

Alfa 33 gets a sporting chance

The facelifted 33 range has a more overtly sporting appeal, topped by the 16v Green Cloverleaf with Alfa's first multi-valve production engine. Peter Robinson reports

ALFA ROMEO HAS TRIED HARD to disguise the 33's basically humble beginnings as it turns towards more sporting cars. And, in the new 16v version, it comes close to succeeding.

In the 33's last major facelift before an all-new car is launched in two or three years' time, Alfa's first multi-valve production engine should help to boost sales of the car in this country.

The 33's credentials have certainly been strengthened by the recent round of improvements, even if — with the possible exception of the 16v — it doesn't take the corporate Alfa Romeo far down the path towards speciality and sporting cars.

The most interesting and, in the long term, significant of all the models is the 16v, for it comes closest to embodying the spirit of the cars Alfa will be building in five years' time.

If the facelifted 33 succeeds, it's entirely possible that its successor will also be powered by Alfa's distinctive and wonderfully responsive 'boxer' four engine, a prospect that is almost justification enough for buying a 33.

Alfa's comprehensive styling changes weren't just intended to give the car a fresh, more contemporary appearance. In drawing on both the 75 (bullet-nose) and 164 (high rear with thin horizontal tail lights) for

inspiration, the family relationship is more obvious. There's also been a concerted effort to increase body rigidity — up by 30 per cent — while the use of bonded front and rear screens adds another 15 per cent to torsional strength. Alfa says stiffening the car provides roadholding benefits and reduces noise levels, a claim that's verified from behind the wheel.

We've already driven the 16v back to back with VW's Golf GTI 16V (*Autocar & Motor*, 24 January 1990) on Alfa's Balocco test track, but on the rough roads of southern Spain, subtle distinctions in judgment were revealed. The power steering —

standard on all 1.7-litre models — is nicely weighted and sensitive at the straight ahead but can't completely disguise the car's torque steer. Despite changes to the front suspension geometry, when you accelerate hard on an undulating or slippery surface, the 16v's 137bhp can be felt through the steering wheel as the front wheels strive to provide consistent traction. On a smooth, dry road, torque steer is never a problem, the 33 boasting excellent grip and near neutral handling, though the steering, when off centre, isn't as direct or precise as first indications suggest, and the 36ft turning circle is excessive. A



Frontal styling echoes the 75, rear the 164. Stiffened shell reduces road noise. Seating position has been lowered



permanent solution to the problem will arrive in September when a full-time 4wd version of the 16v 33 is released.

Until then, 33 hatch and Sport Wagon models offer a new electronically controlled, part-time 4wd system on the 1.7E, but not on 16v versions. Alfa is confident that the improved four-wheel drive cars will increase the company's presence in this market, for while the Sport Wagon has taken 30 per cent of all 33 sales, only 4 per cent of those were 4wd.

Nobody will call this 33 a quiet car, though it is more restrained than the old model. It is the quality rather than the level of noise that is a vast improvement, for it's dominated by an engine that's everything you expect from a sporting Alfa.

At Balocco we compared Alfa's 16v favourably with the Golf's unit in terms of response and performance. Perhaps so, but don't be deceived into thinking this is a flexible engine. The figures don't lie. Maximum torque of 116lb ft is developed at 4600rpm, maximum power at 6500rpm, and that's exactly how the 33 feels — rather peaky. Below 2000rpm it requires light throttle openings to prevent driveline snatch; above 2000rpm it is tractable and there's a distinct improvement in performance at 3000rpm and again at 4000rpm.

But it's not until the tach needle flicks past 4800rpm that the engine really begins to sing, becoming so much smoother and eager as revs rise that it's hard to avoid rushing enthusiastically out to the 7100rpm cut-out... 400rpm beyond the redline. Those who loved the Sud's snarl will savour the 16v's sound, and relish its new-found performance.

Work the engine and the 33 gives excellent results — Alfa claims 0-62mph in 8.2secs for the non-catalytic converter version — so buy this 33 only if you enjoy massaging a gear lever. There are no plans for an automatic 33 — which is further proof that the Italian market takes 80 per cent of all 33s produced. Even so, Alfa is sufficiently confident to predict that production will rise from 110,000 in 1989 to 130,000 in 1990.

Alfa has responded to criticism of the old 33's cramped footwell by repositioning the pedals to give more space between brake and accelerator. It's not the only area where Alfa has reacted to complaint. Anti-lock brakes are fitted to the 33 for the first time as an option on all 1.7-litre models. The system brings rear disc brakes in place of the normal drums and a more positive pedal.

Road noise has been lessened, especially from the rear end, and the 33's ride, while always firm, is seldom harsh except over very choppy surfaces. Not so good is the driving position. Lowering the front seats certainly ensures decent headroom, even with the optional sunroof, but it does nothing for comfort levels. You sit very low, the pedals are still too

Anti-lock brakes optional on all 1.7s, part-time 4wd available except on 16V. Interior feels more durable, fit and finish of fascia improved



close for tall drivers and the seat lacks adequate thigh and lumbar support.

If the standard 33 buckets lack the prominent lateral padding of the 16v's seats, their higher mounting and deeper padding still make for a more comfortable driving position. General quality levels have been improved — the 33 does feel more durable — and fit and finish of the dashboard is greatly improved.

Some things never change, however, just to prove that Alfa hasn't corrected every Latin quirk. Accelerate hard with half a tank of petrol and the 33's fuel gauge reads three-quarters full.

ALFA ROMEO 33 1.7IE

ENGINE

Longitudinal, front, front-wheel drive.
Capacity 1712cc, four-cylinders, horizontally-opposed. Bore 87mm, stroke 72mm.
Compression ratio 9.5 to 1.
Head/block alloy/iron.
Valve gear side, two-valves per cylinder.
Fuel and ignition Bosch L3-1 Jetronic, Bosch E210 electronic digital.
Max power 118bhp (79kW EEC) at 5800rpm.
Max torque 109lb ft (148Nm EEC) at 4500rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Five-speed manual.
Ratios: 1st 3.4, Final drive ratio 3.888, 19.75mph/1000rpm in top.

SUSPENSION

MacPherson struts, transverse lower wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar.
Rear, tubular axle, long-travel wishbones, Panhard rod, coil springs.

STEERING

Rack and pinion, power assisted.

Brake, and the low fuel warning light illuminates.

So many of the 33's flaws have been rectified and, in the 16v, Alfa at last has a competitive rival in the hot-hatch class. Its image demanded nothing less. Based on an Italian price increase of between 6 and 8 per cent, the new 33 should range from £10,000 for the 1.5 to just under £12,000 for the 16v, which will be sold in the UK in Green Cloverleaf specification when it goes on sale this June. There may be detail changes to the interior trim and equipment on UK-spec cars.

★ **Alfa chief tells all, p50**

BRAKES

Front disc. Rear drum. Optional Bosch ABS, front vented disc, rear disc.

PERFORMANCE (claimed)

0-62mph 9.4secs
Top speed 118mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION

29.6 urban, 49.4 steady 56mph, 37.1 steady 75mph

33 16v GREEN CLOVERLEAF

As for 1.7IE except for

ENGINE

Compression ratio 10 to 1.
Valve gear side, four valves per cylinder.
Fuel and ignition Bosch Motronic ML4-1.
Max power 137bhp (98kW EEC) at 6000rpm.
Max torque 115.4lb ft (157Nm) at 4600rpm.

BRAKES

Front vented disc.

PERFORMANCE (claimed)

0-62mph 8.2secs
Top speed 129mph (205km/h)

FUEL CONSUMPTION

27.1 urban, 47.7mp steady 56mph, 35.6mp steady 75mph.

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