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ROAD TEST

The Alfa Romeo Alfetta GTV 2000

Exhilarating road manners mask detail failings. Beautiful, comfortable, quiet—and expensive, but worth it.

IF SOMETHING is worth having, it is worth waiting for, says the old adage. MOTOR SPORT has certainly had to wait long enough for a road test of the sports-coupe version of the Alfa Romeo Alfetta, so long in fact that the original 1.8-litre Alfetta GT has now been superseded by the Alfetta GTV 2000 and a smaller-engined sister, the Alfetta GT 1.6. I may never know whether or not the Alfetta GT 1.8 would have been worth waiting for; what I am sure of is that in general model terms the GTV 2000 in which I covered nearly 3,000 miles recently, certainly rewarded any impatient sufferings from the deliberate procrastinations of Alfa Romeo GB. In this new, top-of-the-Alfetta-range guise, Alfa's sporting coupe has thrown a hard-to-beat challenge into that hotly-contested 2-litre executive sports saloon/coupe category.

In spite of protestations from me, promises from him and a published letter of complaint from a reader about our neglect of the Alfetta GT, Alfa GB's PR man, Barry Needham, successfully parried MOTOR SPORT away from the GT until the recent model change. Which happened to coincide with the replacement of my TR6 by a new Alfa Romeo 2000 Spider Veloce, thus convincing Barry, no doubt, that I wasn't anti-Alfa Romeo after all. . . . MOTOR SPORT had been *persona non grata* apparently, because my slightly acerbic review of the GT after an introductory drive in an early 1hd example in Italy suggested that I would have a "preconditioned attitude against a road test example and we didn't see any point in offering

a car if it was going to be damned." So much for faith in one's own product and the ability of one's engineers to iron out teething problems by continuous development! This road test GTV 2000 showed a considerable improvement over that early GT I drove and most probably the later 1.8 GTs, which were first imported in mid '75, would have shown little resemblance to that Spring 1974 pre-production car. Perhaps MOTOR SPORT could have sold you a few more cars after all, Barry?

This Giorgetto Giugiaro-inspired, wedge-shaped, four-seater coupe when in 1.8-litre form had the old 2000 GT Veloce and 1600 Junior alongside it in the Alfa range. Sad to relate, these evergreen, joy-to-drive coupes have been sacrificed with the coming of the GT 1.6 and GTV 2000, whose character is of a very different, though still enjoyable, nature. The Alfetta saloon continues in 1.6- and 1.8-litre forms only, though a 2-litre presumably can't be all that far away, especially as I see that such an engine option is available in South Africa.

The Alfetta GTV 2000 shares the same mechanical layout as the saloon. That is to say its in-line, four-cylinder, twin-overhead-camshaft engine is front mounted, while its clutch and five-speed gearbox are at the rear, an adventurous, by mass-production standards, design which is a throwback to the Alfetta 159 Grand Prix car of Fangio fame and helps provide 50/50 weight distribution. Externally, the resemblance to the saloon ends at the radiator grille. The four-door saloon's boxy,

conservatively-styled, three-box (engine compartment/passenger compartment/boot) body is replaced by a beautiful, elegantly stylish, two-box, two-door body of infinitely more character and presence. This 2-litre version is identified by slightly incongruous rear three-quarter air-vent panels from which the letters "GTV" are cut out, rubber over-riders on the stainless steel bumpers and trapezoidal vents in the wheels instead of the round holes of the 1.6 version. Alloy wheels are a £200 extra.

The clean lines involve a steeply-raked screen and a steeply sloping bonnet, of which little is visible to the average-height driver; yet this car is notably easy to place. The heated rear window is even more steeply-raked, tumbling down to a tail-spoiler above the high, chopped-off tail. Pronounced flares over all four wheel arches make the GTV much wider than it appears from the driving seat, yet again, the precision of steering feels to shrink this car through gaps where slab-sided, compact family cars would fear to tread. Though appearances belie it, this coupe, at 5 ft. 5.3 in. wide, is fractionally narrower than the saloon; it is 13 ft. 9.7 in. long (2.3 in. shorter than the saloon) and has a 4.3 in. shorter wheelbase (at 7 ft. 10.5 in.) and, helping its excellent aerodynamics, is a height of only 4 ft. 4.4 in., more than 4 in. lower. Indeed, its aerodynamic Cx coefficient is exceptionally low, equalling the new Rover 3500 at 0.39. Involved in this is a deep two-part front spoiler, a prominent feature of the front-end styling, as are the four Carello quartz iodine headlights, whose beams on the test car alas, were less prominent, quite dangerously lacking on dipped beam, partly, I hope, through maladjustment.

This GTV's engineering-sculpture of an engine showed a reluctance to reveal its all-alloy beauty and awkwardness of dip-stick access, the front-hinged bonnet's cockpit release requiring Samson-like effort. Beneath this Alfa engine's traditional, chain-driven twin-overhead camshafts, eight valves and

hemispherical combustion chambers, the GTV unit discloses its grey hairs with an unfashionably long stroke: 88.5 mm against a bore of 84 mm. The capacity is 1962 ccs, the compression ratio a four-star tolerating 9:1, the aluminium block has wet liners and the crankshaft runs in five bearings. Apart from installation differences, including a different shape for the finned alloy sump, this engine is identical to the 2-litre unit fitted to models such as my own Spider, the 2000 GTV and the 2000 Berlina, which means a high specific power output (even by current standards) of 122 b.h.p. DIN at 5,300 r.p.m. and 129.5 lb. ft. torque DIN at 4,000 r.p.m. It achieves this with the aid of two twin-choke horizontal carburettors of either Dellorto, or Solex construction (Solex on the test car) and Golden Lodge Spica surface discharge plugs. An Alfa-specialist friend of mine warns me that to substitute any other type of plug for these Golden Lodge will ensure an instant 5 b.h.p.-plus loss of power. A case of design compatibility, so be warned. Power output for the 1600 is 109 b.h.p. DIN at 5,600 r.p.m. and 104.9 lb. ft. at 5,600 r.p.m. The defunct 1800 gave the same 122 b.h.p. figure as the 2-litre but at the slightly higher revs of 5,500. But it produced a little less torque: 123 lb. ft. at 4,400 r.p.m.

The split propshaft is in continuous motion when the engine is running, with no means of disconnection between it and the crankshaft, at which end the starter ring lies. This fact isn't noticeable from the cockpit by way of untoward vibration, even on tickover. The shaft is disconnected from the final drive by a hydraulically-operated, 8.46 in. diaphragm clutch sited with the flywheel beneath the rear seats, ahead of and in the same alloy casing as the five speed gearbox and differential. Gearbox ratios are 1st, 3.30:1; 2nd, 2.0:1; 3rd, 1.37:1; 4th, 1.04:1; 5th, 0.83:1. The 4.1:1 final drive ratio is the same as in the 1.8-litre GT; the less torquey engine of the 1.6 benefits from a lower, 4.3:1 ratio. Unlike other 2-litre Alfa Romeos, the GTV 2000 does not have a limited slip differential.

The GTV 2000 shares the same suspension layout as the Alfetta saloon tested in MOTOR SPORT, June 1974. Alfa have shunned independent rear suspension in favour of the lower unsprung weight and nil camber change of a De Dion axle. The De Dion tube is triangu-



lated by tubular longitudinal struts connected by a spherical joint on the cross member supporting the front of the gearbox. Lateral location is by a Watt linkage pivoting in the centre of the De Dion tube. There is an anti-roll bar, coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers. With this De Dion arrangement the gearbox/differential assembly is attached to the body and carries the inboard 9.84 in. diameter disc brakes. The mechanical handbrake utilises the normal rear pads.

Torsion bars, wishbones, telescopic dampers and an anti-roll bar constitute the front suspension. Outboard brake discs of 10.27 in. diameter are fitted. There is servo-assistance and dual circuits for all four brakes and a pressure limiting valve in the rear circuit.

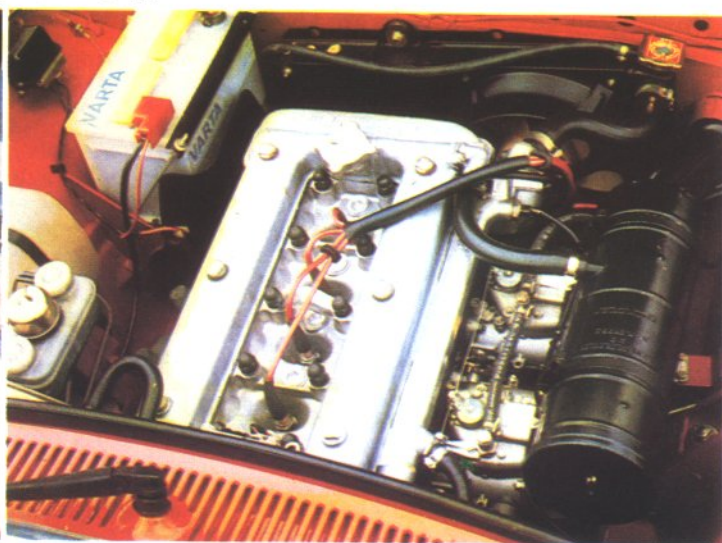
Cloth upholstery, a £70 optional extra, evoked a sumptuous atmosphere within the test car. This cloth treatment extended to the door

panels and its beige trim went well with the car's Alfa-red exterior, though the same upholstery is even more impressive in Barry Needham's own, very attractive, black-painted GTV. At the Press introduction of the GTV I drove both Vinyl and cloth-upholstered cars; in terms of comfort as well as appearance the cloth is well worth the extra. Some subtle re-shaping of the front seats combined with the velvet-like cloth made this the first Alfetta model in which I have felt really comfortable, an improvement confirmed by racing driver John Handley, who declared the test car's seats much superior to those in his wife's Alfetta GT. Incidentally, the Handley family stable of Porsche 911 2.7 and Alfetta GT would have been a good contender for our Ideal Pairs feature of a few years ago.

The height of the GTV's driving seat can be raised by a clever cam device operated by a fore and aft movement of a pull-out lever on the driver's right. But the seat lacked stability when raised and longer-legged drivers complained about the shortness of the cushion. Full-width headrests built into both front seats have accurate vernier adjustment by a knob on the side of the squab. Another splendid piece of seat engineering is shown in the "tip-up" arrangement for rear seat access: as the backrest is hinged forwards the whole of the seat slides forwards. The doors are wide too, but the low roof line ensures that it's still a bit of a scramble into the back seats. These seats are slightly "bucketed", have no centre arm-rest and are comfortable for two modest sized people—so long as those in the front aren't too greedy with seat adjustment. Tall people would find life hard from a head and leg-room point of view; this is really an ideal four seater for families with children up to their mid-teens.

The steering column can be adjusted up and down; an additional telescope facility would be welcome. Instead of the early GT's wood-rim wheel, the GTV has a padded, thick-rimmed, three-spoke wheel with finger grips. There is a horn push in each spoke. Most drivers found the wheel rim too close to their thighs when seat and wheel were adjusted correctly for attitude; a smaller wheel would cure that and raise the steering ratio advantageously. Otherwise I found the driving position (after much daily fiddling of adjustments) satisfactory, for the first time in an Alfetta. The pendant pedals

The unusual instrument layout has separate consoles for speedometer and tachometer/auxiliaries. The glove-"locker" does not lock. The delightfully flexible and temperament-free all-alloy twin-cam engine gives 122 b.h.p.





The GTV can be thrown into full-blooded slides in great style, still keeping all four wheels on the deck.

are excellently spaced and the left foot has a big, well-placed foot rest where the bell-housing should be.

The steeply-raked screen rail is a hindrance to tall drivers, but to make matters worse, even for shorter drivers, in wet weather the wiper blades are too short, leaving a vast, unwiped space at the top of the screen. These column-stalk operated wipers have two speeds, the faster of which needs accelerating, and no intermittent facility.

In the light of Rover's hatch-back, semi-estate 3500, I can't help wondering why Alfa did not design a fold-down rear seat into the GTV. Instead they seem to have wasted the hatch-back theme. The bulk of the vast rear parcels shelves lifts up with the button-released tailgate, to which it is neatly attached by a single, central hydraulic strut. "Neatly" made possible because Alfa avoided the difficulties of making the shelf removable. Boot space is not exceptional, at 12.9 cu. ft.

A GTV driver is faced by an unusual instrument layout. A 150 m.p.h. Veglia speedometer lies straight ahead within its own square cowl. A completely separate rectangular cowl in the centre of the fascia houses the 7,500 r.p.m. tachometer on the left and warning lights, fuel gauge, oil pressure (55-60 p.s.i. hot) and water temperature (175° F) gauges on the right. The poorly-damped fuel gauge flashed its low-level warning light when half full. This controversial instrument arrangement is much more effective than it looks: the speedometer is exceptionally clear, a necessary feature in a car which is extraordinarily deceptive in its pessimistic impression of speed. Italian versions of the GTV have the speedometer and tachometer transposed; to my mind the choice for speed-limit and endorsement-riddled UK is more appropriate, for the engine in this 24½ cwt. car does not rev so easily to the 6,000 rpm red line that the tachometer needs constant attention (unlike the same engine in my Spider, which weighs 4 cwt. less). The glass face of the centre cowl attracts some reflections.

The hatch-back theme does not include a fold-down rear seat. That GTV motif is a little unsightly.

This classic engine starts easily from cold with correct use of the choke. The adjacent hand throttle can then be used to warm up the engine for the couple of minutes advised for all Alfa Romeos, after which the choke can be dispensed with. Second gear is horribly difficult to engage when the 'box is cold. Which brings me to the one sour note in the otherwise totally pleasurable experience of GTV driving: the gearchange. Alfa have failed to overcome the problems attached to the long rod linkage to the rear-mounted gearbox. It is notchy, it is baulky, particularly into first and second into which cogs the test car sometimes needed an extraordinary amount of force, it is out-of-keeping with the thoroughbred spirit of the rest of the running gear. The gearchange is clunkily noisy, too, and there is some whine from the all indirect gears. At least the clutch is reasonably light.

The GTV's steering in all except method (it is rack and pinion) is in the best Alfa tradition: light, precise, smooth like churning a spoon through cream, and so communicative. It gives

this car an instant charm, a palliative to the gearchange, an extension of the superbly contrived suspension. There is none of the suspension harshness associated with sporting cars, the GTV taking bumps in its quite soft stride, the after effects controlled by good rebound damping and the advantage of low unsprung weight to settle the rear wheels quickly. This softness leads to quite a lot of roll (lean would be a better word, for roll implies wallow, which this Alfa does not do) when cornering rapidly. Yet whatever the body angle each corner refuses to forsake the tarmac. At most speeds the GTV is a natural understeerer, never to a degree which gets out of hand, but a stark contrast to my tail-happy Spider and other pre-Sud/Alfetta Alfas. This turn-around in Alfa handling traits makes the GTV a much less nervous car in corners than earlier Alfas, adding a large enough margin of safety and stability to keep less able drivers out of trouble up to extraordinarily high cornering speeds. Beyond this normal high-speed boundary the GTV reserves a territory for the skilled driver who is capable of taking it by the scruff of the neck and throwing it around, when it becomes a safe, high-speed oversteerer, pleausurably controllable by that positive steering. This is a car of superb balance, obviously greatly benefiting from its weight distribution. Here I am practically eating my hat, for I remember saying in that 1974 Alfetta test that the rear mounted gearbox showed little advantage. I think there has been much subtle development on the suspension side since then.

This weight distribution, plus the flat "foot-print" implanted by the De Dion axle, shows up even more in magnificent traction, without the aid of a limited slip differential. It makes for fast exits from tight corners and is especially useful for quick exits from road junctions into traffic streams; full acceleration can be used without the embarrassment of spinning wheels. It needs a very slippery surface before the inside wheel will spin at all. The traction proved useful too in extricating the Alfa from a



muddy Mallory paddock where lesser cars were in difficulty.

The GTV's handling and roadholding are matched by brakes which cannot be too highly praised. For modest pressure and with excellent feel the four discs slow this coupe with astonishing, racing-car-like effect, without any fade, findings which I confirmed with some rapid laps of Goodwood whilst there to test another car. However, this performance must have been achieved by the use of quite hard friction material, for the first couple of applications from cold are not very inspiring.

If the twin-cam Alfa engine is becoming long in the tooth, age has not detracted from its personality. True, the long-stroke makes it feel a little rough by contemporary standards, but it makes up for this by a wide spread of torque, tractability, power and docility, a flexibility which makes it a crisp performer from low revolutions in town traffic without ill-effect on the plugs of this quite highly-tuned engine. Throttle response is excellent, there is some intake roar from the twin-choke carburettors when accelerating hard (a gorgeous crisp crackle), but little mechanical noise. The gears are excellently spaced (just over 30, 50, 75 and 100 in the lower four) and though fifth is ostensibly an overdrive, the engine's flexibility ensures that it is a useful gear at all times, useable down to the lower 20 m.p.h. bracket, though this is not the way to treat an Alfa engine. There is rarely a need to push the engine to the maximum of its rev range in the

gears. If one does so, however, it will reach 60 m.p.h. from rest in about 9 sec. and 100 m.p.h. in 30 sec.

An almost total lack of wind noise, even at highly illegal speeds, is another endearing feature of this excellent Alfa. Coupled with perfect straight line stability and an engine which is well subdued when not accelerating, this feature makes the GTV into a very relaxing motorway car. It becomes a little noisier above 100 m.p.h., yet with the speedometer indicating 125 m.p.h. and the tachometer needle on the 6,000 r.p.m. red line in fifth, I was still able to hold a normal conversation with my passenger. Sustained three figure speeds do cause some drop in oil-pressure, however, and an oil-cooler might be advisable for persistent cruising of that nature on the continent.

The low wind noise is in spite of opening front quarterlights being fitted, these being of the anti-theft, knurled knob controlled variety, as are the rear passengers' "half-lights". With this Alfa as ammunition, I'd like to start a "bring back the quarterlight" campaign, aimed chiefly at manufacturers like Jaguar, who were unable to master the wind problem so took the easiest way out. Through-flow ventilation is not a complete substitute. In any case, this Alfa too has good through-flow ventilation and an excellent heater, with separate controls for driver and front seat passenger. Unfortunately it will not work without the booster fan. Front three-quarter visibility at road junctions is hampered by the thick and steeply-angled screen pillars and rearward parking vision is none-too-good.

Minor annoyances are reversing lights which work without the ignition, thus remaining on if you wish to add braces to the belt of the powerful handbrake on an incline, a heater motor which too is independent of the ignition, so is liable to be left on at the expense of the battery and a lack of detail equipment such as hazard warning lights, courtesy lights in the glove box (non-lockable) and boot, and passenger vanity mirror. In respect of such detail equipment this most expensive Alfa Romeo below Montreal level is lacking when compared with its Italian rival, the 2-litre Beta Coupé or HPE, for example, the most expensive of which is £4,503. This Alfa costs £4,799 without the test car's cloth upholstery or Blaupunkt radio, which would have made it more expensive than the Rover 3500 at the time of the test. The Rover is undoubtedly better value for money, but at the same time it is much more bulky, less nimble, possibly a little "stodgy" in its appeal to younger executives. Both are appealing in different ways, the Alfa being more of a "driver's car", a nimble thoroughbred, the Rover a fast and luxurious work-horse. The BMW 320i comes into the same price picture, but more of that in a future issue.

In 2,800 miles the test car consumed 2 pints of oil, had a worse fuel consumption of 20.6 m.p.g. and a best of 26.5 and more usually averaged 24 m.p.g. in spite of being driven at very high speed outside town and at very slow speeds in heavy City traffic. It would benefit from a fuel tank with a capacity larger than its 11.9 gall.—C.R.

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Reprinted from the
January 1977 issue of

MOTORSPORT