



# The X Factor



Affordability, good looks and superb handling are just some of the benefits of owning an X1/9 mid-engined sports car – just be aware of the hidden pitfalls, warns **Cliff Chambers**

**A**s the world's first affordable, mid-engined sports car, Fiat's X1/9 took less than a decade to extinguish Britain's presence in a market it had dominated for more than 20 years.

Syled by Bertone's Marcello Gandini, the X1/9 began life in 1969 as a concept car called the Runabout that was built on behalf of Fiat's Autobianchi subsidiary. Resembling a speedboat on wheels, the red and white Runabout was dominated by a massive roll bar with integrated light pods.

Three years later and with inspiration from another of Gandini's designs – the Lancia Stratos rally car – the impractical Runabout had been transformed into an ultra-modern replacement for the Fiat 850 Spider. In late 1972 it was launched onto a North American market that was begging for an alternative to the ageing MG Midget and Triumph Spitfire.

Buried between the targa-topped

cockpit and miniscule boot of early X1/9s was a 1290cm<sup>3</sup>, single overhead camshaft engine that generated just 45kW of power. Weighing a tad more than 900kg, the little Fiat was slim but solid and based around the robust 128 sedan floorpan.

The cabin was modern although relatively cramped; an oversized four-spoke steering wheel providing some access issues for larger drivers and well-shaped seats separated by a multifunctional centre console.

Early US-market cars had a top speed of 150km/h and took a lethargic 20.1sec to cover the standing 400m.

Despite its diminutive size and mediocre performance, America loved the X1/9. US deliveries during 1974 topped 20,000 and by 1978 the mid-engined Fiat was exceeding combined sales of British Leyland's Midget and Spitfire.

Such was the pressure to fill European

and US orders it was four years before a right-hand drive version of the car appeared on Bertone's production lines.

Australia saw its first X1/9 in 1978 – the 1.3-litre version by this stage generating 54kW, with a top speed of 156km/h and taking 19.1sec for the 0-400m dash.

As had been the case in the US, panache rather than performance created a market for the X1/9 among buyers who would later be known as 'yuppies'.

With their targa roof panel strapped securely into the front boot and a picnic lunch in the rear luggage compartment, there was no space for dog or kids.

But Mr and Mrs Upwardlymobile could exchange admiring glances with the Porsche punters while knowing that their Italian two-seater had cost less than \$10,000.

It also drained the planet's fossil fuel reserves at a misery 8.8-litres per 100km.

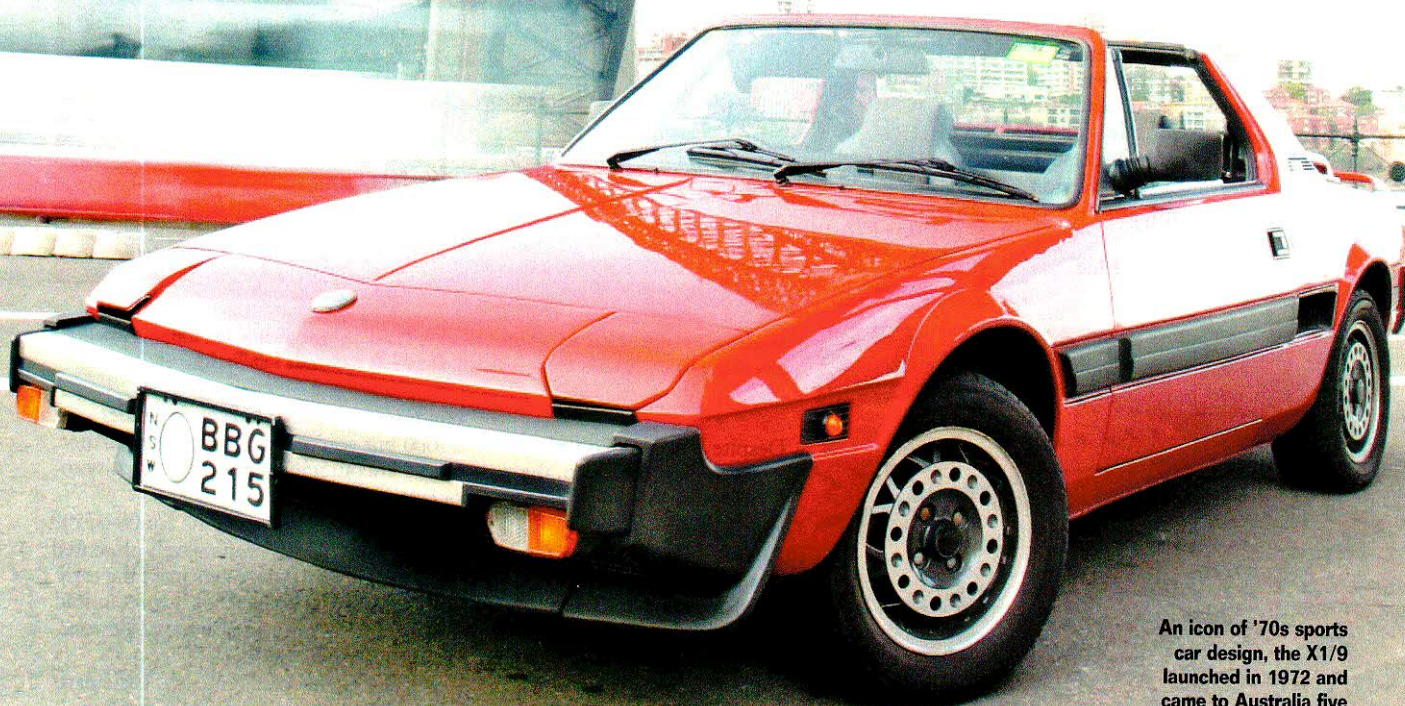
August of 1981 brought Australia a 1.5-litre upgrade of the X1/9, with 8.5kW of additional power, a five-speed gearbox, new alloy-spoke wheels and a \$3000 price increase. Full-width bumpers and an elevated engine cover to accommodate the taller Ritmo engine provided a more purposeful appearance, while the extra power and gear ratio reduced the 0-100km/h time from 13.8sec to 11.4, increased top speed to a respectable 170km/h and contributed to a 12 per cent improvement in fuel economy.

With Fiat losing interest in X1/9 production and local prices forced beyond \$15,000, Australia's flirtation with the Series II X1/9 lasted only until mid 1983.

Five years later and sporting Bertone badges, it briefly returned with fuel injection, larger wheels, power-assisted brakes, improved seats and rear spoiler. Australia's 54 cars were among the last X1/9s produced; Bertone discontinuing the model in early 1989.

## ON THE ROAD

Motor sport allusions are not misplaced when describing the driveability of an X1/9. Even with its roof panel removed, the high-sided cabin with its low-set seats is slightly claustrophobic and extremely involving. Many owners have swapped the standard steering wheel



An icon of '70s sports car design, the X1/9 launched in 1972 and came to Australia five years later

for a smaller, leather bound replacement, improving knee clearance and heightening enjoyment of the excellent rack and pinion system.

Even in cars with uprated shock absorbers and suspension bushings, the ride is firm but few X1/9 enthusiasts care as compensation comes in the form of extraordinary dry road grip and response.

Those words 'dry road' are pivotal because the combination of damp bitumen, a rearward weight bias and short wheelbase can entrap the unwary.

Be especially cautious of cars with wider than standard tyres as they are prone to aquaplaning on very wet surfaces.

The gearshift demands familiarity, especially in cars with some linkage wear, and second gear may need a minor throttle blip for smooth engagement.

Traditional heel-and-toe gearshifts demand practice and some dexterity as the pedals are small and the foot well cramped.

With four unassisted discs, early X1/9s require a decent stomp on the pedal but on dry roads will outbrake almost any vehicle of comparable age.

Removing the relatively light roof single handedly is possible and it stows in the front luggage compartment. The spare wheel lives behind the seats, making stowage of a grubby wheel difficult without transferring grime to yourself and parts of the interior. If the front boot is vacant, plonk the wheel in there until the tyre can be repaired and cleaned.

Peter Raupach has owned X1/9s off and on for 20 years and currently has two of the final-series Bertone cars. Our featured red example is up for sale – phone 0411 122 491 if you're interested – Peter preferring a silver version that's been fitted with after-market air-conditioning.

"My first X1/9 was a 1978

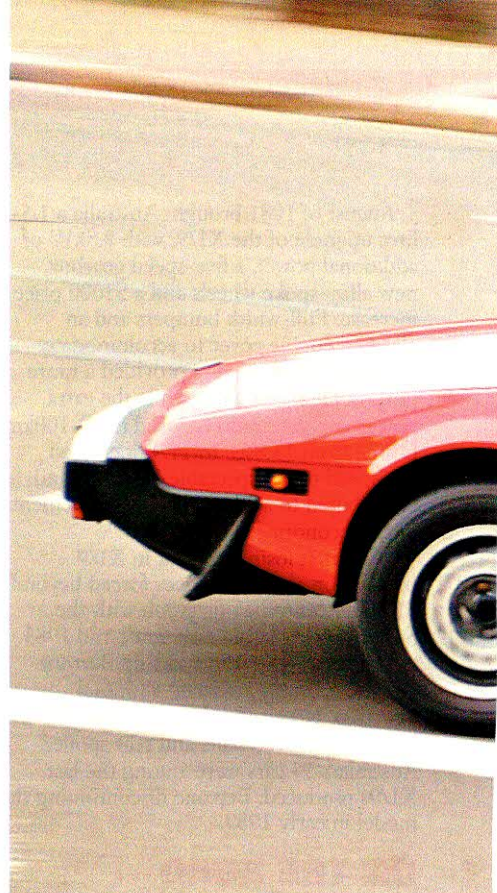
model with the 1.3-litre engine," Raupach told *Unique Cars*. "It wasn't ultra-fast but I loved the way it handled and the fact that you could place it so accurately because you can see all the corners.

"With the 1.5-litre engine and five-speed gearbox, the X1/9 just becomes a more usable car that you can take on a decent-sized trip. They cruise very happily on the highway and have a bit of reserve power if you need it."

Raupach takes issue with opinion that dubs the X1/9 impractical or cramped.

"Driving with the top removed there's virtually no wind noise and the roof panel is really easy to remove or refit," he said. "There's space in the rear boot for golf clubs – but not in the bag – and if you pack carefully, the two boots and behind the seats have enough room for whatever two people might take on a weekend away.

"The Bertone cars with the fuel-injected engine are very practical as everyday transport. The two I own have both covered around 140,000km and I really couldn't see myself driving anything else."



**Involving interior has been labelled cramped and claustrophobic but fitting a smaller steering wheel will ease these feelings. Gearshift demands familiarity**

## BUYING

Despite being an icon of 1970s sports car design, the X1/9 has been slow to achieve classic market recognition. In Britain, where rust-free cars of any kind are hard to find, reputedly sound examples of the late-series Bertone sell for the equivalent of \$7000.

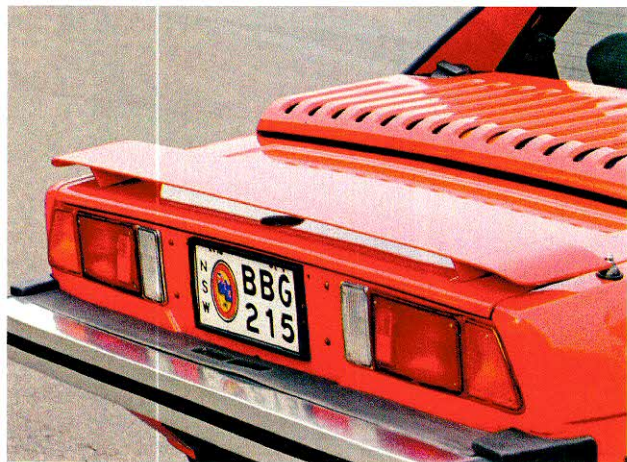
Similar cars with air-con and leather trim on the USA market are worth \$2000 less.

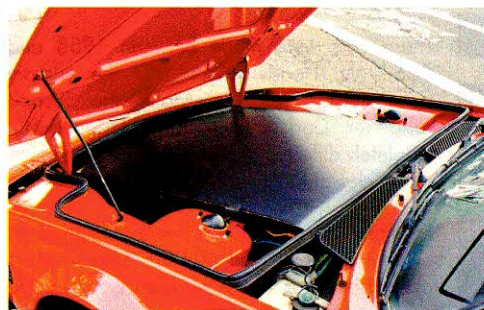
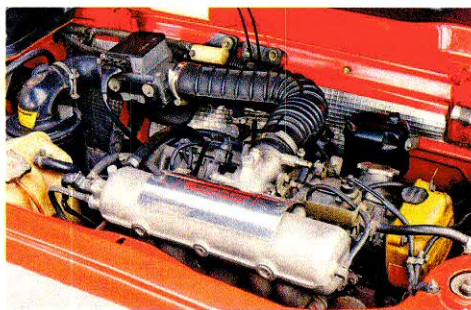
Early 1.3-litre cars in viable

condition are available here for under \$3000 but you're likely to spend a further \$5000 encouraging a car of this quality to operate reliably.

Better prospects exist in the \$5000-\$7500 price bracket, which proffers well-presented and maintained 1.5-litre cars from the early 1980s. At \$10,000 and above, expect to find good examples of the fuel-injected Bertone or a show-quality Series II.

According to Peter Raupach, basic parts are available from specialists in Australia and virtually anything can be ordered via the Internet from the USA or Europe. ■





**X1/9 with 1.5-litre engine and five-speed gearbox makes for practical motoring but check for recent maintenance receipts**

## Buyer's checklist

**BODY:** Three things bedevil the X1/9 body – rust, poor accident repairs and rust. That's not to say that all X1/9s will be rusty or that a car with peripheral corrosion can't be saved but extreme caution is essential. Check closely the cabin floors, door sills and shut panels, windscreen pillars, the front boot floor and rear mudguards. If these areas appear sound, any bubbling in other regions can likely be rectified without enormous expense. If the structure is compromised, don't even bother. Check the door and front boot gaps for inconsistencies and ensure that the vulnerable jacking points haven't been crushed.

**ENGINE:** Engines as inaccessible as the X1/9's are

always a temptation to the 'out of sight, out of mind' brigade and any car that doesn't come with recent maintenance receipts demands caution. Ensure that your test drive allows the engine to reach full operating temperature and then check for water leaks – especially under the car. Replacing the coolant pipes that run from the front-mounted radiator is an expensive and specialized task. 'Squeeze testing' the water hoses to ensure they are fitted with internal reinforcing is also recommended. Weak synchromesh is a common gearbox problem but the transmissions are generally robust.

**SUSPENSION & BRAKES:** Poor brake performance and

front-wheel locking is often due to seized rear-brake pistons. Worn rear suspension ball joints are also common – highlighted by the car wanting to 'rear-wheel steer' even at low speeds. US-based Vick Autosports stocks a wide range of suspension upgrades and other X1/9 parts.

**INTERIOR & ELECTRICAL:** X1/9 electrical problems are frequently due to poor maintenance of cables and connections between the mid-mounted engine and front-mounted battery. Ensure that all the instruments work and that the cable-operated window winders fitted to earlier cars function smoothly. Worn catches will allow the roof panel to vibrate or even become detached.

## Fast facts

### FIAT X1/9, 1978-89

**TOTAL PRODUCTION:** 160,000

**BODY TYPE:** steel integrated body/chassis, two-door coupe with removeable roof panel

**ENGINE:** 1.3 or 1.5-litre in-line four-cylinder with single overhead camshaft, twin-choke carburettor or fuel injection (Bertone)

**POWER:** 62.5kW @ 6000rpm (X1/9 1.5-litre)

**PERFORMANCE:** 0-100km/h: 11.4 sec, 0-400m: 18sec (1.5-litre)

**TRANSMISSION:** four or five-speed manual

**SUSPENSION:** Front: independent with struts and control arms. Rear: independent with struts and control arms

**BRAKES:** four-wheel disc, unassisted except on Bertone model

**WHEELS & TYRES:** 5JJx13 alloy, 165SR/13 radial (1.5-litre)

**PRICE RANGE:** \$1500-\$12,500

**CONTACT:** Fiat Owners Clubs in most states