

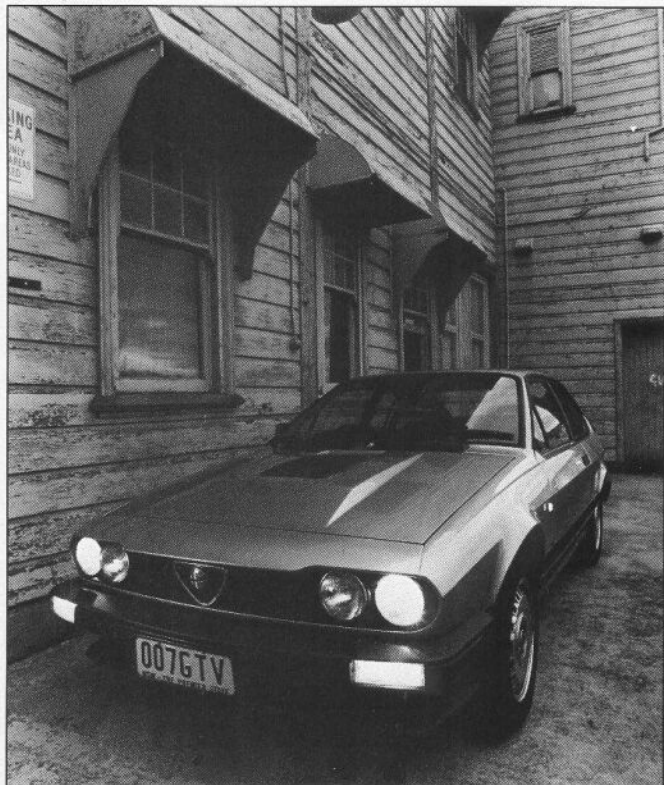
THE WOMAN in the telephone box seemed just a little upset, and not without good reason. A well turned out woman, she had casually left her Alfa Romeo GTV6 in the market square of a German town while she made her call. Enter, car-less, a harried James Bond eager to save the world. Double oh seven being a proper Brit and all that, he did the right thing and tried to ask her permission to take the car, without success. When the seconds are ticking away to a nuclear holocaust and only you can do anything about it, drastic action is called for and Bond unflinchingly did his duty, jumping into the GTV6, irate woman in background, and roaring off on his mission of mercy that, if successful, would take him to new heights of stardom as the cat's pyjamas of the British Secret Service.

The flagship Alfa sports car is a pretty stylish way to arrive when saving the world, or to arrive at the shops when getting the groceries come to that. On either of these missions, however, one should not take too seriously the saga of the GTV6 as unfolded in *Octopussy*, latest adventure epic starring Roger Moore as a somewhat up-tempo version of the character we once knew as Ian Fleming's. For one thing, the GTV6 is certainly not a car to jump straight into and roar off at a high rate of knots. Fleming's Bond, a Bentley lover, would surely have taken time to warm properly the car's engine and gearbox before such a drive. In *Octopussy*, Roger Moore does not do this, but then that is perhaps to be expected of a man who has ditched his Rolex for a Japanese watch and probably cares not these days if his martinis come shaken with three maraschino cherries and a multicoloured straw.

There are other things to contemplate before driving off in the GTV6, things to savour and to condemn and things that simply demand your attention, for this Alfa even with great familiarity is not a car to be taken for granted. On first acquaintance you will spend at least five minutes adjusting the driving position, and then it will not be ideal, varying from acceptable to bloody awful depending on how far your frame diverges from the short leg/long arm ideal. Reaching the best driving position — and for those on the tall side this is a semi-reclined, knees-up attitude — requires careful balancing of the seat and steering wheel adjustments: set up the seat for easy reach of the gear lever and the pedals will be too close; go for a comfortable pedal position and the steering wheel is out of reach, while wherever you sit

A

GTV6 does James Bond nicely when it comes to saving the world in the film *Octopussy*. Bob Murray finds out how Alfa's flagship fares on less pressing engagements . . .



Photography: PETER BATEMAN

you will find the roof brushing your hair, the top of the windscreen unnervefully close to your forehead, first and third gears a real stretch away, poor rear visibility and pedals which require an unnaturally high left leg to operate the clutch and which cause an ankle ache in all those without double-jointed right feet. Bond, I'm sure, would have found saving the world a lot easier than having to cope with all this, specially when, true to Alfa's stubborn form, the gear lever works with the smoothness of a rooted box in a '63 Beetle.

Before all this, however, is the GTV6's body. Double oh seven did

himself a disservice by jumping straight in for the car's classic Giugiaro styling in worth a few minutes' close examination of anyone's time. There are many things to admire: the rakish, beautifully proportioned profile with the full length side windows and slim pillars that do so much to make the cabin bright and airy; the smart alloy wheels; the superb paintwork (the test car's metallic silver finish made the orange-peeled BMW 323i of elsewhere in this issue seem very second rate, despite the odd bit of grit under the Alfa's skin); the fine fit, finish and sound of panels, hinges and door catches and

locks. Even the V6's distinguishing mark, its humped bonnet with black plastic panel, is nowhere near as objectionable as it sounds.

There are delights for the eye at either end of the car. At the front there is the lovely alloy V6, the fuel injection gear and large air cleaner nestling neatly between the 60 deg banks with their belt-driven single overhead camshafts. Elsewhere there's all kinds of technical finery such as sodium exhaust valves and electronic wizardry to control ignition timing and fuel delivery. It looks a useful engine and indeed the specifications suggest plenty of getaway performance for overworked spies: 117 kW at 5600 rpm and 212 Nm at 4000 rpm are the claimed figures, and both power and torque are high for a non-turbo'd engine of just 2.5 litres.

Look closely at the front end and you'll see the wishbone and torsion bar suspension, the anti-roll bar, the steering rack that manages to transmit so much feel to the three-spoke leather rimmed wheel up there in the cabin, and, underneath everything, the driveshaft that takes the power back to the rear-mounted five-speed gearbox, in unit with the limited slip differential.

The de Dion rear axle (with Watt linkage and another anti-roll bar, and springing courtesy of coils) is as much a part of the Alfaetta Alfas as that rear-mounted gearbox, if a little less controversial, and makes up a whole that is eminently complementary with Alfa Romeo's image of advanced engineering. Other features help in this direction, too: you don't have to inspect the brakes to know that they are four big servo-assisted discs (though it is nice to push them hard, to know again that an Alfa is probably the best stopper this side of a Porsche), to try the gear ratios to know they will be close to perfect, or to measure the ground clearance to know it is ample not only for Italian motorways but also Australian washaways. Knowledge that the GTV6 comes with a 75 litre fuel tank (the 2.0 litre GTV carries 54 litres) is reassuring, too, but these things are all deep within the Alfa's bowels: visual delight at the rear of the car comes in opening the hatchback rear door and finding luggage space that puts the boots of some sedans to shame, even if the rear seats are of the non-fold down variety, and some space is lost over the 2.0 litre GTV because of the V6's bigger fuel tank.

Our Jimmy had neither passengers nor luggage, nor, one suspects, the three seconds the GTV driver should delay engaging gear after pressing the clutch pedal to the floor. With the clutch so far from the engine (in the GTV it's with the gearbox and diff, unlike the

front-mounted clutch in the rear-gearboxed Porsche 924/944) it takes those three seconds for the gearbox to become fully disengaged, allowing cog swapping without graunching. I suspect the graunch in *Octopussy* was edited out; since 007 went on, via some pretty snick driving that included a lovely oversteer slide followed by a rather less lovely bouncing off steel containers, to save the world with only a couple of seconds remaining, we should on this occasion forgive his lack of GTV etiquette.

The GTV6 doesn't sound a hundredth as nice in the film as it does in real life, and in real life it sounds fabulous — probably the nicest sounding bit of hot blooded Italian engineering outside of Maranello or Sant'Agata. The V6's noise is easily one of the car's strongest character traits, in a car that already has more personality in one column stalk than some Japanese coupes have in their entire being. The engine sounds a little clattery at idle, takes on a muted drone at low revs and then develops a musical bark at medium to high revs that leaves you in no doubt as to its condition: it is a picture of health.

The engine's responsiveness is formidable. Most of the adjectives used to describe the sweetest-natured Italian exotic engines apply, and you know it from the first time you tickle the accelerator and watch the tachometer needle dart for the red line. On the road, this instant and unfussed response makes the V6 one of the most pleasurable engines to drive behind, its lack of any sort of cammy or turbo-effect peakiness enhancing progress around town, often the place where 117 kW engines are either too 'off cam' to cope or too temperamental to be smooth. The GTV6 has no such problems, for there is torque for the asking at very low revs and a mid-range that, with the help of shortish gearing, offers a refined and satisfying accelerative punch — ideal overtaking material. The low-down torque is also ideal for minimising the number of gear changes, good news around town, especially, where coping with the strongly sprung lever is sometimes a dreadful pain. Once in gear, however, the drivetrain behaves well, a slight snatch on the overrun in the higher gears being the only undesirable.

Being an Alfa engine, of course, the power band is as wide as the tach says it is, and the V6 is willing and strong all the way to the 5700 rpm warning sector, to the 6300 red line and to six-five where an ignition cutout halts further exploration. What an engine this is! In its noise, potency and response — and, yes, its adorable personality — it feels to be straight out the classic

exotic engine mould. And yet at the same time it behaves in such contemporary fashion, giving away little or nothing in even temperament, fuel efficiency and reliability to the most mundane Japanese engine. In the time I had the GTV6, it started first turn of the key every time, performed during a very mixed bag of driving without the slightest tantrum or hiccup, and recorded fuel consumption that varied between a performance-testing worst of 7.1 km/l (20 mpg) and a press-on country cruising best of 9.4 km/l (26.5 mpg). And this from an engine that thinks little of maintaining a cruising speed between 160-200 km/h!

It is cruising at speeds like this, however, that the engine noise, thrown into prominence by a lack of both wind and tyre noise, can become tiresome. Fifth is fairly tall for an Alfa at 35.4 km/h per 1000 rpm but it's still short for a car of this power (the BMW 323i has 41 km/h per 1000 rpm available, for instance) with that consequent lack of quiet for very fast motoring but a decided advantage to performance. The ratios are very much performance oriented, and although not quite as natural as some Alfa gearboxes — the first three ratios can sometimes feel annoyingly short — they do manage to transmit the power with great effect, allowing the rear end to display its considerable traction.

That rear grip, via Pirelli P6s on the test car, is uncommonly good: even sudden applications of power in the low gears generally fail to unstick the GTV6's rear, on wet roads as well as dry, but by the same token full bore getaways can be marked by a deal of axle tramp and thumping, such is the rear tyres' reluctance to spin.

It's been said before — as, indeed, have all the GTV's weaknesses — but the front suspension falls quite a way short of the rear-end competence. In some conditions, in fact, the front end can feel quite incompetent: jittering and moving off line on poor surfaces, turning into corners reluctantly and then running wide in understeer at surprisingly modest speeds, with the steering loading up and requiring strong hands to hold stable. Because of this last feature you would normally say it is a car to drive from the shoulders, but because of the driving position and the wheel's angle, which invariably puts the top of its rim a good stretch away, the steering effort must come from the wrists and lower arms, tiring the driver excessively.

For some of the time on less demanding roads you can rid your mind of these things, saving all your concentration for smooth gear changes and revelling in the engine's appeal, the quiet and supple ride (coupled with



GTV6's lines are as pleasing as ever (left), full length side windows make cabin bright and aid driver's visibility; rear-flat rear window doesn't allow good view, however. Standard convenience items abound; headlight sprays are effective



Cabin (top) looks inviting and seats are fine, but driving position, as always feels far from natural for most drivers. Rear seats don't fold and lip is high (above) but boot space is genuine, makes most other coupes appear poorly served

PRICES AND OPTIONS

Make	Alfa Romeo
Model	GTV6
Base Price	\$28 400
Metallic paint	\$506
Sunroof	\$672
Price as tested	\$29 578

ENGINE

Cylinders	petrol	6
Valves	SOHC	
Aspiration	Fuel injection	
Comp ratio (to one)	9.0	
Bore/stroke (mm)	88 x 68.3	
Capacity (cm ³)	2492	
Max power (kW/rpm)	117/5600	
Max torque (Nm/rpm)	212/4000	

TRANSMISSION

5sp man	
Ratios km/h per 1000rpm	
First	3.500 7.9
Second	1.966 14.1
Third	1.345 20.5
Fourth	1.026 26.9
Fifth	0.78 35.4
Final Drive	4.1

CHASSIS

Drive	unitary	rear
Front suspension	wishbones, torsion bars,	ant-roll bar
Rear suspension	de Dion axle,	Watt linkage, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Brakes	servoed discs	
Steering	rack and pinion	
Turning circle (m)	10.1	
Turns lock to lock	3.5	
Kerb mass (kg)	1210	
Fuel capacity (l)	75	
Tyres	195/60 R15 Pirelli P6	

BODY

two-door coupe

Exterior (mm)	
Wheelbase	2400
Front track	1373
Rear track	1352
Length	4260
Width	1664
Height	1330

PERFORMANCE

Top speeds (km/h/rpm)	
First	50/6300
Second	89/6300
Third	129/6300
Fourth	169/6300
Fifth	208/5900

Standing start (secs)	
0-50km/h	3.0
0-70	5.2
0-90	7.6
0-100	9.3
0-110	11.2
0-120	13.2
0-130	15.3
0-180	25.6
400m	16.4

In the gears		2	3	4	5
30-60	3.2	3.9	6.1	9.2	
40-70	3.1	4.3	6.2	9.1	
50-80	3.2	4.6	6.4	8.8	
60-90	3.4	5.4	6.4	8.9	
70-100		5.6	6.7	9.2	
80-110		5.8	7.1	9.6	
90-120		5.9	7.5	10.4	
100-130		6.1	8.6	11.7	

FUEL CONSUMPTION

km/l (mpg)	
Best	9.4 (26.5)
Worst	7.1 (20.0)
Overall	8.7 (24.5)

superb high-speed damping control), the light and communicative steering, strong (if a little over-servoed feeling) brakes and smart cabin with firmly bolstered and well trimmed seats. These days there's even a dashboard that puts the major dials in front of the driver (as well as an unacceptable amount of reflections) and sees the cabin full of most of the convenience doodahs one can expect of a \$28,000 car. Rear passengers with legs — if you can get them in; the GTV has always looked to have more interior room than it actually possesses — will like the heavily bolstered, kidney gripping seats and the winddown side windows with their unrestricted view out. With all these things in mind and the music of the engine in your ears it is possible to fall in love with the GTV6. And you go and find the good roads.

You will be driving alone and the roads will be familiar. It won't matter if it's raining. Even though you know the road you will be reading the bitumen a good kilometre ahead, following the line of telegraph poles over the treetops, reminding yourself of the access roads and the junctions and the blind, tightening corners that you know could hide a car coming toward you. You will drive smoothly and positively, and you

won't have a very comfortable driving position because you will have moved the seat forward to allow your arms more leverage on the steering wheel.

You will know which gears you want long before you want them and on the downshifts you merely dab at the top end of the clutch's long travel before carefully matching revs and slotting the lever home, which, if you did it correctly, the lever will do with consummate ease, even into second. You will use the brakes hard and deep into a corner, and you will use all the engine has to give — heel and toeing at 6000 rpm sometimes. You will take more steering wheel than you consider should be necessary, and you will start to turn in early, allowing the car to drift wide as you feed in the power past the apex, using as much of the rear grip as the front end will allow. Then it's six-three in second, third, fourth . . . yes, fifth, too, for here is a car which red lines in all its gears. If you got the twisty bits right the engine music will be the icing on the cake, and you will permit yourself a quiet smile — if you don't you're not human.

There is enormous satisfaction to be had in driving the GTV6 fast and well, but it's a satisfaction borne not of the car's inherent ability but of your

mastering of the car, of your overcoming of the GTV6's weaknesses and inconsistencies, and your ability to draw on the car's inner potential that far too often seems inaccessible. Driving the GTV6 thus is greatly self satisfying: you really do feel as though you've achieved something.

Alas for most of the time, when you're feeling lazy or preoccupied, it is far too easy to feel this flagship Alfa Romeo is a car to fight, and the more you fight it the more it responds badly. Progress becomes jerky and ragged. It is not, as I said earlier, a car to be taken for granted: every gear change, especially the gear changes, and all other driver inputs require careful and considered action, and I'm not sure this is a recipe for a truly capable and relaxing grand touring sports car of the mid-1980s.

It is a shame. I would, I think, happily spend the rest of my motoring behind Alfa's 2.5 litre V6 engine, but I could not contemplate a future in a car that in other respects was so darned frustrating and tiring. The replacement GTV (see following story) will have to be better, but Alfa being Alfa there are no guarantees. In the meantime, the Bonds of this world — James, and our own, equally talented Colin — have their work cut out.