

Test by Roberto Giordanelli
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IN THE BLUE CORNER
AN ALFA 147 GTA
IN THE RED CORNER
ANOTHER ALFA 147 GTA

147 GTA AM 3.7 by Autodelta

Sparring Partners

If you are a young, upwardly mobile car junkie then Alfa Romeo has probably created the ultimate pocket-rocket for you – the 147 GTA. If it could go straight upwards, it would be orbiting in space in less than one hour. Totally bonkers, it is a hatchback armed with the motor from a GT car. Driving through the front wheels – just like your driving-school car – you are confident that despite its supercar performance, it won't bite you. Of all the hot-hatches, the 147 GTA is the king. The engineering half of me says that it can't possibly work, while the test driver half knows that it does. You would think that 250bhp is enough, but no. Along comes independent London-based Alfa Romeo specialists Autodelta to seriously up the horsepower stakes to 328bhp, as well as uprating the brakes, suspension and looks. Improvement is like infinity, it can never end. Not an easy task as improvement only comes by abandoning failures.

Three hundred and twenty-eight brake horsepower through the front wheels. How on earth did we ever come to these astronomical figures? I blame the Germans. The 147 GTA's roots can be traced back to Alfa's first fwd car, the 1971 Alfasud. Designed by Rudolf Hruska – okay so he was Austrian – the Alfasud took the motoring world by storm. Ah, I remember it well. It also created a yardstick for build quality by being at the bottom of the list. The Germans are very clever but their obstinacy at Porsche has infected the Italians at Alfa Romeo. The Porsche 911 is all wrong yet the Germans refuse to move the big heavy engine that hangs off the rear bumper. Perseverance and the invention of electronics finally won the day. Meanwhile Alfa Romeo moved mountains to eliminate torque-steer and send massive power to the front wheels. The original Alfasud just about behaved itself with its 63bhp. When along came the Alfa 33 (an Alfasud with brakes), things got silly. An Alfa 33 with 100-odd bhp at the traffic lights Grand Prix might go forwards or might leap sideways, you just never knew. Like Porsche, Alfa's obstinacy and cleverness sorted the problem, in this case delivering an efficacious 250bhp to the front wheels. ↪

Autodelta 147 GTA AM

If you think Autodelta is pushing its luck at 328bhp then just watch this space: a 400/450bhp supercharged 3.7 147 GTA AM is on the Autodelta launchpad. Madness, but then who am I to criticise the fitting of excessive power into little Alfas when there is a 500bhp

Alfa Romeo in my garage that was originally designed for 100bhp? But the fascination of overpowered cars is the reason why you have got this far into this story. Take the new sport of 'drifting'. Manufacturers in their ivory towers go to great lengths to design cars which go straight, so down here on the front line we want exactly the opposite.

Enter not one, but two rocket-ship Autodelta 147 GTA AM 3.7s – one red, one blue. I could have conned you here by saying that there is only one car. Explanation – sound waves are slow at 700mph. Light travels a bit quicker. The speed of light is 670 million mph. Another Austrian, the physicist Christian Doppler (1803-53), enters the fray. Just as you hear a 'Doppler effect' when a racing car screams past you, a similar thing happens with light. An object travelling quickly towards you – and I mean quickly – looks blue, and as it goes away from you, that same object will look red. It's called blue-shift and red-shift, and is a useful tool if you are an astrophysicist. As our snapper's photo-kit lacked the appropriate shutter speeds, we cheated by having two cars. The mods to the specially commissioned blue and red cars are similar but with subtle differences.



ABOVE: Autodelta's restyling blends perfectly with the factory design
BELOW: Power from the 3.7-litre V6 is a very useful 324/328bhp

IN THE BLUE CORNER

The blue car is that of Brett Edbrook, who bought it new and then handed it to Autodelta to do the business. He test-drove the red car while he was on Autodelta's waiting list, a move that clinched the deal. Brett requested more top-end power and very challenging handling upgrades. He not only wanted a better ride but more grip than the standard car could deliver. Brett has owned several Alfas in the past and has always modified them. He is very happy with the Autodelta mods: "Other than the cost, there are no negatives".



Power upgrade apart, Brett is even more impressed by the handling improvements. He now has "BMW M3+ performance, without having to own a BMW". An abandoned failure was when Brett tried some 35 profile tyres. The car tramlined and the ride was ruined. He finds the Michelin Pilot Sport 2 (225/40/18) to be the best compromise. Although no trackday junkie, this blue car recently returned from a blast around Zandvoort Circuit. Outwardly, both cars carry the same subtle Autodelta bodykits. Front and rear bumpers are tastefully aesthetic upgrades, as well as being both stronger and lighter than standard, while 70mm tail-pipes and a wider lower stance complete the picture.

IN THE RED CORNER

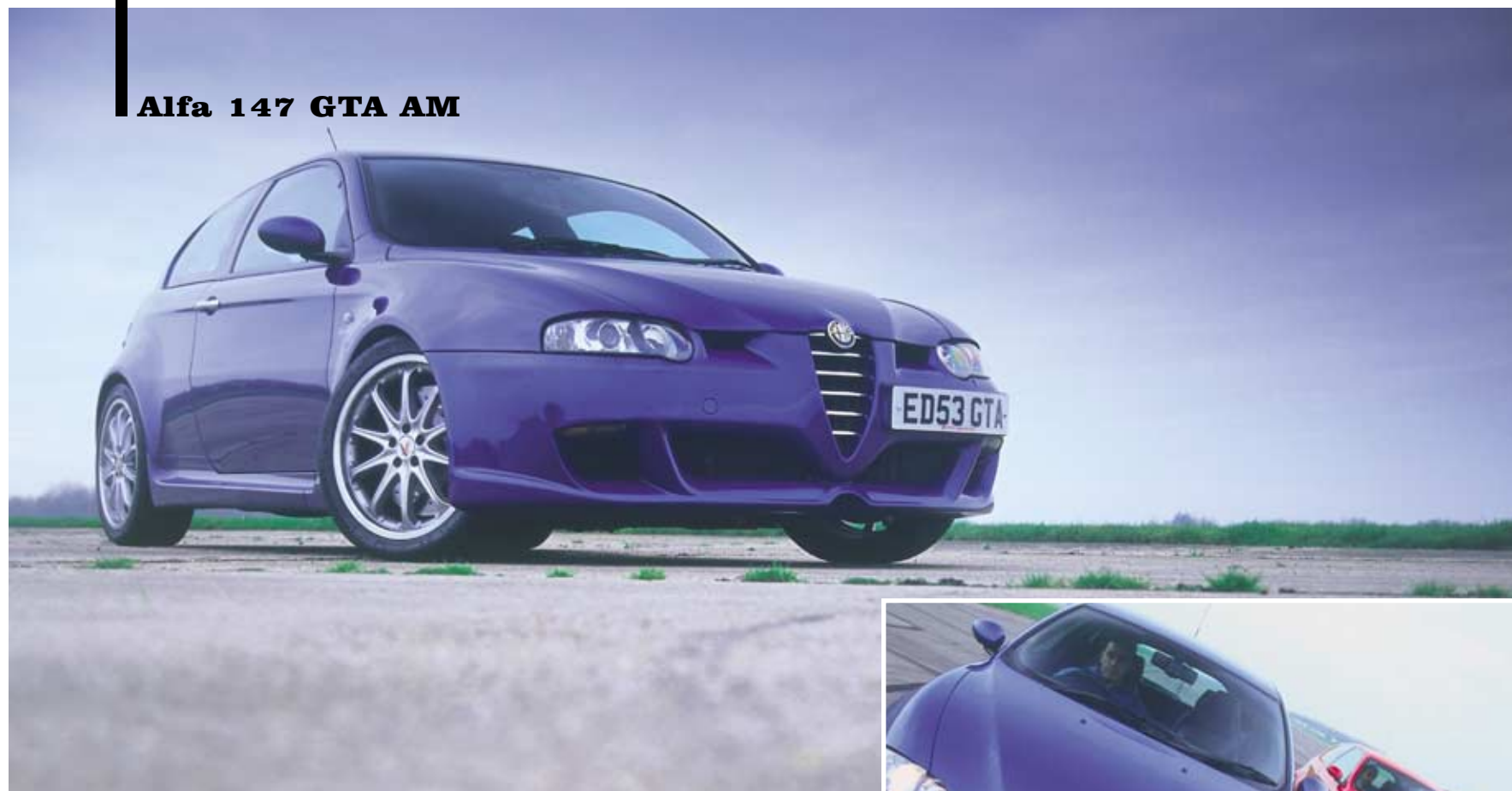
The red car is that of Sarin Swami who runs a few cars in the UK as well as some in his home country of Malaysia. He mostly uses a Smart city-car for London traffic and a Lotus Elise for trackdays at the new Sepang Grand Prix circuit. His red car is one of the first from the Autodelta production line and is the one test-driven by Jeremy Clarkson in his Sunday Times feature. It is also the car that the Stig drove on the test-track on the BBC Top Gear programme. Front drive it may be, but just look at the list of tremendous cars that it beat: Subaru Impreza STI, Aston Martin DB7 GT, Audi S4, Porsche 911 turbo, Vauxhall VX 220 turbo, Honda NSX Type R, BMW M3, Nissan 350Z, Mazda RX8, Ford Focus RS, Lotus Esprit V8, Audi TT V6, MG ZT, Noble, Mercedes SL 55 AMG, Volkswagen Golf R32 and others... ↩

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

	Autodelta 147 GTA AM 3.7	Alfa Romeo 147 GTA 3.2
Engine:	3750cc V6 transverse	3197cc V6 transverse
Bore x stroke:	101mm x 78mm	93mm x 78mm
Compression ratio:	10.5:1	10.5:1
Ignition and fuel:	Bosch Motronic ME7.3.1 Re-mapped and fitted with Ferrari throttle body	Bosch Motronic ME7.3.1
Power:	328bhp @ 7300rpm (blue car) 324bhp @ 6800rpm (red car)	250bhp @ 6200rpm
Torque:	260lb ft @ 4700rpm (blue car) 270lb ft @ 4700rpm (red car)	221lb ft @ 4800rpm
Transmission:	6-speed manual, front-wheel drive, LSD 30% progressive lock-up (red car) 25% progressive lock-up (blue car)	6-speed manual, front-wheel drive. No LSD
Brakes (front):	355mm vented discs 6-pot calipers	305mm vented discs 4-pot calipers
Wheels:	7.5 x 18 (blue car) 8 x 18 (red car)	7.5 x 17
Tyres:	225/40/18	225/45/17
Kerb weight:	1360kg	1360kg
0-60mph:	5.0sec (est)	6.1sec
Top speed:	175mph (est)	152mph
Cost:	£39,234	£23,520



Alfa 147 GTA AM



making it the fastest front-drive car ever tested, so you don't have to take my word for it – Autodelta's cars work.

The red car is set up slightly stiffer than the blue and it also has the differential set-up a tad tighter on the lsd. Rubberware is courtesy of Bridgestone Potenza SO3s, which are on trial. While the handling package is racier, the power delivery is aimed more at improving torque than top-end power. Outwardly, there are Autodelta front and rear bumpers as per the blue car but the exhaust tail-pipes are 10mm bigger, at 80mm. The wheels are also half an inch wider at 8 x 18. The Autodelta 147 GTA AMs made all other cars at the test-track look thin and spindly.

THE MATCH

Bruntingthorpe mid-winter is like the Arctic Tundra but without the warmness. Safe in the knowledge that full bazooka was possible on these treeless plains, we went for a blast. I started off with the blue car, driving really slowly, trying to fault-find the handling and power delivery, but failed. The ride is fabulous, especially when you consider the suspension loss that comes with 40-profile tyres. Steering response is superquick. Handling is neutral and noise levels, while being slightly up, are not intrusive. Power delivery is smooth with a noticeable extra rush coming in at around 4500rpm. Traction is improved with a 25% progressive lock on the uprated differential. Traction control is retained and you have to pedal quite hard before it cuts in – an indication of a good set-up. Switching off the traction control presents no problems other than corner-exit wheelspin with full power.

Moving to the red car, it feels tighter. It may not sound much but that extra lock-up in the diff (30% instead of 25%) is starting to tug at the steering. Nothing like an Alfa 33 but it is just peeking its head over the torque-steer barrier. The ride is harder too, which improves dry weather cornering. Power delivery is also different – slightly more bottom end with none of that extra push at 4500rpm that the blue car has, just strong ever-stronger linear pull right through the rev range.

Brakes on both cars are also uprated with six-pot calipers



ABOVE: Autodelta's competent 147 GTA AMs certainly go as well as they look and add that extra exclusivity to owning a top-end Alfa Romeo

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and 355mm vented discs up front. At nearly twice the weight of an Alfasud, the brakes take a hammering. With the upgrade they are up to the job, although the heat haze when parked is the tell-tale sign of how much work they have to do. There is no point fitting big brakes on the rear as, under hard braking, the configuration of these cars means that the rear end is hardly touching the ground. Unless you want to flick sideways into the path of an oncoming 40-tonne truck, rear lock-up is to be avoided.

Make no mistake, these are seriously fast cars. Five seconds to 60mph, 100mph in about 12 seconds and 175mph top whack calls for responsible driving. Negatives? Like one of the owners said, apart from the cost, there are none. Both our hyper-hatch drivers commented on how these cars get noticed, not so much by the police but by onlookers who say that they never realised that Alfa Romeo made such a cool car. Full credit to independent specialist Autodelta for developing the 147 GTA AM, and crowning the undisputed king of hot-hatches as the King of Kings.

THE WINNER

And the winner is... the red car. It looks the business and would have a slightly quicker lap time on a trackday. But it's only the winner if you are under 30. For oldies, the winner is the more understated blue car. Its ride is ever-so slightly easier on those crumbly bones and its extra top-end oomph will make you feel young again. 