

Fiat/Bertone X1/9

The first affordable and practical mid-engined sports car makes a great first classic, explains Malcolm McKay

Fantastic value for money (if you shop around) and well supplied with parts, the lively, nimble and fun X1/9 offers usable and practical classic transport, especially in five-speed 1500cc form.

Derived from the Fiat 128 in a project driven from the start by Nuccio Bertone and never given the full Fiat backing it deserved, the X1/9 was first mooted before 1970. It took decades for leading manufacturers to recognise that this was the way sports cars should go and the X1/9 could easily have stayed in production if Fiat had bothered to develop it. Several owners have dropped in Uno turbo engines, giving a 36 per cent power boost that the chassis is more than capable of handling. Others argue that lag is a liability in a mid-engined car because turbo cut-in can break traction mid-corner: they prefer a bigger Fiat-family engine, the twin-cam 2-litre of which the ultimate is the HF Volumex unit, making an X1/9 really fly.

The X1/9 was a baby Stratos and its unique appeal gave it healthy sales in the UK despite being only a little cheaper than a Triumph TR7, which was marginally faster. It was more expensive than an MGB – but it was noticeably quicker too and offered far more sophistication. As for the Midget, had it not been for a huge price differen-

tial, it might have driven it out of the market.

The X1/9 brought Italian designer badging to the mainstream: it was chic and avant-garde, sold in 1300 form with two soft bags for the rear boot in material that matched the seats. But it was more than a trendy fashion accessory: the X1/9 offered superb handling and roadholding with a comfortable and surprisingly quiet ride plus plenty of luggage space. The lift-off top gave fresh air without excessive buffeting, taking seconds to remove and store up front. There remained a niche for the X1/9 until the last cars were sold in 1990, 18 years after its launch.

Today, the key issue is rot: protection was limited and steel quality dubious so, unless previous owners have been fanatical with rustproofing, there will be some. Look at the insides and backs of panels for signs of bodging and make sure previous repairs have been done properly. Avoid cars with significant rot – though sections are cheap enough if you fit them yourself, complete panels are expensive and professional repairs mount up. Also, beware a car that 'just needs shocks and rear ball joints'. Original parts are NLA and replacements have had to be specially made, so they don't come cheap: a set of new dampers and two ball joints comes to £700.



TONY BAKER



From top: assembly line at Bertone, which took over manufacture in 1981; stylish limited-edition Lido featured chrome bumpers; Niki Lauda with Ferrari F1 team; bigger bumpers on later, Bertone 1500

Timeline

1972 X1/9 announced; only c250 built; launched in US in 1974 with just 66bhp
1976 Larger bumpers
1977 First rhd cars, with fitted luggage, tints, alloys and foglights
1978 Lido has chrome bumpers, silver stripe, white trim. 1500 five-speed replaces 1300. New dash/wheel, seats, higher engine cover, revised bumpers
1980 US gets Bosch L-Jetronic option, 75bhp
1981 Fiat hands production over entirely to Bertone
1982 (1983 VS in UK) Bertone introduces two-tone, leather, new alloys and electric windows
1984 Revised colours with higher waistline, different alloys
1986 Cheaper, single-colour version added with fabric seats
1987 Black rubber mouldings, different wheels, black bumpers
1989 Gran Finale with Alcantara trim, special wheels, rear spoiler, stainless bumper caps, red/blue metallic paint

The facts

Produced/no built 1972-'89/c180,000
Engine watercooled. 1290/1498cc overhead cam 'four' with Weber twin-choke carburettor
Max power 73bhp @ 6000rpm to 85bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 72lb ft @ 3400rpm to 87lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission four-speed all-synchromanual on 1300, five-speed on 1500
Construction steel monocoque
Suspension independent all round, at front by MacPherson struts, tie rods
rear MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, track control arms
Brakes discs all round
Steering rack and pinion
Height 3ft 10in
Width 5ft 1in
Length 13ft
Weight 2424lb
0-60mph 12.2-9.9 secs
Top speed 99-110mph
Mpg 29-34
Price new £4575 (1500, 1978)

Insurance

Premium from £377 for comp cover for a 21-year old with a clean licence on a 1985 Bertone X1/9 1500 as second car, agreed value £1500, garaged overnight, 5000 limited mileage. Same but as only car, 10,000 miles, not garaged, three years' NCB, £456; Lancaster (01480 484848).



On the road

The X1/9 is great fun to drive so the important thing to remember on the road test is to concentrate on looking for faults and not lapse into enjoying yourself. To that end, keep the roof on – you'll stand more chance of hearing untoward noises from the suspension, engine and transmission. Do take it off at some point though, to check the seals and let in more light for checking the interior.

On the road, the X1/9 should be quite quiet – much more so than Spridgets, Spitfires and the like – and refined. The 1300 engine is a little gutless but the five-speed 1500 feels lively and willing. The engines are free-revving and need to be worked to give their best.

Keep a close watch on the water temperature gauge because overheating is common, almost always due to a silted-up radiator (which is in the nose). Be particularly wary of mystery leaks – the pipes run through the central tunnel and are inside a welded box section so, if they rot, it's a major task to repair them. If the engine has been allowed to overheat too much in the past, a warped cylinder head and leaking head gasket can result.

Many X1/9s have been uprated: make sure you know exactly what has been done, that it's been done competently and that your insurance company will still cover you. An engine swap isn't the only way to improve performance – the standard engine can give a lot more with a change of cam, bigger valves and gas flowing. Bolt-on improvements – a performance exhaust and manifold, air filter and carburettor jets – only cost £370.

Electrical gremlins on neglected or little-used cars are common. The fuse box is in the passenger footwell and can get damp, while the electric windows fitted on VS models (most of the cars in the UK) become unreliable with age, especially the little-used passenger side.

Five-speed 1500 goes well but all X1/9s thrive on revs and handle brilliantly



Alternatives



MATRA-SIMCA BAGHEERA

Top speed 109.8mph
0-60mph 11.6 secs **Mpg** 28-35
Produced/no built 1973-'80/47,796
Price new £5370 (1978)
Price now £1250
 Mid engine, glassfibre body, three-abreast seating, all-disc brakes and all-independent suspension gave the Bagheera appeal, though almost all were lhd and Simca-derived 1.3/1.4 performance was limited. Rotten floors and bulkheads have claimed most but the Matra club provides keen support.



MG MIDGET 1500

Top speed 100mph
0-60mph 11.9 secs **Mpg** 27-30
Produced/no built 1974-'79/73,899
Price new £2971 (1978)
Price now £1500
 Incredibly archaic in this company with its pushrod front engine, live rear axle, leaf springs and lever-arm dampers, the Midget 1500 sold on low price and classic ragtop appeal. It still offers that and, with superb parts availability, is a good classic buy, though rust can be rampant.

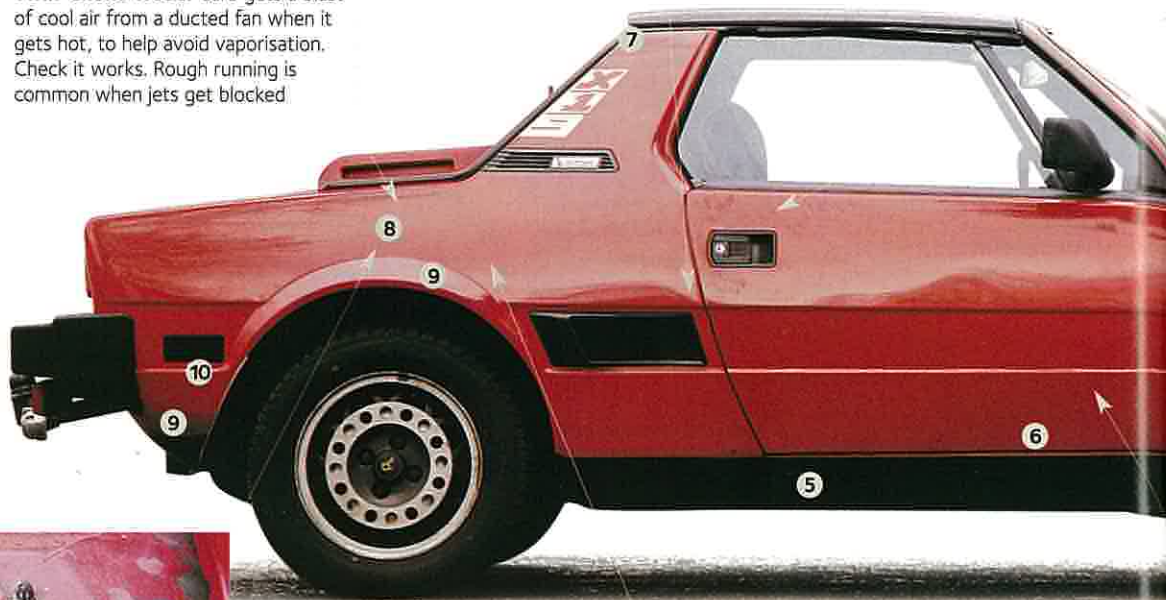
Rot spots

- 1 Front panel above and behind bumper
- 2 Front wings in front of wheels and around arches
- 3 Front struts and inner wings inside boot
- 4 Windscreen surround, especially base and pillars
- 5 Floorpans and sills, full length including ends
- 6 Door bottoms
- 7 Back of roof above rear window
- 8 Rear strut turrets
- 9 Rear wheelarch all around wheel and valance behind
- 10 Wells either side of rear boot



Twin-choke Weber carb gets a blast of cool air from a ducted fan when it gets hot, to help avoid vaporisation. Check it works. Rough running is common when jets get blocked

All UK X1/9s were fitted with alloy wheels, but around six different styles were used; check the spare behind the driver's seat is the same. Remove the spare and tweak the seat adjuster for very tall drivers



Rust in the rear suspension strut turrets is quite common: it can be difficult and expensive to eradicate properly due to cramped access, so check this area carefully



Look for signs that the engine has been regularly serviced and is not suffering from overheating or a blown head gasket. A rattly, oily engine is likely to be worn out

Owners' views

At 23, Richard Hull is studying Motorsports Engineering at Brunel University and building an X1/9 in his spare time. "It's quite rare and a bit of an oddity, which is nice," he says. "And, being Fiat, there's lots of scope for improvement with swapovers from other models. They're good fun and you can pick one up for a few hundred pounds. Of course, I was influenced by the fact that Dad had one. Mine's a 1979 car and, at 6ft 4in, I fitted in it, whereas I can hardly fit in his later car. Now we're building it into an Abarth rally replica, we've had to drop the floor by four inches so my head doesn't hit the roll bar. Even when I was driving a Subaru Impreza, I liked getting into the X1/9: it's quite special to drive, really good fun. Hopefully, we'll get it back on the road again this summer – there was quite a bit of rust but it's all cut out and welded now, ready for painting and reassembly."



"I used to work on them and vowed I would never own one," laughs Kevin Hull. "Then, when my son passed his test and we didn't need a family car any more, I decided it was time for a fun car. I saw one, realised they were so cheap and bought this one for £750. In over 20,000 miles, all it's needed has been tyres, radiator, exhaust and a little welding on the floorpan."
 "I fitted electronic ignition because the points tended to seize up in the winter," Hull explains. "It's great fun and very cheap to run – I get most of my spares from the local Motorists Discount Centre!"

What to pay

Show/rebuilt	£3500
Average	£1000
Restoration	£100

Parts prices

Front wing	£294
Brake pads (axle set)	£11
Brake/clutch master cyl	£47
Rear w/arch repair panel	£62
Secondhand engine	£120
Water pump	£35
Leather retrim	c£500
Speedo cable	£34
Shock absorber	£113

On the web

www.irata.com/x19
www.csis.ul.ie/staff/conorryan/x19
americanx19.tripod.com
www.nyssa.ltd.uk/FiatX19



Seats are quite durable but split at the seams; early cars had stripey 'deckchair' fabric before the all-leather VS-spec was introduced; subtler cloth remained the standard material



Electrical gremlins affecting the dashboard gauges are common, especially on cars that have been left outside for long periods, allowing them to get damp inside



Headlamps can be wound up manually if motor fails (usually due to diodes on the side), accessed via this panel under front bonnet. Look for rust here too

Worn synchro, esp third, common but not terminal; jumping out of reverse is more serious. Worn linkage easily fixed



One to buy £1800

Year of manufacture 1988 **Recorded mileage** 69,336
Vendor Brian Gill, Gloucester; tel: 01452 380955
For near-immaculate original car **Against** several small dents

Mechanic Brian Hill bought this X1/9 from its second owner in '92 after searching everywhere for a good one – and he's kept it that way. It's been a third car, always in heated storage when not on the road. He's proud of the fact that it has never failed an MoT and the history file includes every one. The gleaming Mica red paint is original and the fabric seats are almost spotless. The car is as clean underneath, with only the tiniest hint of rust at the base of the offside rear suspension turret. The Pirelli P3000 165/70 tyres are less than a third worn and the spare is the original, unused. The Fiat radio has been replaced with a quality CD player.



The car has been religiously serviced; Gill has replaced the cambelt twice and fitted a new rad last year. The engine starts willingly and runs smoothly, pulling well. There is a slight crunch when changing into third, suggesting that the synchro is weakening. The MoT expires on 12 March but will be renewed before sale. Small dents in both doors and the nearside and top of the roll hoop – plus that bit of rust – are the only points that detract from this exceptional, fairly priced X1/9.

Specialist view

Steve Brooke's Alternative Autos has been supplying parts for X1/9s since 1986, when they were still in production: "They're a good choice for a first classic and the average age of our customers must be mid-30s – though quite a few are older and have had them from new. Once people have had an X1/9, they're smitten.

"Parts availability is still good and there is a strong following in Europe where prices are higher and remanufacture is worthwhile. Panel supply is drying up, so cars that need whole new panels are best avoided – the last price we could find on a new door was £600. They can rust almost everywhere, so open the boots and lift everything to look underneath – almost all areas are visible if you look in all the nooks and crannies."

Alternative Autos (01484 865086, www.alternativeautos.demon.co.uk) **Eurosport UK** (01493 748981, www.eurosport-uk.co.uk) **P1X 2000** (07710 467201, www.p1x-2000.co.uk) **X19 Files** (01406 330460) **X1/9 Specialisten** (0045 8627 0260, www.laursen-online.dk/x1-9) **Middle Barton** (01869 340289, www.racecar.co.uk/mbg)

Clubs

X1/9 Owners' Club
01823 672039,
www.x1-9ownersclub.org.uk
Fiat Motor Club 020 8372 4028,
www.fiatmotorclubgb.co.uk

Books

Fiat X1/9 Collectors Guide
Phil Ward, MRP **Fiat X1/9**
Gold Portfolio Brooklands Books
Fiat X1/9 1974 to 1989
Classic Reprint, Haynes

The verdict

There are still quite a few low-mileage, cherished X1/9s out there and they are a good deal cheaper on the open market than in classic circles, where the good ones are already recognised. Check out general car sales magazines and websites and shop around – the pitfalls are easy to avoid and you should be able to find a gem that will give years of trouble-free classic fun.

MARKS OUT OF 10	TOP SCORERS
Driving	9 Mini 74
Everyday?	8 MG Midget 71
Looks	8 Morris Minor 1000 71
Parts availability	7 VW Beetle 71
Ease of maintenance	6 Austin A35 70
Rust resistance	3 Fiat 500 70
Club support	6 MGB GT 70
Running costs	7 Reliant Scimitar 70
Value for money	9 Triumph Vitesse 70
Insurance	5 Austin Seven 69

Final score **68/100**