



Alfa Romeo Sportwagon



AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★ ★ ★ ○ ○
Handling/steering	★ ★ ★ ★ ○
Comfort	★ ★ ★ ○ ○
Space/practicality	★ ★ ○ ○ ○

THE SPORTWAGON RANGE

body upper medium, 5 door estate only
trim levels Standard, Lusso and Veloce
engines petrol 1.6/120bhp, 1.8/144bhp, 2.0/155bhp, 2.5 V6/190bhp
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual
auto options Selespeed (2.0 T.Spark), Q-system with manual H-gate (2.5 V6)
notable features ABS, 4 airbags, auto climate control, radio/CD player, optional self-levelling and sports suspension

LIKES AND GRIPES

clear, black-on-white dials (Standard)
 well-placed minor controls
 easy back seat folding
 height-adjustable rear seatbelts

thick pillars mar rear vision
 brakes too sharp around town
 lap strap centre rear seatbelt (standard)
 high rear sill, narrow load gap

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (<i>mirrors folded</i>)	443x184
front - legroom	88-109
- headroom (<i>no s/roof</i>)	93-97
rear - typical legroom	99
- typical kneeroom	75
- headroom	95
- hiproom	132
load space (<i>all seats in use</i>) (litres/cu ft)	385/13.6
load length (<i>seats up/folded</i>)	82/151
load width	83-127
load sill height (<i>inside/outside</i>)	16/71
boot/load aperture height	45/75

ALTERNATIVES

Audi A4 Avant stylish Teutonic build, with a firm ride and "cosy" back seat.
BMW 3-Series Touring superb engineering with lots of driver appeal, but pricey and not as exclusive as it was.
Volvo V40 safe, sensible Swede lacks much in the way of grace or space, yet not without appeal.

CALL IT A LIFESTYLE ESTATE IF you must, but Alfa prefers to call the Sportwagon "an extended coupé with designed space." This neatly sidesteps any criticism that it's not exactly the largest load carrier in the business.

But never mind that it's not that capacious – its businesslike boot beneath the curvy, bespoilered tailgate converts easily into a usefully large load deck that will carry golf clubs or skis with ease. Pity about the high rear sill and narrow opening, but useful features include adaptable luggage-restraining nets and a reversible carpet/plastic floor panel and a tailgate that hinges far forward into the roof for easier loading of bulky items.

Styling apart, the Sportwagon is mechanically very similar to the 156 saloon, including its range of power units. This now includes an entry-level 1.6-litre engine which, though *relatively* modest in performance, is nevertheless lively when revved and beautifully smooth – it's quiet running, too. There's also a five-cylinder 2.4 turbo-diesel that's more melodically thrummy, but as quick as the eager 1.8 Twin Spark and a lot longer legged on a motorway than the delicious 2.5 V6.

The engines' aura of design excellence is echoed by the Alfa's superb chassis. Well-balanced handling and grippy roadholding enable the Sportwagon to be cornered with great verve, while the super-quick steering displays a combination of smooth accuracy and swift response.

Though distinctly sporty in nature, this estate has a compliant and unflustered ride, even though its suspension is slightly firmer-damped than the saloon's. Self-levelling and sports suspension are also available.

The Sportwagon's dynamic delights are matched by an equally impressive, climate-controlled cabin. Forget the awkward wheel/pedal relationship of Alfa's past. Height and reach adjustments for the steering and driver's seat guarantee comfort at the wheel.

Back seat space isn't over-generous, but then it isn't in the Sportwagon's rivals, either. Headroom is good, though, and the seats are comfortable – if a little upright for some.

There are two front and side airbags, and a pair of window bags are available as an option.

VERDICT

The Sportwagon is no great shakes as a "proper" estate car – if you need acres of space, look elsewhere. No, this is simply an elegant, roomier version of the much vaunted and highly desirable 156 saloon. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, it makes a lot of sense to add extra space to the already sporty pace. Highly recommended.