky to have drawn breath at a time when other makers were happily committing motoring euthanasia with any model that vaguely resembled a traditional sports car. Different because Fiat went outside its own walls to conceive and nurse its





BORN TO RUN

new babe. Surrogate father is Nuccio Bertone, master stylist whose credits include Ferrari, Maserati and Lamborghini.

Old Nuccio didn't get the X1/9 absolutely right the first time. Maybe he had the best intentions but Fiat wouldn't play ball with the proper ammunition. Whatever the reason, the original X1/9 fell a little short of sensational at its launch eight years ago.

The old four-speed 1300 was a sports car without balls. It had the paper appeal with that wind-cheating wedge shape, all-independent suspension, four-wheel disc braking, close ratio gearbox and an engine that wanted to do party tricks but couldn't.

Beautifully precise steering and amazing handling qualities were always there. But who really cared? Could that eunuch of an engine ever do justice to the Fiat's sporting intentions?

The genuine sports car driver cared. The Yanks, with their different set of values, didn't.

They snapped up the little Italian cutie pie and joined the Porsches and Datsun Z-cars on the grid for the Beverly Hills grand prix for poseurs, that daily 15km/h kerbside crawl down Rodeo Drive. Shoot, you don't need horsepower for that kinda stuff . . . just a mindblowing set of wheels that'll stop a pretty girl — or boy — in her/his Guccis at 100 metres.

But, for Chrissake, who's heard of a genuine sports car with a 1290cc tiddler providing the motivation? And what about a four-speed box that ran out of legs at 160km/h while that runt of an engine screamed its tits off in protest?

Now, though, it's all there. An engine and transmission to complement one of the best chassis to come off a production line. What a difference 298cc and a fifth gear makes. The deficiencies of the older car have been rectified. Old Nuccio can smile. An engine with more grunt, and a five-speed gearbox geared for a moon shot.

The new X1/9 is superb. A true sports car.

Sure, it doesn't fit everyone. I've never met Nuccio Bertone, but my guess is he is no giant. He's designed a motor car for the little people. Or, as Jackie Stewart says often, "for a person of average build." Stewart's idea of average is Malcolm Johnston.

No one jumps into an X1/9. Wriggle is more like it, certainly for someone stretching over 187cm. And then only with knees at 10 to 2, cradling the steering wheel. Cornering is achieved using a peculiar hand shuffle along the rim, avoiding those obtrusive knees.

The smooth-grained leather-cloth vinyl seats wrap around at the hips and shoulders. There's a rest for the left foot when it's not required to depress the clutch.

The small-diameter soft-feel wheel — with a rim too smooth to be entirely practical — falls at crooked arm's length for the reclining driver. Like a sports car should.

The gearstick and shift is not right. They rarely are on Italian cars. The lever is too long and too close, the movement too lumpy and lengthy.

It should be better; there is no excuse for a box requiring more than a short, sharp throw on a car of such a modest engine capacity and power.

The stretched 1.5 litre engine now has the performance to go with the strength it has always possessed. It's made for hard work, with sporting design features like overhead camshaft, short stroke, alloy cylinder head and dual-throat Weber carburation.

Power is up from 53.7 kW to 58.8; torque is boosted from 101 to 118 Nm. The power increase is felt at all stages to red-line 7000 rpm, although performance peak is around the 5800 rpm orange line. Better though, the added torque provides the flexibility and response so sorely missed in the 1300 model. Here is a car that will now handle the urban dawdle at 3000-3500 revs without stuttering or yawning.

On an enticing ribbon of open road it'll arc up to 170 and stay there, swallowing the sweepers with just a hint of understeer, all the time giving the comforting

impression that it has no inclination whatever to spear off the strip of bitumen to try some landscape gardening.

The mid-engine layout is the key to the X1/9's tenacious handling. Almost perfect unladen weight distribution of 51 percent front and 49 percent rear has been achieved by locating the engine in Formula One fashion aft of the cockpit straddling the rear driving wheels.

It now has the go-material to allow the adventurous driver to reach deeper into the car's reserves of handling, for its limpet-like cornering feats and precision rack-and-pinion steering draw comparisons with thoroughbred race machinery.

Its amazing dynamic characteristics compensate for its vulnerability in other areas, notably its tiny dimensions. For, though the body shell has been designed to comply with America's demanding safety requirements, the car's ability to react so swiftly is its greatest safety attribute.

Happiness is a smooth, snaking stretch of roadway. Americans, with their arrow-straight freeways, will never experience the unmitigated joys of exploring the outer limits at the controls of a car designed to give motoring pleasure.

A patch of rough road will unsettle it, but never disconcertingly. Wonderful, direct — three turns lock to lock — steering is always there to help put the X1/9 back on course and the unsympathetic 10-metre



BORN TO RUN

turning circle doesn't hurt here. In the Shopping World parking jungle . . . yes. This car was not conceived to ferry housewives and groceries.

The last line of defence, four-wheel disc braking, is as effective as one might wish. Heavy at the foot because of the lack of a booster, but not uncomfortably so. They stop, and keep on stopping . . . no fade, no deviation and no fuss.

The Fiat defies unnatural treatment by the driver. Heavy-handed work at the throttle and steering wheel produced similar results for our impatient lensman waiting for The Picture on the exit of an interesting corner. Nothing. No body roll to speak of. No squeal of protest from the Pirellis. No squeal of delight from the photographer. Too easy.

The ride is firm on good surfaces, falling away to harsh when the roadway deteriorates. Forget about tackling dirt tracks or risk unearthing a rattle or three. Mr Bertone has untold skills as a designer; however quality control in his assembly shop falls short of ideal.

Conventional ventilation is woeful. A torpid two-speed fan makes all the usual noises of bringing fresh air to the occupants. It need not bother.

Sports cars bring nature's own to driver and passenger in a manner only motorcycle riders could appreciate (before the introduction of compulsory headgear).

Roof-off, wind-in-the-hair motoring.

This contemporary Fiat dispenses with yesteryear's canvas fliptop for a more practical removable plastic lid.

Top off? Simple. A one-man operation. Pull a couple of release catches and the one-piece roof comes straight off. Ingeniously, it stores away in the front luggage area under the bonnet. Like a giant jigsaw . . . and everything fits.

It's civilised if you want it to be. With the side glass up, wind swirl barely tickles the crowning glory.

With the roof on we learn it is no longer mandatory for occupants of convertible sports cars to suffer the terrible privations of the past. Wind noise is minimal, when it rains you do not finish sitting uncomfortably in a pool of water, and draughts fail to penetrate the door and window seals. Sports car driving is no longer advanced-level masochism.

Luggage room is remarkable for a vehicle of this size and application. The front compartment will accommodate an average suitcase, while a second stowage area in the tail will take smaller items. Packing away luggage for an extended holiday is probably out of the question, but a dirty weekend . . . yes. Anyway, try getting more than a briefcase and toilet kit into a Ferrari or Lambo.

And the X1/9 spare wheel doesn't intrude on the valuable cargo space. Its

home is out of sight behind the seats, shielded by a vinyl cover tied down with velcro.

Dashboard is dominated by speedometer and tacho, the latter reading in true sporting fashion from right to left, in easy-to-read orange on black.

Other instrumentation includes a quartz clock with stopwatch facility, water temperature and oil pressure gauges, and warning lights for brake fluid level, fuel level, handbrake and battery. Uncluttered. All that is needed. On the other hand,

The alternatives
were to pull the
pin on the whole damn
project, or else load each
car with a hefty
price increase

Fiat is not generous with its standard equipment. You pay extra for in-car entertainment, but this way you can nominate the radio/cassette of your choice.

Bertone's little inspiration is not without its irritations. There's that half-baked conversion from left to right hand drive. Half-baked because the steering mechanism has been moved, but that's about all. The wipers — two speed with an intermittent mode — sweep the left side of the screen but leave our driver's side with a large blind spot. The bonnet release remains on the left side bulkhead, out of reach of the driver. Likewise the levers for the engine compartment and rear storage, concealed cleverly in the doorwell and accessible only when the passenger door is ajar, are designed to suit left-hand drive

countries. Strange too that in a continent criss-crossed with tollways, the Europeans consistently fail to provide bins for loose change. The X1/9 has a console bin; however it is open at the rear and coins spill everywhere under sudden, hard acceleration.

True sports car drivers don't pay heed to fuel economy. Most don't anyway. For those that do, feast your eyes on these statistics: the X1/9 refused to consume petrol at a greater rate than 9.2 litres/100km — that's thrashing it all the way. And what about a best of 7.1 litres/100km? Bertone's slippery metalwork and that tall, tall gearing can take a bow, for the X1/9 is not a featherweight, not at 920 kg. This kind of economy from a machine capable of an 18-second standing 400 metres and a point-to-point performance to scare European legends with telephone numbers for price tags . . .

Talk about the agony and the ecstasy. The consumer pays plenty more for that extra sting in the tail and fifth gear. About three grand more.

In normal circumstances a similar update would tack on a few hundred dollars.

But in this case the Oz buyer is wearing what Fiat quaintly describes as "price restructuring". In reality it's a massive loading designed to pacify Bertone following the loss of the US market.

Bertone actually threatened to renege on the deal to screw together X1/9s when the car failed to meet stiff new US emissions regulations introduced in mid-1980.

Overnight the X1/9 lost its biggest market. The alternatives were to pull the pin on the whole damn project, or else load each car with a hefty price increase. Which is why we now pay a sobering \$13,995 retail.

Even so, the X1/9's future cannot be assured beyond the end of 1982.

This year's batch of 500 for Australia could be next year's collectors' items if the X1/9 follows Healey, Triumph, MG and other open-top sporties of yesterday to the big parking lot in the sky.

The end of the Best Small Sports Car on Mother Earth. ☺

FIAT X1-9 1500

Fully imported Italian two-door, two-seater, mid-engined, rear-wheel drive convertible sports car, powered by a 1498cc overhead camshaft four-cylinder engine.

Claimed Power: 59 kW at 5750 rpm; *Claimed Torque:* 118 Nm at 3200 rpm; *Transmission:* Five-speed manual (no automatic); *Suspension:* All independent by MacPherson struts, lower control arms; *Steering:* Rack and pinion — 3.3 turns lock-to-lock; *Brakes:* Four-wheel discs; *Tyres:* 165/70SR Pirelli Cinturato P3; *Wheelbase:* 2202 mm; *Length:* 3969 mm; *Width:* 1570 mm; *Kerb Weight:* 920 kg; *Fuel Tank Capacity:* 49 litres; *Test Car Options:* Alloy wheels (\$400); metallic paint-work (\$250).

HIGHWAY HIGH NOON

Make/Model	Capacity (cc)	Power (kW)	Stg 400m (secs)	Fuel (litres/ 100km)	Price (\$)
Fiat X1-9	1498	59	18.0	7.8	13,995
Mazda RX-7	2292	84.6	16.8	14.7	16,820
Datsun 280ZX	2753	98	17.1	17.4	20,000