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Head to head

Alfaholics GTA-R 290 v Jensen Interceptor R Supercharged, by Jensen International



Price

£320,000 £325,000

Power

240bhp 650bhp

0-62mph

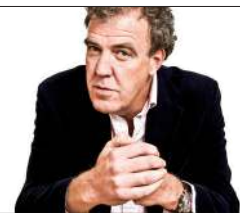
4.9sec 3.8sec

Fuel

23mpg 23mpg

The Clarkson Review: Alfaholics GTA-R 290

A blast from the past, rebuilt even better



Jeremy Clarkson

I think we are going to have to face up to the fact that the supercar is dead. They're too big and they're too powerful. On a normal road you cannot keep your foot down in first, second or third for more than a second because it's like trying to fly a jet fighter through a shopping centre. And this means you are putting up with all the discomfort and all the shortcomings of that racing-car layout and then not being able to enjoy — or even use — the supercar's raison d'être. Its power. Plus, if you arrive at someone's house in a bright orange, 8ft-wide, mid-engine two-seater, they will assume they are being visited by an eight-year-old Saudi Arabian who has spent all night driving round Harrods.

So, because supercars are now unusable and driven by ghastly people with no taste, wealthy petrolheads, who do have taste, are being driven into the arms of Eagle, which will sell them a beautifully restored and modernised Jaguar E-type. Or Jensen International Automotive, which can build them an Interceptor with the reliable engine and electronics from a modern Chevrolet Corvette.

Yes, these restored cars cost as much as a Ferrari or a McLaren, but you can use all the performance all the time, and when you drop round to see friends they won't draw the curtains and pretend to be out.

All of which brings me on to the car you see in the photographs this morning. It started out in life as an Alfa Romeo GTA but has been

restored, redesigned and rebuilt by a family-owned company in Bristol called Alfaholics. The result is called the GTA-R and if you want one it'll cost you £320,000.

Now, you would probably pay six figures for an E-type or an Interceptor because Jags and Jensens have that kind of kudos. But an Alfa?

The trouble is, Alfa Romeo has spent most of the recent past making dismal hatchbacks with the word "Fiat" crossed out and "Alfa Romeo" written in in crayon. So we have all forgotten that back in the days before the Arna and the 33 and the MiTo, Alfa was one of the most respected and loved car companies on earth. Enzo Ferrari worked there early in his career. And it dominated the Formula One drivers' world championship in 1950 and 1951.

Back in the 1960s, a 1.6-litre GTA cost £2,898. That's about £500 more than you'd have paid for an E-type. So, make no mistake, for older people the Alfa brand is very special.

There's another reason why the Alfaholics GTA-R costs £320,000. The 3,000 hours of work that have gone into making it.

The original engine has been removed and in its place is a Twin Spark four-cylinder unit from an Alfa 75 that has been bored out to 2.2 litres. This now produces 240 horsepower, 200 torques and a noise that makes even your eyebrows tingle. On a visit to the workshop I wondered out loud why the company hadn't fitted the V6 from an Alfa GTV, and those

There's a reason why it costs £320,000: the 3,000 hours of work that have gone into making it

present looked at me as though I'd defecated on the office desk. The Twin Spark engine was chosen because — as anyone who knows anything knows — it can trace its roots and architecture back to the aluminium 1.6-litre engine that the original GTA had.

Alfaholics, then, does not just add what it thinks will make the car more reliable or more modern or snazzier. It makes sure whatever it changes, or does, allows the character of the original to shine through. It's like the company has taken Julie Christie and rebuilt her so she's 25 again. And given her optional air-conditioning. And Bluetooth. And new air vents with tiny Alfa badges in the middle. And I think I'm in love.

First things first, though: the interior. The car I drove was racing-car basic, but the driving position was — and this is a first for any Alfa — perfect. The steering wheel was high up, close to your chest and even closer to the gearknob. And the pedals were perfectly placed for double declutching and heel and toe changes. (I'm aware this might not make much sense to the under-40s.)

But while it felt like a racing car in there, it certainly didn't feel like one when I took it for a drive. Because, unlike all modern cars, which are designed with one eye on the Nürburgring, it's as comfortable as a Shackletons wingback armchair. And so easy to get in and out of, you know.

This is because modern suspension systems have to support the huge weight of the car, which gives them very little spare capacity for doing anything else. If you are giving a fat man a piggyback ride, it would be unreasonable to suggest you should be able to play the guitar at the same time.

The GTA-R, however, with its carbon-fibre components, weighs just 830kg. The suspension can

prop that up without thinking, and so concentrate fully on what it's supposed to be doing.

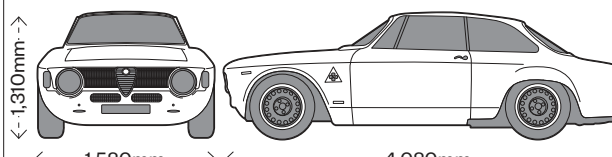
Like the original, it has a double-wishbone suspension at the front and a live axle at the rear, but all the pick-up points have been changed to give it a more modern feel. Sprinkle in telepathic steering and you end up with a car that doesn't feel as if it's from the 1960s at all. It feels as if it's from that weird bit of your head where the concept of "perfect handling" lives. The brakes work too, principally because you get six-pot discs at the front, but also because all they have to slow down is something that weighs less than a cheese slice.

Here's the best bit, though. You can accelerate — hard — through first and second and third. You can go from 0 to 62mph in less than five seconds and then keep on accelerating to 148mph, and not once will you soil yourself. This is not a frightening car and nor is it big. It's an Alfa, and when you've driven it, you'll understand what that means. They're different. They feel alive.

There's more too. In a modern supercar you are constantly aware that you're not quite as good as the systems that are keeping you on the road. You are just meat in the room. But in the Alfa you feel like you're part of a man-and-machine



The Clarksmeter Alfaholics GTA-R 290



Engine 2200cc, 4 cylinders, petrol	Fuel / CO₂ 23mpg / n/a
Power 240bhp @ 7000rpm	Weight 830kg
Torque 200 lb ft @ 5400rpm	Price £320,000
Acceleration 0-62mph: 4.9sec	Release date On sale now
Top speed 148mph	Jeremy's rating ★★★★★

team. The handling limits are set not by the car but by you. That's an important factor if you are a petrolhead. And it's why racing used to be so much more fun to watch, because with a bit of red mist you could make your car do things it should not be able to do.

Then there's the noise. It doesn't come from electronic witchcraft in the exhaust. It's a joyful, snorty-rorty cacophony, and it comes from the engine. It sounds real and it made me feel very special, very nostalgic and very happy. I adored the GTA-R more than is decent, or even healthy.

It also gave me an idea. There are tons of people my age who'd love a 3-litre Ford Capri or a Lancia Fulvia or a Triumph TR6. But they are put off by the promise of all that incontinence and unreliability. So, surely, there must be a market for people to start doing them up and selling them to hedge-funded petrolheads who no longer lust after a Lamborghini.

One such man recently asked Alfaholics to make him a totally rebuilt and modernised 101 series Giulia Spider. He then took away 22 slightly different shades of light blue paint to see which worked best in the light in London. And then he took the best five to his house in the south of France before deciding.

I'd like to do that one day ■