

FIRST DRIVE - ALFA MITO 1.4 Turbo (155 bhp)

26 June 2008 - The Alfa MiTo has been launched this week and is now heading to the Italian showrooms; taking Alfa Romeo straight back to its past MiTo is a fun, sporty, agile and very stylish hatchback that is set to be the next step in the brand's revival. A lot of work has gone into the MiTo project and a lot rides on it being a hit with consumers across Europe.

The international media test drive day was held on Tuesday, and it dawned warm and sunny, with the famous Autodromo Nazionale Monza, a name etched into Italian sporting tradition, set to provide the perfect - and quite appropriately evocative - backdrop to the occasion. The MiTos sat in the paddock in rows, in three colours: red, the glittering deep metallic Alfa 8C Competizione red, and black.

On first sight the MiTo is much better looking than official images had suggested, its distinct Alfa 8C Competizione inspired front end combined with all round potent hot hatch looks make it stand right out from the crowd with a bang. The frontal treatment gives it a truly unique identity, which is perfectly synonymous with Alfa Romeo, and its bulbous arches offset the high sideline and promote a squat, purposeful and aggressive look. The LED rear lights are striking and give it a supercar feel, shamelessly inspired by the recent Ferrari 599 and the Alfa 8C. Big, bold alloy wheels and brash detailed styling cues, such as the eye-catching chromed light surrounds (which can also be personalised in different finishes), all add to the effect of a new car with heaps of individually but indelibly blended with Alfa Romeo heritage; vital qualities if it is to go head-to-head with the Mini.

The ignition key is patterned with the shape of the traditional Alfa 'heart' and the inner area is colour-coded red. The MiTo burbles into life - in our case, the 1.4-litre 155 bhp turbocharged version, which according to Alfa Romeo's engineers, has been reworked in key areas from the unit used in the Fiat Bravo and Grande Punto Abarth.

Alfa Romeo's heritage is all around us at Monza: large backdrop posters in the paddock area depict racing successes from the past: Mauro Pregliasco's Alfetta GTV Turbodelta splashing at speed down a muddy track is captured in crisp black and white, as is another poster depicting Toine Hezemans and Nino Vaccarella framed in huge laurel wreaths after yet another win with the Tipo 33-3. For Alfa Romeo the racing link is unbreakable, and glancing at the photos and recalling these glory days is Han Akersloot, a former Autodelta factory driver and now PR consultant with Alfa Romeo Netherlands.

We set off down the paddock and drive adjacent to the famous track which is being used today by a number of single-seater racing cars out testing. The MiTo's turning circle is pretty good, just getting out of the paddock gate involves a very tight right hand twist past huge and unforgiving concrete blocks, which are comfortably negotiated with room to spare. The intermittent howl of racing engines flying past behind the towering catch fencing adds to the vibrant atmosphere and reminds everyone that Alfa Romeo is right at home here, on the race track, an arena that it repeatedly fought and beat the world's best, in the process creating the evocative brand image that the MiTo seeks to capture.

The glorious setting of Monza becomes even more poignant as we burst onto the historic banking, which despite falling into disuse decades ago, is now perfectly maintained. The ghosts of the past hang heavy on the steep, brooding surface, reputations were made and broken on this crushing test of man and machine in unforgiving action. Legends were created here. Powering the MiTo up the banking makes you realise the steepness is shocking; racers of old redefined bravery as they hurtled round this course, their momentum carrying them almost as if locked into a furious pendulum swing. Our pace though is more sedentary, but the MiTo still grips tight to the aged concrete tightly, unfazed by the treacherous surface that propelled so many of its predecessors into fabled folklore. Into the infield, swooping under the track and alongside the tree-lined perimeter access road, and we burst out into the busy Monza morning traffic. Meanwhile the outside temperatures continue to soar.

The glossy 'roadbook' recalls the past, and the road map has been chosen to evoke test routes of the past which provided the diversity required to allow all a car's features to be put through their paces. Leafing through the roadbook and the past is brought to life in a series of images, the parallels are drawn: The legendary Tipo B 'P3', Tazio Nuvolari on the grid at Monza, Autodelta test drivers in crisp overalls at a tree-lined Balocco, a Montreal at speed on the roads of Milan, an Autodelta GTA-SA racing along the Monza banking during the Jolly Club 4 Hour race in 1969, Test Driver Guido Moroni casually perched on the pitwall in the late 1960s, and a TZ2 erupting from the main gates of the Autodelta factory - motoring legends one and all. The MiTo is born into illustrious company.

The test drive route is 106 km, and is set to take us from Monza north towards Lecce, through Lissone and up the SS36. At the small town of Suello we will swing sharply east in the direction of Erba, before cutting northwards again and tackling a steep ascent through

Canzo and Asso, from where we will plummet sharply down a tortuous road, through Valbrona, and onto the banks of Lake Como. Hugging the lake we will head south towards Lecce again, cutting off to pick up signs for Oggiono and the SP51, and returning to Monza.

We begin the jaunt heading north on a fast, crowded, dual carriageway, steering well clear of the chaotic driving that is as much part of Milanese tradition as cutting-edge fashion and pasta. The MiTo is right at home on this surface, the steering is quite responsive if a little on the light side thanks to the modern era electronic systems. This 155bhp turbo version has a top speed of 215 km/h, and although we never got to test this figure it pulls well at higher speeds; it's set to be an accomplished small motorway cruiser.

The cabin is roomy and airy, even though this car features an all-black interior. The instruments are housed in a deep cowl in true Alfa Romeo style and are clean and crisp: chrome effect surrounds, with clear white numbers on a black background; the needles hang vertically at rest. The water temperature and fuel gauges are clear too in a similar vein, allowing the driver to focus entirely on the road ahead. Between the speedometer and rev counter an LCD display provides digital information, also revealing to us that the outside temperature is now into the 30s. However the air con is doing an admirable job of keeping the occupants cool.

The dashboard section structure is finished in a stylish carbon fibre effect with the outer sections and glovebox being made of the now-obligatory hard plastics which also feature on the door and rear side panels. The Blaupunkt radio, CD player, air con and other functions in the centre of the dash are simply laid out and easy to use. The tray below features the usual pull-out cylinder-shaped ashtray while the USB port, complete with the familiar Microsoft logo, is easily accessible. The steering wheel is chunky and pleasing to grip, whilst the switch gear has a reassuringly solid feel.

The fabric seats are sporty and supportive and the back is able to accommodate three adults with sufficient legroom. All in all, it's a pleasing cabin, well thought out by the designers, the functions clear and accessible. It is simple, stylish, highly specified, and sporty; just as an Alfa Romeo should be.

We pass through Cesana and Carella and turn north again; the road begins to climb sharply and tight hairpin bends feature as we head up the mountainside. Here the MiTo's useful torque is firmly put to the test; its mid-range pull is excellent. It makes easy work of the

terrain and doesn't feel its 1145kg kerb weight; meanwhile we steer clear of steady streams of cyclists clad in brightly-coloured lycra jerseys. The level of available grip is superb as we chuck the MiTo through the many twists and turns; it feels in tune with the changing demands of the surface, easily able to cope. The 230 Nm (23.5 kgm) torque is useful and gives the MiTo an excellent mid-range; the engine is revs nicely right through the range and the needle is able to thrust towards the 6500rpm redline with plenty of power on tap.

Once we reach the summit the road drops dramatically down to Lake Como, a demanding test by any standard, and by including it in our route Alfa Romeo's planners have betrayed no fear that the MiTo might be shown up. This is exactly the type of road an Alfa Romeo worthy of the name has to excel on: lots of power, torque, stopping power, and general all-round ability are musts. There is no room for compromises, any deficiencies will be glaring.

Although the route is over 100 km long, this short section totally defines motoring fun and is the perfect setting to try any Alfa Romeo. We descend the sun soaked mountain through 180 degree bend after 180 degree bend, aiming for the gently lapping waters of Lake Como. The mountainside though is alive with hordes of little black and red MiTos racing up and down the sinuous road. As we stop to take photos of our car, MiTos rush by from all sides, the sheer rock faces reverberating to the squeal of tyres doing their job. From a distance the MiTo looks very assured and solid, digging into the hairpins and holding its line well, the suspension doing its job.

Meanwhile the action is interspersed with Italian cars of all shapes, sizes and ages plodding up the hillside: Mareas, Puntos, Pandas and Stilos toil towards the summit. And of course the obligatory 3-wheeler Ape comes wheezing up the ascent the driver enthusiastically waving from the tiny cockpit and honking his horn furiously. This is Italy. And in Italy everyone is a racing driver. Alfa Romeo won't lose sight of its roots as long as it keeps conceiving cars in this region.

From behind the wheel of the MiTo it's a similar story: fluid handling and rapid responses. It rides with assuredness on the rougher surfaces of these minor roads; comfort isn't compromised by the search for performance, and the driver feels part of the experience. The MacPherson front/torsion beam rear suspension is well tuned for the task in hand. The brakes are excellent and inspire confidence. It's an involving car. During Monday's press conference Alfa Romeo CEO Luca De Meo and his team were very honest in detailing the MiTo's Grande Punto underpinnings, but took care to outline the areas that they had focused

on reworking: the engine, brakes, chassis rigidity, suspension, driving experience, looks and feel. The T-Jet engine, which forms the base of the new unit, has already gained a reputation for big engine responses from its 1368 cc, so its the perfect unit to power the 'hot' MiTo.

All the efforts of Alfa Romeo's engineers to imbue a sporty setup seem to have paid off handsomely, and the chassis rigidity is excellent, an area of focus that Fiat Group engineering boss Harald Wester referred to during the press conference, defining it as class leading. The 6-speed gear box is crisp and smooth, something that Alfa Romeo used to struggle with in the past.

The innovative DNA system works well, the 'D' (Dynamic) sports setting sharpens up the handling, improving throttle response with more boost, although the switch has to be engaged at low speeds. The 'D' setting also prompts an LCD display on the dashboard that allows boost levels to be clearly visualised, thus involving the driver further into the driving equation.

We drop like a stone down the final kilometres which are chiselled into the mountainside and level out right on the shoreline of Lake Como. And time stands still as the adrenaline drains away and we are thrust into a world of complete calm. The huge lake stretches out before us and the houses of Mandello and Abbadia on the opposite bank appear as little dots clinging onto the steep sides. The sheer tranquillity of the scene is perfectly summed up by a rowing boat lazily bobbing in the water a dozen metres off the shore with a cloth parasol shielding its snoozing occupants from the beating sun. Life here is relaxed indeed.

As we turn onto the 583, which hugs the shoreline towards the foot of the lake, we spot motoring journalist John Simister and Auto Italia photographer Michael Ward sitting outside a tiny roadside café. It seems the perfect spot to take a break after the rush of the mountain roads. The cafe appears to have been last refurbished sometime in the 1970s, and apart from the apron wearing owner the only other person sipping coffee is the local postmistress. Relaxing outside it seems pertinent to ask Simister, who gets to drive every new car that has four wheels, his own informed opinion of the MiTo . He likes it, comments its pretty good all round, and picks out the handling, responsiveness of the engine, and the gear changing as particular highlights. Coffee arrives on an ancient and heavily carved wooden tray that looks like it really should be inside a museum showcase, while the feeling that time has clearly bypassed this location is reinforced: an espresso and a cappuccino total just 2.20 euros.

Admiring the pair of gleaming MiTos parked outside, appreciation of its distinct styling continues to grow. It's modern yet typically Alfa Romeo, and it beats the Mini hands down in the looks stakes, making BMW's rival appear quite old and staid. The Alfa 8C Competizione derived cues work well, and the back end in particular looks very neat and chunky. The only over-styled details I noticed were a fussily moulded cowl over the exhaust tailpipes and two unnecessary protrusions, on either side, under the rear bumper.

Alfa Romeo is aiming to redefined the hot hatchback once again, and the parallels to the fondly remembered Alfasud (which oddly hasn't featured in the many historical depictions that thrust into view at the launch) are impossible to miss. The MiTo takes Alfa Romeo back to its roots, doing what it does best, and the conservative target of 70,000 units a year should be easily achievable. Meanwhile, the cars bask on the roadside in Como. In Italy everyone is an automotive expert, and so the MiTo attracts much attention.

It's time to head back, and the MiTo's round town abilities are unexpectedly put to the test as we miss the route signs and are plunged into Monza's very tight town centre. Chasing round a maze of narrow one way streets the MiTo rides smoothly over the harsh paved surfaces, and negotiates the cramped, twisting turns with ease. Manoeuvrable and responsive, the MiTo is clearly able to handle the urban jungle just as well as a demanding road.

On first impressions, the MiTo has all the makings of a winner, and should prove a powerful contributor to Alfa's long-awaited revival, taking up the baton with effect, and biting a sizeable chunk out of the much vaunted 300,000 units a year target.

- Edd Ellison