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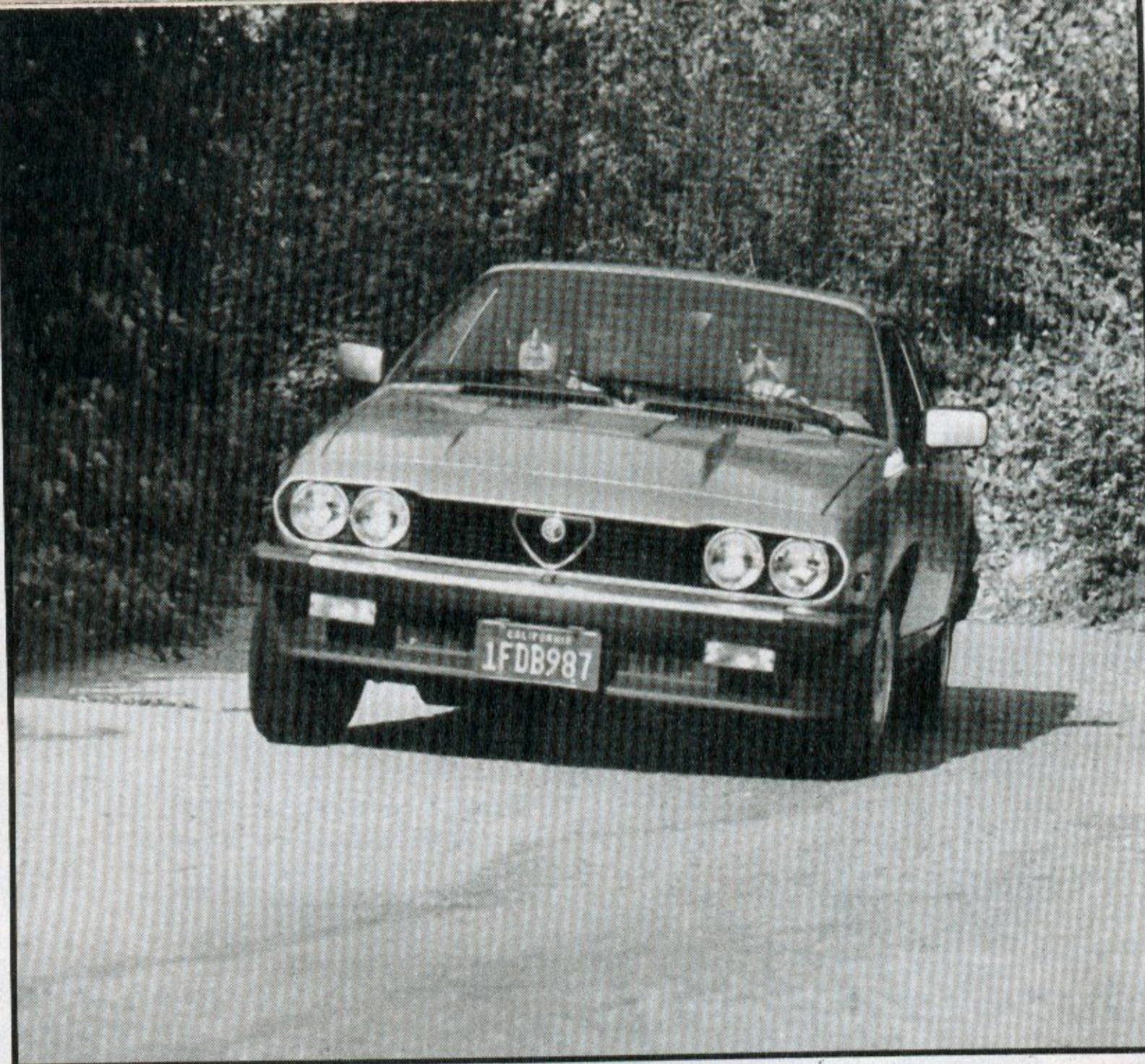


PHOTO BY RICHARD M. BARON

## *Extended-Use Report :* **ALFA ROMEO GTV 6/2.5**

*24,000 miles: demanding mistress or comfortable companion?*

**I**T'S MORNING AND the heavens are spewing venom. Sheets of rain pelt the Alfa as Dorothy makes her way to work. Water begins to back up in the gutters, overflowing into the streets. As the roads become rivers, Dorothy considers turning back. But because she's past the halfway point she continues on to R&T's offices. The water levels deepen and even tall American sedans sit stranded in the flooded waters, their owners perhaps singing "Nearer My God To Thee." But Dorothy pushes on, the GTV6 never stumbling or coughing.

It's the first sweltering afternoon of summer and like grunions at a full moon, everybody in southern California seems to be heading to the beach. For 30 miles of freeway Peter never takes the Alfa's shift lever higher than 2nd gear. First, 2nd, stop. First, 2nd, stop. By the time he reaches the shore, hot and pooped, he'd gladly swap the GTV6 with its difficult clutch, cranky gear-box and inadequate air conditioning for a clapped-out Chevy with a good automatic.

It's a glorious evening along the northern California coast. As Richard and the Alfa head up Highway 1 toward Carmel, the sun descends into a truly Pacific Ocean. In his best boy-racer fashion, Richard charges into the twists and bends of the narrow road. He lifts off the throttle, and the Alfa's rear moves gently outward. He adds a little throttle and it gently moves in again. The car's response is always poised and predictable. Suddenly, from out of the twilight, a car intrudes across the Alfa's path. Richard hits the brakes and the GTV6 stops right now with nei-

ther fuss nor swerve. It's a good thing too, with rocks on one side and a cliff that drops 500 ft into the sea on the other.

These vignettes just about say it all. After living with the Alfa Romeo GTV 6/2.5 for a year and a quick 24,000 miles, R&T's staff has come to these conclusions: That the GTV6 is superbly engineered in some respects, is confoundingly underdeveloped in other respects, is a joy to drive on the open road, and is a pain in traffic.

More than other long-term test cars, the Alfa polarized the staff into distinct groups of supporters and detractors. In so doing, we were confronted with an important issue, one having to do with being a nonconformist in a conformist world. There's little question that the GTV6 is different from most cars familiar to Americans. Unlike other foreign carmakers (read: the Japanese), Alfa Romeo doesn't massage its products to fit American tastes. What's good enough for the Italians is good enough for us. Someone weaned on Fords or even Datsuns isn't likely to hop into the Alfa, twist the key, drive off and immediately feel familiar sensations. To many people, including several R&T staffers, a car requiring driver adaptation or effort is an unnecessary nuisance in this age of instant gratification.

But different doesn't have to be bad. Sometimes it's just a matter of relaxing, opening one's mind and concentrating on the subject at hand. Those on the staff who met the GTV6 on its own terms often came to appreciate its unique qualities. Take for example the car's driving position. While most Americans

# ALFA

place their hands at the ten and two o'clock positions on the steering wheel, Italians consider it fine form to handle the wheel from the bottom portion of the rim, say at the four and eight o'clock positions. This requires a different relationship among the seat, wheel and pedals.

Sometimes, however, different really is awful. It's the staff's opinion that the GTV6 has one of the worst shift linkages of any modern car we've encountered. The fact that Alfa uses an unusual rear-mounted transaxle is no excuse; the Porsche 944 manages to have a reasonably precise gearbox with a rear transaxle. And for Alfa fans who recall the outstanding manual transmissions of past Alfas, the gearchange on the GTV6 (and the Alfetta before it) is especially galling.

Once again, however, a little patience pays off. One eventually learns that the gearbox does not respond well to manhandling or fast shifting; a light, deft touch on the gear lever is far more effective. And when the driver is able to plan his shifts ahead, the transmission works acceptably well. It's the sudden lane change and the quick downshift to 2nd that cause an inevitable "crunch."

Nor can being different justify the GTV6's interior. From a standpoint of either esthetics or ergonomics none of us learned to like it. The steering wheel may be made of beautiful, polished wood, but that doesn't make up for the fact that its rim obscures the instruments for most drivers. The seat facings may be genuine leather, but there's also so much flimsy-looking plastic and the color coordination is so uninspired that overall the interior looks as if it belongs in an econobox.

But while the shift linkage and the interior are grist in the mill of the Alfa's detractors, the lovely V-6 engine is by itself almost enough to justify the car in the heart of its supporters. In the car's comment-collecting notebook, staff members wrote words like "smooth," "mesmerizing," "powerful" and "hypnotic" when describing the engine. Indeed, it has the sound and feel associated with machinery of exotic heritage. Initially the rev buildup is slow, but at around 4000 rpm the car fairly leaps ahead, accompanied by a potent snarl from the exhaust pipe. Yet, when loping along the highway in a cruising mode, the engine is relatively quiet. Combine the V-6 with accurate rack-and-pinion steering, powerful 4-wheel disc brakes, plus an unusual De Dion rear suspension, and you have a grand touring car in the best European tradition. And for the icing on the cake, all this performance comes with fuel economy that averaged 22.0 mpg during the 24,000 miles we used the car. With the 17.6-gal. tank, that gives a range of more than 350 miles.

So much for our long-term subjective impressions of the GTV6. What about maintenance and day-in-day-out reliability? Along with high style and fine road manners, Alfas have a reputation as troublesome cars. Over the years R&T staff members have owned a variety of Alfas, and on the whole they've not provided an especially lucrative living for any Alfa mechanics. Unfortunately, the GTV6 has given us precious little evidence to refute the common wisdom.

As we reported at the 12,000-mile mark (R&T, January 1983), the GTV6 seemed to be a trusty companion. The only failing was a cracked brake master cylinder, promptly replaced under warranty. But since then, our Alfa has turned into a demanding mistress. During the second 12,000 miles, the starter motor quit, the 2nd-gear synchro ring failed and a head gasket leaked, the last malady causing a bout of heavy oil burning. In addition, the ignition switch disintegrated, the gas cap key broke in the cap, the interior rearview mirror fell off, and the speedometer, fuel gauge and oil pressure gauge malfunctioned.


Having to disassemble the transmission and much of the engine after only 24,000 miles is not reassuring. Most remarkable

of all, oil burning, bum 2nd-gear synchros and faulty head gaskets are quintessential Alfa Romeo bugaboos, though on older 4-cylinder Alfas they usually occurred much later in a car's life. One would think that after years of experience with these problems Alfa engineers would avoid building them into a newly designed powertrain.

With the exceptions of the gas cap, fuel gauge sending unit, and a set each of front and rear brake pads, all our car's troubles were corrected under Alfa Romeo's standard 1-year/unlimited-mileage warranty. Because we had been in possession of the car for less than a year, there was no question of who would pay. But it's important to note that most folks don't drive 24,000 miles in a year, and that most of these failings might have occurred after the warranty coverage ended. If so, would one be facing a sizable repair bill? Maybe not. An Alfa spokesman said, "We want to keep people satisfied," and told us that if it was apparent that the car had been maintained by the book, the company would do its best to accommodate a customer. "It might not be 100 percent, but we'd certainly contribute to the cost of the repair," he said, explaining that the firm treats each claim individually. One thing Alfa is not likely to fix under warranty (except in extreme cases), is synchros. Most synchronizer rings fail because of abuse, claims the Alfa rep.

The car's metallic paint, trim pieces, upholstery, carpeting and overall body structure held up well under our use. After 24,000 miles the GTV6 was still tight and rattlefree. We should also add that the latest version of the GTV6 is improved. Alfa Romeo says its new digital ignition improves performance from 0-60 mph by 1 second, the front seats are redesigned to give more thigh support, the steering wheel is leather wrapped and the air conditioning has been given greater cooling capacity. Alfa officials also tell us they've made several adjustments to the shift linkage.

Tallying up all the costs of driving the Alfa for 24,000 miles comes to an astounding \$7535, or 31¢/mile. This, for example, compares to \$2227 and 9.5¢ for a Mazda RX-7 as reported in the April 1982 edition of R&T. Though even routine maintenance charges are on the high side, most of the total cost comes from the GTV6's relatively poor resale value.

Despite the problems, we're still confident that Alfa Romeo has what it takes to build an outstanding enthusiast's car. However, the GTV6's design faults and lack of reliability lead us to conclude that the company is resting on its considerable laurels. Two years ago we named the GTV6 one of the 10 best cars for the Eighties. But since then some impressive competition has entered the moderately priced GT market. Given the choice today, many staff members would pick Porsche's 944 over the GTV6, or even Honda's new Prelude, a car that costs considerably less than the Alfa. The train of automotive technology moves at a dizzying pace these days, and we hope Alfa Romeo climbs back aboard soon. 

## ALFA ROMEO GTV 6/2.5 Overall Cost & Cost per Mile for 24,000 Miles

Delivered price .....	\$16,983
Gasoline (unleaded, average of 22.0 mpg) .....	1499
Oil (in addition to routine changes) .....	32
Routine maintenance, by the book .....	495
Repairs and replacements (front & rear brake pads, fuel gauge sending unit, gas cap) .....	276
Total expenditure .....	\$19,285
Resale value at end of test period (est wholesale) .....	11,750
Cost of driving 24,000 miles .....	\$7535
Overall cost per mile for 24,000 miles .....	31¢