

FIRST
DRIVE

Alfa Romeo 147



THE ALFA 147 IS FIAT'S ANSWER TO those manufacturers who offer more prestigious contenders in the compact hatchback market – VW Group's Audi A3 and BMW's Compact are obvious examples.

What's behind this trend is the industry's need to make reasonable profits from smaller cars, as larger car sales continue to diminish across Europe. The formula is to offer a high-style, more-exclusive alternative to the likes of the Astra and Focus, concentrating on driver-appeal, and a high standard of equipment and finish, which (manufacturers hope) will make value for money less important to the customer than a good image.

Alfa Romeo's credentials aptly fill the bill – except for the marque's former reputation for poor reliability and rust-resistance. The 147 seeks to build on the larger 156's improved image and, indeed, draws on many common components and technical features. However, it emerges as a fully-fledged, lower-medium hatchback in its own right.

The engines at launch are both blessed with ample power for the model's size and weight, but they do need to be revved freely to return best acceleration; such treatment is no hardship for they make lovely noises, even when taken up to near 7000rpm. The 1.6 remains sweet at the other end of the spectrum, too – the two-litre less so.

Ride is firm because the car is set up to handle; which it does convincingly, although, on admittedly unfamiliar roads, the steering and general cornering responses didn't seem quite so rewarding as the 156's.

It's a nice driving position and space

behind is generous, especially on the other side. The three-door is a "proper" four seater (despite its high-style looks) though its luggage capacity is unremarkable. Still, the 60/40 split backrest and cushion fold to ensure versatility and a flat, extended load deck, with good trimming for the backs of seats.

Rear passengers even get their own footwell and face-level heating and ventilating outlets, but there's an intruding centre tunnel. Getting into the back requires agility, but at least the front seats "remember" their previous settings.

The five door is due in May/June and at present, the interesting "Selespeed" automatic (see R9985 for details) is available (expensively) only with the two-litre Lusso higher-trim grade.

Be aware that the 147's firmer riding, more extrovert characteristics will be emphasised by the Lusso spec – the cheaper Turismo should offer a more pliant ride on its 65-Series radials and it's still nicely kitted-out.

VERDICT

Even the Alfa badge can't guarantee that buyers will prefer this rather smaller yet more expensive alternative to the tried and tested. The jury must still be out on reliability and it can't be said that the Alfa's dynamics are in a class of their own – the competition has become so much better of late. Still, it's fun to drive, looks the part and you won't see thousands of them.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE 147 RANGE

size and type lower medium (premium priced) three- and five-door hatchback

trim levels Turismo, Lusso

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.6 litre/120bhp, 4/2.0/150; diesel: none

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual ("Selespeed" auto synchromesh gearbox optional with 2.0 litre only)

notable features six airbags, ABS, air conditioning, trip computer, handset locking with alarm, headlamp-off delay, polished alloy door handles, rear foot and face vents

LIKES ...

quality of Lusso's seat fabric
reversible load platform for soggy items
nicely trimmed load area
an extra (delayed) wash/wipe sweep

and GRIPES

displays not clear in poor daylight
"space saver" spare
restricted front passenger footwell
prominent boot sill
terrible front number plate mounting

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (folded mirrors)	417 x 173
front- legroom	90 - 108
- headroom (no sunroof)	94 - 102
rear- typical legroom	97
- typical knee room	72
- headroom	91
- hip room	127
load space (all seats in use) (litres/cu ft)	320/11.4
load length (seats up/folded)	61/128
load width	97-119
load sill height (inside/outside)	23/73
boot/load aperture height	49/77