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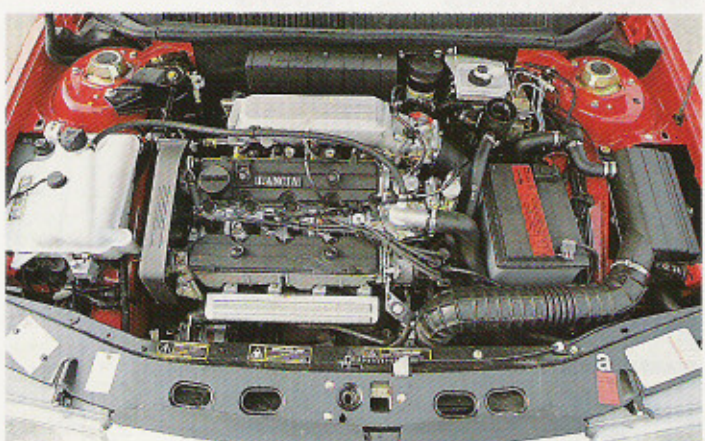
Lancia Dedra 2000 Turbo

A turbocharged two-litre engine adds sparkle to the Dedra, but the new-found potency uncovers shortcomings elsewhere

Price as tested £20,284 **Top speed** 132mph **0-60** 7.4secs **MPG** 22.1

For Strong performance, refined motorway cruising
Against Poor driving position, harsh ride, dull handling

Despite huge levels of torque running through the front wheels, the inside front is reluctant to spin, even in tight bends. Grip is good yet the chassis fails to entertain. Not so the fine, neatly installed balancer-shaft turbo two-litre, which is smooth and willing



EVEN WITH LANCIA'S LUSTY TWO-litre twin-cam engine under its bonnet, the Dedra lacks sparkle. It's a cruiser not a bruiser, a safe, sober cousin to the vibrant, entertaining Delta Integrale.

But the dowdy image is about to change. With a 165bhp version of the balancer-shaft, turbocharged four from the Delta HF, and with further tweaks to the Tipo-derived chassis — including the addition of a viscous limited-slip differential, bigger brakes and sportier tyres — the new top-line Dedra is breathing fire.

At £18,034, it's in a hot price sector, too, competing with the new BMW 320i (£17,950), the Audi 90 2.3E SE (£18,434), Peugeot's 405 Mi16 (£17,625), Alfa's 75 3.0 V6 Cloverleaf (£17,995), the Nissan Primera 2.0e ZX (£17,366), and Renault's 21 Turbo (£19,250), not to mention top-spec Cavaliers and Sierras.

Like these, the Dedra Turbo is targeted at the business user-chooser. It's well specified and ducks under two-litre/sub-£19,250 tax bracket. The only giveaways that this is no ordinary Dedra are the larger-diameter,

15ins wheels, a neat bootlid spoiler and subtle sideskirts.

Not to beat about the bush, the Dedra Turbo is very quick for a two-litre saloon. There's some reason to believe our test car's engine was a particularly strong one, the car being appreciably quicker than those tried at its European launch. Indeed, for sheer overtaking ability the Dedra Turbo is bang on pace with the best in its class — and that includes the 220bhp Sierra Cosworth 4x4.

A 0-60mph time of 7.4secs and 30-70mph through the gears in 7.0secs might not appear all that sizzling by Cosworth standards — they're about the same as a BMW 325i's times — and the 132mph top speed is just middling, too. But take a look at the Dedra Turbo's in-gear acceleration times: its fifth-gear 50-70mph time of 6.2secs beats the BMW's by 3.5secs, the Cosworth by more than a second. Drop down a couple of ratios and it does the same thing in just 3.9secs, matching the Cosworth. For mid-range pull, compact four-seaters don't come much better.

The key to this mid-range potency, from what is effectively a development of a '60s Fiat

engine, lies with Lancia's precise management of the turbo boost in conjunction with effective control of ignition and fuel injection requirements. This 'Boost-drive' system, as Lancia calls it, uses digital electronics to maintain continuous turbo boost pressure across a wider-than-usual range of engine speeds. The aim is to achieve better driveability, rather than a high peak power output, and this is reflected by the relatively tame 165bhp at 5500rpm but a terrific torque figure of 202lb ft at just 3000rpm. Significantly, the engine achieves at least 75 per cent of its peak torque between 2000 and 5750rpm.

That's the theory, anyway; in practice, the results aren't quite so clear cut. There's no denying this power unit's potent mid-range urge, but the shove in the back comes suddenly, at around 2700rpm, and after the initial vigour it tails off significantly. There's no real top-end bite, which means the power band isn't quite as broad as that of the best new-wave turbo engines. Curiously, those early Italian-spec launch cars behaved somewhat differently, with a much more progressive power delivery. ▶

Top View Dimensions:

- OVERALL LENGTH: 170.9' / 4343
- OVERALL WIDTH: 66.9' / 1700
- Boot capacity: 480 dm³
- Turning circles: 103 m
- Interior seat widths: 55.1" (rear), 56.2" (middle), 56.4" (front)

Side View Dimensions:

- OVERALL HEIGHT: 56.2' / 1430
- REAR TRACK: 55.7' / 1415
- WHEELBASE: 100.7' / 2540
- FRONT TRACK: 56.5' / 1436
- Angles: 34.5°, 38°, 30°, 27.32°, 18.23°, 26.29°, 42°, 42.5° max
- Ground clearance: 19" (rear), 24" (front)

Figures taken at 2800 miles by our own staff at the Lotus group proving ground, Millbrook

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The Dedra Turbo's balancer-shaft engine is pleasantly refined and remains free from harshness as the rev limit approaches. There's a muted chortle from the wastegate on the over-run and a throaty, hard-edged growl from the exhaust under hard acceleration. This softens to an acceptably subdued level when cruising. Our only gripe is that when trickling along in first gear, the throttle action is jerky. The gearbox, borrowed from the 16-valve Thema, has closely spaced ratios and a decent shift action with short, precise throws. However, the shift can be a little obstructive until the transmission oil warms up.

Cruising in the Dedra Turbo elicits nearly 30mpg, but if the storming performance is used to the full, economy inevitably suffers. Our overall figure of 22.1mpg is fair for a turbocharged two-litre with this level of sprinting ability. The 13.9-gallon tank should permit a cruising range of about 370 miles.

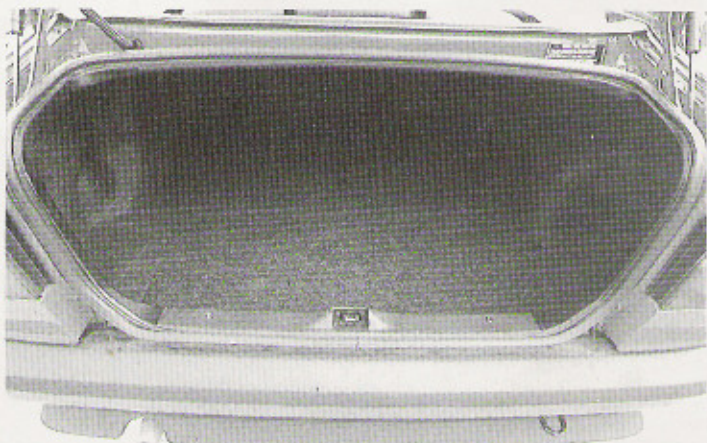
Directing around 200lb ft of torque to the tarmac via the front wheels without the steering tying itself in knots is an acknowledged problem. Lancia's solution is something called 'Viscodrive', which is nothing more than a fancy name for a Ferguson viscous coupling. In this application, it's fitted to the right-hand driveshaft. By transferring part of the drive torque to the wheel with the greater grip, it counters any tendency for an individual front wheel to spin, such as when turning a tight corner or on split-friction surfaces.

It works remarkably well, and without a silicon chip in sight. The spinning inside front wheel that might be expected through a series of fast, tight bends just doesn't happen. Flooring the accelerator pedal in second gear on a slippery uphill corner will, of course, provoke some wheelspin, but the combination of the viscous coupling and the grippy Michelin MXVs copes with almost every other situation.

The downside is distinctly inert steering feel. The helm's gearing is direct enough, but there's too little communication and even less finesse. In short, competent though it is, the chassis doesn't match up to the fine engine. Body roll verges on the excessive and suspension control occasionally falters, even with the optional automatic electronic damper control set to the 'sports' setting. This tends to make the ride worse but little else. Despite ample grip, the Dedra's chassis fails to entertain, and that's a cardinal sin for a sporting saloon. It's quick and secure, sometimes agile, but that's not quite enough.

The brakes are disappointing, too. There's no doubting their stopping power but the combination of a mushy pedal action and

Cabin seems cold and unappealing, and ergonomics is not its strong point, either in its controls or driving position. Levels of equipment are good, though leather trim is part of optional £2250 'performance pack'. Passenger space, front and rear, is not generous but boot is roomy



inconsistent pedal pressures means a smooth braking action is denied. Electronic anti-lock braking comes as standard.

As a motorway cruiser, the Dedra Turbo seems in its element. Here, the gutsy engine barely acknowledges inclines, and the ride is much smoother than it is around town, where the body can shake and shudder over ridges and pock marks. Noise levels are low, too.

Cabin aesthetics are cold and unappealing. From the old-fashioned fascia to the imperfect driving position with too-close pedals, the effect is decidedly '70s. The rosewood veneer looks as if it might have been an afterthought, the electric seat operation is ergonomically unsound, the wipers and heater fan are noisy, the heating controls are over-complicated, there's precious little oddment space and the lighting stalk is designed in such a way that it's all too easy to switch off the lights when changing beam settings. Points in its favour are a comprehensive spread of instruments and a good-to-grasp leather-rimmed wheel.

As far as space is concerned, there's not all that much in the front and only just enough room for a six-footer in the back. The boot is

a good size but the opening is small. The spare wheel is a space-saver type.

It is well equipped, though. Standard items include remote central locking, an electric sunroof, a high-spec radio/cassette, electric windows and mirrors, thermostatically controlled heating, power steering and alloy wheels. The 'performance pack' fitted to the test car includes leather trim (which means forgoing the split/fold facility for the rear seat), electric seat adjustment and the automatic damping control, dubious value at £2250.

This car has too many shortcomings in too many areas. The uncomfortable driving position, harsh ride, dull handling and mushy brakes gang up to dull the enjoyment of what should be a thoroughly competitive sports saloon — because there's no denying that the Dedra Turbo is exceedingly and appealingly rapid. Strong grip and a terrific overtaking ability make it one of the quickest sports saloons around. If you see a Dedra Turbo looming large in the rear-view mirror, you'd better pull over to let it past. Chances are, its driver is exploiting the good bits. ■