

Fiat X1/9

£1000 to £3500

Neat styling, superb handling and potentially loads of rust, the Fiat X1/9 has them all. Kim Henson takes a close look at this Italian sports car.



Critics of Fiat's X1/9 are keen to point out that the car, as a sports machine, was underdeveloped and not exactly terrific in terms of power. That may be true but then, in absolute terms, nor were contemporary MG Midgets or Triumph Spitfires. In fact there is far more to the diminutive and often overlooked, yet in many ways sophisticated Fiat than merely engine output, and in any case the tough engines with which it is fitted can easily be tuned to give higher performance...

The X1/9 is often compared to Toyota's MR2 Mk1 but by the time the Japanese car launched in 1984, its Italian rival had been in production for 12 years. But it took a long time for UK fans, desperate for a modern two-seat sports car, to persuade Fiat to build a right-hand drive version of the X1/9. By 1974 UK specialist Radbourne Racing was so fed up with a lack of interest from Fiat's UK franchise it started importing its own cars and converting them for UK roads. Fiat finally announced a right-hand drive X1/9 in September 1976 but the first ones did not arrive on British shores until the following February.

Mechanically the X1/9 was a derivative of the Fiat 128 range, though its styling was evolved from the 'Runabout' concept car created by famed Italian styling house Bertone.

"The X1/9's propensity to dissolving can be a serious problem unless the car has been well cared for"

This firm built the bodies of the X1/9 and after March 1982 took over production of the complete cars.

The mid-engined Fiat was a good-looking sportscar which offered quick changes between open top driving or snug 'fixed head' motoring, courtesy of its removable Targa roof panel. It also provided a comfortable cockpit for two adults, an accommodating ride quality and – importantly – good traction, thanks to the weight being concentrated over the driving wheels, plus exemplary handling and roadholding. With near ideal weight distribution and a well-designed independent suspension system, the X1/9 loves corners and driving along a twisty road brings out the best in the car.

Admittedly the early examples of the car, with 1290cc engines offering 75bhp through a four-speed gearbox, are not outstandingly rapid in terms of acceleration, taking around 15 seconds to crest 60mph, but they are capa-

ble of 100mph and can cruise happily for hours at motorway speeds. They can be hustled along quite rapidly when required, if maximum use is made of the gearbox.

The later 85bhp, 1498cc machines are usefully faster cars, and the addition of an overdrive fifth gear provides more relaxing motoring at high speeds.

Impressive overall fuel consumption can be expected from Fiat's efficient overhead cam engines used in both versions – typically the X1/9 will return 30mpg in town running and 35 to 40mpg when touring.

All X1/9s are remarkably practical cars for real life motoring, and feature a pair of luggage compartments – there's a long, wide and shallow one in the nose of the car, plus another wide, if not very deep, 'boot' located at the rear, just behind the engine. On those rare occasions when the sun comes out the Targa panel can be removed and stowed in the rear luggage compartment.

Conclusions

Enjoyable to drive, comfortable and economical to run, and with great handling, the X1/9 has a lot going for it and is certainly worth considering if you are looking for an individualistic sports car. But the car's propensity to 'dissolving' can be a major problem unless the car has been very well cared for. When buying, you should avoid seriously rusty examples unless you truly love welding.



AT A GLANCE

- Excellent handling; reasonable performance
- Rust can be rampant
- Prices from under £1000 to around £3500.

MEET THE EXPERT

Julian Vernon
Xtra X1/9s Ltd

■ Having tinkered with cars for many years, Julian Vernon started Xtra X1/9s Ltd about 10 years ago, initially selling spares, then expanding to include maintenance, repairs and restoration. Today he has two workshops, and exports X1/9 spares all over the world. Julian advises that

some spares are becoming harder to get, such as front grilles and spoilers, though these may be reproduced soon. Generally it is easy to keep an X1/9 on the road. Julian imports some parts from Italy, and has had some re-made, including nosecones and valance panels. To anyone thinking of buying an X1/9, Julian says that the cars have much to

offer for relatively little outlay, and his advice is not to be put off by rumours; "Neglect, rather than inherent faults, kills X1/9s". The extent of any rust depends on how the vehicle has been cared for. The body shell is very strong – capable of surviving high speed accidents. Julian says; "Buy one and treat it like a Ferrari, and it will give good service".

RIVALS

MG Midget
Built: 1961-80
Values: £1000 to £5000
■ Fun to drive, affordable to run. Rust problems can be horrendous. Virtually all spares available and most are inexpensive. Excellent choice for a first classic.



Toyota MR2 Mk1
Built: 1984-89
Values: £2000 to £6000
■ Fast, dynamically impressive and reliable. Rusts in a few specific areas, but is a far more durable proposition than many contemporaries. However some spares can prove costly.



Triumph Spitfire
Built: 1962-80
Values: £800 to £4000
■ Affordable, enjoyable sports cars with good accommodation for passengers and luggage. Structural rot often advanced. Spares widely available, several specialist suppliers.



DID YOU KNOW?

- The X1/9 was produced from 1972, but was not introduced to the UK until 1976.
- Mid-mounted 1.3-litre engine and gearbox in first X1/9s were from Fiat 128 Rally.
- The final Gran Finale versions were exclusive to the UK. ▶



Above: Two compartments in rear, engine then small boot
Below: Car boasts useful extra luggage compartment up front.



BODY & CHASSIS

Neglected cars need very careful checking as rust likely to be rampant



1 Check front end of body shell. Open the lid of the forward luggage compartment and inspect the structural metalwork thoroughly. Pay special attention to the sections beneath the front chassis legs, usually hidden beneath the floor mat, and areas around the hinge mountings. Look closely too at the suspension turret tops. Check the inner and outer wings and the nosecone. Although neglected X1/9s can be very rusty, a well cared-for example can survive long-term. Even cars which appear superficially rusty in several places can be sound in key, structurally important areas.



2 Examine sills and underbody. Look at sill assemblies, including top, horizontal sections, adjacent floor pans and jacking points. Damp carpets are a bad sign; rainwater leaks corrode the floor. With the car on a ramp, check structures behind the wheels. Check along each chassis rail and panelwork between them and the front cross-beam. Ensure that the tie rod mountings are secure, also the location points for all suspension components. Watch for distortion of underbody (due to possible accident damage) as well as for corrosion damage.

3 Check front wing extremities. The lower rear corners of the front wings can rust away; scrutinise them closely for any holes and for the tell-tale signs of trouble – extensive dollops of body filler. If corrosion is serious, it can extend to surrounding structures, so make sure you view these carefully. The lower edges of the doors can suffer from rust damage too; the first signs are bubbling along the bottom of the outer skin. Open each door fully and examine carefully the bottom section from underneath in addition to viewing from the side; in severe cases the lower edge of the door may be virtually non-existent. Effective repairs will involve welding in new steel, and are therefore complex and time-consuming; often a replacement door is the easiest and most cost-efficient long-term answer to the problem. If you do replace the door, make sure you thoroughly treat it with a wax/oil based preservative to help avoid any trouble reappearing in the future.

4 Examine the rear valance. Due to the lowdown stance of the X1/9, it is much easier to view the rear valance and its associated panelwork with the vehicle raised on a ramp. This will make the examination of the underside of the engine and transmission, covered elsewhere, an easier prospect. Ensure that the valance is not in an advanced state of disintegration. However if it is crumbling away this is not necessarily a reason to reject the car as replacement panels are available for under £50. While in this area, check out the state of the exhaust system; a new system can currently be obtained for just over £100. Look closely too around the rear wheel arch lips, and at the state of the metalwork which forms the floor of the rear luggage compartment; check from under the car and from above. When doing so, make sure you include the sections at each side, behind the rear wheel arches.

5 Look closely at deck panel ahead of windscreen. Severe rust in the panel immediately ahead of and beneath the windscreen, and also in the screen pillars (A-posts), is a cause for concern, as neat, strong repairs here are not at all easy to execute. In any event the windscreen will need to be removed in order to tackle such work. If the steel has already been breached, be prepared to discover damage which is far worse than is immediately apparent. Often, once you make a detailed investigation, it will be found the rust has spread far and wide beneath the paint, and may have affected a large area. As a general point, if the car you are viewing proves to be seriously rusty, only consider parting with your cash if you love a challenge and the price is very low. It's probably a far better proposition to find a more sound example.

6 Assess wheels and body trims. If the structure and exterior bodywork panels have passed a detailed inspection without revealing too many horrors, walk around the car and focus on other aspects, including the wheels. Styles vary according to model, but, regardless of which type are fitted to the example you are viewing, it is important that they are in good condition, as 'correct' replacements may be difficult/expensive to source. Corrosion of the alloy rims is common; look closely if the metal appears to have suffered from serious erosion. The bumpers and unique-to-version badges and decals need to present, correct and in tidy condition. Ensure too that the headlamps rise and fall on demand, are sound and fully operational.



INTERIOR

Seats suffer seam damage



7 Scrutinise seat coverings. Depending on the model, you may find cloth or leather-covered seat coverings. The cloth versions can suffer from wear, especially in the outer bolster on the driver's side, and splitting seams. The leather seats are prone to seam damage, also brittleness. Applying of hide food is advised to keep them looking good.

8 Other interior checks. Check carpets and door trim panels for damage, and ensure that all instrumentation and switchgear works as designed. Stalk switches (with constant live feed) for headlamps and indicators are prone to burning out on late cars, but new switches are available. All trim components are scarce.



LIVING WITH AN X1/9

Simon Jones
1977 Fiat X1/9
1300

Having surveyed the market for an affordable classic sports car, Simon Jones decided to look for an X1/9. His reasoning was that the model is often overlooked by potential sports car owners, and is therefore usually inexpensive, and in any case he felt that the X1/9 had a great deal to offer – especially in terms of being good-looking, fuel-efficient and providing greater comfort than most sports cars. He also liked the neat, easy manner in which the vehicle can be changed from snug hardtop to open-air machine, without the

problems, such as draughts and water leaks, which are often associated with conventional folding soft tops.

So his search began, and, having looked at a number of examples with advanced body rot, he eventually found a part-restored, relatively low mileage early 1300 model, which he bought. Using a combination of new and used panels, and by fabricating repair sections where required, the body shell was completed and resprayed, then the mechanical units overhauled as required, and the car soon put back onto the road.

Simon has since found that the Fiat has more than lived

up to expectations. His X1/9 has proven to be a comfortable, practical car that feels positive and 'solid' on the road. He finds that, despite his example being a four-speed version, it cruises well over long distances. With average fuel consumption better than 35 mpg, and a low initial purchase price, he's laughing all the way to the bank as well. But he has found that the cost of some components has proven to be higher than expected.

Simon advises would-be owners of X1/9s always to check closely for body rust, but primarily to judge the model on its merits rather than hearsay...

PRICES

- A rough example could be yours for under **£1000**, but at this price level expect major work and expense.
- Approximately **£2000** should buy a sound car in need of cosmetics.
- For a superb X1/9, asking prices can run to **£4000**.

SERVICING AND REPAIRING

■ Access to the engine is through a hatch behind the cockpit, and reaching the motor is more difficult than actually working on it. The engine itself is a conventional overhead camshaft

unit, and routine maintenance presents no fears for do-it-yourself enthusiasts – a panel behind the driver's seat provides access to the distributor. All the components needed

for servicing can still be obtained. When required, the entire engine and transmission can be removed from underneath the car, once the bodywork has been raised to a sufficient height.

PARTS PRICES

■ Prices from **Xtra X19s Ltd** (01273 207345) include VAT but exclude carriage.

Engine Cylinder head gasket set (late type; 14 bolt)	£45.35
Exhaust system	£107.00
Transmission Gearbox (recon exchange)	£350.00
Clutch kit	£86.50
Clutch slave cylinder	£25.95
Clutch master cylinder	£35.00
Brakes/suspension Front pads (set)	£6.90
Rear pads (set)	£13.50
Front caliper (used, each)	£24.50
Front caliper (new, each)	£49.50
Rear caliper (used, each)	£38.50
Rear caliper (new, each)	£89.50
Front strut (used, each)	£45.00
Front strut (new, each)	£110.00
Steering rack, new	£85.00
Body/Chassis Nosecone	£164.50
Front wing	£274.50
Rear valance	£47.50
Door (used, refurbished)	£177.00
Bonnet (used)	£85.00 ▶

RUNNING GEAR

Brakes can seize on seldom-used X1/9s



ENGINE & TRANSMISSION

High-revving five are lively, tough



9 Examine the steering and front suspension.

The X1/9's strut-type front suspension is normally durable and effective, unless the coil springs are damaged or – rather more likely – the dampers are leaking. Make sure you check for both these ailments. Wear in the swivel joints and track rod ends eventually results in an MOT test failure. Note that the top strut bushes can wear as well. Meanwhile the front tie bar bushes crack as their age and mileage builds, and the lower suspension arm bushes also need to be checked closely. The rack and pinion steering system is normally very precise in action, but becomes more vague as the rack wears. Inspect the rack gaiters through the underbody apertures; if any leaks are discovered the gaiters should be renewed before the water and grit can enter and cause damage. Scrutinise the wheel bearings for wear; it's an important check as the installation of new bearings will require the use of a press.

10 Assess the rear suspension.

The X1/9's independent rear suspension gives exemplary ride and handling – provided all its components are in good condition. Examine coil spring/damper struts for damage and leaks, and check mounting bushes. Ensure wheel bearings are not badly worn – with each wheel raised in turn and rotated, listen and feel for graunching/excess free movement. The lower wishbone ball joints wear in time – MOT test failure follows. Unfortunately replacement ball joints are only supplied together with wishbones; these are scarce and expensive when new – more than £300 each!; however, secondhand wishbone assemblies can get you out of trouble for a smaller outlay. As there are no lubrication points there is not a lot you can do to prevent the wear, but it might be worth buying wishbones if you should see them.

11 Check out brake system.

The all-disc system works fine if regularly maintained, which involves ensuring that the sliding calipers are free to move. The brakes tend to seize if the car is used infrequently. The handbrake operating mechanisms are particularly prone to seizure, unless regularly stripped/cleaned and lubricated with graphite grease. Trouble is, few X1/9s are lucky enough to get such attention until an MOT test failure certificate is received... View general state of brakes from under vehicle, and assess handbrake effectiveness on a gradient, during your test drive. Julian Vernon of specialists Xtra X1/9s recommends checking the brakes every three to six months, adding that regular steam cleaning of the underbody/wheel arches helps to keep dirt and salt away from the brakes as well as the car's general structure.

12 Check engine.

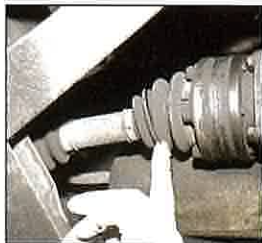
Renowned for their strength and longevity, the overhead cam engines in the X1/9s are also lively, and economical in terms of fuel consumption, unless the standard twin choke Weber carburettor has ailing butterfly spindles or accelerator pump diaphragms. The carburettor can be overhauled for around £30 to restore lost power and economy. It is essential that the cam belt is renewed at least every 30,000 miles; check service record, if available, and enquire of owner when belt was last changed. Power output and crankcase pressure are adversely affected by blockage of the crankcase breather valve (easily cleaned in de-greasing fluid). Very high mileage engines may show signs of worn piston rings and bearings, but these units are capable of clocking up well over 150,000 miles, if regularly serviced.

13 Assess cooling system.

Coolant flows between the front-mounted radiator and the mid-mounted engine (and back again) via underfloor-mounted steel pipes which eventually can corrode, resulting in a loss of water and potential overheating problems. If damage is localised, short sections of pipe can be replaced using rubber hoses. However, if corrosion is more serious, full replacement of the pipes will need to be carried out and this is a major operation. Check also the state of the radiator core, which is visible with the aid of an inspection lamp from under the front of the car, and also look at the rubber hoses and the cooling fan. During your test drive, keep a close eye on the temperature gauge... It is vital that antifreeze mixture with corrosion inhibitors is used in the cooling system all year round.



bearing engines and reliable



14 Check gearchange. A common fault concerns the gearchange mechanism. Seizure of the linkage's bush within the bell housing places undue strain on the clutch hydraulic slave cylinder, which then gives up, resulting in a poor gearchange quality and 'crunching' of gears, eventually damaging the gearbox itself. This is more likely on cars used infrequently. Other trouble spots to look for include excessive free play in the gearchange mechanism, worn synchromesh and a dodgy reverse gear. The four-speed gearboxes which were fitted to the early (1.3-litre) X1/9s are a little stronger than the five-speed units installed in the later, 1.5-litre cars. Fully reconditioned gearboxes, which include new synchro units, gears, bearings and gaskets, can be purchased at reasonable prices from specialist suppliers such as Xtra X1/9s.

15 Assess driveshafts and final drive. Check gaiters on inner and outer driveshaft joints, to ensure that they are intact, or dirt and moisture will enter, wrecking the joint within. Excessive wear in the driveshaft joints can sometimes be caused by collapsed engine mountings. These are quite difficult to see so check very carefully. To remove the engine and transmission units from the car, the driveshafts need to be detached; not difficult, but can be time-consuming. Major problems with the final drive unit are rare; as with the engine, the assembly is tough and long-lasting. But listen carefully for untoward noises in both 'drive' and 'over-run' situations; grumbling bearings and/or clanking sounds from within mean that a very early stripdown and detailed examination/assessment will be required; specialist help may be required.



"Few X1/9s are lucky enough to get attention until an MOT test failure certificate is received"

PRODUCTION HISTORY

■ **May 1969** Styling exercises by Italian coachbuilder Bertone led to Runabout concept unveiled at Turin show – in styling terms a direct forerunner to X1/9.

■ **1969** Fiat launches 128 family – sports car derivative will become X1/9.

■ **May 1972** Fiat X1/9 launched at Turin show; two seater mid-engined sports car, powered by 1.3-litre, overhead camshaft engine driving rear wheels via a four-speed gearbox. All independent suspension, four wheel disc brakes.

Equipment includes pop-up headlamps,

removable Targa roof panel, aluminium alloy road wheels, tinted glass, fog lamps and a heated rear window.

■ **1974** As Fiat UK refuses to market X1/9, British specialist Radbourne Racing imports its own cars which it converts to right-hand drive.

■ **February 1977** Right-hand drive X1/9 officially introduced to Britain.

■ **May 1978** Limited edition Lido launched, with bright finish bumpers.

■ **January 1979** New 1500 version, with more powerful 1.5-litre engine (Ritmo/Strada unit) and five-speed

gearbox, also larger, energy-absorbing bumpers.

■ **Spring 1982** Cars now produced by Bertone, and have Bertone badging.

■ **July 1983** VS version featured two tone paint, leather trim and electrically operated windows.

■ **July 1988** VS discontinued.

■ **March 1989** Standard X1/9 discontinued. Special Edition 'Gran Finale' versions introduced in UK to mark final production models. Features include Mica paint, spoked alloy road wheels, rear spoiler, leather-covered steering wheel and special Alcantara upholstery.

SPECIFICATIONS

■ Fiat X1/9 1500 1978-89

Engine	1498cc in-line four cylinder, ohc
Power	85bhp @ 6000rpm
Transmission	Five-speed manual
Brakes	Discs all round
Suspension	Front: MacPherson strut with lower control arms. Rear: MacPherson strut
Wheels	5x13in alloy
Tyres	165/70SR13in
Performance	Top speed: 105 mph 0-60mph: 11sec

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

Kerb weight 2027lb

Height 3ft 10.5in



CLUBS SEE PAGE 109

■ **Fiat Motor Club of GB** S Robins, 118 Brookland Road, Langport, Somerset TA10 9TH Tel: 01458 250116

■ **Fiat X1/9 Owners Club** Bwthyn Penygroes, Penisarwaun, Caenarfon, Gwynedd, LL55 3PP Tel/Fax 01286 872161 Website: www.x1-9ownersclub.org.uk.

■ **Sporting Fiat Register** Phil Maclean 2 Pinfold Close, Rippingdale, Lincs PE10 0TB

INSURANCE COSTS

■ Comprehensive, agreed value policies start at around £100. For high mileage/everyday use, premiums depend on driver's age, driving record and individual circumstances.

THANKS TO

■ Grateful thanks to **Les Cherrett**, owner of the lovely VS example featured in our photographs, also to **Julian Vernon** of **Xtra X19s Ltd** Unit 2, Dyke Road Mews, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 3RB (01273 207345) www.xtrax19s.co.uk and for extensive help with photography, to all the team at **Roger Taylor Classic Cars** in Bournemouth.