

A spider with no legs

It's beautiful, this Brera convertible, but be prepared for a dynamic disappointment

ANOTHER BEGUILINGLY beautiful new Alfa Romeo, sparkling in the hot Italian summer sun. Pininfarina style. Handsomely stitched soft leather upholstery, enticing black-and-aluminium cabin, doubly welcoming because the new Spider has no roof and that drop top welcomes you inside like an open door invites you into a grand home.

V6 or twin-cam four – you choose. We start with the bigger engine. Push the starter button and that creamy smooth V6 snarls into action. There is nothing this side of Ferrari money that sounds so good, so spirited, quite so human in its tone – as though real people tuned that engine note by hand and ear. (That's one thing I love about all Alfas: the discernible human factor.)

So we set off, sweet clutch, light and short-throw but slightly vague gearchange. The steering fluid and linear. All V6 versions of the Spider get four-wheel drive. The other engine option, the 2.2 four, is less torquey, so front-drive suffices to parcel out the power.

The 3.2 V6 is the new General Motors-collaboration

unit, built in Australia (how much further from Italy can you get?) but it's zestful and elastic just like the old Alfa V6 that serenaded a generation of GTV buyers. It zings around to the 7000rpm electronic rat-a-tat-tat cut off.

Performance is good but not special. The Spider is based on the handsome Brera coupé, a Brera convertible in all but name. Like the Brera, this is more tourer than tearaway.

We soon find, on winding roads, that the handling is also secure and stable and safe. But it doesn't sing to you, scintillate you. This car just doesn't have the agility of a Boxster or even the latest Z4. The four-wheel drive, beefy weight (almost 1700kg) and nose heaviness all spoil the fun. It's 65kg more than the Brera too, and to compensate

Alfa has always known what to do with soft leather and aluminium. Takes your mind off the rather paltry performance



for the half-as-good rigidity, the ride quality has been softened. Handling suffers. It feels what it is: a sports car based on a saloon, the dynamically good but not great Alfa 159.

But as the road straightens, you revel in the flipside of the car's character. What's been lost in agility and speed is made up for in comfort and easy liveability. The Spider is a roomy, relaxing convertible. Easy to drive, easy to use. Electronically controlled fabric roof down, windows up, wind deflector in place, it's a pleasant place to spend time.

The 2.2-litre engine version is better dynamically than the V6, if not so muscular. It's lighter, more agile, and the engine has that lovely twin-cam rasp redolent of all great Alfa fours.

The Spider hits the UK early next year. It is gorgeous, sonorous and handsomely crafted by coachbuilders Pininfarina, and it oozes character, verve, charm.

But of course this is a familiar tale. While many of us in the UK admire Alfa's style and its BMW-alternative role, few of us spend money on them. It's why Alfa's UK market share is a pathetic 0.2 percent. We don't trust the cars or, sadly, the dealers.

But the quality of Alfas is improving, just as the character is being enhanced, and a big shake-up of the UK dealer network is imminent.

Very soon, we Brits may once again buy Alfas instead of just loving them.

GAVIN GREEN

ALFA SPIDER V6

Price: £28,000 (est)

Engine: 3195cc 24V V6, 260bhp @ 6200rpm, 236lb ft @ 2000rpm

Transmission: Six-speed manual, four-wheel drive

Performance: 7.0sec 0-62mph, 146mph, 24.2mpg, on sale in the UK: Early 2007

RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Beauty still skin deep

Like a Brera, but much heavier and with a softer ride