

Alfa Romeo 156



SCORECARD

Overtaking / pulling power

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Fuel economy

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Handling / steering

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Comfort / ease of control

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Interior space / practicality

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Accident / injury avoidance

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Costs in service

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Depreciation prospects

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YOU'VE GOT TO HAND IT TO ALFA! IN A home market that sells less than two per cent of cars with an automatic gearbox, its sporting 156 and 166 saloons offer no less than three different "dual mode" transmissions. Alfa is determined, it seems, to convince enthusiasts that they can have their cake *and* eat it.

The 166's Sportronic is a normal torque converter automatic with a manual, sequential-shift override alongside. Then there's Q-system – another conventional four-speed automatic, this time with a manual H-pattern gate offset to one side of the D. Last, but by no means least, Selespeed is effectively a regular five-speed manual, but without the clutch pedal.

It not only offers self-shifting gears to ease the burden in suburban snarl-ups, but ices the cake for boy-racers with Formula One-style, thumb-operated gearshift buttons on the steering wheel. So now we can all play at being Michael Schumacher.

Selespeed is both a manual and an automatic, yet each is a little different from its regular counterpart. It needs

time to get used to it. And even then, the lurching "hole" as it smooths out brisk first-to-second upshifts, and its inability to always correctly read the driver's intentions, remain ever-present (albeit minor) irritations.

Allied to the 156's firm but never frantic ride, sabre-like steering and peerless performance, shifting gears at the mere prod of a thumb (once the 156 is rolling) becomes a novelty that's hard to put down. The thumb-shifters aren't ideally placed ("paddles" behind the wheel would be easier) and, contrary to expectations, our youthful test car didn't prove quite as brisk or economical as a regular five-speed manual we tested previously.

Even without Selespeed, the 156 is a highly desirable piece of engineering. Adding Grand Prix-style gearshifting (although neither as cheap nor quite as polished in execution as we'd like) makes this rewarding family saloon even more fun. It's not quite flies-in-the-teeth Formula One stuff, but it's as close as most of us are likely to get.

HOW THE SELESPEED COMPARES	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes† best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom - front (cm)	Typical leg/ knee room - rear (cm)	Steering turns/ (p) circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
ALFA 156 SELESPEED (SEMI-AUTOMATIC)	1970/155	3300	9.3	23.2/16.1	28½	25/24	106	95/76	2.2/11.4	443
Ford Mondeo 2.5 V6 5dr (manual)	2544/170	2955	8.2	21.7/15.0	29	23/22	110	102/76	2.8/11.7	456
Honda Accord 1.8SE Sport 4dr (manual)	1850/136	3380	10.2	26.2/18.9	32	27/15	109	100/73	3.1/11.1	459
Nissan Primera 2.0 4dr (CVT M6)	1998/140	2600	9.1	36.0/21.1	32½	24/14	107	99/74	2.7/12.3	452
Subaru Legacy 2.5GX 4dr (manual)	2457/154	3050	8.6	21.1/13.9	29	25/20	107	98/75	3.2/11.3	461
VW Bora 2.3 V5 4dr (manual)	2324/150	3320	8.5	18.8/14.0	32	24/17	109	93/65	3.0/10.5	438
						† all with ABS			(p)all power-assisted	

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.1	3.8	5.9	9.3
IN 5TH GEAR		5.9	11.5	17.6	23.2
IN 4TH GEAR		4.2	8.5	12.2	16.1

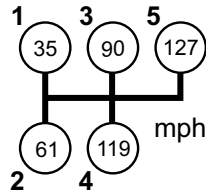
20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	N/A/8.9		11.7/8.0		
		11.5/8.5		11.7/7.6	

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
		6800*		6840	5960

* for best acceleration

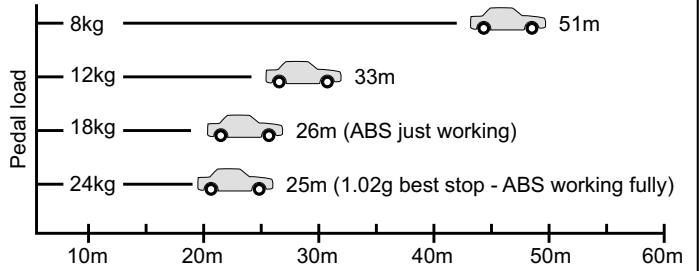
Gearing gives 21.2mph per 1000rpm in top gear = 3300rpm at 70mph



BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●○○○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●●●○ Handbrake ●●●○○

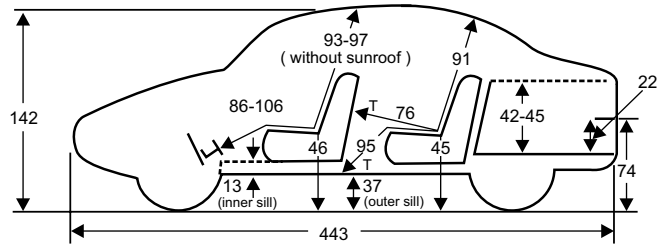
Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (with standard ABS)
 (A good-to-average best stop is about 26m at 15-20kg pedal load)



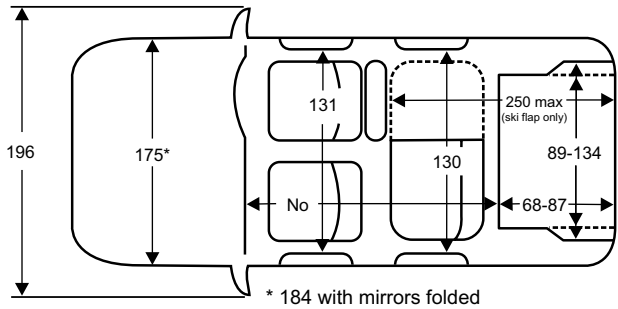
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:
 13kg at start of test, 13kg at end of test (Ideal brakes show no change)

MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres Four-door saloon



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



* 184 with mirrors folded



FUEL CONSUMPTION

Fuel grade: unleaded 95 octane petrol	
Type of use - air conditioning off*	mpg
In the city - heavy traffic	18
In the country - quiet driving	39
Typical mpg overall	28½
Realistic tank range†	55 litres/ 340 miles

†based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience - *not* nominal tank capacity

*with air conditioning switched on, consumption will increase by 2–4% in winter and 4–8% in summer

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Developed from Fiat's Ferrari Formula One technology, Selespeed marries microprocessor control and fast-acting hydraulic actuators to the 156 Twin Spark's conventional five-speed manual gearbox and clutch. The result: two-pedal "automatic" convenience when you want it, or sequential hands-on-wheel gearshifting when more spirited driving beckons.

Claimed advantages for this "halfway house" gearchange are unimpaired performance and fuel economy. Sporty rev-"blipping" (courtesy of a drive-by-wire throttle) is incorporated to provide perfect downshifts every time. Gearchanges aren't as seamless around town as those of today's best automatics, but Selespeed offers tons of fun for keener drivers – even those who *don't* eat lots of spaghetti!

LIKES AND GRIPES

Eager, refined Twin Spark power unit	...	but V6 engine sounds better still!
Powerful, reassuring brakes	...	but over-sensitive initial application calls for a delicate touch around town
Minor controls are just where you want them	...	but low-set back seat a little <i>too</i> sportily snug
Superb, alert chassis and incisive, ultra-quick steering	...	but downside is a perpetually fidgety ride
"All-things-to-all-men" Selespeed technology	...	but some details, steering wheel "furniture" and software could benefit from fine-tuning

