

# THE FORGOTTEN SUPERCARS

Originally shown at Canada's Expo '67, the Alfa Montreal is on record as one of the most maligned cars of its era. In the first of an occasional series on the supercars that didn't set the world alight, David Vivian drives it. Photography: Stan Papior

# CANADA GOOSE

OF ALL BERTONE'S GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS, surely his masterstroke was to give the Alfa Montreal slatted headlight covers and bulging flanks. A car with shades and tight trousers: now *that* was styling and very, *very* Italian.

I've always loved the looks of Alfa's forgotten supercar, they're just so shamelessly sassy. Here's a car with more visual affectations than Quentin Crisp that still contrives to look tough and menacing. Whatever its surroundings, the Montreal always adopts a street corner pose, a sort of jacket-draped-round-shoulders and Gitanes-lolling-on-bottom lip arrogance that smoulders with adolescent angst. It's got that defensive 'what you looking at butt head?' vulnerability. It's saying: 'Don't poke fun at my fancy clothes; deep down I'm harder than you are.'

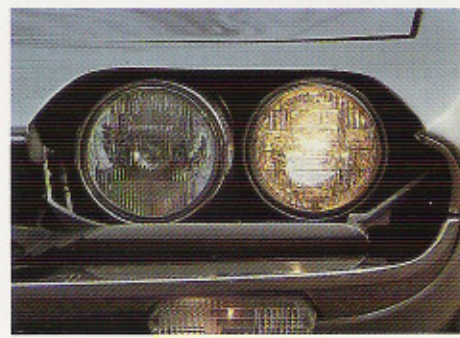
With a 200bhp 2.6-litre quad-cam V8 shoehorned beneath its long, shapely bonnet, the claim carried some weight. But the power wasn't put behind the pose until 1971 when Alfa finally launched its fastest production car to an intrigued public and frankly sceptical press.

The scepticism stemmed from the Mon-

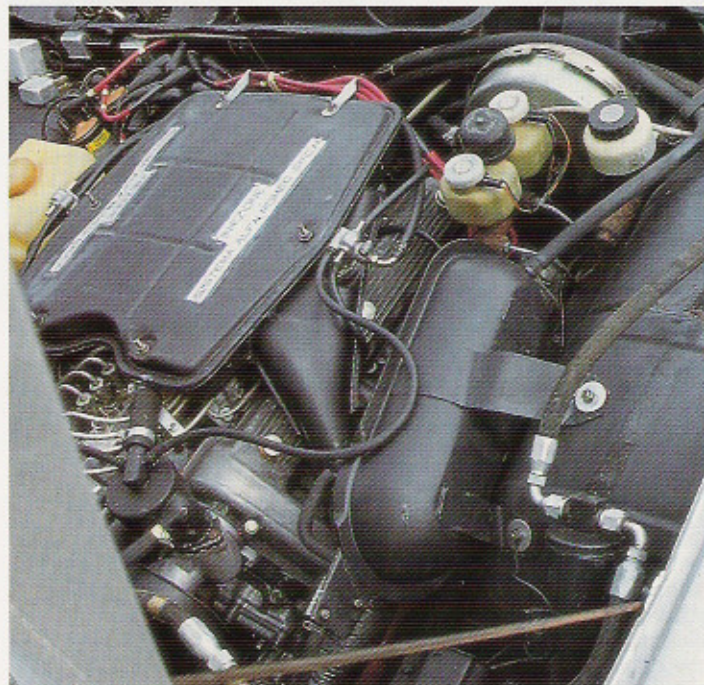
treau's origins as a concept show car some four years earlier at Expo '67 in Montreal, Canada. Bertone's commission brief had been to produce a one-off stunner, a car that symbolised 'man's highest achievements in the automotive world'. That kind of publicity hot air could have consigned the concept to the dustbin of history but perhaps because the Montreal's shape possessed a good deal more practicality than the regular free-form show car fantasy, the dream became a reality.

Re-detailed for manufacture — thankfully, the headlamp shades, dummy bonnet duct and extravagant cabin vent slots remained — the Montreal's hand-formed all-steel monocoque looked close enough to Bertone's original styling study for the coupe (more a two-plus-one, really) to acquire instant junior-league supercar status. Mind you, that wouldn't have been the case had it retained the show car's cooking 1.6-litre lump. Nothing so mundane could possibly be allowed to power the symbol of man's highest automotive achievement. To Alfa's eternal credit, it resisted any number of half-baked solutions and instead gave the world one of its more memorable supercar engines — a detuned version of the V8 used in Alfa's F1 and '33' racers.

This all-alloy masterpiece, with its cylinder banks angled at 90deg, had a smaller bore and stroke than the 3-litre grand prix racing unit, totting a swept volume of 2593cc. The level of mechanical sophistication, however, was unchanged. Twin-cam, eight-valve heads capped each bank with fuel administered by Spica indirect mechanical fuel injection. Ignition was electronic, lubrication dry sump and, on a compression ratio of 9.0 to 1, the engine developed 200bhp at 6500rpm and 173lb ft of torque at 4750rpm though, more importantly, around 90 per cent of the peak figure was







**Distinctive slats over headlights and wide hips give the Bertone-styled Montreal street presence. It makes junior-league supercar with the help of Alfa's memorable detuned V8 — an all-alloy 3-litre**

available between 3000 and 6000rpm. Heady stuff. The rest of the specification was rather more run-of-the-mill. The engine's impressive outputs reached the rear wheels via a standard issue five-speed ZF gearbox — also used by Fiat for its Dino and by Ford on numerous RS Escorts — while a modified 1750 coupe floorplan carried the parts bin suspension components. Borrowed from the Giulia was the coil-sprung live rear axle located by trailing arms and an A-bracket. Coils were also employed at the front, this time in conjunction with Giulia-style wishbones. Unassisted recirculating balls did the steering. Much more in keeping with the supercar image, however, were the brakes: meaty ventilated discs all round. Seventies road test reports criticised the Montreal for many things, but brake fade wasn't one of them.

Still, I was about to find out for myself. Roberto Pedone is a Wolverhampton-based classic car enthusiast and dealer as well as a self-confessed 'Alfista'. His immaculate silver left-hooker Montreal was made in 1974 and imported from Italy in '89, having spent the previous 10 years not doing very much as the property of an Alfa director. Fellow Alfa-buff ▶



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Antonio Quarta brought it over and did it up before selling it to Roberto last November for a sum which our man was reluctant to disclose, though he wouldn't part with it now for less than £25,000. After all, it's only covered 19,447km (12,086 miles) from new. And with that, Roberto chucked me the keys.

'Adventurous' is a word often used to describe Italian instrument design, but the Montreal's transcends both inventiveness and aesthetic iconoclasm to attain the status of the truly bizarre. The cabin's slim seats and hard plastic trimmings aren't at all unusual; they could have come out of any mid-70s Alfa. The instruments, on the other hand, could only have come from the mind of a sadist who reads science fiction in his spare time. They poke you in the eyeballs as you slip behind the elegant wood-rimmed three-spoke steering wheel. Two huge circular cowls house eccentrically located speedo and revcounter surrounded by fiendishly complex segmented compartments in which a mixture of gauges and warning lights resides. Flash Gordon would have been fazed, Buck Rogers bamboozled. How can you reasonably be expected to tell the speedo from the revcounter when both require a multiplication factor to get true readings, as in  $12 \times 10 = 120\text{kph}$ ?

The start-up procedure, at least, is straightforward. Twist the key for ignition, wait for the whirring fuel pumps at the back of the car to prime the injection system then crank the engine without touching the accelerator. The engine cracks into life and immediately settles to a slightly lumpy 800rpm idle. Even now, you can hear the V8's breeding. It makes a lovely double-register sound; a mellow, burbling bass decorated with well-defined whirrings, clicks and 'sizzles' from the intricate valvetrain. Just brush the accelerator and the engine



**Immaculate '74 Montreal worth around £25,000. Live rear axle gives supple ride but too much body roll. Power mid-bend can slide rear out but more likely to spin away through inside wheel**







More positive are the gearchange and clutch. The former snicks easily through a well-defined gate with the minimum of effort, the latter is smooth, progressive and surprisingly light. As for the brakes, there's about an inch of dead pedal travel before the action firms up and the car slows. They feel a little dead, but the pads are still cold and it's early days yet.

Trundling through Wolverhampton's suburbs, the Montreal is friendlier than I'd have anticipated. The burbling V8 shows no temperament and is superbly tractable. It murmurs along in third without the slightest protest.

The first stretch of clear road looms. Second gear, foot flat and it's all there, just as you knew it would be: instant response, a delectable hardening of the engine note and a respectable shove in the back. Respectable but not fierce. With a top speed of around 135mph and a 0-60mph time just the wrong side of 8secs, the Montreal wouldn't be considered supercar-quick by today's standards but, to be honest, it wasn't really back in the early '70s. What's addictive about the V8's performance isn't its sheer grunt but the wonderful sense of relentlessness that goes with outstanding flexibility. As tested by *Motor* in 1972, the Montreal packed away all the fourth gear 20mph increments between 30 and 90mph in under 7secs apiece. Overtaking isn't a problem.

On the contrary, it becomes an obsession — just to hear the quad-cam marvel working hard. Its sonics are so good, they're almost a parody of the supercar song — a raw racer's soundtrack fed through a few high-pass filters to remove the dirtier elements and leave the pure, unadulterated fury. Bags of snap, crackle and pop on the overrun almost demands that you have the windows wound down and drive

**Simplicity and style of body is not reflected by bizarre interior, with complicated and confusing dials and markings through elegant steering wheel. Gearchange is well defined and slick**

through as many tunnels as possible.

And as the pace picks up so the Montreal begins to pull itself together. The steering remains heavy and vague about the straight-ahead but feeds back plenty of information. Grip from the modestly dimensioned (195/70 x 14) VR-rated Michlins is seldom found wanting and even the live rear axle seems fairly well behaved and permits an acceptably supple ride, if rather too much body roll. A bootful of throttle exiting a tight bend will often send the tail skipping sideways but, more often, the Montreal prefers to pick up its inside wheel and spin the power away. Agile it isn't but, on the whole, the fast Alfa feels stable and forgiving.

Even so, it's easily at its best in a straight line. And that's how many will want to remember the Montreal: as an exceptionally stylish GT powered by a great engine — a fine trans-Continental express but probably not a genuine supercar. That, at any rate, is how Roberto Pedone sees it. Having sampled the undoubted charms of the much maligned Alfa, he's selling his, a little sadder but hopefully a little richer too. Good Montreals are bound to gain in value, if only for the Bertone badge and that glorious engine. ■

snarls; a good prod illicit a hollow howl and the spine-tingling shriek of cam chains.

Into first, a dog-leg on the ZF, and away. Initial thoughts, during a six-point turn outside Roberto's house, are dominated by the steering or, rather, the lack of it. The laid-back driving position is comfortable enough but doesn't allow sufficient leverage on a wheel which seems to be attached to the unyielding resistance of a fairground test-your-strength machine. Nor does the first hard-won quarter turn of lock appear to do anything worth cancelling lunch for.