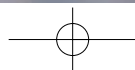


# IL MOSTRO: A



## Alfa Romeo SZ

“You either love them or you hate them,” said Paul Millbank as he handed me the keys to his SZ. But I’ve always loved them, I thought. The bluff, anti-establishment looks and the Zagato cache have always done it for me. Up close though, and you can see why some do not feel the same. For a country that prided itself on a coachbuilding industry where artisans beat pieces of metal over tree stumps for years in the name of automotive sculpture, it seems strange to see a plastic Italian car with cavernous panel gaps and a DIY interior that would embarrass the kit-car fraternity.

And like a kit-car, the mechanicals are from something more prosaic than they pretend, in this case the Alfa 75 saloon. It would be impossible today for a major manufacturer such as Alfa Romeo to get this type of car past the prototype stage and, let’s face it, even 15 years ago it must have been a struggle. Maybe it was nothing more than Ing Vittorio Ghidella, then Managing Director of Fiat Auto, attempting to cash in on the late-80s demand for supercars, bespoke cars or indeed any car that was expensive

and exclusive enough that investors might take a punt on it. Exclusive would have to mean limited numbers, to ensure that supply never quite equalled demand but there was no way that the production lines at Arese could be stopped overnight while a limited run of cars was produced. Building the new Alfa supercar would have to be outsourced.

Enter Zagato, tumultuous artisans of enormous reputation but chaotic business. The last few years at their Milanese premises had been predominantly spent building the Spyder version of the Maserati Biturbo for Alessandro De Tomaso but this was due to end as the ever-megalomaniacal De Tomaso moved production to one of his other factories. It looked like things were going to be quiet in the suburb of Terrazzano di Rho. Andrea Zagato and his cousin Maura were even considering setting up a fashion design arm for clothing. So when Fiat Centro Stile approached Zagato with a proposal to productionise the SZ design, Zagato came on board enthusiastically. Using Zagato certainly fitted in with Ghidella’s vision. The association with Zagato-bodied Alfas of old would do the car no harm at all in the collectors’ market.

Unlike those cars, however, this new SZ was not designed by Zagato itself, but by Walter de Silva and the team at Fiat Centro Stile. Eclectic in the extreme were the various elements that the design encompassed, not least the incredible slab-like nature of the lower half, which was totally at odds with the flowing glasshouse. Given a clean sheet of paper Zagato would probably have produced something similar, such was the eccentricity of the shape – but strangest of all was the medium in which the body was to be constructed. The technical term was Modar, which translates as glassfibre-reinforced low-pressure injection-moulded thermosetting metacrylic resin –



*Test by Andy Heywood / Photography by Michael Ward*

UNDER TEST – THREE VERSIONS OF THE STARTLING SZ

# ALFA ROMEO SZ

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plastic to you and me. Using Modar allowed a certain freedom of expression but was not without its problems in development.

The production of the body mouldings was carried out by Carplast in Piacenza, a company run by Giuseppe Bizzarrini (son of Giotto) with Zagato finishing and assembling in Milan. The production plan was for 1000 cars to be made in the year following the SZ's debut at the 1989 Geneva Motor Show, but problems with the Modar mouldings caused headaches at Zagato and extensive post-production finishing was necessary, which in turn delayed the expected output. Around the same time, Ghidella left Fiat and the project lost momentum. Just 13 cars were actually built in 1989.



**TOP: Owned by David Hobbs, this early car is number five in the series**  
**ABOVE: Businesslike 3.5-litre conversion prepared by Adie Hawkins**

Tantalised by press and motor show publicity, enthusiasts and investors alike were frustrated at the lack of finished cars. Rumours at the time suggested that 3500 customers had paid deposits – although the same rumours do not explain what Alfa Romeo intended to do about the fact that they were only ever planning to build 1000 cars! And if supply was causing a few small problems, demand was about to cause one large one.

Recession bit across Europe like the plague, leaving only enthusiasts in the wake of fleeing investors. The PR value to Alfa Romeo of placing a model in the supercar elite, where list price was market-generated, had just been wiped out. For Zagato, the recession also meant the loss of





lucrative Japanese design contracts which left all its eggs in the SZ basket. There was no option but to continue and hope that enough enthusiastic buyers remained.

The paradox was that having concentrated on the production of this one model, Zagato was able to iron out the original quality problems and soon reached an efficient rhythm. In 1990, 275 cars were built and the following year 748. The final example of the 1036 SZs was built in November 1991.

In those darkened days it took some time to sell the run of SZs and, just to make sure, Alfa Romeo ran a one-make series for the cars, which peaked at a Grand Prix support race in Monaco in 1993. Luckily for them, the underpinnings of the car needed little modification to accommodate the stresses of competition.

The basic floorpan was indeed that of a shortened V6 75; but a development of the racing IMSA version of the car, which had been built in 1988. Structurally strengthened, especially around the engine bay and with coil-over dampers replacing the torsion bars of the saloon car, the SZ was a much more serious proposition. The transaxle gearbox was also made to work properly for the first time. Engines were gently uprated from the 75 specification to give 210bhp at 6200rpm (more realistically 180-190), and work on weight

distribution gave a 56% front and 44% rear split.

**BELOW: Paul Millbank has owned this standard car for two years. Many consider the SZ to be the ultimate rear-wheel drive Alfa Romeo**

Technically, it was as good as one could get bearing in mind the constraints of using 'production car' parts, but was it good enough? Not



“At this point we would be talking about the red car, the blue car and the yellow car, but of course the other thing about SZs is that they were all red”

## Alfa Romeo SZ



everyone agrees, it seems, which is why *Auto Italia* collected three SZs together for this test. One standard, two distinctly modified.

At this point Giordanelli would be talking about the red car, the blue car and the yellow car, but of course the other thing about SZs is that they were all red and all with a tan leather interior. The exception that proved this rule was a unique black with black example made for the personal use of Andrea Zagato, which is no help whatsoever today.

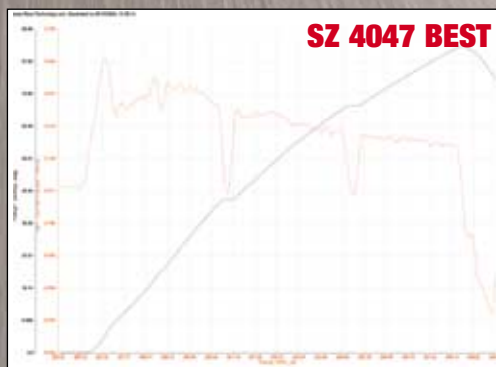
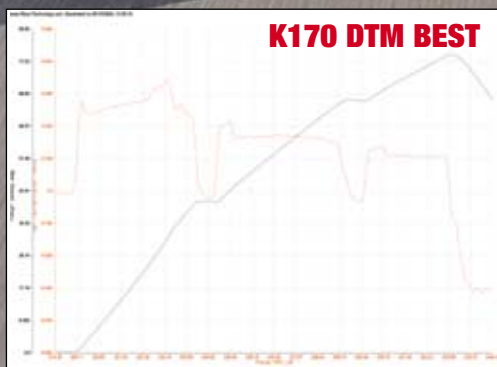
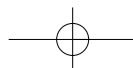
The standard car (K170 DTM) was brought along by Paul Millbank who has owned this late example for two years. A confirmed Alfa man, Paul sees the SZ as probably most of us do – the ultimate rear-wheel drive Alfa, and it is used frequently but sparingly.

David Hobbs' love affair with his SZ (SZ 4047) has lasted eight years so far and shows no sign of ending. It is now his only car and for a man who has had experience of a wide variety of Italian exotica over the years, that is some accolade. This very early example was number five in the run but it has not stopped him from modifying the car to suit his own taste, the most significant part of which was to uprate the engine to 3.5 litres, brought on by a rare engine failure. Adie Hawkins Motorsport carried out the conversion, which provided a useful increase in horsepower. However, it was the fitting of separate throttle bodies that latterly released all of the engine's potential (circa 300bhp), as well as giving it that 'Touring Car' look under the bonnet.

The last of the trio (H881 JLE) belongs to a customer of that inveterate modifier of all things Alfa, Jano at ↪

**BELOW RIGHT: This car was fitted with a Rotrex supercharger by Autodelta. Output from the otherwise standard power unit is a useful 250bhp**







Autodelta. Unsurprising then that this car has been supercharged with a very neatly installed Rotrex blower, belt-driven from the crank pulley with an aluminium charge-cooler to aid precipitation. Other than a remap of the injection system, the engine is standard but the supercharger boost adds up to a useful (and genuine) 250bhp.

Unwilling to let the hack loose on his own subjective recognizance, the Editor had also invited Drivedata along to measure performance figures for the three cars and while John Chambers from Drivedata hooked up his GPS kit, we compared notes.

The two areas that all agreed were disappointing on the SZ were the car's excessive weight and its brakes. 1260kg is quite heavy considering a four-door 75 saloon weighed less. The Modar bodywork was cited as the reason for this as even the bonnet weighs a hefty 35kg. The plastic skin also received criticism for a lack of consistency as the bonnet from one car will not necessarily fit another, and the panel gaps are not even uniformly poor between cars. All accepted this as part and parcel of living with a low-volume exotic. As for the brakes, it was the long pedal rather than any ultimate lack of efficiency that disappointed, although Adie Hawkins had carried out a twin master cylinder conversion on David Hobbs' car that all but alleviated the problem.

Universal praise was heaped on the controversial styling and also the aerodynamics. For such an apparently brick-like shape, the SZ body actually achieved an amazing 0.30Cd and as Paul Millbank said – they get better the faster you go.

Time to find out. Each car completed a number of runs from a standing start against the GPS clock and the best is shown here. First to go was the standard car. Chirrup of wheelspin and an understated launch gave a best 0-60 time of 8.11 seconds. The claimed time for a standard car in period was 7.5 seconds but no doubt more brutally obtained and not by the owner. The Hobbs car was next and whatever the outcome, it certainly sounded the best, with its CSC exhaust howling all the way. Sadly a slipping clutch slowed the change from first to second but even so the 0-60 time had come down to 6.93 seconds. Last but not least was Jano. The supercharger seemed to make very little fuss but still recorded the best 0-60 time of the day at 6.65 seconds.

Circulating the test track, I was surprised at how much I enjoyed the supercharged car. That extra power allowed the sophisticated chassis to really come alive much more than the standard car and to give that true rear-wheel drive feeling. I also appreciated the fact that its modifications were subtle and reversible. Having assumed that the 3.5-litre car would be the best, this was something of a revelation, although the brake conversion on the 3.5-litre would have to be on my shopping list.

And here we are, debating these variously modified Alfas when we should be championing the standard SZ as a bespoke, limited edition that should be preserved for future generations. Its looks are timeless and its handling impeccable but, unfortunately, the performance of a standard SZ now shows its age. Yet the question of whether to modify remains a difficult one. As a collectors' car, it will certainly detract from the car's value, but it will make it more fun to drive in your custodianship. I suppose it depends on whether you are just an investor or a real enthusiast. **ai**

## Alfa Romeo SZ

### THE DRIVEDATA DL1 DATALOGGER

Drivedata produces video and data-logging equipment for racing, driver training, general automotive and leisure applications. Efficient and effective, the DL1 Data Logger we used for the SZ test is a state-of-the-art unit designed primarily for motorsport use.



The DL1 uses a 5Hz GPS receiver which ensures a high degree of speed and accuracy in all its measurement functions – component speeds; temperatures and pressures; longitudinal and lateral g-forces; circuit mapping and lap/sector times. The neat black box (110x75x30mm) records its data on a flash card, and a Windows data analysis package is included in the price of £500+VAT.

For serious drivers the data can be fed back to a laptop in the pit lane in real time (F1 telemetry-style) or superimposed on the pictures from an onboard video system, also supplied by Drivedata.

● For more details contact Drivedata (UK) Ltd; tel 01344 761315, e-mail [info@drivedata.com](mailto:info@drivedata.com), or see [www.drivedata.com](http://www.drivedata.com).



**ABOVE: Cars and drivers await their turn for the timed acceleration runs monitored by John Chambers from Drivedata. The dash-mounted GPS kit is quick and easy to install**