



If you can't afford a Lancia Stratos you could always put a V6 engine in your Fiat X1/9



An

PORSCHE BEATER

by Ed McDonough



AUTO ITALIA HAS ALWAYS been a little partial towards Fiats in general, and the sporty X1/9 in particular. The Editor has written a book about them and several of the regulars have tried and written the tales of various versions, including some with competition backgrounds and those adorned with turbochargers.

When Nick Troth's tidy example pattered past me a few months ago, sounding just that bit more vocal than the standard version, I took note and went to talk to him about it, and invited him to offer it up for a test session which he kindly did, but only after he gave me a few interesting

laps in it himself. The X1/9 is no ordinary car at the best of times, and this was certainly an extraordinary version, powered as it is by three litres of potent Alfa Romeo 164 V6 engine, stuffed very neatly into the midships of what is really a very small two-seater.

The story goes back some 15 years when Nick was servicing customer cars at his garage and was getting a taste for Fiat's little gem; and he liked them and consequently bought a customer's car which he had known since it was almost new. It started life with a 1,500cc engine but the engine and gearbox were getting a bit tired, and were replaced by a 2-litre twin cam with a stronger gearbox. Nick ran that for a year and tuned it so it had some improved performance. That car was in the Troth collection for six years. A hankering for a change and a chance conversation a year and a half ago led to

some theorising about whether an even bigger power plant would fit into the car, so Nick decided to see if it would work.

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Fairly obviously, the main problem was that the X1/9 was just not wide enough, so all the main suspension points needed to be moved outward some 3" on each side. Wider arches were then made to accommodate the larger Image wheels (made in the Black Country of the West Midlands) and shod with Avon ZZ1 225x45x16 on the rear, and 15" rims on

Alternative

Fiat X1/9



the front with 195 x 45 tyres. This combination turned out to be an ideal means of putting the increased power to the ground while remaining immensely civilised in the manner in which it was achieved, even in the damp test conditions when we tested the car. The front hubs from the 164 were transferred to the back of the Fiat and work in conjunction with the X1/9 wishbones and track control arm. Nick has reversed the hubs at the rear so he can use the arm that normally connects with the end of the steering rack as a drop arm, so this locks front and rear and prevents twisting under the stress of the engine's torque, not something either Alfa or Fiat had anticipated!

The Alfa's braking system has also been deployed to help in the stopping department, now that the Fiat is going

to go that much quicker. The servo-assist is removed as panic stops in a rear engine car with a servo tend to mean sudden front-end lock-up. The 164 engine remains fairly standard, though the top end was stripped and new valve guides were fitted, and Nick designed his own exhaust system to account for the new layout and location. He admits that he has kept the engine pretty tame as even in standard form it is immensely torquey and yet is superbly smooth.

Nick claims there is a bit more suspension tweaking to come and the ride is slightly hard, though I found it very acceptable considering this is now a performance sports car. The Spax adjustable shock absorbers work in tandem with the 164 shocks on the rear. The Alfa's anti-roll bar is about to find its way on to the rear for greater stability.

While Nick suggests that the X1/9's most endearing quality is its inherent smoothness under power, I found he was slightly understating this as the performance is a bit closer to that of a much pricier supercar. It has all the positives that make the 3-litre V6 so popular, but here it sits in something that is a fraction of the weight. It's very quick off the mark and has the luxury of very reasonable fuel consumption too.

With Nick encouraging me to discover that it can be pushed and pushed as the handling would still keep me out of trouble, I headed out round our favourite test track, slightly cautious about the owner's words as it remained slightly damp. I need not have worried, as the big shift in power is still integrally connected with classic X1/9 handling, and indeed it just wanted to hang on under pressure. The feel is certainly firmer, which it needs ▶



to be as this car is now capable of some 150mph, though I stayed well clear of that mark, but 130mph was certainly easy to achieve. The car can manage 0 to 60mph in under four seconds, and more amazingly can do it as smoothly as Nick says. Now, that is Porsche-impressive! No early 164 torque steer is apparent here, though Nick says you can provoke it a bit if you really try, but the 164 gearbox mates extremely well to the engine to make the whole package so tractable.

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We focussed on considering just how manageable a 3-litre engine in a car of these dimensions is for the ordinary driver. I expected something of an oversteering nightmare, but Nick Troth has either refined the gremlins out or there is just a lucky balance in terms of weight and power. He feels anyone can drive the car

ABOVE Ed McDonough test driving a modern car - whatever next!

BELOW Alfa V6 looks like its always been in the back - quality engineering

safely, even with all that power and the short wheelbase. The weight of the V6 amidships does move the centre of gravity so the feeling of stability is greater, and with the fuel tank moved to the front, that end sticks to the road better. The weight over the front end means that even at 150mph you don't get terrified. Nick said I could take my hands off the steering wheel at high speed and it would go in a straight line with no wandering – and he was, thankfully, right.

While there was a distinct temptation to push the car on the empty track, it became apparent that the real enjoyment in this car was to use it as a high speed tourer. While it clearly would suit the boy racer and tear round town like crazy, the long high speed cruise down to the South of France was going to be very pleasant in this car. With a lot of work having gone into sorting the interior, and with a reasonable amount of storage room, you could easily see this as a proper performance sports car. Even at well

over 120 mph, the driver is comfortable in the cockpit, with no wind swirling about inside. The 164 engine is quieter than the thrashing Fiat original, so it can be driven harder in comfort. Nick says the enjoyment of this smooth and restrained characteristic is a sign of age. Personally, I think it's a taste of luxury that one could quickly get accustomed to. ■

