

## Motoring

CHRISTOPHER

de FRAGA



# Bertone sports is back

The reintroduction of the Italian X1/9 sports car as a Bertone X1/9, at \$32,250, coincides with both a resurgence in interest in open motoring and a much wider choice of sports car.

The Bertone faces a tougher market now than it did as the Fiat X1/9, but most modern competitors lack the removable roof which is the X1/9's prime charm — apart from its pure shape which fashion has bespoiled and despoiled.

Only 100 Bertone X1/9s will be brought to Australia this year, and three-quarters of them have already been sold, suggesting it retains its attraction despite the passage of time.

The X1/9's roots go back to Bertone and Fiat at the end of the 1960s, when sports cars were in a decline because of pressure in the United States for safety.

Bertone took the Fiat 128 front-drive engine and transmission and put them behind the X1/9's two seats and, when it appeared in 1973, it became the first mass market, mid-engined sports car of the 1970s.

In order to meet safety requirements, the X1/9 had a stiff roll-over cage, popularised by Porsche as a Targa bar and since aped in many other vehicles, including offshore speedboats.

The X1/9 looks delicate and even gives the driver the impression it would reward a gentle touch on the wheel. This is an illusion, however, because it can be thrown about like most good modern cars.

Belying its age, the grip is much better than expected on moderately narrow 185/60 tyres mounted on narrow, quite hard-to-clean 13-inch alloy wheels.

The car also rides reasonably well because the engineers managed to find the right balance between sporting firmness and wheel movement to accommodate bumps and retain grip.

The chassis, which has coil-sprung struts all round, is comfortable on rough roads.

Because it is short, the car has minimal rearward seat adjustment and tall people will find it a tight fit. Another sign of age is the awkward angle of the handbrake and seat belts.

The handbrake is typically weak, with a low-cost arrangement to clamp the rear discs, and



The Bertone X1/9: a life enjoyment system.

requires a very strong pull to set it.

The seat belts just remain uncomfortable, the centre buckle being too high and causing the belt also to sit too high.

Initially, the Bertone X1/9 irritates because its very individual character takes time to come through.

There is little enough zoom from an eight-valve, 1.5 litre engine. Although there is a single overhead camshaft, design age restricts engine speed to 7000 rpm, well below the 7700 rpm of the Toyota MR2 or the 8000 rpm of the Suzuki GTI.

Pushing 980 kilograms, the engine has little enough to do but does it noisily, particularly around 4000 rpm.

From 1498 cc, the engine produces 56 kW at 5500 rpm and 109 Nm torque at 3000 rpm. Good fuel economy saves the engine from total anonymity, 8.5 litres a 100 kilometres being possible around town once the driver no longer seeks performance from it.

In the country, the small 47-litre tank is still good for more than 600 kilometres.

The gearlever for the five-speed gearbox occasionally balks at selecting a gear, something the driver must do often despite the short overall gearing.

Without power assistance, the brakes need a firm shove to stop

the car, much more firmly the first couple of times after driving off — when the brakes are cold. Once the four discs have warmed a bit, the brake response improves and the car stops fairly well.

The steering feels odd, the rack and pinion mechanism having quick response, and the 9.9-metre turning circle is good. But the steering is unable to convey much information about the grip of the lightly laden front wheels.

The lovely leather steering wheel is set so low that it obscures some of the instruments on the panel ahead of the driver, and taller drivers will find the wheel so low as to make it awkward to turn easily.

Take off the single plastic roof panel and stow it lengthwise in its rubber supports under the front luggage hatch and the car's character improves immensely.

It becomes a pleasant city run-about, able to run at 110 km/h in top without fuss and without even blowing occupants' hair about too much.

This is more a life enjoyment system than a car; performance is completely irrelevant.

The Bertone X1/9 retains immense character, a modern classic which, despite its often maddening idiosyncracies, rates eight out of 10.

### PETA ANDERSSON'S view

How refreshing to come across such a gem of warmth and character amid the all too frequent bland efficiency that, of economical necessity, characterises so many new vehicles.

The warmth of the Bertone X1/9, however, is not instantly apparent. Despite undeniable visual appeal, the low, dart-like body seems a long way down, and once you are in it, getting back up again seems even more daunting.

Initially, the driving position is uncomfortable, and there is very little room to alter this compared with more recently designed sporting amalgams. But provided you are of moderate size, it becomes comfortably glove-like and effective.

Use of the handbrake is an exception. It is too far back for

comfort or efficiency. Take the roof off and enjoy the open air, however, and you succumb to the Bertone's simple but real charm. For this you will live with its few foibles.

Stowage space fore and aft of the mid-placed engine is negligible, but then this pretty car reduces almost everything to an uncomplicated minimum.

A concession to convenience are the power windows, and an efficient heater which ensures you stay warm with the roof off on those wonderful cold, clear days.

Performance is not life-threatening, and all in all the Bertone X1/9 would be a delight for a young driver not yet inveigled by the complexities of today's most advanced technology. But for this type of buyer it may be a little too expensive.