

Alfa Romeo 156

Featured model: 1.6 Twin Spark Sportwagon



FEW OF US CAN HAVE FAILED TO spot the increasingly imaginative monikers, such as Santa Fe, Amazon, X-Trail and Explorer, that car makers are tacking on to their products' tailgates these days, all of them seeking to sell us "The Great Outdoors" lifestyle their owners aspire to.

The term "estate car", too, is increasingly falling out of favour with the marketing men. So for BMW it's Touring, for Audi it's Avant, and – given its long and distinguished sporting heritage – who can begrudge Alfa bolting a Sportwagon badge to the back door of its 156 estate?

The sporting signature also neatly sidesteps the fact that – pretty as it is – the Sportwagon isn't the largest load-lugger in the business. Instead, Alfa chooses to emphasise the prestige, "extended coupé" qualities of its tailgate-equipped 156.

Beneath this curvy, spoiler-clad tailgate, the businesslike boot converts easily into a large, mainly flat load deck – significantly more successful than the saloon's at devouring golf clubs and all manner of holiday paraphernalia or DIY buys.

Sleek rear-end styling apart, Sportwagon models largely mirror the saloon. This means 1.6-, 1.8- and two-litre Twin Spark engines, a delicious 2.5-litre V6 and a five-pot, 2.4-litre turbo-diesel. The standard-fit five-speed manual gearbox can be optionally exchanged for sequential, steering wheel-mounted shifting on the 2.0 Selespeed, and the six-speed manual for four-speed Q-system auto on the V6.

Having previously sampled the upper reaches of the 156's underbonnet offerings, it was high time to assess Alfa's "lifestyle load-carrier" with entry-level power.

The 1.6 Twin Spark's performance is relatively modest, as you might expect, but it's game for gearchanges when you gun it, and, like the rest of the line-up, delivers refined, beautifully smooth progress that greatly belies its modest size and entry-level status.

As in the saloon, underbonnet excellence is again echoed by the 156's superb chassis. Finely honed handling, super-quick steering and tenacious grip allow the Sportwagon to be hustled along with great assurance, yet, despite its underlying firmness, the set-up also provides an impressively compliant ride.

Supplementing the Sportwagon's dynamic delights are its comfortable, climate-controlled cabin and ample (if not over-generous) space. There's also side locker storage, adaptable luggage nets, a flip-over plastic-coated floor panel and a selection of tie-downs – all of which add practicality to the Alfa's overall elegance.

VERDICT

Sporty and seductive – like most Alfas – the Sportwagon is soon surpassed if you need an estate car to swallow large loads. Instead, it's more a very elegant, roomier version of the highly covetable 156 saloon, with a smaller-than-you-might-predict penalty if you opt for entry-level power.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Overtaking ability	★★★★○○
Space/practicality	★★★★○○
Controls/displays	★★★★○○
Safety	★★★★○○
Handling/steering	★★★★○○
Comfort	★★★★○○
Fuel economy	★★★★○○

SPECIFICATION

engine 1598cc, 4-cylinder, petrol; 120bhp at 6200rpm, 108 lb ft at 4200rpm; belt-driven twin overhead camshafts, 16 valves, variable valve timing

transmission 5-speed manual, front-wheel drive; 20.5mph/1000rpm in 5th, 16.8 in 4th

suspension front: independent double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, integral coil spring/damper struts, lateral/longitudinal links, anti-roll bar

steering hydraulic power assistance; 2.2 turns lock-to-lock; 11.6m diameter turning circle between kerbs (12.8m for one turn of the wheel)

brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with standard anti-lock and brake force distribution controls

wheels/tyres 6in alloy with 185/65R15 tyres (6.5in alloy with 205/55R16 91W Continental SportContact on test car); temporary spare

LIKES ...

easy back seat folding
nicely trimmed load area/luggage nets
fold-away key saves trouser pockets
wide-opening rear doors ease entry

and GRIPES

brakes sharp around town
third headrest/3pt seatbelt costs extra
"letterbox" windows mar rear vision
key/remote-only tailgate opening

THE 156 SPORTWAGON RANGE

size and type upper-medium (premium-priced) 5-door estate

trim levels Turismo, Lusso, Veloce

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.6 litre/120bhp, 4/1.8/140, 4/2.0/150, V6/2.5/192; diesel: 5/2.4/140

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; Selespeed (2.0), 6-speed man/4-spd auto (V6)

OVERTAKING ABILITY ☆☆☆☆○					
<i>Less racy than the 156's chassis fully deserves, yet the Twin Spark makes the most of its modest capacity. Tardy in top gear, but keep it spinning and it rewards with a smooth, sweet-sounding delivery</i>					
acceleration in seconds	through gears*	3 th gear	4 th gear	5 th gear	
20-40mph	3.2	7.1	10.2	13.9	
30-50mph	4.1	6.8	9.9	13.3	
40-60mph	5.0	6.8	10.2	13.5	
50-70mph	6.4	7.2	10.1	14.3	
30-70mph	10.5	14.0	20.0	27.6	
max speed in each gear (*using 6750rpm for best acceleration)					
gear	①*	②*	③*	④*	⑤
speed (mph)	33	58	86	113	124

SPACE AND PRACTICALITY ☆☆☆☆○			
<i>Not the biggest of load-luggers, but what it lacks in sheer space the "Alfa with an annexe" makes up for in style, elegance and neat touches, while immaculate tail-end treatment brings big usability boost over the saloon</i>			
<i>in centimetres (5-door estate)</i>		<i>inside († without sunroof)</i>	
outside		front - legroom	87-107
length	443	- headroom	94-98†
width - inc mirrors	196	rear - typical leg/	95
- mirrors folded	185	kneeroom	75
height (no roof bars)	142	- headroom	95
load sill height	16/68	- hiproom	130
<i>(inside/outside)</i>		load space (all seats in use)	
steering		<i>(litres/cu ft)</i>	320/11.3
turns lock-to-lock	2.2	load length	75-150*
turning circle (metres)	11.6	full length to fascia	No
easy to park/garage?		load width	83-111
	☆☆☆☆○	load height (to shelf/	44/
		to top of aperture)	74
* with 60/40-split rear seats folded			

CONTROLS AND DISPLAYS ☆☆☆☆○	
<i>Sports-slanted cabin offers fine driving position, well-executed ergonomics plus ample clutch of creature comforts, echoed by superb hip-hugging seats and climate-controlled surroundings on all versions</i>	
	

SAFETY ☆☆☆☆○	
<i>ABS with brake force control plus a quartet of front and lateral airbags standard throughout the Sportwagon stable, but a third headrest/3-point centre rear seatbelt costs extra on all versions</i>	
braking	dry road stopping distance
pedal feel	<i>from 50mph (with std ABS/EBD))</i>
in emergency	pedal load
handbrake	distance
	unhurried 10kg
	sudden 28kg
	+4kg ie 32kg
	49m
	26m best stop
	28½m ABS on

EURO NCAP CRASH TEST RATINGS
156 Sportwagon not yet tested

SECURITY FEATURES		
central locking	✓	alarm
remote control	✓	immobiliser
auto window closure	✗	luggage security
deadlocks	✗	☆☆☆☆○
✓ standard	0 factory option	✗ not available

HANDLING AND STEERING ☆☆☆☆○	
<i>156's superb chassis, incisive, super-quick steering and firm but not frantic ride impressively unchanged by bolting on a tailgate at the back. Self-levelling and sports suspension options available</i>	
	

COMFORT ☆☆☆☆○
<i>Sportwagon's firm but fidget-free conduct, refined effortless cruising and cosseting cabin pamper the passengers as much as the driver. Back seat is low set, but comfortable and amply spacious once you're in</i>

FUEL ECONOMY ☆☆☆☆○			
<i>Fairly frugal, considering the entry-level Alfa's small engine combined with the keen-driver appeal it offers. Easy filling supported by generously-sized tank that gives 400-plus miles between fill-ups</i>			
AA test results (mpg)	official figures (mpg)		
worst (hard/urban)	22½	urban	24.6
best (gentle/rural)	43	extra urban	43.5
overall mpg on test	33	combined	34.0
realistic tank capacity	57 litres	CO ₂ emissions	198g/km
typical range	410 miles	car tax band	D

HOW THE SPORTWAGON 1.6 COMPARES*	engine cyl/cap/power (no/cc/bhp)	revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	fuel economy (mpg)	brakes† - best stop from 50mph (m/kg)	maximum legroom - front (cm)	typical leg/ kneeroom - rear (cm)	steering turns/ circle (m)	overall length (cm)
ALFA ROMEO 156 1.6 SWAGON	4/1598/120	3435	10.5	27.6/20.0	33	26/28	107	95/75	2.2/11.6	443
Audi A4 2.0 Avant	4/1984/130	3170	9.9	25.4/16.9	34	25/18	112	97/70	2.9/10.8	455
Ford Mondeo 1.8 Estate	4/1798/125	3170	9.8	27.4/18.9	36½	25/19	111	108/84	2.8/11.3	480
Renault Laguna 1.8 Sport Tourer	4/1728/123	3370	11.2	26.1/19.0	37	25/12	110	97/71	3.2/10.9	470
Skoda Octavia 1.8T Estate	4/1781/150	3040	8.5	19.7/14.4	35½	24/27	112	97/69	3.1/10.5	451
VW Passat 1.8T Estate	4/1781/150	3060	8.4	20.8/15.0	34	26/14	110	101/74	2.8/11.0	470

* all 5-door estates (all figures except Alfa's for 4/5-door hatch version) † all with ABS