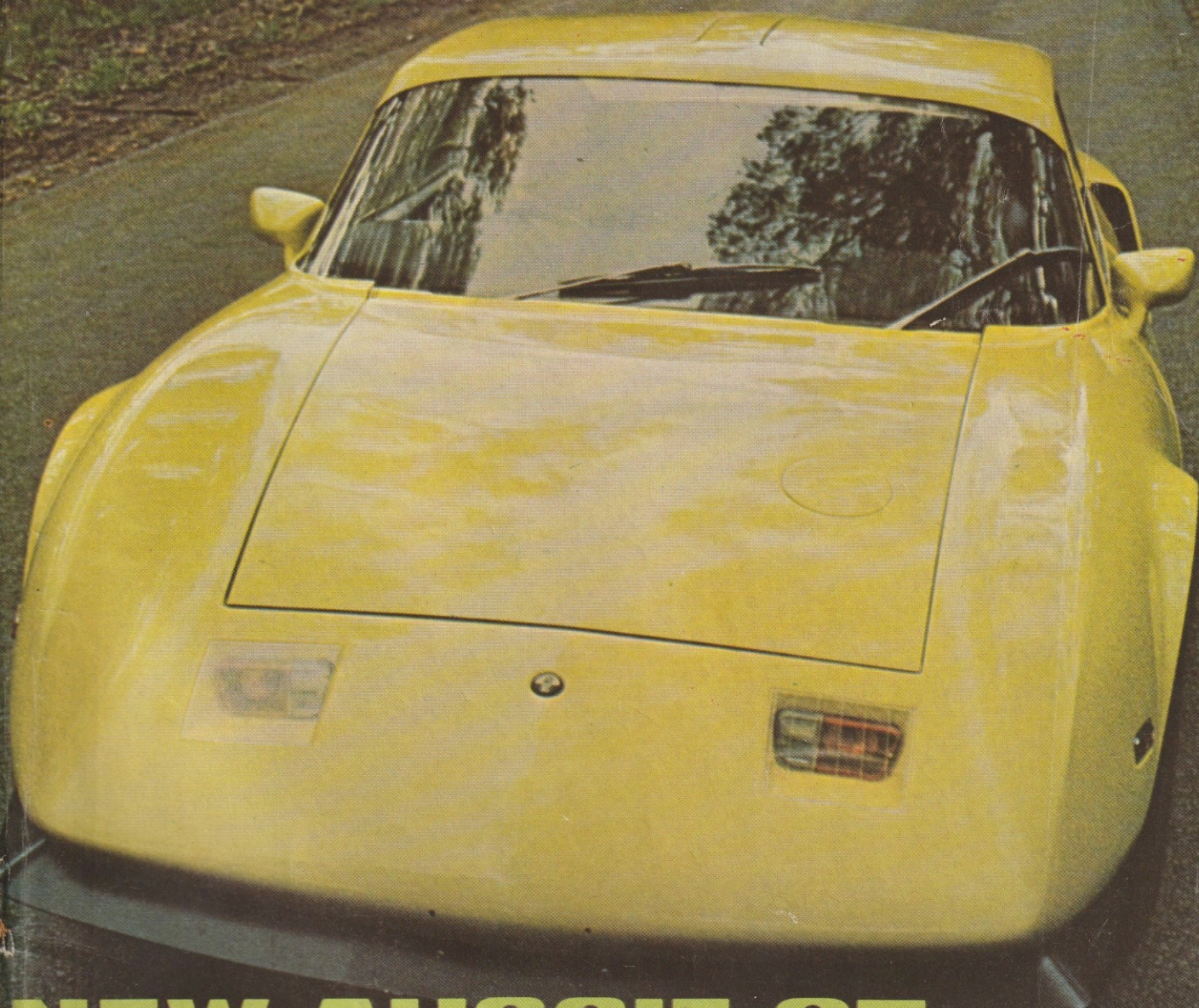


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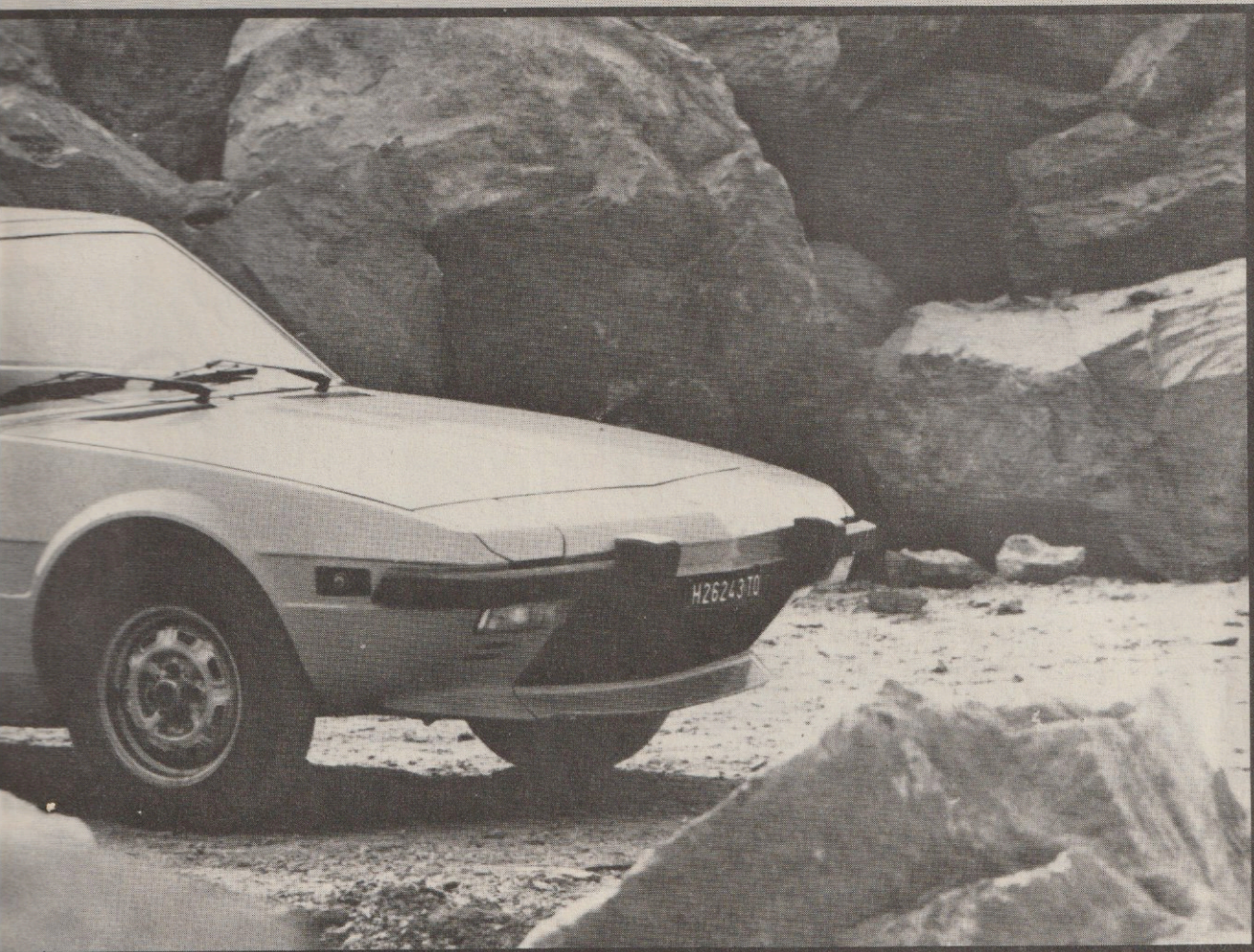


Fiat's devilish X1/9



more fun than any machine I know...

Our man Sloniger has been testing Fiat's X 1/9, the first of the new wave sports cars, and all he can say is that you'll have to get past him to reach the head of the queue.



FIAT BUILDS SMALL sport cars with a flair that suggests some very potent hot line between Torino and the devil. The Italian giant simply seems incapable of launching an ill-handling or stodgy-performing compact two-seater.

The latest, the X 1/9 — which would be better called a 128 Sport Spider — can only gold-plate this image and reputation. It is quite simply more fun to drive than any machine I know.

A mere 1.3 litres shoves the mini-convertible past 100 mph. Pure engineering gives handling beyond the ken of most road users and there is space within an 86-inch wheelbase for two plus plenty of luggage for young weekends.

Building the X 1/9 was a fairly clever exercise in itself. Fiat had the single-OHC, transverse four-cylinder front-drive unit from the 128.

Over 1.2 million of these engines have been built so far, a fair proportion of them with the rally sedan or Coupe hop-ups.)

So what could be easier than mounting said engine, gearbox and differential unit with its independent strut suspension just behind the seats? It was an easier task than Porsche faced with the 914 because you can find height at that point more easily than fore and aft depth.

While the X 1/9 is rated at the same 75 bhp as the 1300 Coupe, it is now produced 600 rpm lower at 6000 and there is a slight torque gain (by 4 lb/ft to 72 lb/ft, also peaking marginally lower at 3400 rpm. Compression remains 8.9 to 1, requiring super petrol in defiance of the current trend.

The changes which brought these slightly different ratings include a cross-flow radiator with thermo-electric fan up front, a new intake manifold and dual exhaust down pipes leading directly into the muffler, a distributor relocated to one end of the cam and finned sump in cast alloy.

Fiat even managed to use the integral gearbox with little change except for turning top gear around. But the rigidity of the new body style meant a 145 lb weight penalty.

Hard to believe, but Fiat took another inch off the short Coupe wheelbase. But the Spider has a wider track and slightly larger turning circle (still small enough).

Inside, you have a shelf with cross-ribs and a drop-down glove box which locks. This is also used to "lock" the front boot latch as well, since it hides in the glove cavity. Both lids in back, for rear boot and engine, have their latches on the left door frame where one lock does both of them.

Bertone, the stylist, may have overdone the decoration, particularly around the tail, but he got the aerodynamics right and used the space very neatly. Curiously enough, there is less wind noise with the pop-up headlamps in use. They seem to deflect air away from the screen pillars.

The car has two honest seats, comfortable for anyone up to six feet. The high backs could use more lateral support for fast bends, but the cushions suit most shapes.

Your driver is faced by a panel containing tach and speedo with fuel gauge between them. Oil pressure

DEVILISH X1/9

and fuel dials are half-hidden by the wheel rim to the left. All are readable.

Apart from a tumbler to raise and lower the headlamps, switches are grouped neatly around the heater controls in a centre console. And they are illuminated by fibre optics, a modern touch. Choke and hand throttle lurk behind the handbrake.

The wheel has a thick rim, a very precise feel and a good position.

Then we come to the shift lever, and here Fiat scores again. This must be the nicest gearbox of any mid-engined car — no small feat. The gate is very tight and the lever snicks into each cog easily with spring loading in the 3rd/4th plane. Rapid upshifts from 2nd to 3rd are merely a flick forward, though reverse might hang you up.

But unless you have very wide feet indeed it won't be easy to heel-toe the car.

The removable top panel — leaving an obligatory rigid roll bar which hinders rear quarter vision less than expected — takes a little more fiddling than that of a 914, but it remains a one-man job.

Ride is predictably firm though the four shock-coil struts smooth out bumps at speed very well. But the car really jolts over cobbles in town. It isn't a city car in other ways either — for instance, the familiar 128 gear shaft holler is very evident at slow speeds when the oil is warm.

While the car will in fact putter to the market, town driving just is not what an X 1/9 is all about.

This one wants a winding road and a challenge from just about any other vehicle. Given short enough straights between the bends there are few cars even at twice or thrice the price which could hang onto its tail-lights.

For that matter, the 100-plus top speed isn't bad for a 1300 but it gets loud cruising over 5000 and you want a fifth gear even though top is mildly overdrive now.

So forget that and seek out the mountain roads where near-perfect balance makes it possible to drive the X 1/9 as an understeerer with the tail merely easing out if you lift off during a corner, as an oversteering machine by keeping revs high and gears low, or as a near-neutral bean bag one pitches sideways with a faint smile for those in lesser machines.

Balance is simply that good, the chassis that much in tune with keen driving and the 75 available ponies. Fiat realised it would be driven hard, fitting four-wheel disc brakes rather than disc/drum like the Coupe.

Shaving an apex is almost second nature with the three-turn steering and you soon get the feeling this baby bomb would simply go any place one happens to point it.

Sixty percent of the planned 100 cars a day are earmarked for America but Australians can always hope too. Because, brothers, just one X 1/9 would be enough to grace any garage. *

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: Inline, single-OHC four set transversely above gearbox and diff behind seats. Cross-flow radiator with thermo-electric fan in nose, new intake manifold, dual exhaust down pipes. 1290 cc, 86 x 55.5 mm, 8.9 to 1 compression, 75 bhp at 6000, 72 lb/ft at 3400 rpm.

Power train: Four-speed, all synchro. Ratios: 3.583, 2.235, 1.454, 0.959. Final drive, 4.076.

Chassis: All-independent suspension with shock/coil struts front and rear, four-wheel disc brakes, rack and pinion steering, 145 HR 13 tyres.

Dimensions: Wheelbase 86.5 in., front/rear track 52.5/53 in., LxWxH 151.0 x 62 x 46 in., weight 1940 lb, load to 440 lbs, boot 9.9 cubic ft (4.4 front/5.5 rear), fuel 10.2 gallons no lube, oil 7.5 pts, turning circle 32.1 ft (three turns lock to lock).

Performance: Speedo error at 75 mph: 4.7 percent. Top speed 104.1 mph. Gear speeds: 25, 45, 72 mph. Cruising speed 100 mph at 6000 rpm (yellow line 6500, red 6900). 0-60 mph 13.2 seconds.



