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Alfa Romeo Montreal

ITALIAN RUMBLE

Words & photos: Paul Murrell

A great engine and a seductive body make the Alfa Romeo Montreal an unsung supercar.

There must have been something in the air in the late sixties. What else could explain previously conservative and sober motor companies suddenly deciding to build high-priced, low-volume cars with pretensions to supercar status?

Citroën is hardly the first name that comes to mind for sports cars, yet when the company bought out Maserati in 1968, the wheels were set in motion to create the spectacular but ultimately doomed SM. Fiat's rush of blood to the head came about when Ferrari needed their help to meet Formula Two homologation regulations. This led to an agreement under which Fiat would build Ferrari's V6 engine and use it in the Dino Coupe designed by Bertone and Dino Spider styled and bodied by Pininfarina. The third oddity came from Alfa Romeo, a company with a better sports car pedigree than Fiat and Citroën, but without having produced much to really set hearts pumping since World War Two.

World Fair

In 1967, the World Fair took place in Montreal, Canada. It was timed to celebrate the Canadian centenary and nations were invited to display their finest achievements in art, culture, science and industry. Alfa Romeo, the only car company invited to provide an exhibit, was briefed to display "an expression of man's ultimate aspirations in the automotive field"... an ambitious request!



Alfa Romeo turned to Nuccio Bertone and Marcello Gandini to create a show car based on the current Giulia 1600 coupe. When they were unveiled, the two cars created a frisson of excitement as truly beautiful examples of automotive design. It was this public interest that convinced the decision-makers at Alfa Romeo to commit the model to production. It isn't clear whether the original plans included the possibility of even limited mass-production, but according to the Expo 67 brief, the project was required to have "feasible mass production possibilities in the not too distant future".

Power to match the looks

It quickly became obvious that the 1600cc twin cam Giulia engine wasn't appropriate to power such a dynamic-looking car. In a decision they probably came to regret, the Alfa executives decided to utilise the famous Tipo 33 V8, also used in their racecars, reduced in capacity and slightly detuned for road use.

When Alfa re-entered racing in 1967, their weapon of choice was the mid-engined, two-litre Group 6 T33. Although not a world-beater, the T33 performed competently and often bested Ferrari, although Porsche outdid it in the 1971 Sports Car Championship. Enlarged to three litres, this engine was used to power a number of Formula 1 cars including March, McLaren and Cooper.

So the new car's engine certainly had some pedigree and, for the time, would have been a schmick piece of kit in any road car. Even today, the specifications are impressive: 2.6 litre 90 degree V8 with overhead camshafts, Spica fuel injection, dry sump lubrication and hemispherical combustion chambers.

Show car to road car

Confirmation of the essential 'rightness' of Bertone's original design came from the minimal changes effected to turn it from show car to road car. Apart from the change to the engine and a few bodywork and trim details, the production cars were almost identical to the Expo cars.

In line with the original brief, the production cars were able to use the chassis, floor pan, suspension, steering and drivetrain from the standard Giulia cars with minimal modification. Independent front suspension by coil springs and wishbones, recirculating ball steering, four-wheel disc brakes and, perhaps unfortunately, a live rear axle with coil springs, radius arms and 'A' bracket, were attached to the pressed steel floor pan.

Mood for Monza

The profile of the Alfa is immediately familiar to any car-besotted schoolboy from the sixties. It is the classic long bonnet, two-door fastback ideal that bored students regularly sketched, with little variation, into the margins of pages in maths books.

Once you look past that classic outline however, there are simply too many design cues fighting for attention. Fussy elements such as the air intake vents in the B-pillars, giving the car the appearance of being mid-engined, the Venetian blinds on the headlights and the overly intrusive NACA duct - all self-consciously catch the observer's eye at once.

You could never mistake the Montreal for anything other than Italian. The driving position puts you immediately in the mood for Monza... arms at full stretch, gearlever high, legs straight and toes stretching for the pedals. Directly ahead of the driver are two of the largest Buck Rogers instrument cowlings I've ever seen in a car. The odd pie chart styling of the clocks and warning lights makes them difficult to read, although the tachometer, redlined at 7000rpm, and speedometer are clear.

Cold Comfort

The seats are upholstered in that seventies staple, velour. Leather wasn't available even as an option except in Germany, apparently. The rear seats are a parody - only a sadist would expect even children



to sit back there. As for boot space... a well-stuffed briefcase would only just fit. Vision other than straight ahead is severely compromised.

Despite its eye-wateringly high price when new, the Alfa doesn't feel like it was built with any regard for quality or longevity. When it was first offered to Australians in February 1974, the price was \$14,400, plus \$193 for metallic paint and \$574 for air conditioning. Alfa Romeo imported 100 cars and, according to the 1975 International Melbourne Motor Show program, the list price then was \$15,570 including sales tax. It might not sound like much today, but the same program listed the Falcon GT priced at "from \$6,004".

Pesky details

Automotive history is sometimes as difficult as ancient archaeology. In researching the details of the Montreal, some facts simply couldn't be confirmed beyond doubt. Two production figures have almost equal credence: 3,917 and 3,925. Production years are usually given as 1971 through 1976, although some experts claim production started in 1970 and others that it didn't finish until 1977. Alfa Romeo museum curator Luigi Fisi in his book *Alfa Romeo – Tutti Le Vetture dal 1910* states "anno di costruzione" as 1970 through 1977, but shows production numbers starting only in 1971 and doesn't quote numbers post-1972. Right hand drive production is usually thought to be 180 but factory numbers, assuming they were sequential, indicate 250.

Even the compression ratio is open to conjecture: it is either 9.0 to one or 9.3 to one, and none of the factory records I saw or experts I spoke to confirmed it one way or the other. Fisi quotes 9.3:1, Bruce Taylor in his comprehensive web page - www.alfamontreal.info/ - quotes 9.0:1.

Montreal in Motion

However, put all these little details behind you and turn the key to illuminate the dash lights. Wait a few seconds while the fuel pumps prime the fuel injection and when the Fuel Pressure light goes out, without touching the throttle, turn the key again and you're ready to go. There's a wonderful V8 rumble, distinctively different from an American engine but just as diaphragm-rumblingly wonderful.

Carefully locate the dog-leg first gear, release the quite firm clutch and the car eases away. Potential embarrassment is kept to a minimum because the engine is quite flexible and the engine to gearbox relationship nigh on perfect. Surprisingly for such an engine, the car is perfectly at ease trundling around at 1500rpm. On the other hand, it revs freely to its redline with a grin-inducing crackle and pop on the over-run. When in top condition, this is a charming powerplant.

Which brings me back to that live rear end. Even with its relatively modest power output, it soon becomes clear that the Montreal struggles to keep its rear wheels firmly on the tarmac. Thankfully, the LSD keeps the moving vehicle almost under control. This is a drivetrain and suspension that only just handles the power on tap but would be severely stressed if greater acceleration were available.

Notwithstanding, it is great fun to exploit the progressive understeer, using the ample available power to tame it. Provoking oversteer is something best left to the racetrack or skidpan. We can only imagine how much better this car might have been with the sophisticated de Dion axle as fitted to the Alfetta.

A Bit Hoony

Ian Wall is the lucky owner of our featured Alfa Romeo Montreal. He uses his car as it was intended and it still wears some of the decals from its recent outing at Classic Adelaide.

When they were new, he'd seen a couple of Montreals and, in his own words, "thought they were a bit hoony". However, when this Montreal came up for sale in 1982, it changed his mind. It wasn't exactly pristine, having been involved in a hefty collision. "We don't know much about the first owner, but the second owner was Fabio Valli who worked for Santos at Moomba. He had the car repainted from its original chocolate brown to white, and then was taken out by a drunk running a red light."



Smash Repairs

The car had been hit hard in the nearside front, warping the shell, and causing major damage to the engine. The bearings on the cylinder head had been sheared off, the splined shaft to the fuel pump drive had a 90 degree bend in it - both mechanically and bodywise, the car was a mess. Ian continued the story, "Because Fabio was in Moomba, he couldn't oversee the repairs, so he sold the car to Luigi Amori of Italservice and, for some reason, I bought the car from him. It took a couple of years to put together. I bought the chassis member that carries the radiator and headlights from a UK car that had fire damage. The front panel came from a car in New York.

"I also sourced a spare motor from the UK but that was from a left hand drive car. Left hand drive motors are quite different from right hand drive motors: the distributor is on the other side where the clutch and brake master cylinders would normally be. They have a different camshaft and the gearing is such that you can't just swap them over. But at least the spare engine has given me a ready source of spares. Other parts were sourced from AFRA in Italy, some from Ricambi Originali in California. I also have an original windscreen from Belgium still in its box, a spare rear 'screen, a couple of camshafts... you won't get them now as easily as I did then."

Common Sense

The motor and fuel injection system are fiendishly complex, but they hold few fears for Ian. He suggested that working on them is "common sense" but as he explained the tortuous procedure required to get the Spica fuel injection to operate correctly, it became obvious to me that this is not a car for the mechanically faint-hearted. "It's like a miniature engine all on its own," he admitted.

Luigi and Ian make a good team. The Alfa Romeo factory sent Luigi to Australia to help local dealers understand the complexities of Alfa Romeos. He did his training at the factory on the Montreal, gaining a wealth of knowledge that he was happy to pass on to Ian. Even the ZF gearbox requires specialist knowledge. As Ian explained, "You need to have the factory clearances to fit the right shims - if they're too wide, the synchro won't operate properly; too tight and they're likely to start a fire in the gearbox. Even to dismantle the cluster gear, you need to know the correct temperature of the oil to shrink the parts back on."

And as for the reputation for 'interesting' handling, Ian commented that the Montreal "always lets you know when it's reaching its limits. It's a car that's always talking to you." It is reassuring to know that such a rare car is in the hands of such a qualified listener.

Boating in Rome

According to Montreal expert Luigi Amori, every year there is - or was - a boat race along the Tiber River in Rome. Apparently, Montreal engines running at 10,000rpm for hours on end have powered a number of these boats. It proves the point that these engines have a prodigious capacity for sustained high rev performance, although in the interests of keeping Montreals on the road as they were intended, one hopes this practice has been relegated to history.

A flawed masterpiece

The Montreal is an infuriating car, only because it is so difficult to pigeonhole. It is a glorious design with hints of Maserati Bora and Lamborghini Miura, let down by overly fussy details. Build quality and reliability were issues when it was new and therefore even more of a worry today. Ian also alluded to a similarity to the rear hatch on the Datsun 120Y coupe - was Bertone moonlighting for the Japanese? Because the bodies were delivered unpainted and left in the open, rust is an ever-present concern. A fabulous engine is constrained by a chassis that only just copes.

Yet despite all of these limitations, the Alfa Montreal is a beguiling car. As I said to Ian Wall, on many occasions I have almost succumbed to the car's obvious seductions but, when the time came to hand over the money, a niggling little voice of common sense prevented me. Having spent time in Ian's car,



the devil on my left shoulder is once again starting to win the argument with the angel on my right.

**SPECIFICATIONS - 1974 Alfa Romeo Montreal
(Taken from contemporary road tests and reports)**

Production: 3917 (1971-1976) – 180 RHD

Chassis numbers: 105.64.1425101 - 105.64.1428862 – left hand drive 105.65.1440101 -

105.65.1440350 – right hand drive

Engine: V8 double overhead cam per bank

Transmission: five speed manual ZF

Power: 200bhp @ 6500rpm

Torque: 173 lb ft @ 4750rpm

Capacity: 2593cc

Bore and stroke: 80mm x 64.5mm

Compression ratio: 9.0:1

Brakes: Disc/disc. Servo assisted

Tyres: 195/70X VR14

Wheels: 6_J

Length: 166" (4.216m)

Width: 66" (1.676m)

Height: 47.5" (1.207m)

Wheelbase: 92.5" (2.350m)

Front track: 54" (1.372m)

Rear track: 51.5 (1.308m)

Weight: 2794lbs (1270kg)

Max speed: 222kph (137mph)

Standing quarter: 16.7 sec 0-60mph 7.6sec

Fuel consumption: 14-18mpg (20-15.7 litres/100km)

