

GROUP TEST: GREAT £1K DRIVERS' CARS



X1/9 is much more fun than a swivel chair.

FIAT X1/9 PRICE: £500-£3200

IT DOESN'T matter whether it's a Vespa scooter, a Fiat 500 or a Ferrari F40. An Italian will drive it hard. However powerful or puny the engine, it'll spend its life near the top of the rev range. The ergonomics department might be run by primates and the anti-corrosion wax applied with a pipette, but an Italian factory worker finds it almost impossible to build a car that's dull to drive.

And even if your feet are disappearing through holes in the floor and the wiring is on fire you'll be reluctant to pull over once you've found a twisty road. The little Fiat X1/9 is everything that's great about Italian design.

It's 1969. Commissioned to build a convertible based on the new front-wheel-drive Fiat 128, legendary design house Bertone – riding high after styling the awesome Lamborghini Miura – is a bit bored with the sensible front-driver Fiat was expecting.

So it takes the 128's drivetrain, bungs it in the middle of the chassis and presents a wild and wedgy prototype that looks as much like a futuristic speedboat as a sports car. Bertone

calls it the Autobianchi Runabout and the Fiat management thinks it's a terrible risk. But the big boss Gianni Agnelli loves it. He gets his way and in 1974 the X1/9 is a production reality, retaining the drama of the concept but adding decent levels of safety and practicality.

It was trendy in the Seventies, but why is it so good to drive now? It's all to do with something called the 'polar moment of inertia'. Try sitting on a swivel chair with your legs stretched out in front of you. You'll find that it's harder to start turning – and harder to stop – than when you have your legs tucked in. Bringing the weight nearer to the axis of rotation lowers the polar moment of inertia.



If you do this with a car by putting the engine in the middle, it will react more quickly to turning forces, making the Fiat X1/9 more fun than a swivel chair and nearly as cheap.

MAKING IT BETTER

Go looking for a Fiat Uno Turbo – its 118bhp engine is easily tuned and fits the X1/9 without chassis surgery. Alternatively, the famous Fiat/Lancia 1.6- and 2.0-litre twin-cam engines can be squeezed in and mad people have tuned them to as much as 250bhp, though the wide tyres required to keep them on the road mean fitting big arches is a must. At least one Alfa V6 has been built. Mmmm...



NEED TO KNOW:

'All Fiat X1/9s are rotten, aren't they?' Not necessarily. And this general perception means bargains are out there, as most potential buyers fear the worst. However, look out for rot in difficult areas to repair such as the windscreen surround, and front suspension pickup points.

Rear suspension towers are triple-skinned and are tricky to weld without removing the engine. Trim is hard to find but, mechanically, the cars are strong and consumable parts such as brakes are reasonably priced. The engines hide no unpleasant secrets, but check for drips along the centreline of the car – coolant runs to the front-mounted

radiator through inaccessible pipes along a tunnel in the floorpan. Problems selecting fifth and reverse gears are due to a failed rubber joint in the selector linkage and enthusiastic driving will wear out the synchromesh on third and fourth. Just use that as an excuse to double-declutch and the gearbox will soldier on.

Further information:

PIX2000: 01584 810161 (Fiat X1/9 specialist)
X1/9 Owners' Club: 07866 437 135,
www.x1-9ownersclub.org.uk
Fiat Motor Club (GB): 020 8372 4028,
www.fiatmotorclubgb.com



1977 FIAT X1/9

- ENGINE: 1290cc/4-cyl/OHV
- POWER: 73bhp@6000rpm
- TORQUE: 72lb ft@3400rpm
- GEARBOX: 4-spd manual
- TOP SPEED: 99mph
- 0-60MPH: 12.7secs
- MPG: 31
- LENGTH: 12 ft 7in (3.83m)
- WIDTH: 5ft 2in (1.57m)
- WEIGHT: 2011lb (913kg)

