

# CLASSIC CAR WEEKLY SHOOTOUT



## Character

MG



FIAT



THE MG Midget is a baby MGB. Whereas the Fiat X1/9 is a baby Ferrari. That might be something of a simplistic summary of the characters of these two cars, but it is one that fits quite well. Write the Midget a bit larger, and you do end up with an MGB Roadster. Max up the X1/9, and you get something that the name 'Dino' wouldn't necessarily appear out of place on.

It's all good, cheap budget fun from the Midget, not intended in any way to be serious. Or extract any more cash from you than it strictly needs to. It's an easy car to enjoy yourself in, safe in the knowledge that whatever you do, it's not going to cost you much money. Thus you can overlook a lot of its ageing technology because what it loses in cutting edge it makes up for in vibrancy.

The Fiat does feel more serious throughout, though. The styling, which, unlike the Midget's largely timeless design, could only have been born in the Seventies, begs to be regarded almost as a fashion statement, and the chassis is much better than the power on offer from either the 1300 or 1500 engine. It's a small sports car that wants to be regarded as far more grown up than it actually is.

National characteristics come into play too. The MG is a very traditional sports car, cast in a similar mould to many before it and many that would come after it. The X1/9, though, encapsulates both its era and the Italian love for the latest in style, for it was nothing like any Fiat that either preceded or succeeded it. But what looked good for 1972 seemed passé by the Eighties, and it was only Bertone's insistence that kept the car alive beyond 1981, the year Fiat itself decided it wanted to end production.

## ON THE ROAD Performance

MG



FIAT



SPORTSCARS the Fiat and the MG may be, but the actual thrill from their performance is based on how fast they feel, rather than how fast they actually are. With top speeds barely over the 100mph mark – rare is the car today that can't do well over the ton, however humble it may be in other regards

– and 0-60 times that can be measured almost in yawns rather than seconds, these cars are not the sort to stimulate the imagination on paper.

So ignore the road test figures and actually get behind the wheel. Because the cars are so small, and seem to wrap themselves around the driver so completely, the impression is of cars that are actually genuinely nippy. In fact, with the Midget being smaller still than the X1/9, it can feel distinctly scary at higher speeds, when you become very aware of how fast you're going and how little metal there is around you in the event of something going a bit pear-shaped. The X1/9 is a more substantial car, but you still feel higher velocities very intensely. Faster overall than the MG, the X1/9 gives a slightly slower account of itself in the sprint to 60, and with its less roty exhaust and bigger

It's the old guard versus the new this week, with one of Britain's traditional lightweight champions going into the ring against a featherweight pretender from the sunnier climes of Southern Europe. Over in the, um, Vermillion Red corner is that old favourite, the MG Midget in 1500 form, while in the black corner limbers up the Fiat X1/9, for this contest for the crown of the most fun but affordable small sports car. Looking at these two very different classics, it's difficult to believe that, at one point in time, they were actually in competition against each other. The era of the small British sports car may almost have been over by the Seventies, but the MG Midget had a few last gasps to breathe before its final demise in 1979. Since its introduction in 1961 – albeit as a reworked and badge-engineered of the Austin-Healey Sprite that had first surfaced in 1958 – there had been few changes to the original formula. Small tweaks here and there resulted in Mk 1, 2 and 3 versions, but there was little to distinguish visually between a 1961 car and a '73 model.

That changed in 1974, when British Leyland – by then the dysfunctional guardian of the MG marque – gave the Midget the most radical makeover of its career. In came a more powerful 1493cc engine, cribbed from what had been the Midget's main rival for years, the Triumph Spitfire. But what was given with one hand was taken away with another, for the extra power was accompanied by a very noticeable raised ride height as well as black rubber safety bumpers. The Midget looked very different, but was it for the better? Most thought not.

However, it was obvious to all that something had been necessary to spruce up the long-in-the-tooth baby MG and make it seem fresher and more valid against its ever-increasing and newer rivals. One serious threat had arrived from Fiat in 1972 in the form of the wedge-shaped X1/9. The X1/9 had several aces up its Bertone-designed sleeves. It just didn't look a lot newer than cars like the Midget, but it was also mid-engined too, one of the first mainstream attempts to bring to the masses what was previously the preserve of fabulously expensive supercars. Against the tired technology of competitors like the Midget, such arguments were very persuasive.

30 years down the line, has age shortened or widened the gap between the Midget and the X1/9. Let's go and find out!

dimensions, it does feel slightly less enthusiastic than the British car.

Both cars won't be too challenged keeping up with modern traffic, so long as you don't attempt too many ill-judged grand prix starts away from the lights. On motorways, there's little struggle to get up to a good speed and stay there, although the X1/9 does sound more relaxed under these conditions than the more ancient MG.

## Handling

MG



FIAT



IT'S almost a foregone conclusion even before the first corner. One car is a rear-wheel-drive British sports car with budget suspension largely dating back to the mid-Fifties. The other is a mid-engined design originating from two decades later and hailing from a country that knew a thing or two about making cars with engines in the middle go around corners. The MG Midget doesn't handle badly, thanks to its 'adult skateboard' feel, but the cart-sprung rear-

wheel-drive does make itself known by the way the car skits around bends with a fair bit of bump from behind. It's even more apparent with the later models, such as this 1500, which had their ride height raised to meet new lighting regulations. The extra inch or so does add extra body roll, which results in more wallowing than is strictly desirable.

If the MG Midget is an enthusiastic but slightly drunk teenager out at the local nightclub, then the Fiat is a classically trained ballet dancer by comparison. On twisty roads, the X1/9 comes into its own, capable of easily beating much bigger and better rivals – a British Leyland-era MG Midget doesn't stand a chance. The all-independent suspension combines with the excellent balance – it's about 40 to the front, 60 to the rear – to create a delicately poised car with very neutral handling characteristics. Although there's no power assistance to the steering, it feels lightweight and perfectly matched to the car, and makes it a sheer delight to manipulate through corners.

So, is it all great with the Fiat? Well, no. The car does sit on very narrow tyres, and if you do get things wrong, then the car will bite you with a vengeance, especially in the wet. If you do lose control in an X1/9, then there is little way back. It's easier to get control again in the MG if you need to,

although that's probably because the Midget will give way at a lower speed. Still, it all fits in with our earlier assessment of the Fiat as a bit of a ballerina...it can be something of a prima donna as well if it wants to be.

## Ride

MG



FIAT



IT'S the Midget that likes to remind you most that you're in a sports car, by bouncing you around whenever it gets the chance. Bumpy country lanes will never be that comfortable, thanks to the serious lack of damping on the car, and it soon becomes a relief that the only thing for your head to hit is thin air or a soft hood. On short trips, the Midget's up and down exuberance is quite entertaining. On longer journeys, though, it just starts to become a little on the wearing side.

Things are a little softer inside the X1/9, which does a creditable job of managing to handle like a proper sports car while also

How classic cars compare with their closest rivals

# FIAT X1/9 MG MIDGET 1500



being quite comfortable under everyday circumstances. Lack of space is more of an issue in the Fiat than bumps coming through from the road, and on marathon jaunts, you'll tire more of not being able to move around much before you start to become too painfully aware of the surface of the road below you.

## Gearbox



LARGER-engined 1500 X1/9 models all used a five-speed gearbox, but those who chose the 1300 cars had to make do with only a four-speed transmission. While that means the car lacks a little top end flexibility, the gearbox is still a good 'un, with a short throw and very competent synchromesh. There's little to gripe about with the actual ratios, although third is a little taller than many might like. It's a matter of personal taste though.

Initially notchy at first, the Midget's gearlever soon becomes as familiar as an old boot. It's not one of the world's great transmissions, but it blends in well with the rest of the MG's personality.

## Braking



AGAIN, the MG betrays its older origins when compared to the Fiat X1/9 by only having disc brakes at the front, while the X1/9 has them all around. Still, it could be worse... the first Midgets came only with drum brakes.

Still, with the small MG only weighing around the same as a Mini, there's little to find fault with. There may not be anything too complicated going on behind the wheels, but because these aren't heavy cars, the brakes are just effective as the ones on the heftier X1/9. Neither car has servo

assistance though, so the middle pedals do require quite a big push to give their absolute best.

## PRACTICALITY

### Cabin and controls



THE Midget lives up to its name inside as well as out. The cabin is a tiny and confined space into which you have to lever yourself with not a little awkwardness. Those who vary greatly from the norm in stature – although what is the norm anyway? – may have trouble getting comfortable inside, and the lack of useable space is another reminder of just how old the design was by the Seventies. You'll probably need to put your legs either side of the steering wheel rather than underneath. Find a good position and stick with it if you can.

Instruments and controls are on the skimpy side, although it's quite common for owners to add extra dials here and there. As standard though were a speedometer and rev counter flanking the steering wheel, with a combined temperature and oil pressure gauge in the centre as well as the fuel monitor. It's all easy enough to see, with the switchgear also being easy enough to reach as well. Most of the switches inhabit the same space as the two supplementary dials over in the middle of the car.

If you're lucky, you may get a radio, installed behind the gearstick, where you will practically be able to change stations using the lever if you push hard enough.

The dashboard of the MG Midget is very traditional – but that's definitely not the case with the Fiat. Like its wedgy outside, the interior of the X1/9 is all straight lines and angles inside, and has dated very badly compared to the Midget. It is pure Seventies, with curves being strictly limited to the steering wheel and the instruments behind it. This is a prime example of the Lego school of ergonomics.

Still, a positive feature of this modular approach is that at least all the dials sit in easy view behind the steering wheel, leaving the centre console clear for just switches and the radio – which sits very prominently in a big box all of its own atop the front parcel shelf.

Thanks to having the engine right behind the seats, space is at a premium, although you can forgive this more than you can the MG's cramped conditions because you know the handling is so rewarding because of it.

While the Fiat's targa roof arrangement makes it less of a true open top car than the Midget, it's still a very pleasant car to drive on sunny days, and there is the advantage that you don't get buffeted by the wind anything like as much as you do in the Midget. It also only takes 10 seconds to remove the roof using just two clips. Unfortunately, having the roof off does limit luggage space, as the panel has to be stored under the front boot. Speaking of which...

## Luggage space



THERE'S space both at the front and the back of the Fiat, and considering how small the car is, the cargo area is quite generous. However, bear in mind, as we've mentioned, that if you want to put anything in the front, having the targa roof in there as well will compromise capacity. However, unlike some other cars with the same arrangement, where you automatically lose any luggage space if you want to lose the roof, fresh air motoring doesn't automatically cancel out your right to carry stuff.

More useful is the boot at the rear, which is of decent enough dimensions to be able to carry two or three reasonably-sized bags. Unfortunately, its proximity to the engine can result in things getting a little warm, so it's not the place to store supermarket goods.

So where is the spare wheel during all

this? Well, in a rather clever piece of thinking, the spare wheel sits in a cut-out behind the driver's seat, nicely out of the way.

You're limited to just a rear boot on the Midget, and it's a shallow and narrow affair that can only just swallow a bit more than the back boot on the X1/9. There is some extra space behind the seats, although this does raise a security issue, as whatever you put there will be on display to anybody who looks inside. And with only a flimsy vinyl hood to keep the lowlife out.

## Running costs



AT last, a section where the MG Midget is the clear winner. Specialist back-up for the MG Midget is superb, with both the car itself and the Triumph Spitfire-derived engine well catered for by both those who repair or those who will sell you the parts to help repair. Not that you'll need to resort to the former too often, as these are very simple cars to work on and even quite complex jobs are possible on your

driveway. Weird, then, that one job that should be very simple actually turns out to be incredibly complex. Thanks to the distributor being tucked away under the steering column, adjusting the points is a real pig. Unfortunately, though, it's something that needs to be done quite often...

Fuel consumption is frugal enough, although the Triumph 1493cc engine isn't as economical as it should have been, and can't compare to the lack of thirst demonstrated by the A-series engines cars.

The Fiat is better on mpg – by quite a way – but sourcing bits and pieces is likely to be a more serious issue. In this country, at least, there are nowhere near the number of X1/9 specialists as there are for the home-grown MG. Not that you'll probably have too many issues with the engine, because it is known to be one of the Italy's better efforts, but watch out for rust rampaging through the body panels. Corrosion is a big problem with these cars, and prices for replacement panels are high. Now, it's not often that a Seventies British Leyland product comes out top in a rot comparison, is it?

Working on the cars yourself isn't that much of an issue, but lack of space can make it frustrating, especially engine work, where you have to lean over a lot of bodywork to get at things. If you've got a hoist rigged up in the roof of a garage that will allow you to hang upside down above the open engine bay, it all becomes a bit easier, but it's possibly not the best option for anybody without Batman pretensions...



## The one that I want

THE Fiat X1/9 scores the most points in the majority of the categories here, but even if it hadn't done, it would still have been the car I wanted to take home with me. In the end, it comes down to scarcity and engineering interest. As much fun as they undoubtedly are in the right circumstances, there's too little to get too excited about with MG Midgets, especially the 1500 cars. The looks are as familiar as the engineering that underpins them, and a Midget falls into the same category as its bigger sister, the MGB, and its cousin from across the tracks, the Morris Minor, as a classic that can easily pass unnoticed in an urban landscape. The X1/9, however, remains a head turner, under most circumstances. You can probably recall the last time you saw a Midget. Now try and remember your last glimpse of an X1/9?

With its distinctive styling and mid-engined layout, I've no doubt it the X1/9 would hold my interest more in the long term too. It might also frustrate me a lot too, but in the end, I think I'd be able to forgive it a lot more than the MG because it is such a fascinating classic.

**Richard Gunn**

## Fact file

### Fiat

Actual car tested	1978 Fiat X1/9 Lido
Price range*	£900-£3000
Top speed	108mph
0-60mph	13.3secs
Economy	36mpg
Fuel tank size	10.1 gallons
Engine	1290cc, 4-cyl, ohc
Power	61bhp @ 5800rpm
Torque	67lb/ft @ 4000rpm
Unleaded fuel?	Yes

Gearbox	4-speed manual
Brakes	Disc/disc
Steering	Rack & pinion
Dimensions	13' 2" x 5' 2"
Weight	2065lbs
Last CCW buyers guide	6/10/05

\* From average condition to top dealer/concours price

### MG

1974 MG Midget 1500
£1750-£4250
102mph
12.2secs
28mpg
7 gallons
1493cc, 4-cyl, ohv
66bhp @ 5500rpm
77lb/ft @ 3000rpm

No, needs head conversion or fuel additive
4-speed manual
Disc/drum
Rack & pinion
11' 7" x 4' 6"
1720lbs
27/10/05