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8C Spider review – Telegraph Review by Andrew English 27.07.2009

A smouldering Italian sun showers its blessings on the long, red bonnet of an Alfa Romeo as it bellows around an Italian test track. Whoah! Worn rear tyres slide wide and the fronts follow. The windscreen's shadows swing wildly across the cockpit as the car slews first one way then the other. There's a shudder through the frame as the rear end collects itself and my shoulders thud into the seat. Back on the throttle, the engine's Stentorian blast rips the shimmering air, tyre smoke receding in the mirrors.

This is work? Hard to justify in anyone's language, except perhaps Italian. I grin like a Cheshire cat, but my head is full of trams and birthdays.

Trams? Pay attention. The tram terminus on Milan's Piazza Castello is opposite the leafy entrance to the Castello Sforzesco and its Filarete Tower. It was there in 1910 that legend places Romano Cattaneo, a young draftsman who worked for a new Milanese car maker, Societa Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili (ALFA) and had been asked to design the company's badge. Perhaps it was a stifling day like this. Maybe he was dallying over a cappuccino as he idly looked across, past the big fountain, to the tower. At its top was the crowned, man-eating serpent of the Visconti family. Eureka! Why not pilfer the coat of arms from the city's one-time ruling family – the *biscione* snake, with the crusader's red cross on a white background? It was there, almost 100 years ago, that one of the world's most convoluted yet recognisable car badges was born.

And while countless redesigns have been effected, every Alfa Romeo has sported the snake and the cross for a century. In the run-up to the company's centenary, it's as well to recall that the blood-red cars from Italy come not from upstart *garagistes* such as Ferrari, Lamborghini or even the Maserati brothers, but Alfa Romeo.

Alfa was winning races when Enzo Ferrari was shoeing mules. It was building sleek supercars before Ferruccio Lamborghini saw his first tractor. *Alfisti* was common coinage at racetracks more than half a century before *tifosi* described Ferrari's fans. Brave, skilful and determined Alfa drivers such as Tazio Nuvolari risked all in dust-choked, dangerous public-road races. His sepia-toned eyes stare reproachfully out of the history books and, lest we forget, Alfa has created a car to remind us of its past glories.

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It all started as a bit of a jape. When the 8C first appeared at the Frankfurt Motor Show six years ago, Alfa had no intention of building it. The name recalled a bygone Vittorio Jano masterpiece; a straight-eight, twin-cam, supercharged engine in a lightweight chassis. The original won the Le Mans 24 Hours four years on the trot, from 1931 to 1934, and the Italian Mille Miglia from 1932 to 1934. The 8C was the most exotic car of its generation and the 8C Competizione was a reminder.

But build it? Come on. A V8 driving the rear wheels might be redolent of a glorious heritage, but it bears little relation to Fiat-based hatchbacks badged as modern Alfas. Besides, fate's vicissitudes meant Fiat now had interests in Ferrari and Maserati, so why compete against itself? Yet the 8C kept appearing and the public besieged Alfa to build a car so voluptuous that one Alfa engineer called it, "As lovely as a woman's legs under a blanket." Eventually Alfa demurred, with a production run of 500 coupés — no easy task at a car company accustomed to tooling up to build 50,000 examples of each model.

A steel Maserati floor pan was cut and shut. The lithe coachwork, designed at Alfa Romeo's Centro Stile studios, was made carbon-fibre reality at an experimental workshop in Mirafiori, Turin. The whole was bonded together at Mirafiori, then delivered as body-in-white to the Maserati factory in Modena for assembly and paint. The mellifluous 450bhp, 4.7-litre, 90-degree V8 was based on a Maserati design borrowed from Ferrari. The gearbox features a robotised, six-speed manual transaxle with a paddle change and automatic or manual modes.

It was effectively a prototype masquerading as a production car, but there were three potential customers for each £110,000 8C. Alfa had promised to produce no more, so what to do? A Spider cabriolet, of course, although two years on Alfa's engineers had learnt more. So as the Spider goes on sale (again, they're all sold, including the 50 heading to Blighty), it incorporates a range of chassis changes that I am currently beasting around the Balocco test track; a tough job, but someone has to do it. Most important is the structure reinforcement to prevent the open-top Spider twisting over bumps. This takes the form of carbon-fibre tubes and subframes, front and rear, plus a double strut brace, which boxes in the front of the car. All this increases kerb weight by 198lb (90kg), to a hefty 3,962lb (1,675kg).

A simple, semi-automatic hood with lightweight frame keeps the weather out, although it is difficult to love the clunky tonneau filler panels that have to be removed and refitted manually every time you raise or furl the hood. One advantage is that the front to rear weight distribution is now exactly 50:50, another that it looks sensational – it's reminiscent of the 2000GT drophead Toyota made for the Bond flick, *You Only Live Twice*. As if to reinforce the point, Alfa presented an 8C in Japanese white; not altogether flattering, it has to be said.

Carbon-ceramic brakes are deployed at each corner to give consistent stopping, save 14kg of unsprung weight and push the price to an eye-watering £174,000. Softer damping and harder springs and anti-roll bars complete the line-up. Other than that it's the same leather, carbon and aluminium cabin as the 8C coupé, with showy surface changes and myriad textures on the leather hides. At least the Spider's leather-and-carbon bucket seats don't require a spanner for adjustment, unlike the coupé's.

The gear-lever-free centre console is still there with the amazing Sport button that sharpens throttle response, licenses a bit of tail-out motoring, halves gear-change times to 0.2 sec and opens a valve in the exhaust to make it more raucous – that's right, it's a loud button.

The Spider rides better than the coupé and that's not just down to body flex. Stiffer springs flout received wisdom about ride and handling balance, but the Spider feels softer, more comfortable and at the same time more wieldy than the coupé. The steering isn't as communicative, but the balance is better. That said the Spider is still strictly top-shelf material when you get it out of shape. The tail wags like an eager puppy, but its 1.7 tons don't come gracefully off the slide and it's easy to end up spinning the other way if you are not fast and accurate with corrections.

Likewise the ceramic brakes are eye-poppingly powerful and almost totally fade-resistant, but they require an almighty push and lack the finesse of the coupé's steel alternatives.

With a folded hood to accommodate, luggage space is at a premium. The boot is just about big enough for one hand-baggage suitcase and there's an inch of space between the seat backs and the firewall. Everything else goes on the passenger's lap, if she'll allow it.

In all it's a pretty hard-core car and one that's about more than just the sinfully soulful engine.

Flap the paddles, spin the rev counter and its baritone song is worthy of Giuseppe Verdi. But then look back at the 8C, ticking as it cools in shadow of the old Auto Delta racing headquarters and it's hard not to thrill at the thought that, somewhere in this company, the blood of Cellini and Michelangelo still runs.

If this is what Alfa is doing a year before its centenary, I want to be there when it unwraps its birthday surprise.