



# ART FORM

'Form follows function' is a philosophy that produces great cars. But sometimes, form itself lies at the heart of a car's greatness. Carrozzeria Touring's Alfa 1900C SS is just such a machine – and equally great to drive

Story by Hugo Reis  
Photography by Rui Reis

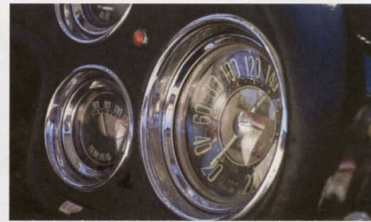
**T**he engine is still ticking as the warm, orange sun sinks behind the mountains. It's the perfect place, the perfect day, the perfect weather to drive this car. I'm well aware that, many years from now, I'll be thinking of this moment and wanting to come back. The car will still be here, and so will these amazing roads, but it may never feel the same again.

Alfa Romeo has witnessed many renaissances in its history, not the least overcoming the aftermath of war. When Mussolini was taken down in July 1943, the north of Italy became a no man's land for a time and was quickly occupied by the Nazis. Although Italy was by now officially out of the war, it still suffered intense battles and bombings, one of which ruined Alfa's Portello factory in 1944.

These events forced a big change in Alfa Romeo's plans. Wilfredo Ricart's ambitious 6C 2000 Gazella prototype, developed during the war, was dropped as being too costly to make, and this forward-thinking, front-wheel drive, streamlined car never saw the light of day. Ricart returned to his home country of Spain and his position at Alfa Romeo was inherited by Orazio Satta Puliga.

Alfa Romeo fell back on making different versions of the 6C 2500 which, as wonderful as they may have been, were pre-war cars and way too expensive. If Portello wanted to turn the page, it would have to start building cars in sufficient numbers to sustain the whole operation. Downsizing was the way to go and in 1950 Alfa launched the 1900. Its four-cylinder engine had a capacity of 1884cc and although the internal design was essentially taken from the six-cylinder 6C, the new engine had a much higher specific output, achieved by shortening the stroke and raising compression, while keeping the efficient twin-cam alloy head with hemispherical chambers and 90 degrees between valves. With a single carburettor, the new engine put out 90hp.





The rest of Alfa Romeo's new 1900 was more radical. The unibody was a three-volume, four-door *berlina* and the first Alfa to be wind-tunnel shaped. It was clever and efficient, but perhaps not very beautiful. The ace up the sleeve was the independent front suspension by coil springs and double wishbones, although the rear was a less radical rigid axle supported by trailing arms and an upper A-frame. Alfa Romeo argued that racing drivers weren't convinced by independent rear suspension but the real reason was down to cost.

In any case, both the press and early customers praised the 1900's dynamics and Alfa Romeo was tempted to return to racing. The 1900 Ti, with two carbs and a five-speed gearbox, was a 100hp, 106mph car, and very successful in road races like the Mille Miglia and Carrera Panamericana. The advertising slogan "The Race Winning Family Car" was no empty claim.

However, there was still a clientele for more upmarket coachbuilt cars. With no resources left to build a 1900 coupe in-house, in 1951 Portello's engineers simply

designed a new shortened platform, labelled with a 'C' for 'Corto' (Italian for short). To spice it up a little more, from 1954 you could specify 1900 Ti Super mechanicals, which offered 115hp from an enlarged 1975cc engine.

The 1900C Sprint platform became a blank canvas for Italian carrozzerie and 1900 coupes slotted in as some of the most desirable cars on the planet. Pinin Farina, Ghia, Castagna, Boano, Colli, Zagato, Bertone and more dressed Alfa's coupe, but perhaps the most elegant of all was Touring's two-window model.

Under Federico Formenti's design management, Touring built four different series of the 1900C Sprint from 1951 to 1958, totalling 1538 cars, of which 589 were the later series as featured here. The two-window Super Sprint was penned by the masterful Carlo 'Cici' Anderloni and is definitely the sleekest and most elegant.

This CSS lives in the Museu do Caramulo in the Portuguese mountains. I've seen this car many, many times before but I can't help feeling butterflies in my stomach and wearing the silliest smile as I greet it. Fun fact: I came here today to drive a very

*Cabin feels much more cossetting than Giulietta's. Large wheel is needed to cope with steering weight*



*Touring's Superleggera method keeps weight low, performance high. Style is superb in every detail*

different car: a Ferrari 400i. However, a technical problem (although I'm tempted to call it a blessing) resulted in this twist of fate and now I'm holding the keys to the beautiful Alfa.

Curiously, this was almost exactly how its first owner ended up buying it. Vicente Cannas Mendes was a successful civil engineer who decided, in the summer of 1956, to replace his faithful Studebaker Champion with a Ferrari. However, unable to find any available example which suited his preferences, he was charmed by the Superleggera-dressed Alfa. Within months of buying one, he accepted a job in Mozambique – then a Portuguese colony – and the 1900 Touring went over with him and his wife. There's a period photo from around 1960 showing the car in Beira on typically unpaved roads, wearing local Mozambique number plates.

In the mid-1960s, Mendes returned to Portugal with his cherished Alfa, which he continued to use extensively. His nephew, Miguel, vividly recalls some very fast trips as a passenger: "He was an excellent driver. I remember a drive on Christmas Eve in 1966,

when we almost clocked 200km/h. He made me addicted to Alfas and speed till today."

When Mendes died in 1970, his family decided to donate his car to the Museu do Caramulo, where it's been displayed and used regularly ever since. In the late 1990s, the museum's founder João Lacerda sent the car to Autonautica in Switzerland for restoration. Once finished, Philippe Rochat of Aeronautica and Lacerda's grandson João Maria drove the car all the way back to Caramulo. "Rochat drove the wheels off the Alfa. We were flat out most of the way, so I guess he was clearly confident of the work they'd carried out."

Today the CSS still sounds fresh and looks gorgeous, even more so since it's no garage queen but very well used. The seats retain a perfect dose of patina, a palpable testimony to its wonderful history. The driving position is sporty, with a high floor and low seat, pretty normal for performance cars of this era. However, unlike the smaller Giuliettas, the seats are reclinable, making them way more comfortable. Your legs are outstretched, and the pedals aren't too offset. The

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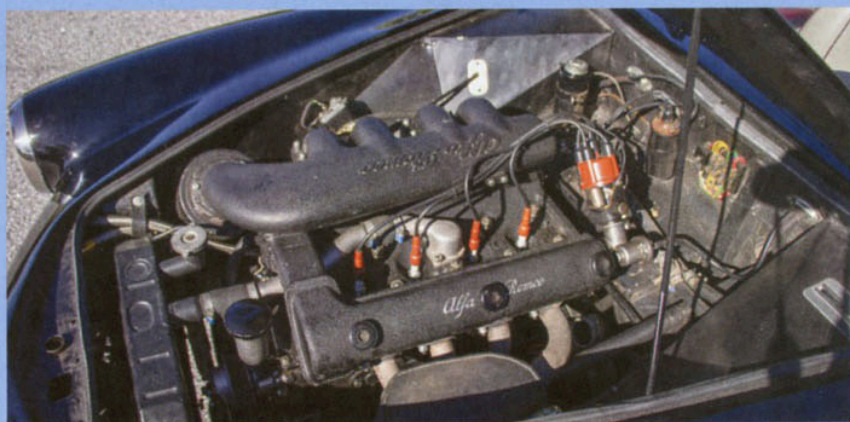




## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### ALFA ROMEO 1900C SS TOURING

ENGINE:	1975cc 4-cyl DOHC
BORE X STROKE:	84.5mm x 88mm
COMPRESSION RATIO:	8.5:1
INDUCTION:	2 x Solex 40 PII double-barrel carbs
POWER:	112hp at 5900rpm
TORQUE:	146Nm (108lb ft) at 3600rpm
TRANSMISSION:	5-speed manual
SUSPENSION:	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar (front); Rigid axle, coil springs (rear)
BRAKES:	Drums (front & rear)
TYRES:	165 SR16
DIMENSIONS:	4405mm(L), 1630mm (W), 1350mm (H)
WEIGHT:	1000kg
MAX SPEED:	118mph



huge steering wheel sits close to my chest, but I don't mind, as the steering requires some determination during manoeuvres and slow corners. But that's where the evidence that you're driving a 65-year-old car ends: it feels incredibly modern. The engine pulls smoothly, with a deep induction roar and an exhaust note that's fruitier and racier than you'd expect. For an engine that is less than two litres, the usable rev range is incredible, tolerating very low revs but also reacting to throttle inputs almost impatiently.

The real star of the show is the five-speed gearbox. Everyone who's driven a 1960s Alfa is familiar with the sleek, long lever gearshifts. Well, this is nothing like that: it has a tight, very short action which encourages you to snick frantically through the gears as fast as you dare. Only the kink up to fifth requires a bit more concentration, but there's little use for it on these roads.

Caramulo's mountains are a truly idyllic place: an empty playground for the enthusiastic driver with all sorts of corners set against epic backdrops. However, these roads are often narrow, technical and not really suited to most 1950s grand touring cars. Except maybe for the 1900C SS.

As I climb up the hill, the engine feels bigger than it is, which is partly explained by the low weight of the body. The Superleggera label means the thin aluminium panels are supported by a clever tubular steel frame, keeping weight down to around a tonne. Combining

that with the clever suspension, the CSS ends up feeling much more agile than it looks. Yes, it rolls through corners but not nearly as much as a Giulietta Sprint. There's less understeer as well, the 1900 shining through the fastest corners.

This gives me the chance to rev the short-stroke engine up to 5000rpm. It is clear that it would happily sing up to the 6000rpm redline, but I would feel guilty and there's really no need for it, as there's more than enough grunt all through the rev range and the gearing leaves no flat spots. As you pile up speed, the car feels even better: lighter, more alert to every input. Only the drum brakes feel weak and out of place.

So why aren't we told more often about how wonderful this Alfa Romeo is? Maybe because the smaller Giulietta Sprint, launched in 1954, stole its limelight – understandably, perhaps, as it was so crucial model to Alfa Romeo's future as its first coupe to be produced in series. As it is, the 1900C SS remains as a well-kept secret, although the fact that prices are so high is a clue that word has got out. I can't help wondering how many of these cars ever get to be driven properly, considering their collectable status and the fact that they look like precious sculptures.

Yes, those looks are certainly a great part of the allure. Driving one for the camera in this scenery, as the sun drops down, feels like being handed a canvas and brushes and discovering that, for the first and unrepeatable time, you're able to make art. 🇮🇹

*Thanks to Museu do Caramulo, Marco Pestana and Miguel Valle de Figueiredo for their help with this feature*

## CHRIS KNOTT INSURANCE

**1954 Alfa Romeo 1900C SS Series 2 Coupé**  
Estimated Value: £200,000

Based on 52 year old male, Architect, full NCB, living in NR6 postcode, SD&P (exc. commuting), garaged, 4000 miles pa, car club member, 2nd car for everyday use.

**Premium: £520 inc IPT**  
Excess: £500  
(exc. fee + legal cover)

