

4C The Future

Alfa Romeo is in need of a revival and the 4C is leading the way.

BY DEREK WATTS

It takes only seconds to change your life. You can push the boundaries of classic style with a modern edge. Your style can become modern, casual and you can become the consummate gentleman.

All in the time it takes to spray on a fragrance of iced mango, Spanish sage, tonka bean and black patchouli.

That's what the advert promises in the duty free magazine on the 10 hour flight from OR Tambo in Johannesburg to Singapore. After a brain numbing lack of sleep I am prepared to believe it. In fact, I'm even starting to believe in the concept of duty free prices! Surely one of mankind's biggest myths.

But here is a true story – my life did change in 4.5 seconds. Not with a whiff of fragrance, but with a glorious gaggle of exhaust notes as I was whiplashed to the proverbial 'ton' while ensconced in a tiny carbon-fiber tub.

In those few seconds I became an anemic and radically lengthened version of Lewis Hamilton. I instantly shed three decades as the dynamite 1.7 turbo seemed to anticipate the whims and wishes of my right foot.

Now supercar owners are a touchy lot and it only takes three letters to get them into a tailspin. GT-R. The Nissan is faster than the latest California T and just shades the Ferrari F12 Berlinetta... at about a quarter of the price.

And now they have a new low cost rival... possibly not in terms of performance figures but certainly in relation to ABS. Otherwise known as Adrenalin Boost per Second.

Welcome to the blurry world of the Alfa Romeo 4C.

At the very core of this brave new world is the much vaunted tub which really embodies the racing ethic of the first model to light the fires of the Alfisti in decades.

It weighs less than Floyd Mayweather, is just as tough and probably took his bank balance to develop.

Everything, including the seats, is bolted to that painstakingly crafted 65 kilograms of carbon fiber. Apparently you could take off the panels and drive the tub!

In fact the whole beautiful bang shoot weighs in at a mere 925 kilograms. And Alfa claim that the 4C has a power-to-weight ratio of 10 pounds per horse power. Even if you excuse the mixed measurement systems, it doesn't mean a lot to me – except that I no doubt upset the equation with my personal displacement.

Propelling this featherweight frame (I'm referring to the car) is the over zealous all-aluminum, direct-injection four-cylinder 1750cc turbo engine which had also shed 22 kilograms. Apologies if this review is starting to sound like a catalogue of Weight Watchers success stories.

And just to complete the obsession, the heavy boot lid is propped up with a thin aluminum rod. A blast from yesteryear.

From the days when engines were smelly, oil leaking affairs, this terrific turbo is part of the passenger list, nestled just behind you with its own sun roof and even open to the odd shower through the open grille.

I read recently that the average height of an NBA star is around 6'7" or two meters in metric terms. Whichever way you measure it, the first mass-produced Alfa to enter the United States market is not going to score points with their basketball players.

Although I'm a tad shorter than the NBA average, I had to perform a limbo dance to get behind the wheel (that dates me for a start) and I defy anybody, especially Britney Spears, to clamber aboard with any degree of elegance.

This is not a complaint by the way. I don't expect supercars to be tailored for my lanky limbs any more than they are tailored for my bank balance! And although I have been talking about the 4C as a supercar, it probably lives on the edge of that elitist description, coming in at around \$100,000.

Motoring writers can sometimes wax lyrical about car interiors and a Mercedes S Class Coupe can actually test your descriptive talents. But the 4C is as basic as the name. I never managed to find a nook for my cellphone and got excited about



what looked like a glove compartment but turned out to be the passenger air bag cover. My big find was a string net underneath the dash for my understocked wallet.

Alfa make no apologies for the stark cabin. Product planner Michael Berube echoes the famous words of controversial South African singer, Steve Hofmeyr. "It is what it is," he says. "We have kept ornamentation down for the power-to-weight ratio. You just don't get that in this price range."

And you don't need Newton's second law of motion to know that the applied force of that energetic turbo and minimal mass is going to produce some butt-kicking acceleration.

But, over undulating surfaces (that is most roads in Africa) the lightness of being and the stiff suspension can leave you wondering who is in charge.

The gearbox can be irrational in auto and clunky using paddle shift and this car does not do poodling to the shops for a pint of milk. It is born to be wild and snarl at onlookers with an array of roars, whistles and crackles.

And you can rest assured that they are gasping in awe of the stupendous styling of this pocket rocket.

The man firmly in charge of Alfa, in fact the whole Fiat S.p.A group, is the man with the magical motoring touch, Italian-Canadian Sergio Marchionne.

He's got some iconic brands in that stable, like Ferrari and Maserati, along with Chrysler, Dodge and Jeep.

Marchionne gained loads of executive cred for turning around the Fiat group in less than two years at the helm and then marched on to form a strategic alliance with Chrysler which pulled the Americans out of a deep financial crisis.

But the Alfa part of the family have been the renegades – failing to produce a profit during his decorous decade and global sales falling to levels not seen since the sixties.

Marchionne has hatched many a plan for Alfa and is certainly not throwing in the

green, white and red towel. The idea now is for Alfa to go it alone with a declared balance sheet supported by a host of upscaled new models.

The 4C is a key element of the Alfa revival.

You may argue that it is a cramped, minimalist weekend street racer. But there is no doubt that it has sparked a new strain of Alfa fever around the world.

To the extent that the South African media liaison folks laughed when I asked about a waiting list. It is seemingly all about strict allocations and only the chosen few shall drive 4Cs in the near future.

With it being built at the Maserati factory in Modena, there is a limit of around 3,500 units a year depending on the output from the Adler Plastic company who make those special tubs.

The 4C alone is not going to bring Alfa back into the black. The real question is whether it will herald the resurgence of the Alfa brand, the passion for performance.

With a touch more attention to refinement there is no doubt it could. And the good Sergio can retire with a happy heart knowing that he has been one of the most successful auto executives of this era. 1



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