

Alfa 33 better for 4wd sparkle

Four-wheel drive goes a long way towards turning the Alfa 33 into a real driver's car. David Sutherland drives the Permanent 4 and the revamped Sportwagon

WITH SOME IMAGINATION, the new Alfa 33 S 16v Cloverleaf Permanent 4 could be considered a junior Integrale. Seriously? There are similarities: it has a lovely engine that begs to be exploited, secure, communicative handling, and bodywork from a famous design house. And it's from Italy.

The dissimilarity is the price. Whereas the Lancia would set you back £21,000, the Alfa costs just £14,980. That's £1000 less than a five-door Golf GTi 16v or an Astra GTE 16v. So even if you instantly rule out the 33 on the basis of its reputed list of faults — awful driving position, shoddy build and so on — the car deserves a hearing on price alone.

Of course, you don't get the Lancia's sheer power, but you do get the latest development of the classic 'Sud boxer engine that dates back nearly two decades. Then it was a 1.1-litre carburettor-fed unit. Now it has 16 valves and two camshafts per cylinder head, and it's managed by the latest in Bosch digital Motronics. Output is 137bhp at 6500rpm.

The full-time four-wheel drive system is not, as might have been expected, taken from any existing Fiat or Lancia. It's a new system that Alfa Romeo says has been developed specifically for the 33 by Steyr Puch of Austria. It's based around a viscous

coupling centre differential, which provides a variable front/rear torque split. In gentle driving, 95 per cent of the torque goes to the front wheels, but in circumstances when the rear wheels have better traction they are fed up to 65 per cent of the torque.

Under heavy braking, initiated from above 30mph, drive to the rear wheels disengages by means of an electromagnetic clutch to aid braking stability. But what UK cars don't get is the anti-lock braking available on the Continent; Alfa Romeo GB says the cost of relocating the componentry for right-hand-drive installation simply can't be justified given the small volume that will be sold.

The car carries a more or less standard hot hatch equipment level: alloy wheels, electric front windows, central locking, sunroof and headlamp washers. Thankfully the body kit is modest by Alfa Romeo standards.

But Alfa Romeo GB doesn't advertise the fact that its cars no longer carry a three-year warranty; that disappeared when the factory bought back the franchise from TKM.

With age, the boxer engine gets better. Despite the enlarged capacity and the fact that two camshafts now rotate in each cylinder head, it's as sweet as it ever was. It will easily hold peak revs (6750rpm) without protest.

That's just as well because flexible

this engine isn't. Throttle response is weak below 4000rpm, and for worthwhile performance it pays to keep revs near the 4600rpm torque peak. The lack of lagging power is emphasised by the 4wd drivetrain; a clean take-off is difficult unless 3000rpm or more is showing. The gearshift is as vague as on any other 33, but at least the new driveline doesn't create extra noise or vibration.

ALFA 33 S 16v CLOVERLEAF PERMANENT 4 SPORTWAGON 16v

LAYOUT

Transverse, front engine, four-wheel drive (Sportwagon front-wheel drive)

ENGINE

Capacity 1712cc, 4 cylinders

mechanically capped

Bore 87.0mm

Stroke 72.0mm

Compression ratio 9.5:1

Head/block aluminium

Valve gear dohc, 4 valves per cylinder

Fuel and ignition electronic injection

Bosch Motronic ML 4.1 injection

Max power 137bhp (102kW) at 6500rpm

Max torque 118lb ft (87 Nm) at 4600rpm

TRANSMISSION

Five-speed manual. Permanent 4 has centre diff with variable front/rear torque split

SUSPENSION

Front MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, anti-roll bar

Rear tubular axle, Panhard rod, coil springs

STEERING

Rack and pinion, power assisted

BRAKES

Front ventilated discs

Rear solid discs (drums on Sportwagon)

WHEELS AND TYRES

14mm alloy rims, 185/60 HR14 tyres

DIMENSIONS

| | Permanent 4 | Sportwagon |
|---------------|-------------|------------|
| Length | 160.4ins | 165.3ins |
| Width | 63.5ins | 63.7ins |
| Height | 54.1ins | 53.1ins |
| Wheelbase | 97.4ins | 97.4ins |
| Track (front) | 53.8ins | 53.8ins |
| Track (rear) | 54.5ins | 53.5ins |
| Kerb weight | 2359lb | 2237lb |

PRICE

Sportwagon 16v £13,448

Permanent 4 £14,980



Interior is a big improvement over the old 33's, but the driving position is still flawed despite superb Recaro seats and Nardi steering wheel

THIS WEEK
ARRIVALS

Gone is the 33's notorious torque steer out of corners, and for this improvement alone 4wd is worthwhile. And with nicely weighted steering the 33 tackles corners surefootedly.

However, the front-biased torque split inevitably makes this an understeering car, with a tendency to run wide when pushed through corners.

Ride comfort is good considering the 185/60 tyres and firm suspension. Alfa Romeo chose not to use the very hard spring/damper settings of the front-drive Boxer 16v Cloverleaf; in fact, it has now given the Boxer the more compliant chassis of the 1.7ie following criticism over ride comfort.

The brakes feel poor, inspiring zero confidence. Worryingly, efficiency appears to vary from car to car; on one the pedal felt soft and had a long travel, while on a second car it was slightly firmer.

The excellent Recaro seats and neat Nardi leather-bound steering wheel go some way towards compensating for the uncomfortable driving position, but it seems a cure cannot be found. If you can walk away from a 33 without a sore ankle, count yourself lucky.

The 33's interior has been transformed. It is no longer justifiable to say the 33 is poorly put together inside. Standards are hardly Teutonic, but fit and finish are acceptable and the fascia moulding is well assembled and rattle-free.

Accompanying the new Permanent 4 is the Pininfarina-styled Sportwagon, back after a 12-month absence. In that time it has gained an exterior facelift and the Permanent 4's 137bhp engine and gearing. What it will not get is the permanent 4wd system.

The price is £13,448, and it carries a lower equipment level than the Permanent 4. It lacks a sunroof and the Recaro seats, which is a pity because the standard seats don't offer the same support and the bad driving position is all the more noticeable.

Boot space is limited, as ever, but in fairness Alfa Romeo doesn't bill the Sportwagon as an estate; more as a cheaper alternative to BMW's popular 3-series Touring.

Weighing marginally less than the Permanent 4, the Sportwagon is said to have a slight advantage in acceleration and top speed. But it's not noticeable on the road. The driver still needs to rev the engine past 4000rpm to get sparkling acceleration. A low fifth gear (19.8mph per 1000rpm) means the engine works fairly hard when cruising, but it's so smooth that noise levels are low. Handling is in the familiar 33 style; under power the front wheels scramble for grip, accompanied by an unpleasant steering reaction.

Both the new 33s have their faults, but as both are good value for money it's not hard to overlook the problems. The Permanent 4 is a particularly appealing package, and could well cause a small hiccup in orders for Golf GTis and Astra GTEs. ■



Sportwagon makes a comeback after an absence of 12 months, with an exterior facelift and the Permanent 4's 137bhp engine, but no 4wd



Four-wheel drive endows the Permanent 4 with surefooted handling and masks torque steer. The system was developed specifically for the 33



The body kit on the Permanent 4 is modest (and attractive) by Alfa standards, while the alloy wheels are replicas of those on the 164 QV