

# Eternal Questions: The Tale of the 1972-89 Fiat X1/9

by Graham Robson

**H**ow many Fiat X1/9s were made? When did production actually end? Were there any gaps in the middle? Were the last cars really "Bertone" or "Fiat"? Aw shucks, guys, give me a break—we're talking about Italian cars here. . . .

But it's still infuriating. Fiat's mid-engined X1/9 was one the neatest little two-seaters to come out of Turin in the Seventies, but there's still much we don't know about it. Which is par for the course, for it's never easy to get facts from the Italians. With, according to popular legend, three different sets of accounts in existence at any one time—one set for the tax man, one for the Mafia, and one true set for themselves—the Italians have never made research easy for auto enthusiasts.

Not that one would ever need to research the attraction of the X1/9. It was sexy; it was practical; it was technically advanced; and when it was new, it simply exuded style. Small wonder that many buyers went out and bought Ferrari badges to put on their car's nose, for in many ways that's what an X1/9 felt like.

Except that some people wanted more performance, no one could really argue about any of that. Failings? For sure, there were several. As far as the American market was concerned, the original 1.3-liter-engined car wasn't fast enough. Build quality? Well, it *was* Italian—and not built in a mainstream Fiat factory, either. Corrosion? Ah, yes, best not to talk about that. . . .

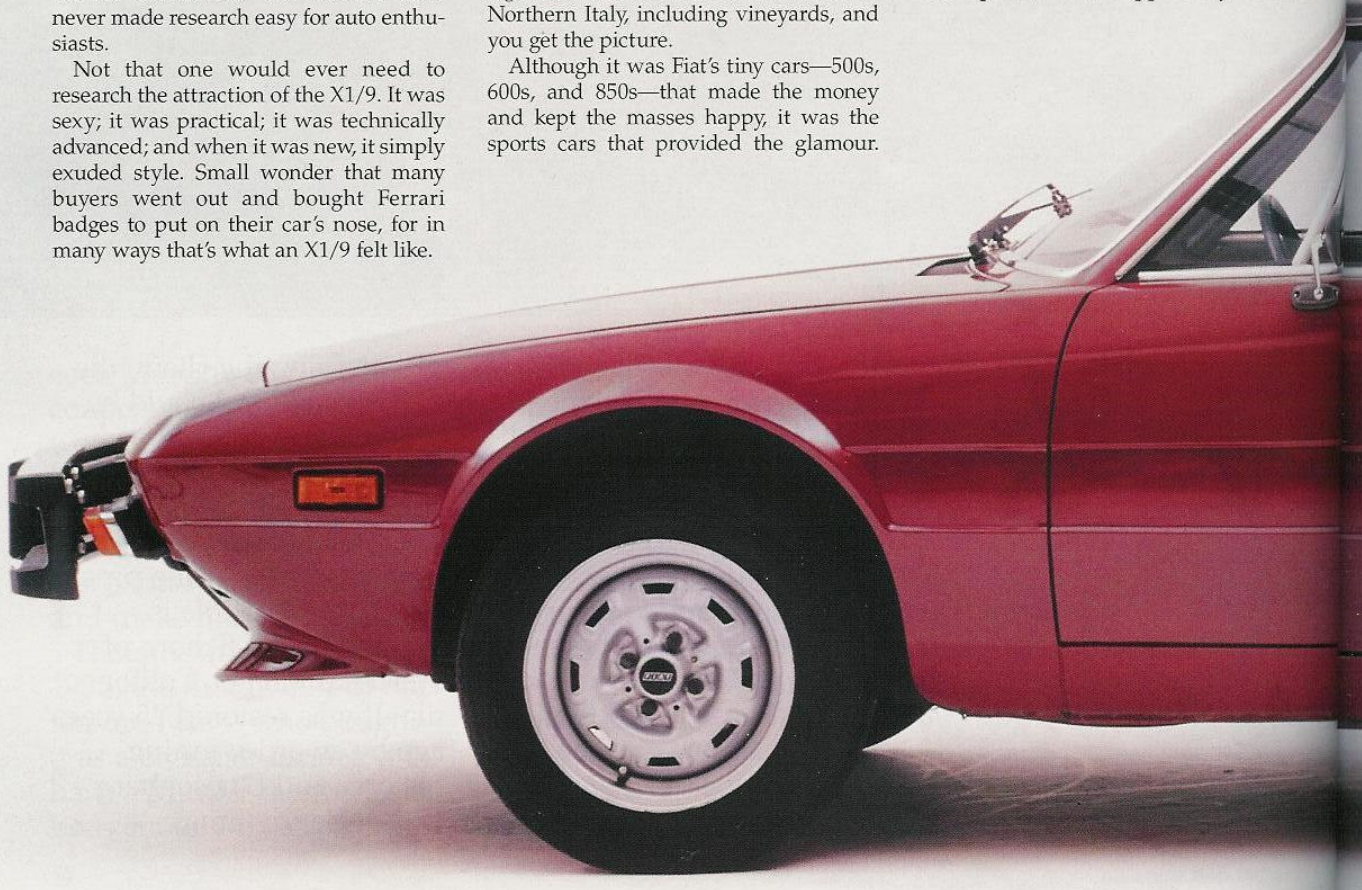
## Origins

By the late Sixties, Fiat was Italy's dominant carmaker, and seemed to make something for everyone. Think of General Motors, but with more style, more dash, and a governing family—the Agnellis—that seemed to own most of Northern Italy, including vineyards, and you get the picture.

Although it was Fiat's tiny cars—500s, 600s, and 850s—that made the money and kept the masses happy, it was the sports cars that provided the glamour.

That's where the inspiration for the X1/9 came from. Bertone-styled Fiat 850 Spiders had been successful (more than 130,000 would be built), but the time was coming due for a replacement. In any case, the rear-engined 850 Spider was technically obsolete, for in the Seventies Fiat's 850 was to be replaced by two related transverse-engine, front-wheel-drive cars: the 127 and the 128.

So, what to do? With the 850 Spider killed off, Bertone, of Turin, would be looking for work, and with the 128 launched, that new car would be looking for a bit of stardust to give it some glamour. Anxious to curry favor, Bertone developed a front-engined/front-drive 128 Spider, which apparently looked





**It was manufactured for nearly two decades, and it found a ready audience both at home and abroad, but for all of that, there are still some things about the midengine Fiat X1/9 that remain a mystery. For that, we can thank “the Italians.”**

awful, and was not a success.

Enter, at this point, Nuccio Bertone himself, no longer a man who used a drawing board, but now the *capo di capo*, the great inspirer, and the politician with influence.

“If we could package a midengined Lamborghini,” he is reputed to have said, “we can do the same with a Fiat.” Scheming up the Miura with a transversely mounted V-12 engine had been difficult, so doing the same thing with a Fiat four-cylinder unit should be easy—or so he is reputed to have said. Since his word was law, his designers suddenly

found it an irresistible idea. Ferrari, after all, had also developed the Dino 206GT, so what was the problem?

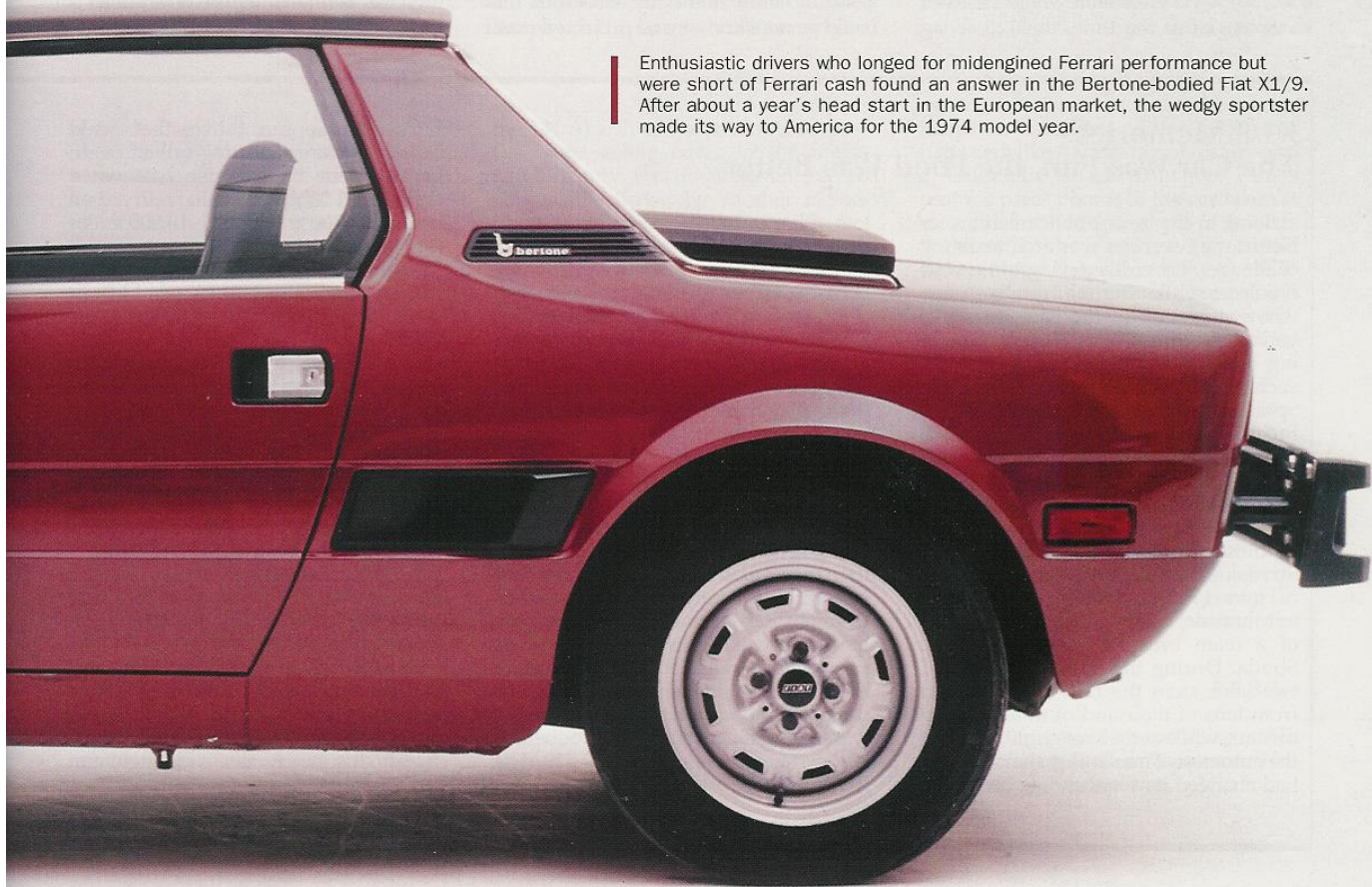
Bertone’s brilliant idea was to pick up the transversely positioned ohc engine of the new Fiat 128, complete with its gearbox and driveshafts; move it back a few feet to a position behind the cabin; make sure the steering mechanism no longer worked—and an instant mid-engined car was born. With just two seats, a sleek wedge nose up front, and a bit of judicious pushing and shoving of the package, a new type of sporty car was possible.

Bertone’s real coup, though, was to show Fiat both his schemes—front-engined 128 Spider and midengined brainwave—and at the same time to build a one-off Runabout Barchetta concept car for the Turin Motor Show of 1969. The public didn’t know that all the elements of the X1/9 were hidden away under the Runabout’s cute skin, but they didn’t mind that. They loved it, they said so, Fiat listened, and—suddenly—Bertone had a new project on which to work.

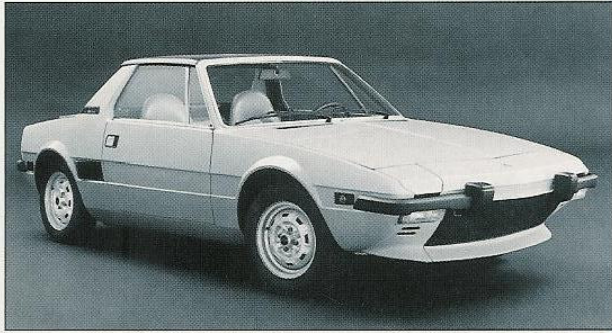
#### **Practicalities**

Those were the days when Fiat could

Enthusiastic drivers who longed for midengined Ferrari performance but were short of Ferrari cash found an answer in the Bertone-bodied Fiat X1/9. After about a year’s head start in the European market, the wedgy sportster made its way to America for the 1974 model year.







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move very fast. Once the Agnellis had said yes, Fiat's design team, led by Dante Giacosa, swept into action. Engineering would be by Fiat; styling and detail decoration would be by Bertone. Then, when the time came, Bertone would press, assemble, paint, and trim the unit-body structures, with final assembly to be concentrated at Fiat's Mirafiori plant, which was just a few kilometers away in another part of Turin. Giacosa's director of advanced design, Guiseppe Puleo, would be team leader.

The new car was given Fiat project code X1/9. (There was a whole series of these at Fiat at the time, the 128 sedan

1. The X1/9 was built on an 86.8-inch wheelbase. It arrived on the market sporting a midships 1.3-liter ohc four-cylinder engine and drivetrain from Fiat's front-wheel-drive 128 Sport sedan. 2. The unitized body featured pop-up headlights and luggage compartments in the nose and tail of the car. 3. The removable targa roof panel could be stored in the front luggage hold. Under the top sat a nicely appointed cockpit.

being X1/1 and the 130 sedan being X1/3, for example.) It was to be a single-purpose two-seater sports car, but with a difference. Neither then, nor later, was there any intention of this coupe becoming a convertible, or a 2+2, or having a different engine.

With input from Bertone, Fiat evolved a sturdy little unit-body structure that could pass all known and projected crash

tests, with two snug seats, with the engine and transmission immediately behind the cabin, and with all-independent suspension (the rear using some elements of the Fiat 128 layout). So far, so predictable, but the innovations then began to pile up.

Not only was this to be a car with *two* luggage compartments—one ahead of the cabin and another in the tail behind

## X1/9 Memories: The Car Was Fun, the Food Was Better

Being in charge of public relations for Fiat in the Seventies was an interesting challenge, sort of like trying to tie your shoelaces while running from someone who wants to beat the cookies out of you. The company was known for making interesting and stylish sports cars such as the Pininfarina-designed 124 Spider and the Bertone-inspired X1/9. But its breadsticks and olive oil came from econoboxes ranging from the ill-fated 126 (holder of a place of honor in the Rust-Oleum Hall of Fame) through the 127, 128, and the last Fiats to come to these shores, the 131, Brava, and Strada.

I joined Fiat Motors of North America in Montvale, New Jersey, in 1978 as part of a team brought in to launch the Strada. During the period, we all had two jobs: stem the flow of bad blood from tens of thousand of unhappy Fiat owners, while at the same time convince the automotive media that the company had changed its ways and, by investing

lots of lire in robots, was going to build reliable, robust vehicles. Right.

The X1/9 was a favorite of mine because of its unique, though tiny, shape and its fun-to-drive personality. The Fiat designers and engineers deserve credit for moving the 128 front-wheel-drive mechanicals to the middle of the platform, thereby creating a rear-wheel-drive sports car.

The X1/9 was supposed to be a sports car for the masses when it was launched in 1972, with a 1.3-liter four-cylinder ohc engine that spun out 75 horsepower (DIN) at 6000 rpm. The transaxle was a four-speed that was not so easy to shift fast, and frequently cantankerous when trying to engage reverse. For 1979, a 1.5-liter engine and a five-speed transmission were introduced. In 1982, the vehicle was renamed the Bertone (after its designer and contract builder) until it was eventually taken out of production. Altogether, there were 140,519 Fiat X1/9s built.

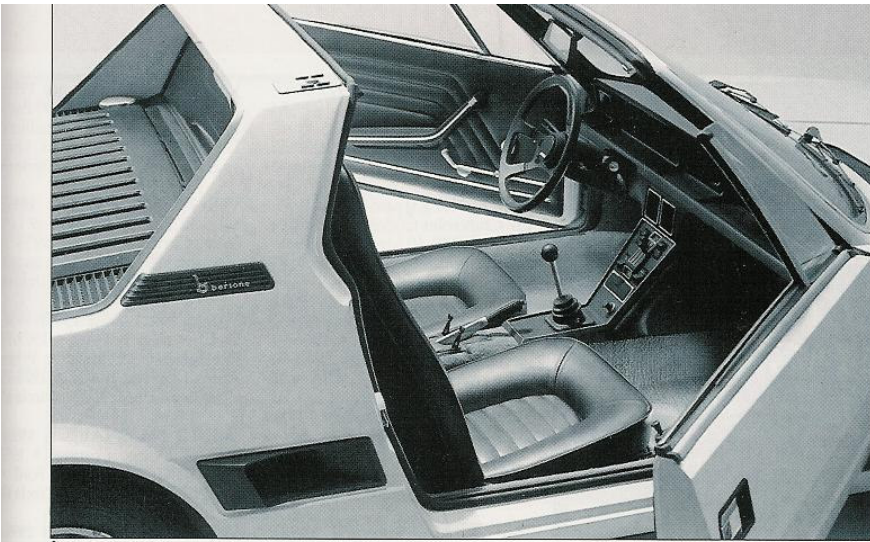
One of the fun things that could capture an unsuspecting (albeit negligent) owner by surprise was when the cogged-rubber camshaft drive belt would let loose at about 40,000 miles (or less), allowing the pistons to smack the valves. Someone later figured out that notching the pistons would be a good idea in that circumstance. But I digress.

The X1/9 was a very snug two-seater with a lift-off targa top that could be stored in the front luggage compartment. And, while the car wasn't particularly fast—the quarter mile came in 18.5 seconds—it was quick-feeling thanks to fast-ratio rack-and-pinion steering, four-wheel independent suspension, and four-wheel disc brakes.

Despite its small size it was pricey for the time, having a base price of \$4167 in 1975. For comparison, a Mustang II Mach 1 was \$4188.

The X1/9 was seen as a "chick car," but women typically didn't like the fact that there was no room to stow anything behind the seats. Like all two-seaters, insurance rates were high, and the fun factor faded rapidly in the face





the engine bay—but it was also to have a removable steel roof panel, where the panel could either be stowed in the front bay or left at home in the garage. A big windshield; wind-up door windows; and great-looking, comfortable seats made up a cabin that should have made British Leyland ashamed of what it was still selling (not that it did, for this was the time when Leyland was reinventing the word

“complacency”). As for the spare wheel, well, there was one, and full-sized at that, but it could only be reached by folding down a front seat and extracting it through a door!

Although it was demonstrably pleased with the style—wedge-nosed with flip-up headlamps, sharp-edged, practical, and above all compact (even in heavier-bumpered U.S.-market trim an original

X1/9 was only 153.5 inches long)—Fiat was most proud of the chassis and suspension layout. MacPherson-strut suspension at front and rear, rack-and-pinion steering so light that no one even considered power assistance, and four-wheel disc brakes all made up a very modern package, and the handling lived up to every forecast. Not only did this little car have roadholding well up to any sports-car level (it made the rival MG Midget and Triumph Spitfire [CA, April 2001] feel harsh and old-fashioned by comparison), but on Rodeo Drive or Fifth Avenue it felt smooth and comfortable, too.

But did the powertrain let the side down? Except for the fact that they were placed behind the cabin, the engine and transmission were almost pure 128 Sport, with no further power tuning. The 1.3-liter (78.7-cid) engine had an aluminum cylinder head with a single overhead camshaft driven by internally cogged belt from the nose of the crankshaft. At first, it was matched to the four-speed, all-synchromesh, all-indirect box of the 128 Rallye sedan. Like all the best little Fiat engines, this was smooth, high-revving, and seemingly unbreakable, but for some

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of day-to-day driving requirements and frequent trips to dealers who worked without an official X1/9 shop manual for the first couple of years! Add to that problems like not being able to open the gas cap, the engine overheating and thrashing away behind your head, and squirrelness in the snow, and its plain to see the X1/9 was an acquired taste.

It has, however, had a respectable career in Sports Car Club of America Class F and G production racing, where it's won the class a couple of times. Kim Baker had much success with the X1/9 in the late Seventies and early Eighties, and Bob Boig has done very well in G Production, to name just a couple of the successful pilots.

In fact, racing is where the X1/9 has carved out a very comfortable and respected afterlife. The cars can be had for a song when you can find them, and there are plenty of go-fast parts. Probably the best-known Fiat tuners and parts purveyors are Paul and Bob Swenson at PBS Engineering in Garden Grove, California. They helped me on a number of projects while I was at Fiat, including getting *Road & Track* to put

the 131 Abarth rallye car on its cover—the worst-selling cover in the magazine's history. (Fortunately, that record was later eclipsed by another racing-oriented shot.) But I digress.

Carrozzeria Bertone has been known for designing and building distinctive—some might say radical—sports cars. Italians are known for design talents and their passion for speed and fast cars. If you didn't have to follow their creations with a team of mechanics and a parts bin, they would have been far more successful.

My most vivid recollection of my time with Fiat and the X1/9 was the friendship I made with Nuccio Bertone and his PR guy, Beppe Panico. Bertone would sit through an interview with an American journalist and listen, nod, and make appropriate lip smacks to questions being translated from English to Italian. He'd hike himself up in his chair and make “Godfather”-like wheezes and whispers, which Beppe would then turn into completely unrelated, but very self-serving, answers. Then it was time to eat.

My fondest Panicoism was when we

launched a limited-edition X1/9 that had suedelike Alcantara upholstery and a “micatallic” black paint job. Panico sent me press photos of the car taken at a local sand and gravel pit (a favorite backdrop of his) with a long-haired Italian model draped over the hood. In one pose she was wearing an evening gown, but in another pose, she was topless. Panico wrote, “Bill [pronounced Bee-hul] I don't know which shot you will like to use, so I send both. *Ciao!*”

I dutifully sent both to *Car and Driver*, thinking the boys in the art department would get a kick out of the note and the photo, but naturally run the one with the model fully clothed. To my complete surprise, they ran both—and the note! While a whole bunch of high school libraries canceled their subscriptions, the X1/9 became a pin-up in teenage boys' bedrooms around the country.

But I digress.

*Bill Baker*

*Bill Baker spent 30 years doing public relations for various car companies. He's now a freelance journalist.*





markets, it looked to need more power.

Before I criticize the original car for its lack of performance, maybe I should look at its opposition. In Europe, and certainly in North America, in the early Seventies, it would have to sell against the Midget and the Spitfire, both of which had 1.3-liter engines of between 65 and 70 bhp at this time. OK, but was a top speed of 93 mph enough, when anything cheap and cheerful from Detroit would humiliate it at every traffic light?

Even though getting it through the new U.S. emission laws would cut the power from 75 bhp to a mere 66 bhp, Fiat thought it was, knew that larger versions of the engine were available when needed, and forecast that the X1/9 would sell on flair rather than acceleration, on beauty rather than brutal performance. Whether Fiat admitted it or not, it was looking to satisfy the Yuppie market rather than that of the traditionalist, and wanted owners to think more of keeping

their hair in place, not their tool kits at the ready.

#### Launch

The new car was launched in November 1972 (immediately *after* the Turin show; Fiat had not wanted it to overshadow other new models), and European sales began almost at once. In Italy, the rather barely equipped domestic-market model cost the equivalent of only \$3000, which meant that there was a big demand at once.

For a time, Fiat only sold the new car at home, not just because the demand was there, but because this was the best way to ease a complex new structure into series production. Bertone, after all, was building the entire structure, not merely paneling a platform provided by Fiat.

Americans who had fallen in love with the style could read about the car before they could buy it, for U.S. sales did not begin until 1974. This was the only year

in which pretty black bumpers were available in the USA, but even these added to the European-spec car's overall length. All that extra weight to provide crash-test resistance, plus a detoxed engine, reduced the top speed to only 93 mph, while 0-60 mph took a lengthy 15.3 seconds. Fuel consumption averaging 30 miles per U.S. gallon was one consolation, but there's no doubt that this was not a very fast little two-seater.

The public, though, loved the cars. Bertone's figures show that although just 9480 bodies were produced in 1973, 20,207 were produced in 1974, after which production settled down to between 15,000 and 20,000 cars annually, which completely underpinned Bertone's business.

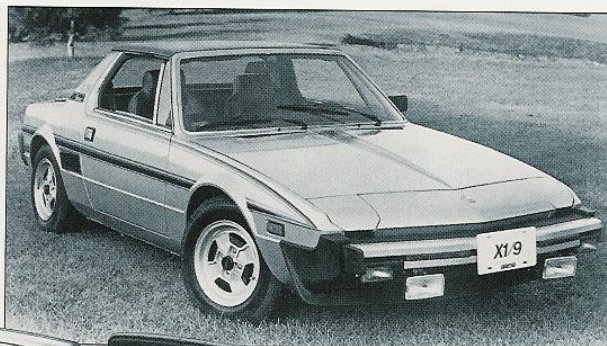
#### Maturity with 1.5 Liters

Capitol Hill, not Fiat, then tried to ruin the X1/9's good looks by passing laws that required "five-mph" bumpers to be

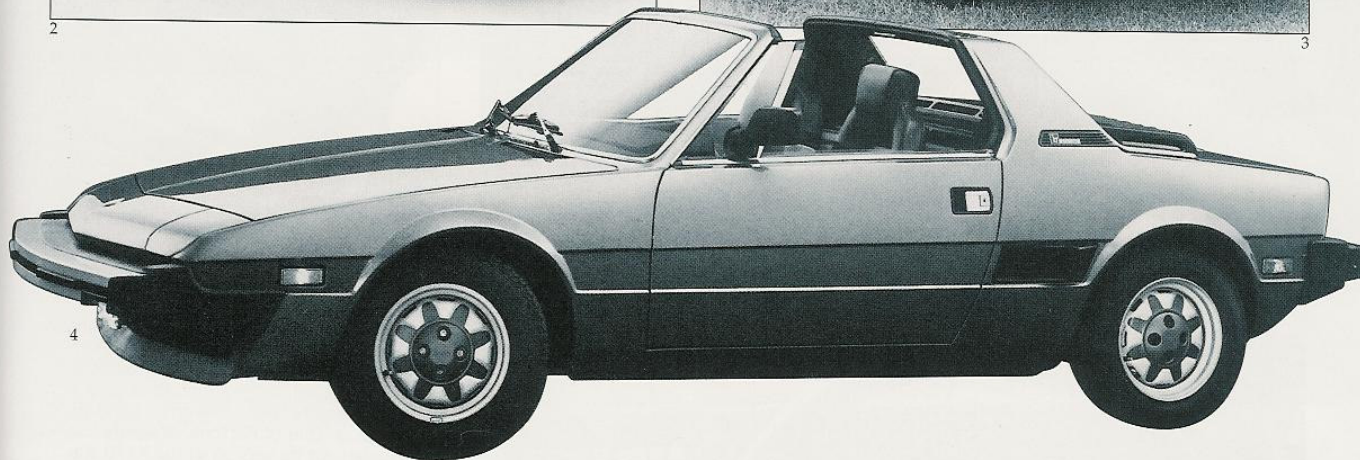




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1. The first X1/9 to be sold in the U.S. was the only one that came with fairly modest and unobtrusive bumpers. 2. Those that came after 1974 would wear more substantial "armor" front and rear. 3. Starting in 1979, the two-seat Fiat was equipped with a 1.5-liter engine—good for 67 bhp in the States—and a five-speed gearbox. New-style bumpers were also fitted. 4. The 1981 U.S.-market model was the first to come with standard Bosch fuel injection (which had been standard in California the year before). With injection, horsepower was pegged at 76 at 5500 rpm. Alloy wheels also were part of the package.

fitted to all cars. To meet these regulations, Fiat was forced to fit big "cow-catcher" bumpers, which not only added length but weight to the little car. This was one of several ways in which the X1/9 was emasculated in the Seventies, and before long, this made the use of a bigger engine essential. For model-year 1979, therefore, the X1/9 became X1/9 1500, complete with a longer-stroke 1498cc (91.5 cid) version of the ohc engine from the new Strada and the very real advance of a five-speed transmission. There were changes to the seats and instrumentation as well. Bertone made sure that we noticed the changes: The bumpers had been smoothed out, and the badging made certain that the five-speed innovation was obvious too. A bulkier engine-bay cover also made its point—a necessity, as the engine was a touch deeper than before.

But this wasn't enough. In 1979, the Shah of Iran fled his country, the second

energy crisis was upon us, the price of fuel soared again—and all car sales suffered. X1/9 production dropped from 20,082 cars in 1979 to 14,993 in 1980, and then to only 4619 in 1981. It didn't help that, at the same time, a storm had blown up all over the world regarding the build quality of Fiat products. Dealer stocks in the U.S. ballooned, confidence deflated almost as fast, and before long, the X1/9's future was under threat. Even though a Bosch L-Jetronic fuel-injected engine became standard for the American market in 1981 (a U.S. option in 1980, it was never adopted for the rest of the world), there didn't seem to be much of a future for Fiat sports cars.

Except that others were brave where Fiat was in something of a panic. When Fiat proposed to kill off its two-seaters, its favored body builders—who relied on the manufacturing business—thought differently. Early in 1982, it was announced Pininfarina would take over

the 124 Spider project, while Bertone decided to assume complete manufacture of the X1/9 and rebadge it as a Bertone motor car in the process. That, indeed, was important, but so was a very large concession from Fiat: The new Pininfarina Spider and Bertone X1/9 models would continue to be sold through Fiat dealers in the USA, and would be backed by a factory warranty.

Even so, the X1/9 continued to live on a knife edge for a time. When I called on Bertone at Grugliasco, Turin, in September 1982, the X1/9 assembly lines were totally deserted, with no sign of cars or body shells in evidence. This, my guide insisted, was because total manufacture of Bertone X1/9s was still being planned, but I suspect one reason was that U.S. stocks of unsold cars were still very high.

Even so, with nothing to lose—and with a yawningly empty factory with a workforce to be kept busy—Bertone put the neat little car back into production, continuing manufacture from 1983 to the start of model-year 1989. It was, in fairness, all bravery and no innovation, for Bertone was not equipped to design a new chassis, or even to upgrade an old one. With the aid of skillful upgrading of the equipment, and with some special





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editions, there was enough demand to keep Grugliasco busy. (After Fiat quit the U.S. market in 1983, importation of X1/9s was handled by Malcolm Bricklin, whose previous automotive exploits included introducing the Subaru to America and production of the 1974-75 Bricklin SV-1 "gullwing" two-seater [CA, December 1992].)

In all that time, there was little mechanical change, for Fiat merely kept watch on the way that American legislation was changing, then made sure its powertrains were up to date with that.

Bertone, on the other hand, lavished its new own-brand 1983 models with two-tone paint, leather seating, and electric window lifts, while the X1/9VS (for *Versione Speciale*) had different alloy wheels and other "I'm trendy" details.

Then the desperation set in. Different trim specifications were made for different markets—some stripped-down entry-level jobs, some trimmed-up "special editions"—but there were no sheet-metal updates, and in the USA, the fuel-injected engine persisted to the end. By 1988, though, the end was very close; the

Faced with a substantial loss of business from Fiat's plan to abandon the X1/9 after 1982, Turin coachbuilder Bertone struck a deal to keep the car in production under its own name from 1983 to 1989. 1. One of Bertone's favorite touches for its version of the X1/9 was the use of two-tone paint, as seen on this 1984 model. 2, 3. Leather seats patterned to match the door panels and power windows were among the creature comforts in the Bertone X1/9. Instrumentation had been revised when the 1500 model came in for '79. 4. An estimated 60,000 or so Bertone X1/9s were made. Automotive entrepreneur Malcolm Bricklin was U.S. importer of the cars.

last special edition of all was called, appropriately enough, Gran Finale; and the last X1/9 of all was apparently produced in March 1989.

Apparently? This, don't forget, is Italy we are talking about, and since Bertone has never to my knowledge stated how many X1/9s it built with its own badges, there will always be an air of fantasy to this tale. Some sources say that as few as about 180,000 cars of all types were produced from 1972 to 1989, while others quote as many as 200,000, but Bertone is not telling.

No matter, in 1989, as in 1972, this was a neat, stylish, and compact little two-seater. The X1/9 was good enough to inspire Pontiac to design the Fiero (CA, October 1988), and as a package it is still very appealing today. But nowadays, after 30 or so years of Italianate corrosion has taken its toll, how many remain? CA





### 1972-89 Fiat X1/9: Selected Specifications

	1300	1500
Years built	1972-78	1978-89
Wheelbase (in.)	86.8	86.8
Length (in.)	153.5 <sup>1</sup>	156.3
Engine type	overhead-camshaft four cylinder; cast-iron block, aluminum head	
Displacement (cc/cid)	1,290/78.7	1,498/91.4
Bore×stroke (in.)	3.39×2.19	3.40×2.52
Compression ratio	8.5:1	8.5:1
Induction	2V Weber carb	2V Weber carb Bosch fuel injection <sup>2</sup>
Bhp @ rpm	66 @ 5,800 <sup>3</sup>	67 @ 5,250 <sup>4</sup> 76 @ 5,500 <sup>5</sup> 76 @ 3,000 <sup>7</sup> 79 @ 3,000 <sup>8</sup>
Torque (lb-ft) @ rpm	68 @ 3,600 <sup>6</sup>	76 @ 3,000 <sup>7</sup> 79 @ 3,000 <sup>8</sup>
Transmission	4-speed manual	5-speed manual
Weight (lbs)	2,156 <sup>9</sup>	2,128 <sup>9</sup>
Top speed (mph)	93 <sup>9</sup>	100 <sup>10</sup>
U.S. retail price (POE, East Coast)	\$3,970 (1974)	\$2,535 (1979)
Total production	Approx. 200,000 (est.); 140,519 Fiat badge, remainder Bertone badge	

<sup>1</sup>U.S.-market models; 150.8 inches outside U.S. <sup>2</sup>U.S. market only. Standard in California and optional in 49 states for model-year 1980; standard in 50 states for 1981 onward. <sup>3</sup>U.S.-market models; 75 @ 6000 outside U.S. <sup>4</sup>U.S.-market models; 85 @ 6000 outside U.S. <sup>5</sup>With fuel injection. <sup>6</sup>U.S.-market models; 72 @ 3400 outside U.S. <sup>7</sup>U.S.-market models; 87 @ 3200 outside U.S. <sup>8</sup>U.S.-market models; 2010 pounds outside U.S. <sup>9</sup>U.S.-market models; 99 mph outside U.S. <sup>10</sup>U.S.-market models; 106 mph outside U.S.



### Clubs for 1972-89 Fiat X1/9 Enthusiasts

Fiat Club of America  
11 Linden Circle  
Somerville, MA 02143-0004  
Telephone: (972) 771-0804

Fiat-Lancia Unlimited  
P.O. Box 193  
Shillington, PA 19607  
E-mail: webmaster@flu.org  
Website: www.flu.org

Rear Engine Fiat Club  
c/o Merkel Weiss  
P.O. Box 682  
Sun Valley, CA 91353-0682  
Website: <http://clubs.hemmings.com/frameset.cfm?club=rearenginefiat>



Article taken from:

Collectible Automobile, Graham Robertson, August 2004. ISSN 0742-812X