

# Alfa Romeo 156

Featuring 2.0 Twin Spark



**A**LFA ROMEO – EVEN THE VERY NAME IS evocative – has never hit the big time in the UK, but it has produced a steady stream of soul-stirring cars in the past, and not a few highly desirable ones more recently.

What it has really needed, though, is a *volume* seller – something to square up to executive sporting machinery from the likes of BMW and Audi on a more equal footing, where areas like build quality, durability and cabin design receive just as much attention as Alfa has traditionally lavished on the adrenaline-stirring bits under the bonnet. Cue the Alfa 156.

Although it shares some underbody commonality with other Fiat Group cars, the 156's new double wishbone front and coil-suspended, multi-link rear suspension gives it a make-up all of its own. The 156's sideways-mounted, in-line four-cylinder engines are something special, too, shoehorning four valves-per-cylinder *and* a brace of spark plugs into each combustion chamber. Beyond this, the 1.8- and two-litre Twin Sparks also boast variable valve timing and variable inlet geometry, while the two-litre also sports a pair of balancer shafts to tune out vibration.

This little lot nets a highly favourable 155bhp output, making it one of the punchiest two-litres on the block, but even the smaller 1.8-litre's 144bhp is more than a match for most other two-litres. Topping the UK line-up is a new all-alloy 2.5-litre V6, with its 24 valves and "drive-by-wire" throttle upping the power output to 190bhp, communicated to the 156's front-driven wheels by a suitably sporty six-speed gearbox.

Pussyfoot around in the V6 and you begin to wonder who's absconded with the accelerator, but indulge its insatiable appetite for revs and there's performance a-plenty, with the 0-62mph sprint zapped off in a claimed 7.3sec along with a top speed of 142mph.

The two-litre isn't far behind, either, despatching the same sprint in 8.6sec (and nearly a second swifter still in the more road-relevant 30-70mph through-gear dash), while the test track saw us orbiting the two-mile bowl at a comfortable and easy 133mph flat out.

Still more impressive than the effortless performance, though, is the smoothness and the eager, sporting note with which it's delivered. At the quieter end of the scale, the sporting symphony subsides to almost nothing when

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## PERFORMANCE

### Acceleration time in seconds

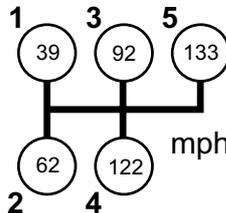
mph	30	40	50	60	70
<b>THROUGH THE GEARS</b>		1.5	3.2	5.1	7.8
<b>IN 5TH GEAR</b>		5.7	11.2	17.3	22.6
<b>IN 4TH GEAR</b>		4.1	8.4	11.9	15.7

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
<b>5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES</b>		11.8/8.6		11.6/7.8	
			11.2/8.4		11.4/7.3

### Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
		6950*		7060	6290

\* for best acceleration



## FUEL CONSUMPTION

Fuel grade: unleaded Premium, 95 octane	
<b>Type of use - air conditioning off*</b>	<b>mpg</b>
In the city - heavy traffic	19
In the country - quiet driving	44
<b>Typical mpg overall</b>	<b>31</b>
Realistic tank range	55 litres/375 miles

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

## FOR THE TECHNICAL

### ENGINE

**Type** front-mounted, transverse four cylinder with iron block and alloy head; five main bearings

**Size** 83.0 x 91.0mm = 1970cc

**Power** 155bhp at 6400rpm

**Torque** 138 lb ft at 3500rpm

**Valves** twin (belt-driven) overhead camshafts actuating four valves per cylinder via hydraulic tappets; variable valve timing and variable inlet geometry

**Fuel/ignition** electronic multi-point petrol injection integrated with distributorless direct (twin spark plug) ignition. 63-litre fuel tank, with low-level warning lamp

### TRANSMISSION

**Type** five-speed manual; front-wheel drive. No automatic option

**Mph per 1000rpm** 21.0 in 5th, 17.2 in 4th (on standard tyres)

### CHASSIS

**Suspension** front: independent by double wishbones and coil springs. Rear: independent by coil spring/damper struts and transverse tie rods. Telescopic dampers and Rose joint-mounted anti-roll bars front and rear

**Steering** rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance; 2.2 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 11.4m between kerbs, with 12.7m circle for one turn of the wheel

**Wheels** 6½J steel with 185/65 VR 15 tyres (optional alloy with 205/60R15 91V Pirelli P6000 on test car); T 125/80R15 95M space-saver spare

**Brakes** ventilated discs front, solid discs rear, with vacuum servo. Electronic anti-lock control (including EBD) standard on all models

## SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES

Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience (the more black blobs the better)

### Seatbelts

front ●●●●○ rear ●●○○○

### Door locking

central locking?

remote control?

auto window closure?

deadlocks?

### Head restraints

front ●●●●○ rear ●●○○○

### Interior

safety padding ●●○○○

driver's airbag?

other airbags? (passenger and side airbags optional on all versions)

side impact protection ●●●○○

### Luggage

secure from interior/hidden from view ●●○○○

### Alarm

engine immobilised?

### Fuel anti-spillage

●●●○○

standard on test car  factory fitted option  not available

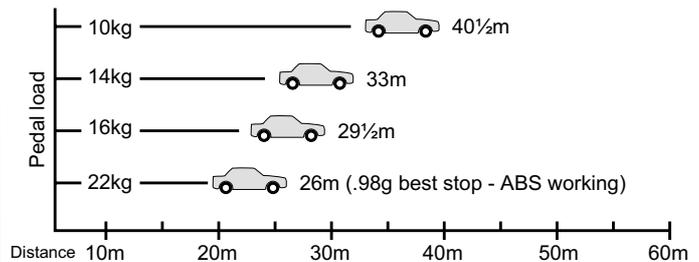
Euro NCAP crash test results - not available

## 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



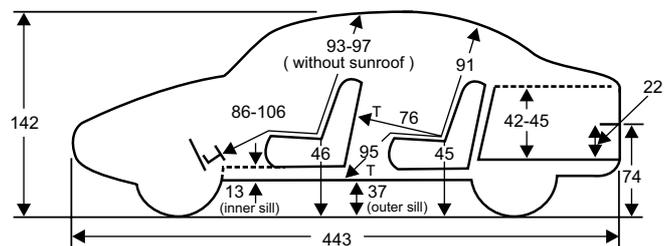
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:

10kg at start of test, 14kg at end of test (Ideal brakes show no change)

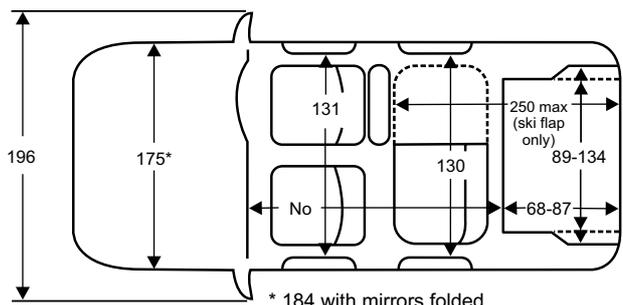
## MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres

4-door saloon



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



cruising, though this does throw some wind rustle from around the door frames and mirrors into prominence.

The 156's gearchange is quick and light (albeit with longish lever throws), and the clutch smooth in its take-up. Recently, Alfa has added Selespeed – Formula 1-style, steering wheel-mounted push-button gearshifting – to the two-litre Twin Spark's armoury. But that's a story worthy of another report in its own right.

Engineering excellence, aimed particularly at the keener driver, exudes from every pore of the 156, and no more so than in the way it tackles bumps and bends. Far too many front-wheel drive cars – notwithstanding the general excellence of the breed these days – are reluctant to get stuck into bends with any real commitment. But the 156's eager appetite for a bit of bend-swinging, its steadfast refusal to nose-drift wide, and its unshakable poise, accuracy and sensitivity – even at the limit – come as a refreshing delight.

Partly responsible for this is the 156's ultra quick steering (under 2¼ turns between locks) – a hallmark of recent and, no doubt, plenty of future Alfas, too. It takes a little dialling into at first, but once you're acclimatised to it, the fluid, swift responses and delicacy of touch it conveys to the driver are a pleasure to savour – just one of many facets that make the 156 such a joy to drive. Bumps are dealt with almost as impressively, although the underlying compliance and control occasionally give way to just a shade too much sporty fidgetiness over rough stuff, a little more so on the optional 205/60 VR-shod alloys fitted to our test car.

The 156's dynamic delights are matched by an equally good driver's lot within the curvy cabin, with both reach and rake adjustments for the not-to-all-tastes, slippery wood-rimmed steering wheel, along with height and lumbar adjusters for the driver's hip-hugging seat. There's an elegant simplicity to the "penny-flap" air vents, the way the attractive white-faced dials all point towards the driver, and the novel rubber-gripped dials for the heating and (standard) air conditioning system. Not only are there umpteen air vents to keep front occupants cool, including a helpful diffuser grille atop the centre of the dash, but rear passengers get a four-shot helping of the fresh air, too. We've seen more convincing mahogany-effect "wood" in our time, though, and a few drivers reported that there's still a vestige of the long-arm/short-legged pedal-to-wheel relationship that afflicted Alfas of old.

Back seat space isn't over-generous (sportily snug, says it well), but then it isn't in many of the Alfa's natural rivals (such as an Audi A4 or 3-Series BMW) either. Be first in the queue to sit behind the front passenger if you can, though, as the height-adjuster gubbins under the driver's seat restricts foot space. The low-slung rear seat (to preserve modest headroom), means back-seaters sit rather "knees up" without much thigh support, while significant cabin tumblehome (inward-curving of the side glass, encroaching on cabin space) only adds to a slightly claustrophobic feel in the back. But, hey! – who buys an Alfa with the mother-in-law in mind?

The smartly lined load space is both square and deep, but marred to an extent by a restricted "hole" to load through, intruding wheelarches and a 22cm drop to negotiate heavier items over. The back seat is fixed, limiting large-load versatility, but at least there's a substantial ski-flap concealed behind the centre armrest, which conveniently detaches when you've got several sets of skis (or more mundane items like a curtain rail) to transport.

On the safety front, only two rear head restraints and merely a lap belt for the centre seat drop a few Brownie points, though the third restraint, along with a pukka inertia-reel seatbelt is optionally available, if required. ABS, along with front foglamps, a headlamp beam-trimmer and a driver's-side airbag (a curious ancient-meets-modern amalgam installed in a wood-rimmed steering wheel) are standard across the board, while a passenger's airbag and side-impact

Buyers would be ill-advised to race to an Alfa dealer if fuel economy is uppermost in their minds ... and yet the two-litre Twin Spark is anything but disgraced in this respect. Enjoy the car to the full and you can sink the fuel gauge needle at a rate of under 20 miles to the gallon, but our 31mpg average (about par for this class) is a more realistic expectation, with frugality well into the mid-forties available for drivers with the self-denial of a saint. Though the 156 is hardly cheap, its generous equipment, fine aesthetic qualities and persuasive dynamic appeal represent strong value, especially for keener drivers and long-standing Alfa loyalists. Build quality, too, we're pleased to say, has come on a quantum leap from Alfas of old, with not a creak, rattle or rusty screw head to be seen for miles around, but if you look hard, you can *just* see where they used to be.

<b>HOW THE ALFA 156 COMPARES</b>	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/kneeroom - rear (cm)	Steering(p )turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
<b>ALFA ROMEO 2.0 TWIN SPARK 4DR</b>	1970/155	3310	7.8	22.6/15.7	31	26/22*	106	95/76	2.2/11.4	443
<b>Audi A4 1.8 20v 4dr</b>	1781/125	3330	10.3	24.8/18.0	35½	24/23*	109	95/68	2.8/10.7	448
<b>Fiat Marea 2.0HLX 4dr</b>	1998/147	3410	8.9	23.6/16.5	29	25/30*	105	99/68	3.0/11.2	439
<b>Ford Mondeo 2.5 V6</b>	2544/170	2955	8.2	21.7/15.0	29	23/22*	110	102/76	2.8/11.7	456
<b>Mitsubishi Galant 2.5 V6 4dr †</b>	2498/161	2885	7.5	20.9/14.0	31	27½/16*	109	102/78	3.0/11.1	463
<b>Peugeot 406 2.0 16v 4dr</b>	1998/135	3210	10.5	27.2/17.6	32½	25½/36*	111	99/74	3.2/11.0	456
† performance/economy figures for estate						* with ABS			(p) all power-assisted	

**VERDICT**

The 156 isn't the cheapest, roomiest or most cossetting family saloon you'll come across; what's more, the driving wheels aren't even in the right place for the purists. Despite this, though, Alfa has come up with a classic here – a steed to be admired for both its aesthetics and its sheer dynamic competence. It's also one that refuses to repeat the small, but so often infuriating, flaws that have tainted Alfas in the past.

Gutsy performance, a fine engine, delicious razor-sharp steering and a supremely self-assured chassis are qualities we perhaps expect from an Alfa. Now that the company behind the squiggly serpent appears to have mastered flawless build quality, a well-sorted cabin and an all-pervading refinement, as well, it deserves to sell a lot more of its masterpieces in the UK.

