

On a fast trip to Scotland, the 210bhp V6 Alfa Sport Zagato chases away the years and reminds

HAVE MONSTER



David Vivian of the raw originality and excitement that first inspired his passion for cars

WILL TRAVEL





I KNOW THIS CAR. IT'S THE ONE I lost for a week under the sideboard. The one I used to worry the cat with. It's the one I liked to pick up and feel and study very closely. The one that was vividly and wonderfully red until I scraped all the paint off by scrubbing it with a concrete door step, thereby effecting a brushed steel finish and inventing the De Lorean 25 years before John Z.

Most of all, though, it's the one that communicated 'car' to me before I could communicate much at all to anyone else. 'Car' equalled 'fun' and 'fun' equalled 'naughty' — it was a kid's thing. Looking at the world on my hands and knees from the perspective of a dog, most of my waking hours were spent assimilating the purpose of this small lump of metal, plastic and rubber. It had shape, it had intrigue, it had moving bits and it had speed: about 300mph if I pushed it hard enough. That's how it ended up under the sideboard.

I can't remember back far enough to know its name or, indeed, if it was just one car. What I do know, though, is that on seeing the Alfa Sport Zagato (*il mostro*, the monster) for the first time in the flesh, I was re-acquainted with those childish feelings and emotions, an open-mouthed wonder I hadn't experienced in 13 years as a motoring journalist. Just seeing it there, parked outside my house — squat, defiant and very, *very* red — reminded me why I like cars at a time when I was beginning to wonder if I really did.

The SZ didn't look ugly at all. Those who use the word in the Alfa's context have missed the



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point spectacularly and stupidly. A Yugo Sana is 'ugly', the SZ is testosterone on wheels, the raw DNA presentation of a car without any genetic engineering; a plastic and carbon fibre manifestation of a primal joy.

The six cream cracker-sized Carello lights are more distinctive than any other headlight system in the world and astonishingly bright, the waistband slit of rear light cluster (lifted from the 164 parts bin) properly menacing for a car that, from some angles, looks like an artfully coagulated blood clot.

What's important is that it's a genuinely new shape. One I wanted to pick up and run my thumb along, to study at close range, to get down low with and scoot along the ground — fast. You never admit these things to yourself, of course, it's just a feeling. But in a car-making epoch that celebrates conformity and refinement above originality and inspiration, the feeling stirred up by the SZ was direct and



overwhelming. The urge here wasn't only to drive Alfa's greatest car in 20 years but also to become a part of it, to be *monstrous* for a couple of days. Playtime beckoned . . . I could hardly wait.

We left my place in Maidstone at 3pm and headed north along the A1, making Newcastle by nightfall. Our hotel was near the airport. Next day, we crossed the border into Scotland and almost immediately found the sort of roads that allowed the monster and me full and meaningful expression. We flew down the straights, a red-hot chilli pepper propelled on the devil's breath. We outraged the dozy and the dull, an alarming vision of perambulating petulance snorting neat gas, blaring a big bore exhaust and screaming a tortuous cam-chain chorus from the mildly uprated, 210bhp version of Alfa's otherwise familiar and endlessly rewarding 3-litre V6.

And when we'd done that we cornered at speeds that must have seemed plain silly to anyone not familiar with the Alfa's formidable chassis credentials: struts at the front, de Dion axle at the back *a la* 75 but with uniball joints replacing rubber bushes, height-adjustable Koni spring/damper units supplanting the 75's torsion bars, fat Pirelli P Zeros on 7 and 8ins alloy rims and, says Alfa, a measure of 'ground effect' at speed to stick the whole ensemble onto the tarmac.

Best, and most mischievously of all, we gatecrashed the Ecurie Ecosse classic car bash at its lunchtime rest stop in Dundee with the express intention of making Ferrari GTO and

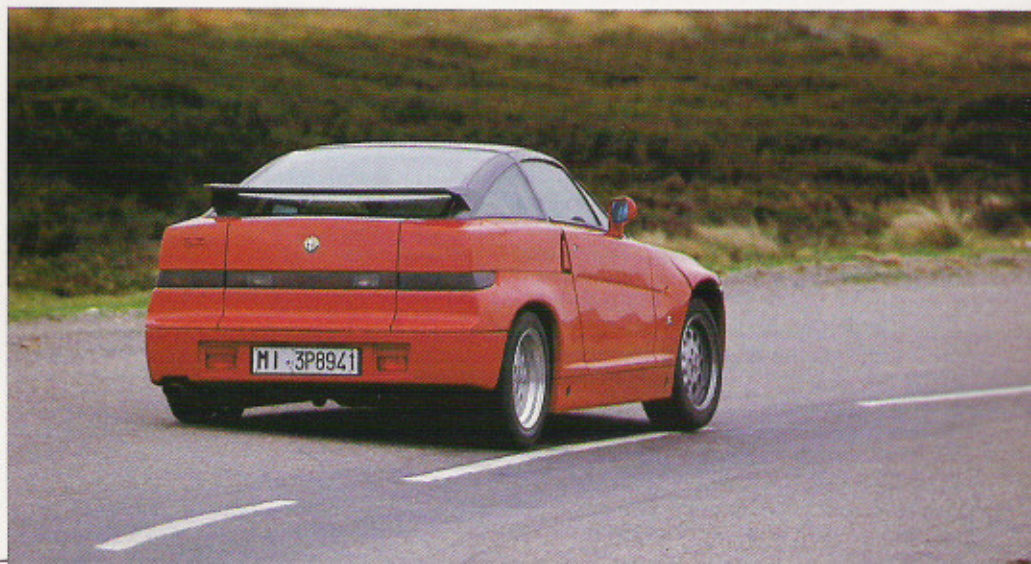


No boot — spare takes up rear cavity (left). Cabin simple but effective contrast to exterior. Leather-wrapped steering wheel Zagato-designed. Bucket seats padded. Clear instruments set in carbon-fibre



Opposite page: BMW racer Frank Sytner in love at first sitting (below left).

Distinctive cream cracker-sized headlights extremely bright. This page, below: chassis displays neutral cornering balance



SZ's 210bhp V6 engine not quite up to promise of car's looks, but still a sharp and rewarding unit. Suspension offers two settings, both of which are low enough to let spoiler ground in dips



D-type Jaguar owners feel shamefully inadequate as spectators swarmed over the one and only SZ in the UK. Basically and fundamentally, we raised hell, swivelled heads through 180 degrees *Exorcist* style and stuck a couple of fingers up at a kind of motoring that has become bland and impotent.

We're getting ahead of ourselves. Spool back to Day One and the long, dark teatime of the M25, M11 and A1. Through the murky, stop-and-start evening we had plenty of time to get a feel for the Alfa's cabin. It's a stunning slice of simplicity every bit as effective as the car's perfectly brutal external appearance. Only the important things are right: the position and rim-thickness of the Zagato-designed, leather-wrapped three-spoke steering wheel, the shape and padding of the muscularly-bolstered bucket seats, the even-spacing of big pedals, the gun-handle intimacy of the door pulls and the plain clarity of the

instrument dials. These are surrounded by roughly hewn sheets of carbon fibre — a macho alternative to buffed walnut and a constant reminder that this most high-tech of car-making materials also lends strength and lightness to the road-shaver of a front spoiler and the stubby bootlid aerofoil. What isn't right hardly matters: the fit of the carpet.

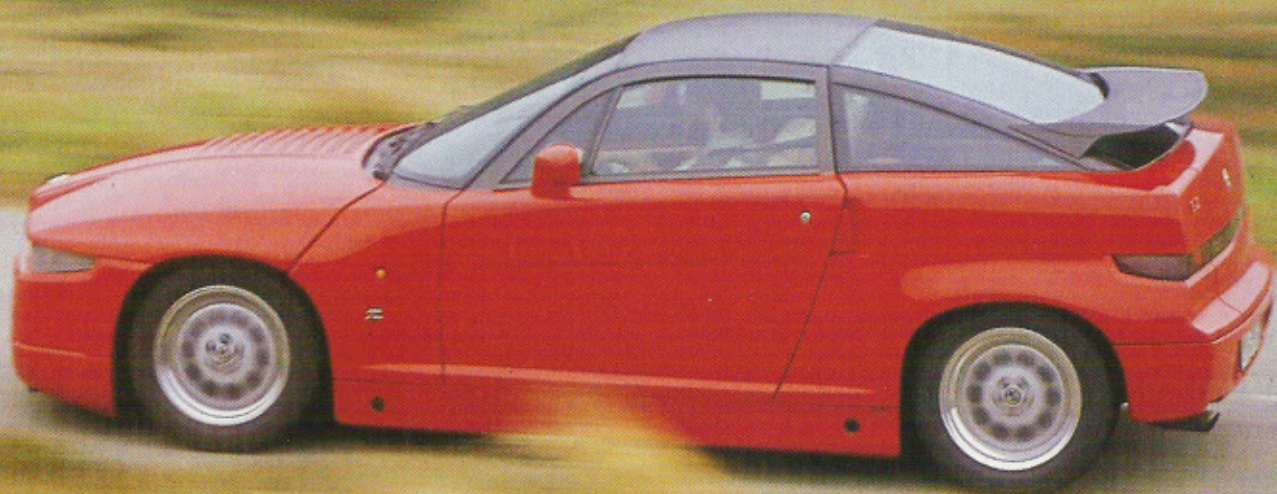
The mindless miles also nurture a few dislikes, most serious of which is the vague, sloppy and ludicrously long-winded gear-change. The gearbox may be 75 but shift quality is JCB.

Also, the huge expanse of wrap-over bonnet — made, like the rest of the occasionally rattle and clonk-prone bodyshell, from an advanced thermosetting plastic called Modar — wobbles about in the wind and in response to a ride quality which, around town, is harder than a skinhead's cranium. The ride height adjustment built into the damping system has two

settings: very low and extremely low. The absence of any appreciable compliance in either mode is a new experience for the 75's strut/de Dion suspension but, in 'high', the Alfa's incredibly deep chin spoiler is 1.57ins farther off the ground than in 'low'. It makes no difference: hit a dip and the spoiler grounds.

The engine — a classic in the GTV, great in the 75 and magnificent in the 164 — isn't exactly a disappointment in the SZ but neither is it up to the job. Charismatically musical, sharp and sweet-spinning as the V6 is, it doesn't have quite enough steam in this application. A Cd of 0.30 and fairly rangey gearing ensure a top speed of around 145mph, which is fine, but a 0-60mph time in the region of 7secs isn't as tough as the SZ's intentions. A car that looks as single-minded as a 0.303 shell demands more kick than a fast hatchback.

But then pointing the Alfa in a straight line never was going to be the script's most enthralling scene. As the SZ nosed carefully over a tarmac ridge on the entrance to the first night's hotel car park, only half the story had unfolded. The abiding impression over dinner was of a small, surprisingly practical coupe (no boot but a big shelf behind the seats) with more refinement but less performance than it deserved, a hard ride and a hopelessly ponderous gear-change. It seemed to be shaping up as the compromise I didn't want to know. What I'd beheld only hours earlier as the seminal automotive experience was slowly but inexorably aligning itself with the modern world and all its predictable familiarity. The



monster was too damn nice.

The morning was cloudless, the shadows low and sharp as we closed on our lunchtime rendezvous with the classics in Dundee. But for the pedantic behaviour of the police, the SZ would have stayed lined up on the quay with several million pounds worth of superannuated exotica and not looked out of place. But, predictably, it attracted too much attention and was duly moved along to a far more conspicuous location on the road.

Famous Porsche 911 racer and artist Nick Faure came over to explain the mysteries of the Alfa's composite body while BMW dealer and racer Frank Sytner asked if he could sit inside and, once ensconced, looked pleased that he had. Frank liked the steering wheel, the seats, the pedals, the dials, the smell, the colour, the headlining, the column stalks, the key fob . . . Frank liked it a lot.

A young lad with a spotty dog and a camera asked if he could take a picture. He reckoned the SZ was "the best-looking car in the world". Being young, he understood.

We left on the A923 which, after 20 minutes or so, joined up with the A93 at Blairgowrie. The section of the A93 that runs between Blairgowrie and Braemar is one of Scotland's truly great roads: it's fast but deceptive, well surfaced but trickily cambered, mostly open cornered but occasionally blind crested. If you're to drive it fast you must concentrate all the way — a moment's lapse could be your last. But in the SZ I felt the rhythm of the road for the first time; the ebb and flow of the cornering and



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braking g forces, the light-headed crests, the lead-stomached dips. The Alfa strung it all together as one.

Here, on this most demanding of roads, outright speed didn't matter. Flexibility did, and we had plenty: strong acceleration between 50 and 70mph in third, an effortless transition from 70 to 90mph in fourth.

They were the only gears I needed. The rest was accomplished with the Alfa's colossally capable chassis. We were running on the low suspension setting — psychologically, if nothing else, the opportunity to lower your centre of gravity isn't one you ignore — and that meant scraping the road with the carbon-fibre spoiler in the deeper hollows. But we knew that damage would not be the result — only an even stonkier cornering stance with almost cheek-tugging turn-in, barely perceptible roll, heroic grip and an awesomely neutral cornering balance. It wasn't just the sheer feeling of precision and poise, of iron-fisted control that was so impressive — a Lotus Elan can give you that — but the lucid and utterly clear communication from the helm. Nothing gets in the way to cloud or distort the issue. When you grab hold of the steering wheel in the SZ, you're in control.

That's the kind of indulgence I'd been craving all along; something that cut through the crap to deliver a real, living thrill. A feeling so strong that the outside world fades to grey, time dilates and it's all about you and a lump of metal, plastic and rubber with shape, intrigue and speed. ■