

There has always been an inter-city rivalry between Alfa Romeo of Milan and Lancia of Turin. You could even hypothesize that the nature of the cars was a reflection of the characteristics of the towns that they emanated from. Alfa Romeos came from a seemingly chaotic city where people lived high on exhaust fumes, drove on their horns and took an alternative view of pedestrian safety – if the pedestrian doesn't look you in the eye, then accelerate. Somehow its edgy, angular, fun-handling, rear-drive cars of the 1960s and '70s were easy to love and had the right feel for the times.

In contrast, Lancia – 130km away in the courtly atmosphere of Turin – remained locked in an arrogant world of engineering complexity, yet at the same time produced too many niche models that appealed to too few buyers.

Both firms built basically similar four-cylinder family saloons of up to 2 litres, but Lancia focused on high levels of finish and a technical perfection that seemed to be immune to the accountant's pen, while Alfa adopted a more commercial view with a slightly cheaper product that was all about driver appeal. An Alfa Romeo was relatively light, fast and excitingly skittish, whereas a Lancia was a coolly cerebral product for the educated connoisseur: as fast as it needed to be, yet never at the expense of a kind of refinement that bordered on the obsessive.

Milanese hubris won out against Torinese

pride in the end, of course, keeping Alfa Romeo independent long after Lancia was subsumed by Fiat. Where the Milanese company had embraced all the possibilities of post-war mass production – and built great cars that centred around the roty appeal of its engines – a Lancia of the pre-Fiat era was a more unified conception that, even in the '60s, still appeared to be steeped in the values of the 1920s and '30s.

The Flaminia was a classic case. A V6-engined prestige car developed out of the Aurelia, it was a beautifully constructed dinosaur that in its dozen-year career remained so resolutely overpriced, underpowered and overweight that no amount of elegantly contrived coachwork could tempt buyers in significant numbers. By the end of the '60s, the Flaminia was a glorious irrelevance, the last examples having been stockpiled for several seasons. Production had ended in the mid-'60s, yet it was still well ahead of most of its contemporaries with its four-speed transaxle cradled in a de Dion tube, plus disc brakes all round (inboard at the back). Double wishbones and coil springs at the front finally banished Lancia's classic but shudder-prone sliding pillars.

The deep, short and narrow all-aluminium V6 was superficially like Vittorio Jano's Aurelia unit, but developed in detail by Professor Fessia to make it stronger and more refined. Fessia, compared to Jano, was a rather cold technologist who had cancelled the racing programme. His focus was on road cars and, backed by Carlo Pesenti – the cement tycoon who took over

Lancia in 1955 – the maintenance of Lancia's reputation for quality at all costs. In the booming and increasingly commercialised country that was '60s Italy, his Flaminia commanded respect but struggled to translate this into profits.

Not that Alfa Romeo had any cause to be smug when it came to its big cars. The 2600 had proved to be a disaster, a range of cars that failed to grasp buyers' rising expectations in a market that was becoming the domain of the Germans and the British with their Mercedes and Jaguars.

Launched in 1962, the 2600 was developed from the 1900/2000 series rather than a grown-up Giulia. By adding two cylinders but slimming down the bones, Alfa contrived an oversquare twin-cam 'six' of 2584cc with a stronger crank. It beefed up the five-speed 'box and dropped the new drivetrain into the same range of fully coil-sprung bodies as had been used for the 2000s, but stretched by 3in to take the longer engine. There was a classically angular saloon, plus Touring of Milan's Spider and Bertone's Sprint coupé – the latter two on a shorter wheelbase.

Originally seen in 2-litre form in 1960, the Sprint was the first car to be styled by the young Giugiaro. It became the most successful of the 2600 range simply because it was very, very pretty. It still is: glassy and suave with its powerful-looking quad-lamp snout, slender bumpers and profiled flanks.

The Lancia is also undoubtedly beautiful, if not quite as uncompromisingly elegant as the Florida II that begat it. Pinin Farina of Turin was

the dominant Italian styling house and had always worked closely with Lancia. Its Aurelia-based Florida show cars of the mid '50s had defined the shape of the architectural three-box saloon car, featuring headlamps in the corners of the front wings. That look would be productionised on the Flaminia saloon. The 1958 Coupé was built by Farina on a slightly shorter wheelbase than the standard saloon.

Slightly aloof alongside the Alfa, it is a deceptively simple yet near-perfect blend of sharp angles, soft curves and elegant details. Like the 2600, it suggests not just affluence but also taste, and the latest in Italian styling that must have made both of these cars look amazingly modern in the general traffic of the early '60s.

The fantasy is maintained in the cabins. Both feel airy and generously glazed, the Lancia the roomier of the two – especially in the rear where it can carry two adults in genuine comfort. By putting the gearbox under the rear seat, there is only a slender propshaft tunnel and thus plentiful floor space. The Alfa is more of a 2+2 but has a slightly more opulent feel than the Lancia, with well-stuffed armchair seating and the luxury of electric windows. The huge and rather beautiful Lancia instrumentation places the design of the interior in the late '50s rather than the '60s. The Alfa's fascia has smaller, fussier dials – and more of them – but looks more 'styled', more modern.

Their specifications suggest that the Flaminia and 2600 should be fairly evenly matched on the road, the 300lb-heftier Lancia having been

uprated from 2.5 to 2.8 litres in 1963. The '3B' carburettor arrangement – a Solex with three chokes – pushed power to 140bhp against the Alfa Romeo's 145, so both cars go well for their size and age without being startling. As ever, though, it's the way that they go about their business that is the point and it's here that the Alfa fails to come together. It is annoying because the elements of brilliance are there – in the way that the straight-six revs out so willingly and how the five-speed gearbox finds its slots so positively – yet the totality of the 2600 is one of clumsiness.

The Alfa's seats are comfortable, but the driving position, with that oddly angled steering wheel, doesn't feel right. From there on, almost nothing about the way the 2600 proceeds really satisfies you. It may have five speeds, yet first is so low as to be almost useless unless you want to crawl up the side of a house. Somehow you are never in the right gear: even fifth is a bit low for truly relaxed cruising. It's one of those cars that makes a lot of noise – a rather nice, expensive sound – but is never going all that quickly. Although, with a 117mph top speed (Alfa claimed 125mph), it was actually one of the fastest Italian production cars that you could buy.

The featured car is on Weber 45DCOE's, an upgrade carried out in the UK by Ruddspeed, which also converted 2600 Sprints to right-hand drive before the factory got around to doing it. As a replacement for the Solex carbs – with their complex induction set-up – it is visually pleasing, on an already handsome-looking engine. Yet it

LANCIA FLAMINIA COUPÉ

Sold/number built 1959-67/5236
Construction steel monocoque **Engine** all-alloy, ohv 2775cc V6, triple-choke Solex carb; 140bhp @ 5450rpm; 163lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual transaxle, driving rear wheels **Suspension:** front double wishbones, coils, a-r bar rear de Dion axle, semi-elliptics, Panhard rod; telescopic f/r
Steering worm and sector **Brakes** discs, with servo **Length** 15ft 4¼in (4680mm)
Width 5ft 8½in (1740mm) **Height** 4ft 8in (1420mm) **Wheelbase** 9ft ¼in (2750mm)
Weight 3351lb (1520kg) **Mpg** 15-20
0-60mph 12.7 secs **Max speed** 112mph
Price new £3888 **Price now** £16,000

ALFA ROMEO 2600 SPRINT

Sold/number built 1962-67/6999
Construction steel monocoque **Engine** all-alloy, ohv 2582cc 'six', three twin-choke Solex carbs; 145bhp @ 5900rpm; 156lb ft @ 4000rpm **Transmission** five-speed manual, driving rear wheels **Suspension:** front double wishbones, coils rear live axle, coils, radius arms; telescopic f/r **Steering** worm and roller **Brakes** discs front, drums rear, with servo (later all discs) **Length** 15ft (4572mm)
Width 5ft 7in (1702mm) **Height** 4ft 7in (1397mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 5in (2565mm)
Weight 2950lb (1338kg) **Mpg** 16-22
0-60mph 11.7 secs **Max speed** 117mph
Price new £2806 **Price now** £18,000



Clockwise, from top left: lines of Florida II show car clearly visible in profile; dash design – with big rev counter and speedo – says 1950s rather than '60s; signature tail-light style appeared on BMC Farina ranges and Peugeots; all-alloy V6 was developed from Aurelia's unit; simple, understated hubcaps

Clockwise, from above: Bertone's coupé styling, Giugiaro's first car design, was hugely influential, too, in Alfa's 105 Series coupés, and the Gordon-Keeble; fussy wheeltrim; straight-six with period Ruddspeed mod to triple Webers; dash is sportier than its rival's; shield grille hints at Alfa's past