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Alfa Romeos: Sampling the Greatest – Part 2

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Following on from last week's driving experiences at Balocco, John Simister heads yet 'further away from normality' as he settles behind the wheel of three, ever-more astonishing Alfas...

Alfa Romeo GTA 1300

We all know about the **GTA 1600**, the pinnacle of every **Alfa Giulia GT** fan's aspirations. But race success was eluding it by 1970, so **Autodelta**, Alfa's competition department, created a smaller-engined version for an engine-capacity class in which success could be found again. So it proved: the **GTA 1300** won the **European Touring Car Championship** in both 1971 and 1972.

And what a complete riot this 1970-built, works-run example is. Hugely flared wings cover fat slick tyres. The short-stroke engine revs to a giddy 8400rpm, making 165bhp on the way. Starting it is a

challenge, however.



The **Spica** fuel injection has no cold-start enrichment system and, with a very hot pair of camshafts, a gentle idle isn't in this engine's lexicon. Eventually, though, it catches and fluffs and sputters and hiccoughs until finally it will take a snap throttle opening and not expire.

And then it's alive, my left ear sonically carpet-bombed by the open exhaust immediately below, engine hunting and surging and begging to be set free. Now on the track, it shoots up to that heady rev-limit as though a mechanical lemming, forcing swift upshifts until all five gears are used up. The gearing is very short, the ratios are close, so the fact that there's practically nothing below 5000rpm doesn't matter at all.



It's a blazingly hot day and the slicks are super-sticky as I fling the **GTA** through the twists with a precision I've never thought possible in a **105-series coupé**. Gentle power oversteer is mine for the asking; I rather hope the inside front wheel is hanging in the air as I indulge, just like **GTAs** used to do in the races. This is the enactment of a dream, remember.



Alfa Romeo 155 V6 Ti DTM

Touring Car racing was a lot more specialised by 1993, when this 155, driven by **Nicola Larini**, won the **German DTM** series – a category which allowed radical modifications. Under the aerodynamically enhanced, ground-hugging body lies a four-wheel drive system which splits torque one-third front, two-thirds rear, the better to channel the 2.5-litre V6's 450bhp, achieved at 12,000rpm, to the road. At up to 188mph with the right gearing.

Pump on, ignition on, fire! The V6 awakes with an explosive bark, the six-speed sequential transmission clatters as loose, unengaged gears rattle around in anticipation, the LCD tachometer flickers unhelpfully within the carbonfibre dashboard. Temperamental instrumentation and a whole new set of racing-car dynamics will make my mental recalibration quite a challenge.

Clunk into gear. Short-travel clutch decisively engaged. Good, I haven't stalled. No more need for the clutch on upshifts, just a throttle-lift for kindness's sake. Downshifts, too, are kinder to this expensive transmission if the clutch is momentarily dipped, while the light flywheel makes for a fantastically responsive throttle-blip.



Am I fast? Slow? The engine is pulling ferociously with a scream to match and the urge continues past every gearshift, so I must be staying in the sweet spot. Yet this is a benign beast when I nail it out of a corner; I can feel that torque-third tugging through the ultra-quick power steering, but powerslides are not this car's natural state. The four-wheel drive keeps it where it needs to be. The **Alfa** doesn't fight you. It co-operates. It's wonderful.



At least it is until I come off the banking for the last time, to be joined by the smell of burning rubber. The outer front tyre has shredded itself, cords and carcass fragments are everywhere. It could have happened at full tilt, maximum g-force in the middle of the banked bend, but it didn't. The benign beast clearly has a caring heart.



Alfa Romeo Gran Premio Tipo B

This is the car we all call **P3**, and this 1932 car - chassis 5005 - is the fifth example made. It has always been in **Alfa Romeo's** possession, although lent out to the nascent **Scuderia Ferrari** after **Alfa Romeo** temporarily ceased works racing involvement, and in the fibres of its steering wheel's wooden rim there may still lurk DNA particles from those who drove it back then. **Nuvolari, Varzi, Caracciola, Chiron...** and now me.

I am overwhelmed. It was in a later version of this car that **Nuvolari** scored a victory in the **1935 German Grand Prix** so astonishing that the military band didn't have with them the music for the Italian national anthem, expecting only a German win. Next to the Mercedes-Benzes and Auto Unions the slender, upright P3 seemed a car from a past era, but it did the business that day as it had many times in earlier life.



In front of me is a 2654cc version of **Jano's** double-supercharged straight eight, with heads and blocks (two groups of four cylinders) joined as one to cope with the boost pressure. Power is 215bhp, top speed is 144mph, and this car is very fit indeed.

It has to be push-started in second gear, upon which it harrumphs into gear-whining, deeply burbling life. Long gearing makes even second gear fast enough for a near-vertical learning curve as I try to avoid mowing down the gathering of onlookers, and now I'm out on the track.



Grand Prix car it may be, but it's very tractable and extremely torquey. First fast bend, cracked-wood steering wheel rim offering weighty but surprisingly precise directional control; I sneak a look at the passing whoosh-lines below, noticing how unexpectedly large is the angle of drift the **P3** naturally adopts. Powerful racing cars drifting on narrow tyres look spectacular, but actually it's what they naturally do.

Working the giant drum brakes firmly into a tighter bend now, and where's second gear? It doesn't want to know, so back into third – it's a non-synchro gearbox, obviously – and rely on the torque. Another bend, try again... aim very carefully for tiny, sharp-edged gateway into gear... get the double-declutch just right... and yes! It's in. Can I repeat that? Don't hold my breath.



On the long straight I'm reaching maybe 120mph, the **P3** feeling genuinely, seriously quick as the light-throttle throb changes to a crackle that's as much potent V8 as straight-eight. The tiny rectangular windscreen does its job well enough, but as soon as I lean into a corner my face is blitzed by the airstream. And now there's a misfire.

Fuel pressure is maintained by a handpump near my left knee, but now the pumping has no effect. We've run out of fuel, conveniently just as I reach the pits, and my fragile I-am-Nuvolari fantasy runs out with it.

Dream over? Can't be. I've re-dreamed it far too often since.

Text: John Simister

Photos: Alfa Romeo

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