

sporting extra

Three months in an Alfa Romeo 145 Cloverleaf.



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Plus chasing classic cars, doing the shopping and playing golf



It's early May, well north of the border. The Ecurie Ecosse Tour. At 9am sharp, outside St Andrew's Old Course Hotel, the skirl of pipes is drowned by the howl of classic sporting engines. A gaggle of Ferraris, G-Types and D-Types, lightweight E-Types, the odd GT40, are all setting course north, in straggling, exhaust-barking convoy.

Now it's mid-morning, up beyond Dunkeld, heading through Glen Cochill towards Aberfeldy. We've just spent 20 minutes chasing a hard-driven Ferrari Dino 196S racer through wonderful scenery on a twisty switchback of quiet Scottish A-road.

We're glued to the Ferrari's shapely tail, windows wide open, listening to the crackle and flame-spit of its exhaust on the overrun, the harsh scream of its straight-cut gears and hard-worked diff. Its brakes whistle occasionally into a tighter bend; rubber chirps as the back steps out a little. We chase him through a series of fast downhill sweeps guarded by solid-looking stone bridge parapets, steep banks, and a little white house just where the last corner disappears into

the forest. We have a lot more in hand than the Ferrari does through here, but we are not hanging about.

Then on the A86 above Lock Laggan, on a tyre-squealy snake of second- and third-gear corners which climbs between rock walls towards a blind brow, a raucous C-Type and a Ferrari 250GT crest the rise ahead and disappear. Snicking gears at peak revs through the twists, listening to our own crisp exhaust note ricochet off the rocks, we follow them over, see cameras starting to point, spectators ahead starting to cheer. Then they stop in mid breath to settle for a friendly wave as the approaching sound turns into a clearly unexpected sight. Because our Alfa 145 Cloverleaf isn't, as they obviously thought, some exotic 1960s racer from Maranello. It just sounds like one.

No other front-drive hatchback, no matter how hot, would have been as readily accepted in this company as the Cloverleaf, but that is its heritage. It's an Alfa; a sporty Alfa. People out to look at the big-league sportscars pore over our car, too. And you can mention an Alfa in the same breath as those other great names with no apologies; even

Name me another hot hatch which will put more than 500 miles into a day, at the best part of 60mph, at near 35mpg

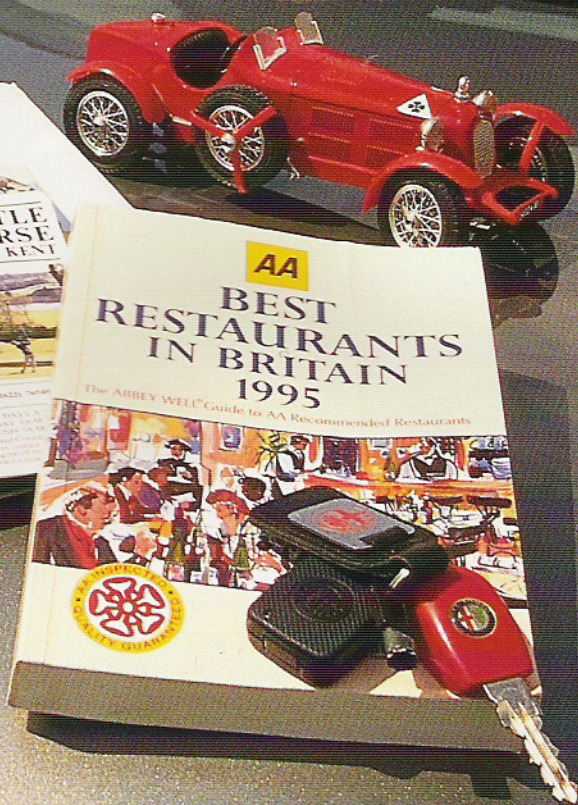
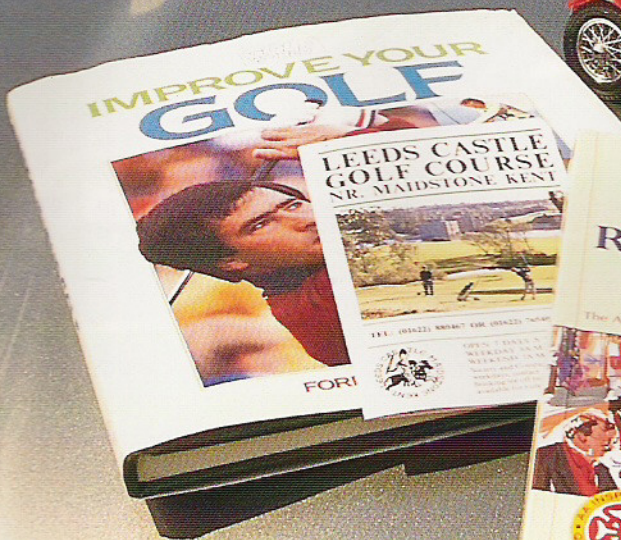


in the company of sports racing and Grand Touring classics, most of which could have added at least one zero to the Cloverleaf's modest price tag.

But then it does combine what has been described as the finest four-cylinder production engine in the world with a chassis as taut as a drum and steering as sharp as a razor – the best version yet of Alfa's characterful 2-litre Twin Spark in such a light and compact package means something great has to come of it.

Four valves per cylinder, multi-point injection, direct ignition and sophisticated Bosch Motronic management: 150bhp at an aurally satisfying 6,200rpm, and 138lb ft of torque at 4,000rpm. Superb flexibility, too, with electro-hydraulically controlled valve timing which adjusts the relative phase of its twin overhead camshafts by up to 25 degrees, changing the valve overlap to give instant throttle response. And to give more than 90 per cent of the

SPEEDWAY





Listening to our own crisp exhaust note ricochet off the rocks

Cloverleaf's peak torque all the way from 2,500 to 6,200rpm.

Refinement, from hydraulic tappets, twin balancer shafts, selective knock control. Clean efficiency thanks to a three-way catalyst and those two plugs per cylinder – a large central one and an offset small one, firing 360 degrees apart to reduce emissions.

The bare figures are 130mph and 0-62mph in 8.4 seconds, but that's only half the story. Even more instantly endearing than its hottest-hatch performance, is the 145 Cloverleaf's unrivalled feeling of involvement. There are many ostensible rivals with similar power, similar numbers, but nothing with remotely the Alfa's character. This engine is in a class of its own, like the sheer joy of exploiting it, in a car which cries out to be driven with enthusiasm.

What's more, my road tester's short-term love of performance has translated into a long-term satisfaction with practicality, reliability and sheer fun. Months of everyday use have only confirmed that in the 145 Cloverleaf, a sportscar's character and a hatchback's convenience are not mutually exclusive. Approaching 10,000 miles of chasing classic cars, doing the weekend rounds of race circuits, shopping and commuting, all this 145 Cloverleaf has demanded is a standard oil change service and a regular diet of unleaded. I haven't even refilled the apparently bottomless washer bottle.

FAST FORWARD (often literally) to June, and a rare week off. Not atypically we are in Cornwall, but I have a commitment to play a round of golf in Warwickshire. (I'll admit to the golf, but I swear I don't wear the clothes from hell). If there had been more time in St Andrew's before our morning start with the Ecosse boys, we could have had a game there, too. Two full-sized bags of golf clubs are more or less permanently resident in the Alfa's all-swallowing boot, but they still leave ample room for all the luggage I'm ever likely to carry. They are secure there, too, with the 145 Cloverleaf's remote central locking and sophisticated alarm/immobiliser. For more space the rear seats split fold (to take loads as diverse as

mountain bikes or office chairs) and there are more handy little oddment spaces inside than you could shake a stick at – which is useful for one who frankly doesn't know the meaning of travelling light.

Bags of room for four big people, too, far ahead of most class rivals, with that uniquely Alfa dashboard shape giving the front passenger even more sense of space.

But back to the plot: time-out in Cornwall, golf in Warwickshire. This only works on one basis; drive north in the morning, 18 ineptly hacked holes and a bite to eat in the afternoon, drive south in the evening in time for a pint and a pasty in Padstow because this 145 is no stranger to this world-travelled gourmet lifestyle, either.

Piece of cake. The return trip was as easy and as enjoyable as the petrol-stop-only dash back from Skye to

London after the Ecosse tour. The Cloverleaf is comfortable all day on a motorway at the legal limit; soul stirring on a twisty backroad with that punchy engine well served by the crisp change and sporty ratios of its five-speed gearbox. As night falls its polyelliptic headlights give a crisp blue-white light, and you can expect comfortably over 300 miles between fills of the 61-litre tank.

It rides a fraction lower than other 145s, is a little firmer, with less roll, and looks subtly more sporty. It has class-leading bodyshell stiffness, contributing to both fine handling and excellent refinement, without squeaks, creaks or rattles even now, after several thousand hard miles. It looks distinctive, of course, and a few people need a while to think about it, but most like it immediately. Its 0.32 Cd figure contributes to low wind noise and economical high-speed cruising, but the shell hides a safety cage, too, around roof, sills and door pillars, to complete a comprehensive safety package which also includes airbags, front seatbelt pretensioners, side-impact bars, an on-board fire prevention system and fire-retardant interior materials.

Its front suspension is related to the latest 155, GTV and Spider – with MacPherson struts and lower wishbones. There are trailing arms at the rear, coil springs, gas dampers and anti-roll bars all round. There is the solid grip of 195/55VR15 rubber on attractive 6.5J alloy wheels, plus powerful, nicely solid-feeling, all-disc brakes, with standard ABS should you ever need it. And the quickest, most communicative steering you will find this side of a racing car – with perfectly weighted speed-sensitive assistance, and just 2.2 turns from lock-to-lock. Of everything about the 145 Cloverleaf, that combination of engine and steering is undoubtedly the most stunning.

But it has its comforts too. You feel firmly located in its height-adjustable driver's seat. The three-spoke wheel is thick-rimmed, leather-bound and red stitched, with airbag and rake adjustment as standard. The instruments and switches are clear and logically laid out. Its boot-mounted six-disc CD auto-changer would fill a long day's motoring with music if you wished, and the 145 Cloverleaf comes with electric front windows, electrically-adjustable and heated door mirrors, built-in foglights, headlamp wash/wipe and plenty more. This particular breed of 145 is a car for the sporty driver, but not, like some fast hatches, for the masochist.

In fact, name me another hot hatch that will let you put more than 500 miles into a day, on British roads, at the best part of 60mph, at near 35mpg, yet leave you without a twinge of muscle or creak of joint, and ready for more. No, nor can I.

But that's the legacy of the Cloverleaf, a badge which has distinguished racing Alfas since the 1920s, which came to stand for the hottest of roadgoing Alfas, and which sits proudly but discreetly on the 145's sills and tailgate.

Between breakfast and lunch on that May morning, this sportiest 145 emphatically confirmed that it wears the *quadrifoglio* badge with honour. Over the next three days, as Ecosse spectators, I swear we had as much fun as any of the real runners. And over the past three months I've grown addicted. It's an Alfa, so it's just that sort of car. ■

