

# Wheels

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AUSTRALIA'S TOP-SELLING MOTOR MAGAZINE



# BULLSEYE!

*It's Camira: high-flyer, high-tech, high-time*

**'On the road this Holden gives a new meaning to 1.6 litres and front drive'**

# FOUR YEARS AFTER

*Some day, Gavin Green, you may own a Porsche, perhaps even a Ferrari. And although you were once blown off by a Datsun 180B, some day you may even own an X1/9.*

**I** REMEMBER well my first drive of a Fiat X1/9. It was in 1978, in the days when you had 1300 cm<sup>3</sup> under your right foot and four speeds under your left. I took it to a race meeting at Amaroo Park and, coming home, used one of my favourite roads — a snaking stretch of bitumen that wanders through bushland and the occasional built-up area. With a friend at my side we were enjoying the delights of mid-engined motoring. At the tacho constantly dancing towards the 6000 mark; at the sweet wail of the single-cam engine sitting just behind your ears; at the strong roadholding and brakes.

I wasn't driving the dart-shaped little machine at anything like full speed, but nonetheless we were moving along at a steady gallop. Or so I thought. Suddenly, on a straight section of the bitumen, I noticed a mundane box-shaped sedan looming large in the rear-view mirror. It was a Datsun 180B, looking every bit as standard as the day it left the showroom. True, it was being pushed hard. But it still effortlessly swooped by the Fiat (and what's more, with half as many decibels coming out of its exhaust).

It put a new perspective on the X1/9, that wretched Datsun. Afterwards I was acutely aware that, despite the musical splendour of the racey little engine, you usually weren't going any faster than grandmas in their Corollas or P-platers in their bog-standard Morris 1100s. True, you *sounded* fast, but on the 1.3-litre X1/9 the tachometer and the speedometer spoke different languages.

Four years later, the chance came to get reacquainted with the Bertone-bodied baby — although this time with 1.5-litres, five speeds and a pair of ungainly looking US-style bumpers to add spice to the brew. Steve Cropley, *Car* magazine's new editor, asked me to take the car to the south of France. "We're giving one away in a competition for under-25s. We want someone young to do the story. Reckon you could spare a week to do it?"

The destination sounded fine; the mode of transport left something to be desired. The drive from London to the Riviera is

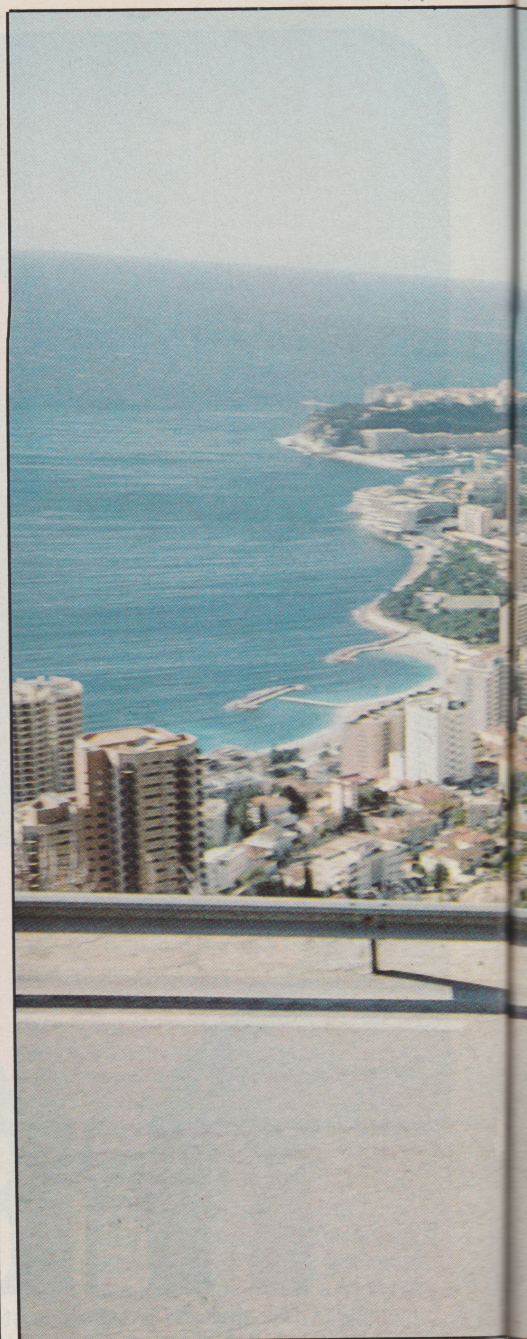
1400 km, of which all but about 100 km is high speed autoroute or motorway. The buzzy little Fiat, with its cramped cabin, didn't seem the ideal. Having unsuccessfully tried to convince Cropley that a Ferrari might be a more suitable prize, I went home to dust off the swimming costumes and racked my memory to recollect what salt water felt like. London and water sports do not go very well together.

A couple of weeks later photographer Colin Curwood (a Lancia Beta Coupe owner) and I were on our way to Dover to catch a Hovercraft to Calais. The sky was clear but the chilly morning meant we were wearing rally jackets and jumpers while the Targa roof of the Fiat was very definitely in place.

The first successful phase in the courtship came on the 250 km run from Calais to Paris. Cruising on the autoroute the little coupe seemed more flexible and comfortable than I'd expected. Although the transverse-mounted engine is loud (and it starts to harshen over 5500 rpm or 160 km/h in top), conversation was possible, the radio was still audible and, more subjectively, the little engine always sounds so sweet and lively at high revs that an enthusiast can easily forgive any excess noisiness.

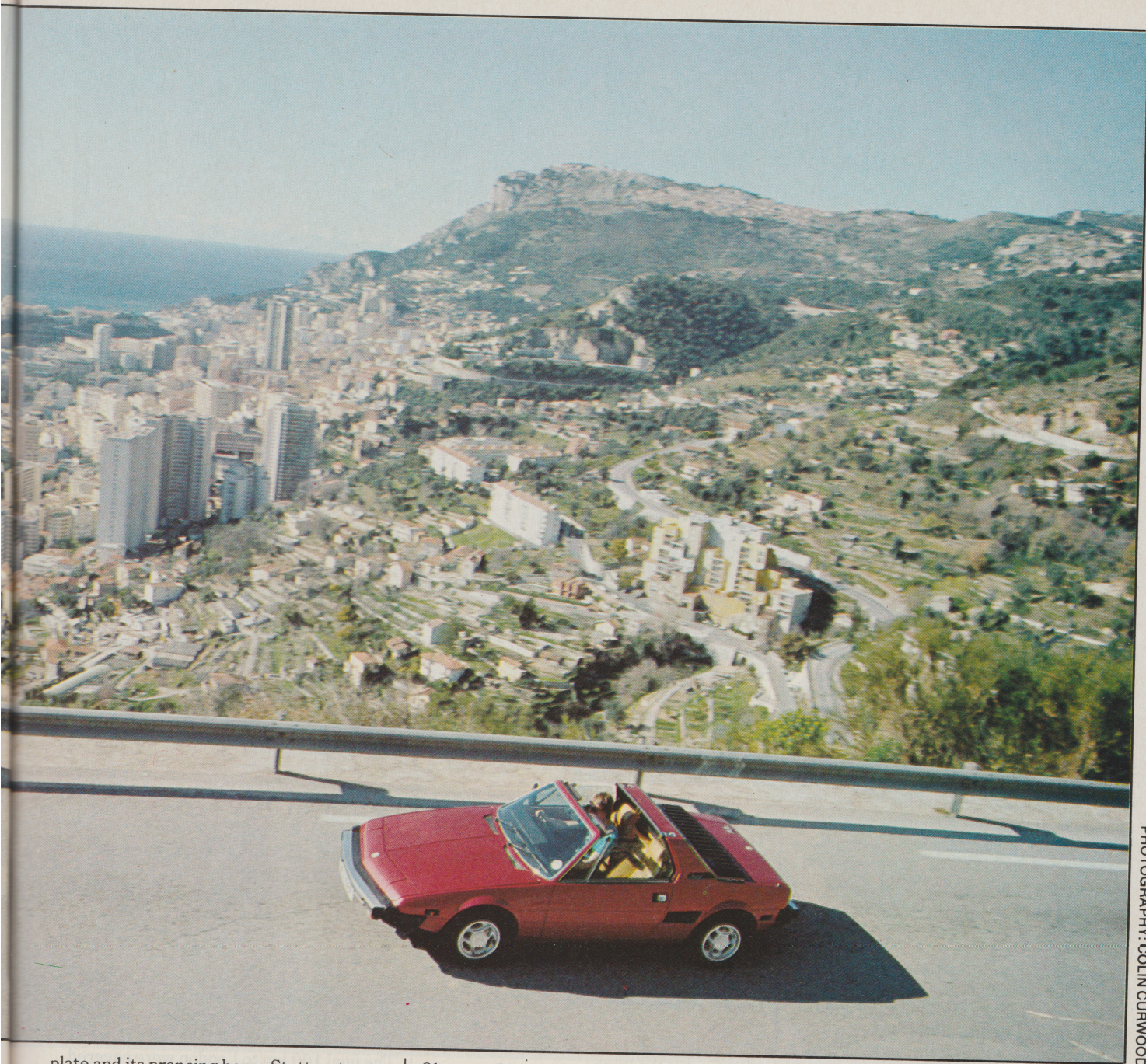
To relieve the monotony of km-after-km of autoroute, there were the occasional bursts to well over the 130 km/h limit. A few times we saw an indicated 190 km/h (180 in real terms). The first 15 indicated km/h over the 'ton' come fairly easily. Thereafter it's a question of building momentum.

But it was the encounters with supercars that provided most fun and made the long trip south more joy than chore. On the way to Paris, through the flat featureless green countryside that covers northern France like billiard table velvet (broken only by the odd clumps of trees and towns), a purposeful-looking black Porsche 911 Turbo loomed large in our mirrors. It slowed behind us (we were doing a touch under 160) and stayed there for a while, teasing us like a big boy might



tease his little brother in a running race. Soon he tired of the game and powered by. Seizing my chance I gave the accelerator pedal a firmer jab, saw the speedo rise above 160, heard the engine begin to wail as the tacho swept by 5500 rpm . . . and then watched as the Turbo rocketed away like an arrow flying from a bow. Memories of a Datsun 180B flooded back. Some day, Green, I thought as the last vestige of the Porsche disappeared ahead.

South of Paris, on the Autoroute du Soleil, which runs through France like a curved backbone, we sought revenge on an ageing Porsche 924. We were cruising at 160, like many of the cars around us, when the gunmetal grey 924 started catching the Fiat. Slowly the sharp nose with its silver-on-black French number



PHOTOGRAPHY: COLIN CURWOOD

plate and its prancing horse Stuttgart motif loomed larger. He stayed behind us for kms, apparently unwilling to stray into the fast lane and power by. I increased the speed of the Fiat. Still the sharp German nose was pointing straight at our Italian posterior. Finally he moved into the fast lane and began to overtake. It seemed to be hard work. As the Porsche edged beside us, the driver, hiding behind reflective sunglasses, tried to keep a nonchalant look on his face. He was trying, that Frenchman. And the exhaust note from the badly tuned engine told all. We let him go.

Further south, in the Yonne area of central France, we had a potentially more costly encounter. Colin, who handles cars with almost as much skill as he does his

Olympus OM1, was at the wheel sitting on about 175.

We spotted a squat shape ahead and were attracted to it like a sailor to a blonde. It was a dark blue Renault Alpine A310 and the blue light on the roof blended perfectly. We were almost alongside it when we noticed the little gendarmerie badge on the flank. Without fuss Colin pulled in behind the Alpine (itself doing some 150 km/h). The blue light kept quiet, and eventually the little sports car swung off the autoroute to Avallon. We kept heading south for Lyon (the second biggest city in France), then onto Marseille (the main Mediterranean French port) and along the Autoroute la Provençale, winding towards the Riviera. Our destination was a holiday villa just

behind Menton, the eastern most French town on the Mediterranean.

The Riviera — the world's most publicised spot for jet-setters — is an area no Australian tourist visiting France should miss. It's a strange mixture of old world Gallic architecture combined with the chintziness of Surfers Paradise; of Sydney weather mixed with the surf of Port Phillip Bay; with bluer-than-blue Barrier Reef-style water lapping gently on the beach gravel; with Pierre Cardin-outfitted millionaires mingling with Instamatic-carrying tourists and unpretentious local folk.

And behind this unique strip of land rise the Alpes Maritimes which, snow capped in places, give the coast one of the world's most beautiful backdrops. Viewed from



the coast, the mountains are probably at their most spectacular from Monaco. And that's where, the following morning, we headed in our X1/9.

We drove west from Menton along the cliff-hugging Corniche Inferieure to the principality, where residents pay no tax (thus the high number of millionaires who choose to live there). Of course, we tried to follow the Grand Prix course through the streets of Monte Carlo. We passed the Casino and drove down to the port with the huge white yachts and launches bobbing gently in the world's most expensive parking bay. It soon becomes obvious, when cruising through Monte Carlo (which is the modern town area of Monaco), that there's an amazingly high proportion of Ferraris, Porsches and Rolls studding the streets. I remember one guy in a lovely red Ferrari 308GTB who replied to my enthusiastic tongue-in-cheek wave with a paternal grin as we passed the other way. It was a father-to-son type smile. "Work hard, my boy, and you might be able to have one of these." Some day, Green.

Further along the coastal Corniche, on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, we stopped dicing with multi-cylinder supercars and starting battling 50 cm<sup>3</sup> mopeds instead. In France and Italy mopeds clog the town roads like rusty HQ Holdens do in Australia and most of them motor along very quickly (in contrast to your rusty HQ). There was one stylish looking femme with bottle blonde hair bristling beneath a leather-back-and-sides bowl helmet, a fur coat and high heel shoes. On her little two-wheel Peugeot

madame looked like a cross between Stirling Moss and Barbara Cartland as she carved her way through the clogged traffic. There was also one stunning-looking mademoiselle with a super-tight pair of leather pants aboard a Yamaha. I don't remember her face.

On we went to Antibes, Juan-les-Pins, Cannes, St Raphael, Ste Maxime and St Tropez. Past the expensive villas and hotels and shops. Past the expensive cars. Past the beautiful and sometimes oh-so-plasticky people. You also notice how many dogs there are about. Little Chihuahuas being dragged about like manicured rodents, Great Danes and Dobermanns dragging their owners around and well groomed poodles that look more like dolls than dogs — often with equally silly looking creatures at the other end of the leash.

But there was also motoring enjoyment to be had on the mountain roads at the back of the Côte d'Azur. And it was on these winding stretches that I really came to appreciate just how good the little X1/9 is. The car's handling and roadholding are superb, its steering super sharp, its brakes so strong no amount of punishment could induce them to fade (although the pad aroma was pretty powerful). Driving the little Fiat makes you appreciate what motoring precision is all about. Colin summed it well: "Before I came here I would never have swapped my Lancia for an X1/9. Now I'm not so sure." Just to polish the whole package off, the worst fuel figure in 800 km of hard mountain driving was 9.3 km/l (25.5 mpg). On the autoroute cruising at 145 to 160 km/h we

did 9.4 km/l to 10.2 km/l (26-28 mpg).

We left Menton, three days after arriving, to start what was intended to be a two-day drive back to London. We bade farewell to our hosts at the Domaine de la Source villa at 10am and drove through the town to the autoroute. We went a little faster on the way back and, just north of Lyon heading to Paris, we decided to try to do the whole 1400 km in one day (bearing in mind there's a ferry crossing to be taken into account). We reached Calais, on the English Channel, at 9pm. Our on-the-road time for the 1300 km drive from Menton (excluding the four fuel stops and lunch) was 9½ hours — or an average of 136.8 km/h. That included heavy traffic bypassing Paris and Lyon. We then had dinner and caught a Townsend Thoresen ferry back to Dover. The final 100 km to London were covered somewhat more prudently. Fifteen hours after leaving Menton we were home: relaxed and ache free after a day-long drive. My only problem as I tried to get to sleep was a buzz in my ears. It sounded a lot like a 1.5-litre Fiat engine at 5500.

Four years after dicing with a Datsun 180B, grandmas and P-platers, the Fiat X1/9 and I have now progressed to battling with a Porsche Turbo, a 924 and mopeds. And whereas my original impression was of a baby sports car, it's now very much one of a mini exotic. I'd like to own one. The only problem is that the more-than-reasonable \$10,000 pricetag in Britain (or \$13,995 in Australia) is still out of my price range as the Citroen 2CV in the driveway shows. Some day, Green. □