

# WOLF COMES IN PLAIN PACK

*More a Euroblend than Italian, the Lancia Thema proves a delight in terms of driving pleasure, packing a punch and not attracting the law in its discreet package. Niggles are few says Nick Carter*

A BEAD OR TWO OF PERSPIRATION was breaking out on the bridegroom's brow. The best man looked decidedly edgy. The organist had already exhausted his limited repertoire. They needn't have worried—the bride was late not because the large black wedding car had broken down, nor because she was having second thoughts, but because the chauffeur had miscalculated the distance to the church.

I was putting Autocar's long-term Lancia Thema LX Turbo to an unusual test at the wedding of some friends. Bedecked with white ribbon and with enough room in the rear to accommodate a flowing bridal gown and its wearer, the car passed that test with flying colours, which is more than can be said for its driver.

Ever since then I have been pulling out handfuls of confetti from between the seats . . .

The Thema drew many an admir-

ing glance at the wedding, but surprisingly few people knew what it was. Not many recognised it as a Lancia, fewer still realised it was Italian.

Perhaps that's not so surprising: the Thema is Lancia's version of the Type Four project, from which Saab produced the 9000, Fiat the Crona, and Alfa the 164. None of which looks particularly Italian—more Euroblend than anything else. The Thema is the second-best looking of the gang of four, in my opinion. The Saab manages an altogether more elegant appearance compared with the Lancia's rather heavy-looking rear quarters. The Thema also features rather too much chrome brightwork.

But so far as driving the Type Four foursome goes there is no contest (at least, not until I get a chance to try the 164). I was lucky enough to spend several months with a Crona Turbo, have driven a 9000 Turbo over long

distances, but my three months and 6000 miles with the Thema have been a delight in terms of driving pleasure. There have been niggling problems, but too few of them to mar the overall picture.

The Thema arrived early in August, resplendent in very dark grey metallic—it looks black from more than five feet away. The LX Turbo is top of the Thema range at £16,995, essentially a luxury version of the £14,250 ie Turbo and fitted with electric sunroof, windows, seats, door mirrors, and so on.

Our usual inspection on delivery revealed no blemishes or loose trim, but on trying to fire the engine from cold the next day there was a problem. The Thema took three or four attempts before it would burst into life, and then the engine quickly cut out. It was not until a couple of hundred yards down the road that it could be persuaded to run smoothly and not stall.

Alas, it is a problem with us to this day. The automatic choke is incorrectly adjusted and won't cut in until the car has been driven for a minute or so. It was not a great problem during the summer and autumn—but now that winter draws on it will need attention.

The only other fault concerns the Thema's 'sophisticated' fault warning system. Confronting the driver is an array of multi-coloured warning lights and a schematic diagram of the car. When a fault occurs, like a brake light bulb blowing, the brake pads wearing thin, or the engine oil level dropping, a little red light appears in the relevant position on the schema-

tic and a very large, very red, light starts flashing in the centre of the dashboard.

All well and good, except that within 1000 miles the very large, very red warning light started its insistent flashing whenever the brakes were applied. A quick check of the brake lights revealed that they were working perfectly; the brake pads were barely worn. The fault lay in the warning system itself.

Small wires that poke into the brake pads to detect their wear rate had become detached. The sensors were crying wolf.

I put up with this until the Thema's 6000-mile service. When booking the car into Jack Rose of Wallington, Surrey, I asked that the problem be attended to. It was, and it was well for a couple of hundred miles until the Thema encountered a large, sharp pothole. The shock dislodged the wires and the lamp flashed again.

It's one of those niggles that doesn't really warrant a trip to a distant dealer and yet annoys the hell out of the driver.

Jack Rose was also asked to investigate the cold-start problem, and claimed it had. It was not until the next morning, of course, that we found the garage's efforts were to no avail. The 6000-mile service (the Thema needs no 1000-mile halt after running in) cost £44, parts and oil accounting for £27.

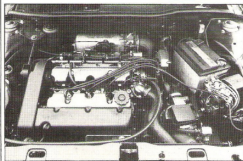
While on the subject of Lancia dealers, it may be said that they are pretty thin on the ground. Although London is better served than most parts of the country, it proved hard to find an agent within a convenient distance who was able to deal with the Thema reasonably quickly. Now we shall have to repeat the process to get the same faults properly rectified.

But these are minor irritations— they have failed to spoil the pleasure the Thema has brought on all manner of journeys. The car's sheer performance brings the biggest smile to my lips. Power comes from the 1995cc Fiat/Lancia twin cam engine, mounted transversely over the front driving wheels, and fitted with Bosch LE2 Jetronic fuel injection and a Garrett T3 turbocharger. Maximum power is 165bhp at 5750rpm, max torque 208lb ft at 2750rpm.

These are figures virtually guaranteed to mean stunning performance. Our Thema was tested when well run-in, and it showed marginal gains in the standing start acceleration times over our 1985 road test car. Sixty mph was reached from rest in 7.4secs, 100mph in 20.7secs. Top speed was down slightly (perhaps due to more windy conditions) to a mean of 132mph.

The beauty of the Thema's performance is that it comes in such a discreet package. Few other drivers realise that the sober looking Lancia packs such a punch; nor does the Thema attract much attention from the law.

Using the Thema's performance to the full does not bring about the sort of problems encountered with the car's Fiat twin, the Crona. Torque



*With no obvious performance giveaways, Thema Turbo's subtle styling belies engine's punch*

*Now nicely run in, long term Thema's 165bhp from turbo 2-litre provides stunning performance*

