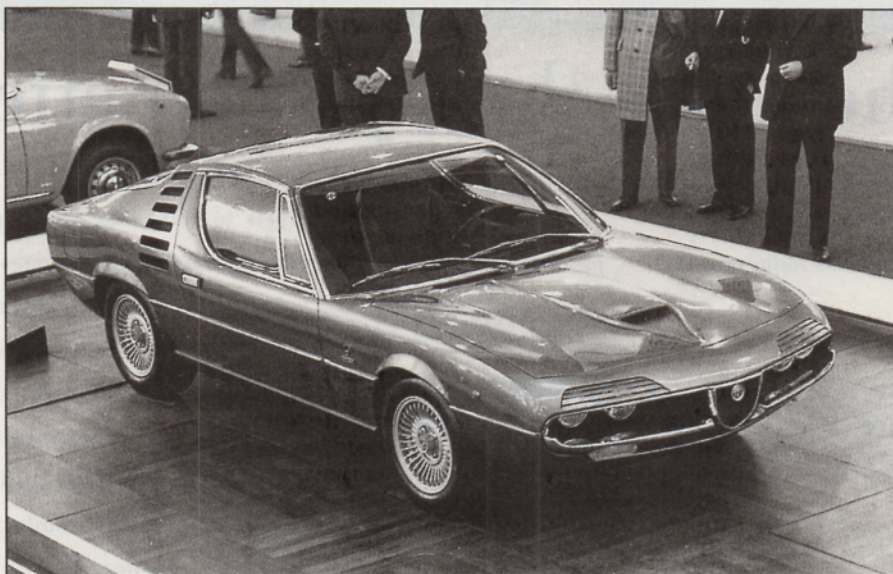


# CONCEPT CAR

*The Alfa Romeo Montreal was one of those rarities, the concept car which reached production. Brian Palmer argues that its time as a Classic has come*



*All that an Alfa should be – dramatic looks, a superb engine, and highly respectable performance. This is the Montreal as it appeared at the 1970 Geneva Show*

IT is rare for dream cars, or concept cars as we tend to call them these days, to make it into production. By their very definition they are there to inspire, to test new ideas and to give the public a foretaste of a company or designer's thinking. Some of these ideas, but rarely all, are later incorporated into future production vehicles.

There was some surprise, therefore, when Alfa Romeo announced, after the enthusiastic reception of their Canadian Expo '67 exhibit, that they were preparing to launch this exotic-looking coupé for public sale. They even gave it a name – Montreal – in honour of the World Fair city that had so approved their creation.

That decision was met with some scepticism. After all, turning dreams into reality is rather harder to do than to say. But Alfa Romeo engineers often seem ruled more by the heart than the head. They are emotional people, making charismatic cars for people who buy them on impulse out of love and passion rather than pure calculated

common-sense. Those people will always prefer to buy Saabs and Volvos.

So once the pledge had been made, if anyone could make the dream a reality it was Alfa Romeo. The idea also made a kind of commercial sense. The range then consisted of the well-liked sports Spiders, sports saloons and coupés, all with Bertone bodies. What it lacked was anything for existing Alfa Romeo buyers with supercar aspirations to trade-up to.

Alfa Romeo was also heavily committed to competition as a means of boosting their image internationally. Their T33 sports racer was the key to this and was powered by a two-litre V8 engine developing 270bhp at 9,600rpm, capable of 186mph. That engine, which had no links at all with any other production Alfa Romeo, was to provide the remarkable cross-fertilisation that made the Alfa Montreal so special.

Alfa Romeo, like many other specialist companies, recognised the advantages of competition-led publicity and development work but lacked both the human and physical resources needed if

they were not to neglect the pressing demands of their production car schedules. So they formed a completely new organisation called Autodelta, which was headed by ex-Alfa, ex-Ferrari, ex-ATS engineer, Carlo Chiti.

That was up and running by the 1964 season and had enormous success with the Giulia TZ sports racing cars in long-distance events like Le Mans, the Targa Florio, Sebring, and the Nürburgring 1000 Kilometres. Subsequently the Giulia GTA was successfully campaigned and brought them three consecutive wins in the European Touring Car Championships in the years 1966-68.

Flushed with this success, Autodelta and Alfa Romeo embarked upon a much more ambitious programme in 1967. The Tipo 33 had at its heart a V8 engine of prodigious power output for its modest size. It had similarities to a design Chiti had produced for ATS some years earlier, and used the classic Alfa formula of hemispherical combustion chambers with twin rows of inclined valves and twin overhead camshafts.

The engine, together with its six-speed gearbox, was placed in the rear of the new racing chassis. This was constructed from three large-diameter tubes arranged in an asymmetrical 'H', with light alloy castings at the end of each leg to provide mounting points for the engine, transmission and suspension.

Clothed in their aggressive, bright red, glassfibre bodywork, the 33s looked ready to conquer the world, but they were dogged by initial problems with those unusual suspension mountings. The cars came right the following year, however, when they scooped first and second places in their class at the Daytona 24 Hours – and the car was hurriedly renamed Daytona to register that fact. This was followed by a class top three win at Le Mans.

The following year the cars were radically redesigned in the chassis department and the engine was increased in size to a full three litres, with four valves per cylinder and a thumping 400bhp. Again unreliability problems crept-in to frustrate early expectations, but with further patient work they made subsequent versions into winners again.

For Alfa, the Tipo 33 project was unusual in that it did not owe anything to current production models. The engine, however – or at least a detuned form of it, offering 200bhp from 2,593cc – formed the highly unusual and spirited heart of the Alfa Romeo Montreal which was finally launched at the Geneva Show in 1970.

Contrary to all rumours and the visual evidence of the exuberant Bertone styling which so strongly suggested a mid-engine position, the 90-degree, light-alloy V8 was stuck out front in the orthodox position and mated to a five-speed gearbox supplied by ZF.

Whether it was ever seriously intended to make the Montreal mid-





Photography: Simon Childs



## CONCEPT CAR

engined is a moot point, considering that Alfa had never really intended the car to become a production reality in the first place – and as a dream car, it hardly mattered one way or the other. No doubt, once the decision was made, the powers that be decided that the car was quite exotic enough as it stood without adding to its cost and complication when it was only going to be a limited run anyway.

In the event the Montreal was to prove unexpectedly popular, despite a price tag that was twice that of a 2000GTV. Yet the car's enthusiastic reception was to become a major embarrassment, because supplies were severely disrupted by the industrial action which plagued Italy over this period. Alfa management was forced to re-think the car's limited production status.

In the Montreal's first full year (1971) Alfa Romeo managed to cobble together 700 cars, nearly all of which were sold on the home market. They only made matters worse when they displayed a right-hand drive Montreal at Earls Court in October: any hopes of supplying enthusiasts here quickly evaporated when it was learnt that it was to be August before the first supplies started trickling in. Patience must have soon turned to frustration and then to anger, as it would be the summer of 1974 before right-hand drive cars arrived in the UK.

The hapless Montreal was also caught up in a political turmoil which was none of its making. As a State-controlled company, Alfa Romeo was coming under intense pressure to rein back on costs, which were spiralling as income plunged. They were also being asked to open a factory in the south of Italy as an employment sop and to become a mass-producer of cars, which they had never been.

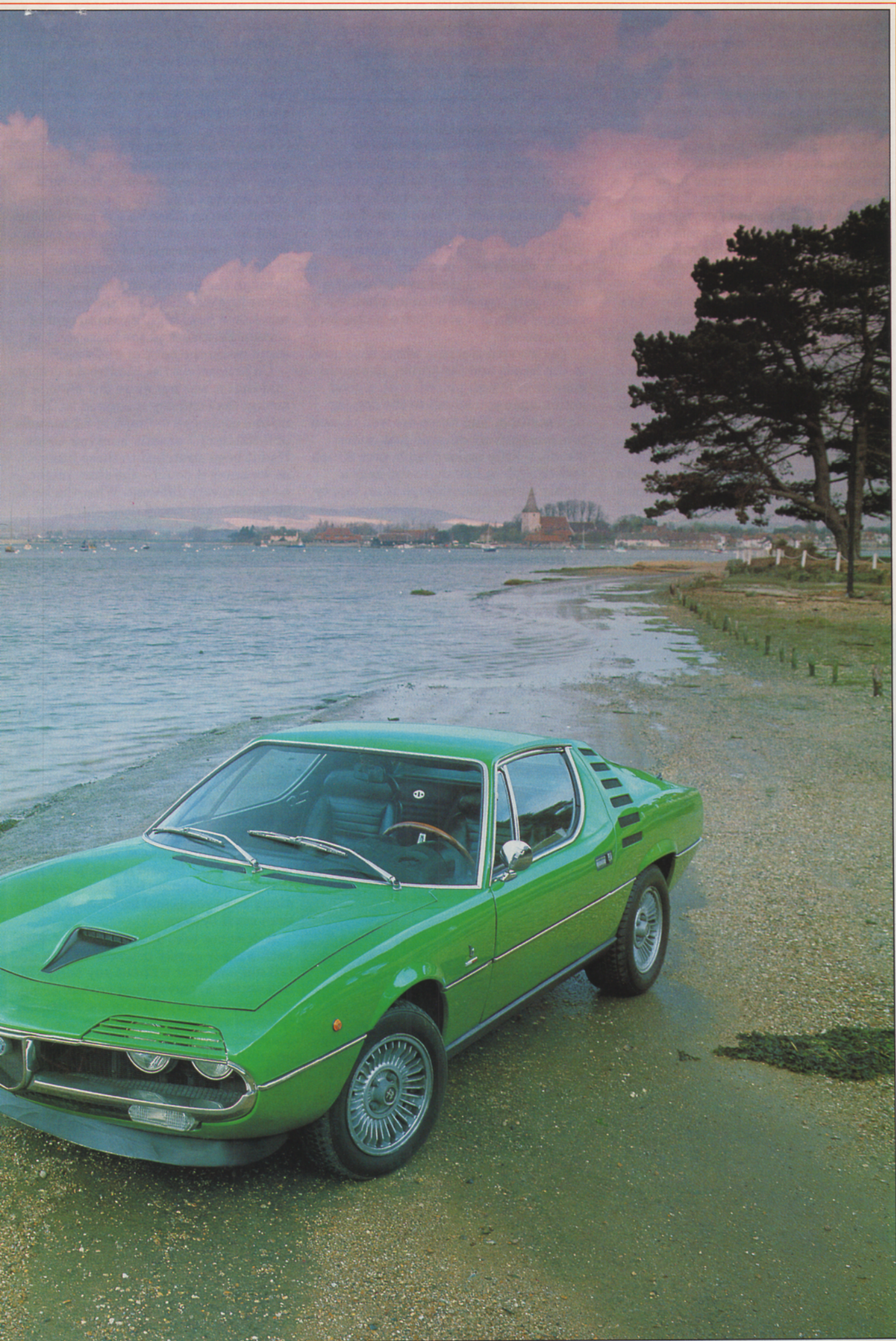
The Montreal sat uneasily in the midst of all this social and economic planning as an extravagant distraction. Never even allocated proper tooling, and now with no hope of getting any, the outcome was clear. Mistreated, abused, and with its latent promise unfulfilled, the Montreal was killed-off in 1976. Yet when making allowances for all its many birth-pangs and the limited-production facilities, the Montreal's total of some 4,000 units was no disgrace. Indeed it fared rather well against most of the company's larger-engined post-war offerings which were nearly always dismal sellers.

Today the Montreal is largely forgotten but there are now signs of an awakening of interest in this sleeping supercar. That's why I decided to try one for myself, courtesy of Nigel Cooper Cars of West London.

First, there's no getting away from the fact that the Alfa Montreal is a striking car with looks you cannot ignore. They are also looks that are as controversial now as they were when new. There are no half-measures – you either love them or loathe them. Detractors point to the Montreal's rather confined wheelbase







COMOBY CAR



and over-ornamented detailing. Personally – and I rather surprise myself here – I’m a lover not a loather and, making allowances for some of the fashion fads of 20 years ago, I reckon it is a design which has stood the test of time remarkably well.

The Montreal still has a surprising freshness that excites the eye. A certain, almost baroque flamboyance in its execution, perhaps, but then I always thought half the point of paying good money for such cars was because they stood out in a crowd. In this particularly attractive and vivid green, the Alfa Montreal certainly does that.

They were pretty expensive here, too. In the UK in 1972, for instance, a left-hand drive model would have set you back the best part of £5,100. A laughably low figure today, I know, but as a guide a Ferrari Dino 246GT sold for £5,288, a Porsche 911S for £5,222 and a Mercedes-Benz 350SL Roadster for £5,595, while Jaguar’s new-wine-in-an-old-bottle E-type V12 came at a bargain £3,206. Tough company, especially when the Montreal’s design made it woefully inadequate as a two-plus-two, even among such restricted company. Luggage capacity was also pitifully lacking and it was of very little consolation that you could hurl your toothbrush and change of underwear through the thoughtfully provided lift-up rear window.

*“the engine takes on a yowl reminiscent of certain Ferraris”*

However, general habitability for an enthusiastic driver and his or her chosen friend proves to be rather good. Certainly, as an amply padded six-footer I had none of the usual comfort problems encountered with Italian cars of this era. Headroom and legroom were fine and I could even reach the steering wheel, which was an added bonus. Think of the Montreal as a two-seater coupé with two awkward and limited luggage bays and you have a recipe for contentment.

The wooden steering wheel feels good to the hands and the stubby, five-speed gear lever is well placed, with a good action once you adjust to the dog-leg first position. The ratios are well chosen too, respectively offering just under 40mph, a little under 60mph, over 90mph and 120mph in fourth. In top gear a highly respectable 135mph is on tap, by which time it may come as no surprise that fuel is rather greedily consumed at 14mpg overall.

The surprising thing about the Montreal, on first acquaintance, is how well-mannered and flexible it is to drive. There are no histrionics at all. Starting

is straightforward, courtesy of the Alfa Romeo-Spica fuel injection system, and the power is delivered with great smoothness. Around town, even in heavy traffic, there is no fuss whatever and such is the spread of power that there is little need to change gear constantly.


Out of town, things liven-up considerably. You couldn’t call the Alfa quiet – but then who on earth would want a silent Alfa? Yet the engine sounds like no other V8 I’ve heard before – indeed, its distinctive thrummy quality reminded me strongly of the boxer units of the later Alfa Suds. Winding it through the gears is an exciting and rewarding experience as the engine takes on a yowl highly reminiscent of certain Ferraris and the hairs start to stand up on the back of one’s neck.

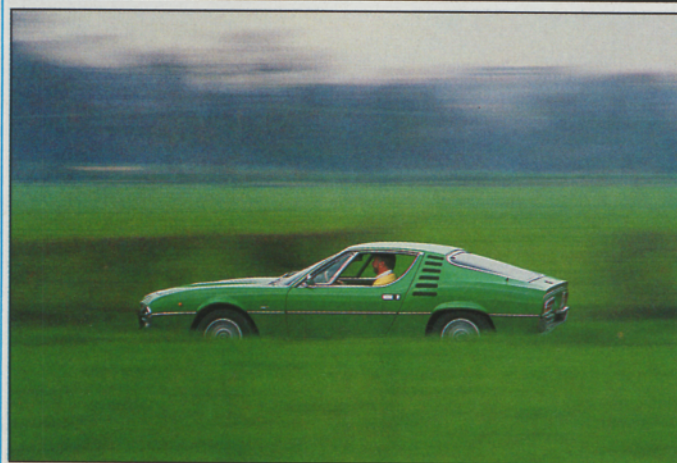
Unfortunately, the Montreal’s critics said that it was not quite fast enough among the company it aspired to. Yet no-one could call 0-60mph in 8.1 seconds or 0-100 in 21.7 exactly hanging about. Had it been stretched to three litres – as we know it could – the story might have been very different. What the backstabbers really hated most about the Montreal, though, was its modest chassis detailing. Having a live axle was bad enough, but sharing its floorpan and suspension with mere saloons, even Alfa’s very good ones, was quite beyond the pale.

Alfa wisely fitted a limited-slip differential to help keep the power planted firmly on the road and whopping 195/70 Michelin XVR tyres offered a notably broad footprint. Yet an underlying softness is apparent, especially around town, with a slight but discernible wriggling action in the suspension. Out on the open road, especially the undulating English country road, I found this softness and some tendency to roll initially a little disconcerting when driving quickly. Admittedly this became less pronounced with greater familiarity, but I could not help but feel that this car’s natural habitat is powering along main roads and motorways rather than rural byways.

It does not take much, of course, with such a ready supply of power, to kick the tail out – with or without any bumps in mid-corner to chivvy that process along. Any cross-country drive in the Montreal is bound to be an entertaining one, therefore. Annoying little things like the appalling high-set pedals that preclude heel and toeing and leave your right foot aching, and the bizarre instruments that are almost impossible to read at any sort of speed, are made even worse on longer contact.

If I’m honest, I started the day rather mistrusting this car, feeling perhaps that it was something of an over-dressed fraud. By the end of the day, though, the Montreal’s willing nature had made quite a strong impression on me, and we’d certainly had some fun together.

No, not a real supercar – but a jolly good Alfa Romeo nonetheless. With that distinguished pedigree behind it, can it be long before the Montreal is highly sought after in its own right? 



*Above, the cabin is distinctively Alfa, with its deeply cowled instruments and dished wheel. Left, fast cross-country work demands particular concentration*

