



The Alfa Romeo 1900C, with body by Touring, was tested by author in a day of driving on both good roads and bad. His observations, com-

bined with those of the owner, give a comprehensive picture of the car's safety and comfort qualities. The Alfa sets on a 98-inch wheelbase.

ROAD TESTING THE ALFA ROMEO

Story and Photos by Ben West

► One bright morning, what should appear in the middle of our own New England village of New Canaan but a brand new 1900C Alfa Romeo. Not being in the least bashful when such automobiles are parked by the Supermarket, we approached the driver as he was placing bundles in the back seat. "How do you like it?" we asked. "I like it very well," replied the gentleman, "even better than the Lancia or the Ferrari as a small car, chiefly because it doesn't give me any servicing or tuning troubles. I've owned quite a few sports cars and, so far, Alfa suits me best."

We talked for about ten minutes longer and found out a lot more about the Alfa Romeo and also about Mr. Dino Olivetti who owns it. Mr. Olivetti is President of the American Division of Olivetti Business Machines, the IBM of Italy. He has raced various sporting automobiles over the mountainous roads of Europe and now he amazes Oldsmobile owners with his dust on the winding hills of Connecticut. He amazed your writer even more when he casually said, "How would you like to try the 1900C for a day?"

No sooner said than done, we agreed, and next day we slid comfortably under the two spoke plastic steering wheel. Getting into and out of this job is a comfortable process, but you'd better not be

over six feet tall or they'll have to cut a hole in the roof for your cap. Our impression of the facia by Touring and Alfa is that all seems to be very well arranged. You can read the black dialed tachometer and the speedometer in a glance through the steering wheel, and they are set low enough for proper illumination at night. The control buttons are cream color plastic, set in thin chrome rims. The interior trim is half leather—half whipcord, and nothing is not well-fastened-down and delightfully neat.

Mr. Olivetti told me to step half down on the gas as I started her up. A button on the panel does the trick. Idling, the engine noise is somewhat on the high side. There can be no doubt that this 1884-cubic centimeter aluminum-alloy block has dual 90 degree overhead adjustable cams clattering over four hemispherical 7.75 to 1 combustion chambers. Nor any doubt that tolerances are so great throughout, that the brand new engine requires No. 40 viscosity Oleo (as the pressure gage tells you in clear Roman). Furthermore, you can sense there is a roller-chain cam-drive operating busily at a one-to-two reduction from the front of a five bearing crankshaft. The engine is hung on three suspension points.

Since continued idling is not the strong point of such high performance engines, we blipped the gas merrily through the dual-barrel Weber and then held about 2000 rpm for a low gear start. You see, the 1900C really produces properly when it revs to between 3000 and 5000 rpm. As the low speed is quite high-ratioed, you have to gun it pretty well for an unstalled getaway. Amazingly enough, once away, the excellent manifold breathing design allows the ladies to lug the car nicely up from a low of ten miles per hour in *high*. I know this seems contradictory, but it's so. The 1900C will further suit the female pilot by refusing to overheat while crawling through summer traffic.

We got that "four" feeling when accelerating, but all became as smooth as a "12" when cruising at a level 30 to 70 mph. And incidentally, we got 24 miles per high test gallon, as an average for all tests. Of course, you want to know the acceleration figures for the 1900C. We would like to hand over a perfectly shining report and say that here is the undoer of OSCA, Keift MG, and so on. But we must be truthful and say that the well-tuned 1900C can stay with the well tuned Porsche—IF you can get the Alfa gearshift to operate fast enough.

Sadly, the (Continued on Page 50)

Alfa's splendid all-synchromesh four-forward speed-box is rendered far from efficient by the cable linkage design of the steering column shift. True, the gear ratios allow you to scream a perfectly tuned engine up to 35 in low, 50 in second, 75 in third and 112 in top, (figuring 5500 rpm as a safe maximum) but, even when we became quite used to mashing into each gear, the shift was still awkward and indefinite.

No, it was not just us, nor was it this particular car. We took the precaution of calling up Frank Griswolds' Alfa Headquarters in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and asked if this shift was wacky, or if they could improve it. The answer was that Alfa has refused to admit defeat on this defect and is working steadily to eliminate it. We think it time wasted, however, as the hump in the middle of the Alfa floor takes up a third passengers' leg room, no matter what, and the SIMCA, Sunbeam Talbot, and Rover people have never licked the remote linkage headache, either.

The single disc clutch certainly does not require the old school Alfa treatment, wherein you make sure that all is clear ahead, and then brace your head when the left foot comes up. For any ordinary driving the 1900C offers a polite clutch of adequate durability, but this can be considered a problematical blessing to those who must push on rapidly in affairs such as the Mille Miglia. Of course, it is well known that once the revs top 6000, any such light weight clutch design is sorely stressed. For the record, though, Luigi Chinette recently placed a 1900C well ahead in a long European race and did not encounter clutch troubles. Neither did he complain of the shift, so we must draw our own conclusions concerning the virtues and vices of this feature.

On the good side of the 1900C we found suspension which can be likened only to Lancia's best. The Alfa's hypoid rear axle (with 4.1 to 1 final drive) is conventional in design, as is the new Lancia. The coil springs are certainly rugged in size and telescope shocks are mounted within them. In addition to underslung longitudinal struts which brace the outer axle, there is a top-mounted V-brace hung from inside frame shackles to the center of the differential housing. Globoidal worm and roller steering top off the 100" wheel base design with 600 x 16 chrome spoke wheels carrying the load of 2000 pounds.

The result of Alfa suspension design is most evident to anyone who has booted the 2.5 Ferrari, the small Cisitalia, and other relatively firm-riding automobiles over country roads at speeds in the upper eighties and nineties. The 1900C has just enough give in its springing to avoid juddering off ripple surface corners and to provide a secure ride in the wet. Yet the car is stiff enough to prevent leaping when ski jumps suddenly appear, and we never could bottom it.

The front end geometry creates a safe amount of understeer which does not disappear when top speed is obtained, and which incidentally, permits the lady of the house to wheel comfortably at 50 mph along our narrow high crowned New England country roads. Of course, she will never motor at this speed willingly, because the speedometer (at this speed) reads "80"—and she usually cannot convert kilometers into miles per hour.

Having spent several hours in the car, we began to appreciate the extremely good seating design. The seats are fully adjustable, bench type, with a high enough back and deep enough thigh support to provide distance comfort in a small and somewhat choppy-motored car. The foot pedals are mounted straight down into the flooring and we thought they would be most uncomfortable to operate as they reverse the old Citroen principle. For some reason, which a chiroprapist could doubtless explain, they are extremely comfortable and provide an excellent footing when the car is bouncing along at full speed on bad roads. Let it be said here, that the Alfa has plenty of leg room for the driver and passenger.

Mr. Olivetti has had a seat suitable for children (he has three most car-minded sons) installed in the area which is usually left for baggage. The installation is so neat that we were amazed to find it a custom job and not part of the original design. There is no real need for this space to be held for bags, as the trunk is larger than most British medium size cars, despite the 1900C's spare wheel, battery, and gas filler.

The Touring body is certainly very neat and gives a small car that certain look of dignity plus speed for which Bentley was once famous (on the Gothic scale). The front, rear and door windows are of a European type safety glass which becomes opaque if cracked or hit by a stone. The two quarter windows are plastic and, of course, suffer checking if left in strong sunlight for any length of time.

The headlights are designed to take mountain roads at high speed providing you don't encounter any corners. In other words, the high beam is a tall narrow oval and the low beam throws a flat fan-shaped beam. We later asked Griswold how one drives with such beams. Griswold assured us that it was easy. All you do is substitute some American sealed beam lamps before you start out. The European safety glass and the stock brake linings also can be replaced.

The stock Alfa 1900C brake is a very fine design, with two leading shoes up ahead and we could never approach fade conditions at any time. The pedal pressure is on the firm side, but nowhere near as hard as the current crop of Mercedes. The only trouble with these brakes is an occasional most earsplitting squeek that

will scatter the populace before you as effectively as a police siren. We found that one good full application of pedal would shut them up nicely for the duration of a ride provided they were used fairly frequently thereafter.

We finally asked the \$64.00 question. The 1900C costs a cool \$7200 delivered courteously of Griswold, American agent. It costs about \$5200 at the Alfa factory in Milan. For this you get a car with no headroom (for a six-footer), mediocre exterior brightwork (including a novel window beading of lightly chromed BX cable), an underbodied enamel finish of doubtful durability, and a most aggravating amount of interior road noise due to insufficient undercoating and insulation. You also get a very handsome automobile with a reliable and famous name, which is unique in its ability to properly interpret the term sports car in this day when performance and utility are usually worlds apart. We can sum the whole story up briefly, "Needed: one sensible shift linkage and one sensible price tag."