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CAR
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BUYING POWER

HISTORY



1969 Marcello Gandini, then working for Bertone and having had a pretty fair-sized hand in the development of the Lamborghini Miura, designs a funky, open-topped sports car on a minute scale. It is unveiled to the public badged as an Autobianchi A112 Runabout, and creates a real buzz amongst car enthusiasts...despite simply taking the transverse running gear from the front-wheel-drive Fiat 128 and moving it rearwards.

1972 Such is the excitement generated by the little car that Fiat steps in to build it. It is named the X1/9, which is simply its project code. Perhaps inspiration was dry amongst the naming team, although all other Fiats only had a numeric code anyway? Bertone builds the bodies and these are then transported across Turin to Fiat which turns the shell into a car.

1977 A few X1/9s have been imported to the UK in lefthand-drive form, and some of those have been converted to righthand-drive but now, at last, the X1/9 is available in the UK with the steering wheel on the correct side. These early cars still have the 1300 engine and no hideous bumpers. They are very rare because...

1978 ...the X1/9 receives its only major overhaul, gaining the 1498cc engine from the Fiat Strada. At the same time, styling is tweaked, with a bulging engine cover and huge, federal bumpers fitted. Inside is also given a light makeover. The new power unit goes some way to addressing the only criticism of the car – a lack of grunt. The heavy body structure counts against performance but the larger engine ensures a 0-60mph dash time of around 10 seconds, allowing much more enjoyment of the fine handling on offer.

1982 Technically, the Fiat X1/9 production run ends. From now on, the cars are built entirely by Bertone. New luxuries are available with the VS boasting electric windows, leather seats and two-tone paint.

1989 Alas, the miniature Fiat ends production, having inspired Toyota to copy the formula with its incredibly popular MR2. The 'Grand Finale' model marks the coming of the end. Around 180,000 X1/9s have been produced.



FIAT X1/9

Engine

Both engines are real gems. Although never that powerful, they have a wonderful rasp and rev-happy nature that inspires you to drive them hard. They can take this sort of treatment up to a point, but only if they've been treated to regular coolant and oil changes. However, at least the humble origins of the mechanicals means that obtaining parts is not a serious issue.

Smoke, rattles or knocks within the engine are a sure sign of trouble, while sludgy oil on the dipstick or gunge in the filler neck also suggest a car that has been enjoyed rather than maintained. Have a look at the coolant too. You want this to be clean as the secret to a happy X1/9 is regular coolant changes. The radiator is up front and if the long coolant pipes get clogged, the engine will not hesitate to overheat.

The system needs to be bled correctly when the coolant is changed, or the head gasket will rapidly wave the white, steamy flag of surrender.

Lastly, these engines have cambelts that should be changed every 36,000 miles or 36 months. Do not forget the time element of this interval as rubber degrades with age as well as use, and failure will cause much engine damage.

The chassis can handle more power, leading to some to fit larger Lancia units or Fiat Uno turbo engines – not that you'll find many donor vehicles left now as the Uno Turbo is probably rarer than the X1/9 these days. Be wary of engine upgrades. A sheaf of bills from a professional company is always good but be sure that it's what you want and that no compromises ruin the experience.



Suspension and steering

MacPherson struts at each corner keep things simple yet effective in terms of suspension. Replacing struts can be pricey so as well as checking that the mountings haven't rotted out, check for spring or shock absorber damage/wear and tear.

Rear swinging arms can suffer from wear due to the rear upright balljoint being riveted to the arm. It can wear which will cause the rear end to feel horribly loose. The only way to correct this was historically to fit a new arm, although you can now get around this by drilling out the old balljoint and bolting in a replacement.

Give the steering wheel a good tug in all directions as the U-joints in the steering column and the mounting bracket under the dash can cause excessive play.

Transmission

The gearbox is also borrowed from Fiat family favourites and unfortunately, the synchromesh is a bit of a weakness. Second or third tend to suffer most so a little care with the change will make all the difference. There can also be a tendency to jump out of reverse – so make sure to include some rearward movement in the test drive. Gearbox trauma isn't the end of the world however and a replacement gearbox should not be too expensive. It is a hassle you may prefer to be without though.

The linkage is prone to wear, which will give gear selection problems, especially with fifth and reverse. A new 'lollipop' bushing should solve that one.

Parts prices

Parts prices are courtesy of Sirus UK. Used parts are stripped and cleaned.

Headlamp, new	£15
Headlamp motor, recon	£88
Gearbox, used	£160
Engine, used	£180
Carburettor, used	£88
Boot lever assembly, aluminium	£58
Electric window switch, used	£33

Bertone's baby sportscar for the masses became a real success, selling well in America as well as in Europe. **IAN SEABROOK** tells you why you need a dinky Fiat in which to enjoy the summer sun

Interior and electrics

Many different trims were used over the 17-year production life of the X1/9, and some are impossible to find now, so condition is important. This may explain why some are a bit 'pick-and-mix' inside.

Electrics do sadly cause a few problems, although no more than many British classics. Typically, earths or dirty connectors are to blame. If the headlamps fail to rise, it's likely to be wiring rather than motor related. Make sure that everything works as it should, from lighting to electric windows, if fitted.

Be wary of the carburettor fan. This is designed to blow cool air over the carb when it gets hot, to prevent fuel vaporisation. However, it isn't linked to the ignition so can run with the engine switched off. After a long run on a hot day, it could well drain the battery. An over-ride switch is a good way to cure this foible but simply removing the fan will inevitably cause engine problems on a hot day. It gets quite warm in the cramped little engine bay, which is well out of the way of cooling air. It's the same sort of story with the radiator fan – sensors can fail so many opt for the reassurance of manual control.



Bodywork

A small Fiat must be a rusty death trap. Yes? Er, no actually. The X1/9 features an incredibly strong monocoque as it was designed to survive the ridiculously tough proposed American safety standards. When it was discovered that most American saloons couldn't pass these tests, they were relaxed. That left the little Fiat with an incredibly strong, but incredibly heavy (for its size) bodyshell.

Well, okay. We can't deny that these little Fiats rust, but compared to some Seventies Italianas, they aren't that bad, and earlier cars seem to have been built of sturdier stuff than later versions. Sills and floors don't tend to be too bad but you certainly need to check them. There should be a seam down the rear of the door shut face. If it's missing, a new sill has been fitted or it has been bodged. Also carefully inspect those suspension towers, especially where they attach to the

inner wings. Four struts mean that you need to be checking at the back too of course and while you're poking away at the back, check the state of the luggage compartment. It isn't unusual to be able to see the road where this has rotted away, helped by heat from the exhaust.

Rot around the windscreen is easy to spot, but much less easy to repair. Front wings often corrode but if your magnet falls off, don't immediately panic as glassfibre replacements are available. If the roof or windscreen has been leaking, the floors can corrode of course, so get underneath if you can.

The low nose is vulnerable to parking knocks and check underneath for rot. Tinworm also strikes at the base of the front luggage compartment, and usually comes through from the other side so if you can see bubbling, it may just be the start.

Brakes, wheels and tyres

Discs all-round ensure good stopping power, so be wary of anything that seems a little reluctant to lose speed. Calipers can seize, especially if neglected or if the car has seen little use. If there is any pulling or vibration on the test drive, have a closer look and see if you can spot a rusty disc – typically, the caliper fails to centralise properly and the pad may not contact one side of the disc at all. Handbrake efficiency will also suffer.

Brakes can drag if the handbrake cable has jammed or if the brake hoses have begun to fail internally – blocking the return flow of fluid. Parts are still cheap and plentiful.

More is not necessarily a good thing when it comes to tyres. Going beyond a 185 width tyre is likely to upset the handling and cause wheel bearings to have a very short life.



Specification

Car	X1/9 1300	X1/9 1500
Year	1972-1978	1978-1989
Engine	1290cc 4-cylinder OHC	1498cc 4-cylinder OHC
BHP/RPM	73@6000	85@6000
Top Speed	100mph	112mph
Gearbox	4-speed manual	5-speed manual
Consumption	30-35mpg	28-32mpg
Suspension	All models: MacPherson strut front and rear with telescopic shock absorbers.	



Contacts

Clubs/info

- Fiat X1/9 Owners Club, Tel: 01379 668625 or www.x1-9ownersclub.org.uk
- Fiat Motor Club, Tel: 020 8372 4028 or www.fiatmotorclubgb.com

Specialists

- Sirius UK, Chelmsford, Tel: 01245 460 301 or www.x19spares.co.uk

How much?

Be quick and you'll be able to snap one of these up for a song, as prices have still not really gone up as many were expecting. That seems almost criminal when you consider how much fun these little cars can be. This means that prices still struggle to get much beyond £2000 for the best, although early 1300s may fetch a little more being purer and therefore fancied by collectors. There are plenty for around £1000 and if you've got patience and metal-working skills, these could make a good buy. Projects can be had for a few hundred although you need to ensure that you aren't just buying a source of parts as rot can be extensive if not attended to. Running costs needn't be horrendous either – most service items are available from any good motor factors and are very cheap.



Verdict

Small often means overlooked and that's no exception here. Look at the MG Midget. It's more fun than a B and surprisingly, just as comfortable. Yet prices run at half those of its big brother. Like the miniature MG, the Fiat X1/9 remains firmly rooted in sensible money, so the loss of others is definitely your gain. In fact, even a Midget looks pricey compared to the little Fiat.

Get behind the wheel of one however, and you'll discover plenty to enjoy. Perhaps people fear the rot and electrical woes but it's not like MGs repel rust well, and as for Lucas electrics...

With a zingy engine to push you along, excellent handling and surprising comfort, the Fiat makes a cracking choice for a classic sportscar. The engine squeezes under the cut-off for cheaper vehicle excise duty and with a tiny body to punt around, it can be good on fuel if you can resist the urge to go racing up to the red line. Club and parts support is thankfully still strong too, easing the stresses of owning an Italian sportscar, although the humble running gear makes life a lot easier too. This isn't some exotic machine, powered by a bespoke engine that threatens to destroy itself at the earliest opportunity, leaving you penniless; it just takes the MG strategy to another level – taking humble running gear and making it fun and unexpectedly refined, wrapped up in a fetching, Italian designer frock.

Insurance quote

Based on a 1980 Fiat X1/9 1500 valued at £2000

- Fully comp, 29-year-old, two-years NCB, parked on drive, unlimited mileage, £463.50
 - Fully comp, 50-year-old, full NCB, garaged, 3000 mile limit, second car, £150.60
- Cover includes 24hr breakdown recovery (UK and Europe) and motor legal expenses

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