

COMPANY PROFILE

Affair Of The Heart

Alfa Romeo may at last be fixing their image problem in the UK, but Automeo has been successfully repairing and servicing Alfas for the last 23 years

Story by Simon Charlesworth Photography by Gerard Hughes

The bonnet is up and his glasses are perched on the end of his nose. Les Dufty is about to demonstrate an operation which is in very real danger of becoming extinct: how to correctly balance a pair of twin-choke carburettors on Alfa Romeo's classic twin-cam.

Everything is laid out just so, with wing protectors shielding the paintwork on Les's magnificent original 1984 Alfetta GTV. It's almost as if he's demonstrating a surgical procedure. We're eagerly listening and

learning about the importance of tuning each individual cylinder for optimum running. In the brief moments when he's engrossed in adjusting the mixture and the idle, and taking exhaust gas readings, there is a faint but very real smile on his face. By no means are Alfa Romeos just a job for Les, they mean so much more to him than that.

Based in Bristol, Les stresses that it's not really fair to compare Automeo with a conventional garage business, because he maintains all his

customers' cars as if they were his own. He takes his time to do the job correctly, he insists on using genuine Alfa Romeo parts and if you don't like that, well, he'll cheerily bid you farewell.

Automeo's premises may be small but they are a living, breathing illustration of quality not quantity. It is certainly possible – and we're living proof of this – to spend ages fondling the racks of genuine Alfa tools which Les has collected. Indeed, it is this impressive collection that illustrates how advanced Alfa Romeo was, pioneering

the use of specially commissioned tools for specific roles, in the days when you could repair an Austin with a decent toolbox and a large lump hammer. Talking of which, it is this requirement which Les thinks explains why Alfa Romeos have been lumbered with an unfortunate image.

"I had a call from a bloke with a 916 GTV, who'd just collected it from a national chain, following an MoT. It had a broken sparkplug and what they had done is banged the plug back in. He'd driven it two miles up the road and it melted

BELOW: The wealth of official Alfa Romeo service information in Les Dufty's comprehensive library



two of the coils. The garage claimed it wasn't their fault, because it was alright when it left them!" says Les with ample incredulity.

"It was one of the smaller plugs and they'd broken it, because they hadn't taken the coils out with the coil base-plate. It was just obvious they didn't know what they were doing – and you get a lot of that.

"There used to be a problem with Alfetta rear wheel bearings, which require a special tool. They're put in with a collar and are torqued up, so you have to have the right kit – but you wouldn't believe the number of times I had people asking me about play in the back wheels.

"I'd tell them it was the wheel bearings and they wouldn't believe me, because they'd just had them replaced. Yet when I took the wheel off, you could see all of the chisel marks where the mechanic had tried to get the locking nut back up. Of course, they then

needed more new wheel bearings fitted because the fitted ones would come apart when you removed them."

Make no mistake. By no means is there any hint of ego or arrogance from Les, it's just that his high professional standards have come from nearly 21 years spent working at the cutting edge of engineering – in his case at Rolls-Royce's aero division (formerly Bristol Siddeley) in Filton.

"I worked in Number Four Development Machine Shop, which in those days was really like a large tool room. All the development work on the engines was machined down there and after it was all tested and signed off, it would go into the production shops where they'd make thousands. My introduction was with all the jets like Concorde's engine – the Bristol Olympus 503B – the Harrier and other military combat planes."

So how and when did the career change happen? "I've always been

into cars since I was a youngster, so that has always been with me and when they offered me early retirement, I decided that was the chance to alter things. It started from a hobby – it was never intended to be big – and was intended to allow me to afford to run my Alfas and to learn about them.

"A 2-litre Giulietta I purchased was a big disappointment when it was delivered new in 1981. I had this image that Alfa dealers would be the next best thing to Formula 1 pit-stop mechanics – and it was a very disappointing car. We nicknamed it the slimming machine, because if you kept it on a steady throttle it worked like a slimming machine – it kangaroo'd.

"When I took it back to the dealer, they said 'yeah but all the Giuliettas do this'. That was their story. If you complained about an Alfasud fault they'd say 'yeah but all the 'Suds do this' – it was just nonsense. They didn't

know what they were on about. So it was either sell it and get a BMW or persevere – and luckily, that's when I met John Clifton. There was no doubt about it, John was the best Alfa man in England; I learnt a helluva lot from him," says Les.

"In the beginning, the main focus of Automeo was cars such as the Alfetta GTV and Berlina, the 105-series – both Spider and Bertone coupe, the Alfasud, and the 33. It then progressed up to the GTV6s, Sixes, Nineties and 75s, before the transition to all the new models. Nowadays, most of the cars are the modern ones with the 16-valve engine."

These days Les focuses mainly on electrics and servicing – the medium to light work – as he freely admits that "my days of chucking gearboxes and back axles about have long gone". The amount of engine and electrical diagnostic equipment Les has around the tidy workshop is almost as impressive as his

BELOW: The stock of time-saving special tools essential for making those tricky jobs easier



knowledge of the subject.

"I use the Maverick Technology's Dec II which is purely set up with Lancia/Fiat/Alfa software and is a very good unit – and I've also bought the new Snap-On Modus that is an all-singing-and-dancing unit, which does everything bar make the tea. The Modus software is pretty effective because it covers everything up to and including the Alfa 159," says Les.

"Why I like the Dec II unit is that it's one of the only units which features the Motronic information for the Alfa SZ/RZ, 3-litre 75 and 16-valve 33. Alright, in those days, the data wasn't anywhere near as complicated as it is now, but it is still nice to be able to run data without having to patch into it with a low-tech voltmeter."

What sort of problems are people encountering now with more recent cars like the 156 and 147? Unfortunately, the majority of problems seem to be caused by

fools armed only with enthusiasm and not enough knowledge.

"The 16-valve engine will use and lose a lot of oil, like a lot of modern engines. I've not found them to be a problem, providing that you use a good oil and I always use Agip 10/60 fully-synthetic race oil. Not only does it quieten it down considerably, but it stops the usage.

"Another problem with modern Alfas is that, unlike the older cars, they are not all owned by people who are interested in the cars, and this is also heightened by low second-hand values, because some people only buy them because they get a lot of car for the money..." says Les, before quickly recommending regular oil checks, in order to quantify an Alfa's thirst for a drop of the good stuff.

Les doesn't say as much, but for him, I get the distinct impression that buying an Alfa purely


for cheap transport is something deeply wrong – and I can understand the sentiment because it is almost akin to automotive desecration. Les doesn't only just work on Alfas, own Alfas or have enough Alfa automobilia to keep the Museo Alfa Romeo honest, but he also confesses to taking technical literature to read on planes!

Unsurprisingly given his passion and background, he has even engineered some of his own tools to make certain servicing jobs vastly quicker. According to Alfa's own advice, when changing an Alfetta slave cylinder or even just the rubbers, you should drop the crossmember just forward of the transaxle – but Les has come up with a nifty little device which saves doing this and saves his customers over 2 hours of labour charges. Another labour-saving device is a bar which Les has fabricated for changing a variator – normally you should

remove the entire camshaft – but not with Les's tool, because it is now possible to remove it with the cam in-situ.

It's the sort of attention to detail which isn't just deeply comforting if you've ever had a bad experience with a garage, but it's comforting to know that the world of Alfa maintenance has a passionate, informed expert who really takes time to think things through.

"The thing is with Alfas," says Les, just before we leave, "Especially with the older ones, you form an affection, an association with the cars. You come to terms with an Alfa and if they love you, they're great cars – if not – they'll take your money quicker than Dick Turpin."

So with one of the great obstacles removed from the Alfa ownership experience, now your head can be as contented as your heart. Suddenly, I feel a car change coming on. 

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BELOW: Les Dufty's own award-winning Alfa Romeo Alfetta GTV on the ramps. As if it needs any work!



Alfa Romeo SZ

Scarily



tempting

Even its most devoted fans wouldn't call this Alfa pretty, but they'll tell you there's more to beauty than mere looks. Act quickly if you want a rapidly appreciating 'monster'

WORDS: SIMON CHARLESWORTH **PHOTOGRAPHY:** LYNDON MCNEIL



Alfa Romeo SZ



Quirky driving position echoes SZ's eccentric exterior

One of life's certainties took a tumble in 1989 when Zagato joined forces with Alfa Romeo. Before then you could rely on an Alfa design blending curves, proportion, balance and beauty to create a car that was memorable for all the right reasons – but the SZ changed all that.

The red machine has always been a very black and white car because its styling divides opinion as swiftly and comprehensively as Marmite introducing itself to inexperienced taste buds. After all the hype and anticipation about the new car Zagato enthusiasts must have initially viewed the new coupé with alarm at its launch in 1989; it must have been like expecting a production of *La Bohème* and instead finding yourself in the front row of a Bananarama gig.

Even today, enthusiasts are hardly likely to appreciate the SZ for reasons of conventional beauty – but they *do* appreciate it for its dynamics, brave aggression and spirit of uncompromising singularity. After all, no company before or since has attempted to translate brutalist architecture into automotive design – a field almost obsessively preoccupied with easy-on-the-eye looks. So it's ironic that it was Alfa Romeo, creator of many of the world's most beautiful cars, that thundered down what appeared to be a design cul-de-sac.

As you'd expect in the current classic market, the value of a low-volume, Zagato-built V6 Alfa Romeo is rising. After being rock solid for many years at £15,000-20,000, you're now likely to have pay up to £30,000 for a usable example,

with the odd exceptional car fetching £40,000. But the question is: can the Alfa Romeo SZ satisfy your inner enthusiast as well as your bank account?

Of all the car manufacturers in the late Eighties to produce low-volume special models – including Aston Martin, Porsche and Ferrari – Alfa Romeo looked least likely to sign up to that club. Tarnished by years of underachieving sales from dynamically fantastic yet slightly flaky models, the company was in urgent need of a halo product – and what better than an advanced, limited-edition coupé, a concept that would remind the world of Alfa Romeo's glory days while pointing toward a more successful future? Such was the infectious belief in this project that it survived even when proudly independent Alfa succumbed to the financial advances of Fiat in 1986.

The coupé's eventual name, Alfa Romeo Sprint Zagato, is misleading because Andrea Zagato's company only oversaw the car's production and not its design (unlike the later open-top Roadster Zagato). Three design teams were asked to submit proposals for the range-topping Alfa: Zagato, Alfa's own *centro stile* (design centre), led by Walter da Silva and Alberto Bertelli, and the FIAT *centro stile*, headed by Robert Opron and Mario Maioli. Zagato's proposal didn't make it far into the race, leaving the contest between Alfa Romeo and Fiat, and it was the latter which won.

Dubbed ES30 for Esperimento Sportivo 3.0-litro, Opron sketched the car's basic parameters, but its interior and exterior were largely the work of Antonio Castellana, with Zagato apparently adding only a few minor details later. Assembled by Zagato, the body was a steel shell to which composite panels of

1989 Alfa Romeo SZ

Engine 2959cc, V6, sohc per bank, 12-valve, electronic fuel injection **Power and torque** 210bhp @ 6200rpm; 181lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, transaxle with limited-slip differential
Brakes Vented discs front, inboard vented discs rear, servo-assisted **Suspension** Front: independent, uniball joints, double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar, remote front riser. Rear: de Dion axle, coil springs, telescopic dampers, uniball joints, semi-trailing arms, Watts linkage, anti-roll bar
Steering Rack-and-pinion **Weight** 1260kg (2778lb) **Performance** Top speed: 145mph; 0-60mph: 7sec **Fuel economy** 21.4mpg
Cost new £40,000 **Value now** £25,000

Not what you'd call pretty – but a beautiful drive

thermosetting methacrylic resin and glassfibre were bonded.

Underpinning the startling bodywork, the ES30 borrowed most of its mechanical components from the Alfa 75 America, while its suspension drew from the Group A IMSA racing Alfa 75 Turbo. Replacing the Alfetta-derived torsion bar front suspension, the ES30 featured the latest in motor sport thinking: coil springs, uniball joints (rose joints) and remote-controlled height-adjustable Koni dampers. This arrangement was initially set up by Giorgio Pianta, who earned his stripes on the Fiat 131, Lancia's 037 and Delta S4, and the IMSA 75.

From the 75 production line came Alfa Romeo's beautiful all-alloy three-litre V6 engine, reworked by the Alfa Corse motor sports department with high-lift camshafts, remapped Bosch Motronic engine management and an increased compression ratio of 10.0:1. The result was a claimed 20bhp power increase to 210bhp, which was fed back to the rear wheels via an Alfa 75 transaxle with limited-slip differential.

The entire project took a mere 19 months to complete, and the experience and data gained by Fiat from the SZ's computer-aided design were later put to use on mainstream models. Launched at Geneva in its last appearance as the ES30, the SZ's production run was planned to include 1000 cars, all originally painted in Rosso Alfa with a dark grey roof.



But the first advanced, lightweight, limited-edition Alfa Romeo for many years failed to create a huge demand. The big drawback for many was the styling; and even though its structure was immensely stiff, making it handle fantastically well, it was actually 10kg heavier than the Alfa 75 V6. On top of all this, Alfa's old foe of poor reliability soon tarnished the SZ's image. Economic gloom in the UK and the absence of a right-hand drive model also played their parts, and a mere 60 cars crossed the Channel instead of the planned 100.

Alfa tried to remedy the weight issue for the Roadster Zagato, a soft-top version featuring thinner, lighter panels and more colour options. Yet the RZ looked softer and ended up being 120kg heavier than the SZ, knocking the edge off its sparkling dynamics. Alfa even introduced the SZ Trophy race series to encourage sales of both models, but turnover remained disappointingly slow. The problem was that the SZ asked too much of potential first-time Alfa Romeo customers and come the end only 998 production SZs and 38 ES30 prototypes were built, and just 278 RZs.

Today, though, the SZ has become a non-conformist cult icon. As modern cars have grown in size and brutishness, the SZ has matured into something fascinating for people who realise that beauty isn't merely skin deep. To most, the reason behind the SZ's Italian

nickname – *il mostro* (the monster) – is plain for all to see. But there's another reason why it gained that moniker: its beautifully balanced, resolved handling and performance monstered the competition.

Our car is a bit of a rarity: a fully sorted and healthy SZ. Owned by Phil Dennys, it's maintained by fellow SZ owner Les Dufty, boss of Alfa specialist Automeo. Get in and the usual pong of petrol is only conspicuous by its absence.

GIUSEPPE BUSO – FATHER OF THE ALFA ROMEO V6

Giuseppe Buso joined Fiat in 1924 after gaining his Perito Industriale diploma at Turin Technical Institute. After working in the calculations office of the aero engine department, he transferred to the car division's experimental department.

He left Fiat for Alfa Romeo in early 1939, where he assisted Orazio Satta Puliga in the calculations office of the special products department. Here his work was mainly focused on advanced racing car technology associated with the Alfa 158 GP car, and he worked on superchargers with Wilfredo Ricart.

In 1946 he was asked to join Ferrari, where he worked closely with both Gioacchino Colombo and Aurelio Lampredi on the 1.5-litre V12 for the Ferrari 125 Sport. It wasn't long before Buso was asked to return to Alfa by his old boss and friend Dr Satta. He left Modena in 1948 with a one-way ticket to Milan.

Back at Alfa, Buso worked on the classic 1900 and the Giulietta before starting on the fuel injection and valve gear of Alfa new V6. This iconic engine has subsequently seen action in many cars and in 1993 became a twin-cam,

24-valve unit for the range-topping Alfa 164.

Production of the hallowed V6 lasted until 2005, when it was finally – and controversially – superseded by a General Motors-based 3.2-litre V6.

Buso was also prominent in establishing the Museo Alfa Romeo, developing a talent for hiding historically important cars that would eventually form an important part of the museum's collection.



Left to right: Alfa alpha males Satta, Buso, president Giuseppe Luraghi and engine maestro Carlo Chiti

AUTOMOBILISMO STORICO ALFA ROMEO, CENTRO DOCUMENTAZIONE (ARESE, MILANO)

Alfa Romeo SZ

thanks to Dufty's hard-won knowledge of the engine management system.

The leather two-seat interior feels special and focused: the heavily bolstered seats, numbered Zagato plaque, parade of Veglia Borletti dials – including a rare mph-calibrated speedo – and a steering wheel that fills your hands so perfectly you want to blush. Such details reveal why the SZ was built: to hell with the marketing man and his gobbledegook, this car is about *driving*.

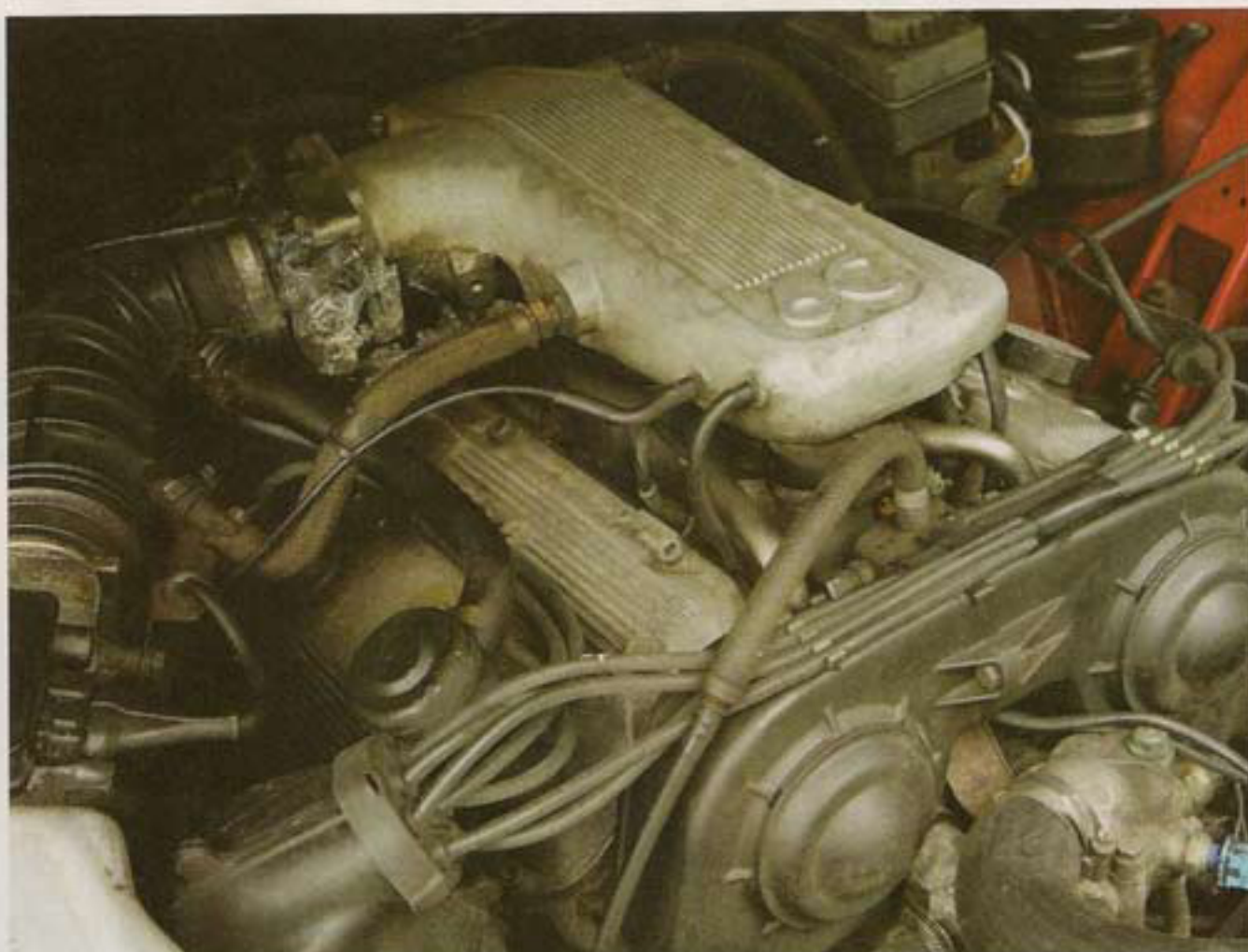
Settling in the driver's seat, the SZ combines an impression of perching on the porcelain throne while stretching for the steering wheel as if it were a much-needed new roll of loo paper – and with a pedal box offset to the right. But throttle response borders on the sensual and you only have to tickle the pedal to send the V6's revs flying to heaven and back. The pedal is delightfully light and a complete contrast to the clutch, which feels as if you've got your left foot stuck in thick mud. It's a balancing act akin to simultaneously giving your quadriceps a work-out and treading on egg shells, so it takes a few minutes to avoid setting off like a learner driver.

The seats give good support but are no match for the g-force that the SZ's race-bred set up can generate. Guide that beautifully tactile steering wheel through a bend and it doesn't disappoint; the power-assisted steering is exceptional – light, quick and bursting with small-talk. The handling, balance, poise and interaction are all in danger of trespassing on the boundaries of perfection, while the ride is a good compromise between firm, connected and comfortable.

As your confidence grows, bundle together more speed – an easy task with this Alfa's long-throw transaxle gearbox in such rude health. The engine is sublime; never mind its responsiveness, torque or wonderfully linear power delivery – it's the sound that gives you goose bumps and makes you feel as if there's electricity passing through your body. Below 4000rpm it's a rich, creamy gurgle that rises gently and melodically in tone; above 4000rpm sounds like a La Scala tenor hitting his highest note at the climax of an aria. It's not fast in a modern sense, but its performance is perfectly in sync with enjoyable A and B roads; it's invigorating and rewarding without feeling bonkers, instant-driving-ban fast.

Of course, you have to take care when buying an SZ and you really must consult a specialist such as Les Dufty, who is aware of the pitfalls and willing to inspect a car. But first you have to find one for sale, which will probably take some time due to the small number built. When you do, talk to the owner and the garages that have stamped up the service history, because some SZs were neglected during their '£12k affordable supercar' phase – so budget for an initial service bill.

Specifically, check the aluminium roof for electrolytic corrosion with the steel skeleton, and also whether the throttle plate – incorrectly



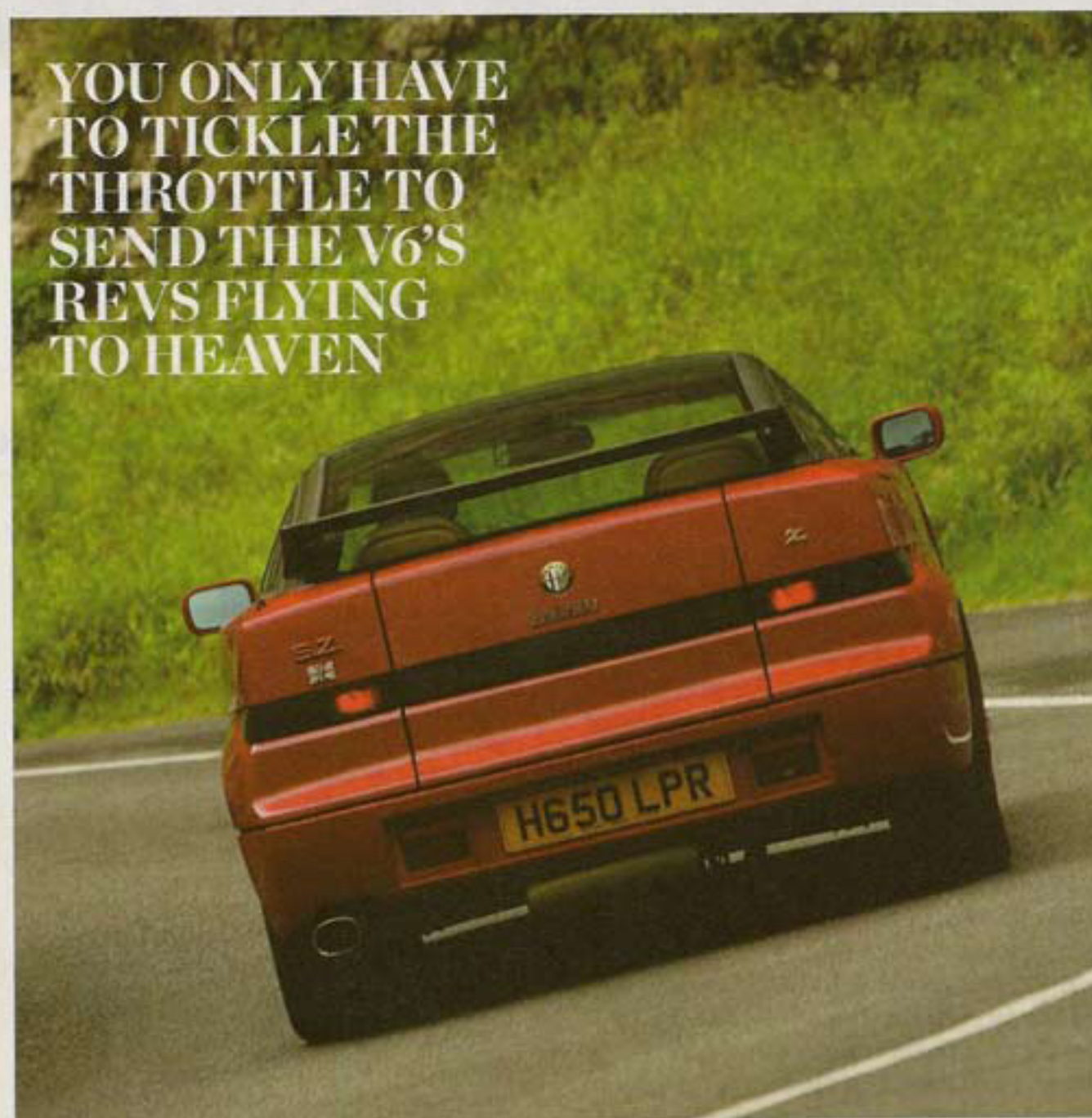
Alfa's motor sport department breathed magic into the SZ's sublime V6 engine

set by the factory – is remedied. Inspect the waterpump, because SZ Motronic-compatible pumps are no longer available, and look underneath to make sure the composite sills haven't been damaged by trolley jacks. Also, have the rear brakes serviced, and is all the suspension in good working order?

Admittedly, you might think you can't be bothered – but such cynical lethargy will evaporate when you first drive a Sprint Zagato – a car that performs well in the market, but even better on the road.

Happy heart and happy brain? Yes on both counts.

THANKS TO: Phil Dennys, Max Banks at Alfaholics (0845 458 1570) and to Les Dufty at Automeo (0117 9695771)



YOU ONLY HAVE
TO TICKLE THE
THROTTLE TO
SEND THE V6'S
REVS FLYING
TO HEAVEN

The view you get after you've been monstered by *il mostro*

ALFA ROMEO SZ

It was ugly, by god it was ugly.
Yet strangely charismatic too.
Enough to win you over?
You bet, says **Glen Waddington**

BACK IN THE JUNE 1990 ISSUE, CAR MAGAZINE whipped up the M4 from London to Wales and gave the Alfa SZ, in the words of one Basil Fawlty, a damn good thrashing. After a day at play it concluded that 'without a doubt, Alfa Romeo is reborn once more as a sports car force.'

Surprised? Well, 20 years ago – a year in which Guns 'n' Roses' *Paradise City* and U2 & BB King's *When Love Comes To Town* bobbed in an ocean of Kylie Minogue dross – Alfa Romeo was more a spent force. You could buy yourself an Alfa 75 but it was a development of the old Alfetta, a medium-sized saloon that dated back to 1972. And its broken-backed styling was, er, challenging, shall we say. Or, as you might have said at the time, 'I'll have a BMW 3-series, please'.

But there was no 1-series back then, no Audi A3 either, and the VW Golf was reliable yet drab. So you might have considered an Alfa 33, complete with flat-four engine and front-wheel drive thanks to its Alfasud heritage – and not a single Fiat component in sight. But Alfa was busy platform-sharing with the 164, a sharp-looking executive saloon. If you peered beneath its wedgy skin you'd have found oily bits of Saab 9000, Lancia Thema and (eeurgh!) Fiat Croma.

During the two decades since we've got used to Alfas being pretty good, if somewhat conventional and a bit Fiat-ish. We've had two generations of front-drive GTV and Spider; we've had the 156 and 159, which finally offered an Italian alternative to the 3-series. But if the SZ hadn't shown up, everybody might just have given up on Alfa Romeo altogether. And there's nothing conventional about the SZ.

'Ugly as sin and just as tempting', declared CAR's headline. Even its mother thought it was ugly – the Italians dubbed it *il mostro*, or 'the monster' – but those platform-sharing lessons learnt with the 164 saloon had given Alfa Romeo a few ideas. And while the 164 spearheaded Alfa's new direction away from an Italian British Leyland to the sporting, charismatic arm of the Fiat Group, the SZ was proof that there was real intent behind it. After all, what does Alfa Romeo mean most to you: a slightly sharper Fiat saloon or a proper sports coupé with more oh-my-gawd presence than Madonna in a Help the Aged charity shop?

Back to those 164 lessons. The SZ is really a rebodied Alfa 75 – so that means you could say this is the last of the proper Alfas. Its layout of front engine, transaxle gearbox and de Dion rear suspension was pioneered in the Alfetta and lived on in the GTV coupé. It makes for great balance (because the gearbox is at the rear) and excellent grip, because the semi-independent rear axle is designed to keep the rear wheels perpendicular to the road surface. ▶

Beholder, beauty, eye, etc – that kind of presence you don't argue with. Alfa's majestic V6 provides music to match. Better run for cover



IF THE SZ HADN'T SHOWN UP,
EVERYBODY MIGHT HAVE GIVEN UP
ON ALFA ROMEO ALTOGETHER



Photography Mark Fagelson



They say time heals, and it's been kind to the SZ – maybe we should thank Chris Bangle. It's much more classical inside

Inside it's focused on driving. A carbonfibre fascia contains bespoke instruments and 75-sourced vents and switchgear but arrays them with logic rather than the 75's look-at-me bonkersness. There are deep, supportive tan leather seats, a proper driving position and scantily clad inner doors, with soft leather only where your arm might venture to rest at a cruise.

Start the engine and it immediately fills the cabin with a glorious woofle. Beat that, Porsche 944, with your big-block four-banger – Alfa's V6 is one of the most sonorous engines ever created. You select first by slotting the lever straight home – a surprise – rather than stirring glue as you would in a 75. Apply some revs, gorge on that creamy snarl, and give it some stick.

You'll immediately notice the quality of the steering, which seems to lay the road in the palm of your hand. It's tactile, accurate, but not too heavy. Turn-in is instantaneous but not so sharp as to be scary. And the weight of the gearbox at the back helps you to mete out variations in your angle of attack with the throttle.

The thrust on hand is ample rather than shocking in a chassis that could easily manage 300bhp, but you soon get into a groove, driving in a more laid-back, GT-style manner, stringing corners together with ease and fluidity rather than pointing, shooting and clinging on. It may have been developed in a hurry but there's real maturity in the way the SZ handles and rides (especially once that clever plastic body has warmed up and stopped creaking). Thank Giorgio Pianta for that. He track-tested and honed the SZ having honed his own skills developing the Lancia 037 and Delta S4 rally cars for Markku Alén, Henri Toivonen and Walter Rohrl.

These days, the SZ's hasty development and limited production (less than 1000 built) mean you need to buy carefully. You'll pay from £20,000 for a decent example (a good five times as much as that 944 is worth now) but, as specialist Les Dufty of Automeo says: 'It's not a bad idea to budget another £10,000 to bring it up to scratch.'

The cost of parts can be prohibitive because they're becoming scarce – and because the 75 base was only nominal. Some aspects of the running gear are more specialised. 'The rear dampers cost £600 even when they were available,' says Dufty – and they're prone to snapping above their bottom mount. New wheels are similarly unobtainable. Braking is marginal until the competition pads have warmed through, and noticeably poor on badly adjusted cars – the rears are inboard and tricky to reach. And the handling is sensitive to the suspension geometry being set correctly. 'You really need to know who's looked after the car and that they knew what they were doing,' says Dufty.

Don't get carried away with thinking that plastic body banishes rust woes, either: the aluminium roof corrodes electrolytically where it meets the steel windscreen header. See? We said it was the last of the real Alfas. **CR**

But all that is a happy coincidence. Alfa Romeo was simply using the best ingredients it had in the larder and reheating them to make a new dish. In double-quick time. At the behest of boss Vittorio Ghidella, the SZ was styled, developed and produced in just 19 months.

Okay, so the shortened 75 floorpan meant half the job was done and Alfa had more than just its own store cupboard to hand. It had a long-lived but stagnated relationship with *carrozzeria* Zagato (who would build the car), and an industry rich in automotive engineering and materials knowledge. Ghidella set designers Mario Maioli and Walter de' Silva (yes, that Walter de' Silva) the task of styling it and de' Silva won. Not because his car was the prettiest (yeah, right) but because Maioli's would have been too complicated to build. Zagato teamed up with Carplast (owned by Giuseppe Bizzarrini, son of Giotto of supercar fame) to develop new construction methods – the SZ has a thermosetting methacrylic resin skin, glued over a steel skeleton. And the project gave Alfa's design team the chance to learn CAD/CAM skills before applying them to full-scale production cars.

The SZ shocked everybody when it was launched at the 1989 Geneva show as the ES30 ('experimental sports car, 3.0-litre'). Not just because of how it looked but because of Alfa's audacity in bringing it so suddenly to the Porsche market. It went on sale with a 210bhp version of the 75's 3.0-litre V6 (up from 192bhp, thanks to new Motronic management), for £42,000 – just two grand shy of a 944 Turbo, for a car that would always be much more exclusive (Porsche built 25,000 944 Turbos) if 37bhp less powerful.

Now, 20 years on, the SZ – 'Z' for Zagato, with a Zorro-like signature on the wing – has grown into its looks. It remains competitively aerodynamic at C_d0.30 and was always claimed to generate positive downforce. But forget that. This car, like it always was, is still about presence, from snub snout to acutely pert tail, via extraordinarily slabby sides and contrastingly delicate glasshouse.

ALFA ROMEO SZ

Prices today:
£20,000 to £40,000
Produced: 1989 to 1994
Number built: 998
Engine: 2959cc V6,
210bhp @ 6200rpm,
172lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission:
Five-speed manual,
rear-wheel drive
Weight: 1260kg
Performance: 7.0sec
0-60mph, 146mph