

## Alfa Romeo 164 Twin Spark



**I**F MONEY IS NO OBJECT, THE 164 TO GO for is the V6, which has 3 litres and 200bhp in Cloverleaf guise, and a glorious sound as one exploits its electrifying performance. However, it's not just the engine that makes the 164 special – its chassis endows the car with agile, pin-sharp handling that leaves most saloons in the shade, yet the car is surprisingly comfortable, too.

Alfa's 2.0-litre alternative strikes a compromise: take a well-developed four-cylinder instead of the V6, settle for a "mere" 143bhp and you can still enjoy the 164's sporty nature yet save on costs all round.

This Twin Spark (two spark plugs per cylinder) engine – which is also on offer in the new 155 – is always audible, almost brash, as it snarls away from the traffic lights, but it ambles contentedly in slow traffic. It goes eagerly when given its head, but the latest catalysed version can't match Alfa's performance claims for the original non-cat car. Neither does it distinguish itself in the numbers comparison with other 2-litre executive saloons. What it does

manage is to retain that sense of urgency and excitement when called for.

Its clutch is lighter (though not light) compared with the V6, its driving position and the feel of the major controls are much better than previous Alfas and the seats support well. The driver has a neat and generous set of dials plus a tidy row of tell-tales, all in the main display, with a check button to ensure that it's all systems go. In contrast, the minor switches put style before ergonomics and can be most confusing.

Headroom is the trickiest dimension all round, rear legroom hardly better than that of a Tipo or Tempra, but with the optional leather on our car (that lifts the otherwise plasticky interior aura), everyone except the very tall felt cosseted and secure – even when the driver was enjoying himself through the bends. The ride can jostle a bit at low speeds over town pot-holes, but it smooths out to an ideal, firm but shock-free poise as the pace quickens – ideal for a sporting saloon.

# Living with the 164. . .

The 164's boot space is curtailed by the spare wheel beneath it and the battery to one side; neither do the back seats fold forward, although you can poke your skis (or a length of timber) through the centre armrest hatch.

The radio reception is spoilt by the poor aerial (incorporated in the rear window heater), but the heating and ventilation generally work well, with good flow to rear passengers' footwells, for instance. The facia vents turn warm with the heater too readily, though.

Other grouses? Alfa's wipers are squeaky, smeary devices, the location for the driver's left footrest is most odd and the outside mirrors lose their adjustment when you slam the door. On close inspection, the fit and finish inside are still sloppy, but for general build quality, things have improved substantially over the last decade. There's a six-year anti-perforation warranty to reassure owners with long memories, but it still has some small-print exclusions and costs money for annual checks.

The showroom price of the Twin Spark 164 is competitive and our tests showed a 4-5mpg improvement in petrol consumption against the V6, lifting the model to the economical end of the 2.0-litre executive sector; some rivals are bigger and roomier, it must be added. However, it would be difficult to think of one that offers keen driver-enthusiasts more fun.

Designing a good chassis and suspension continues to be more of an art than a science and this 164 is dynamic proof that Alfa Romeo still knows a few tricks that Tokyo has yet to fathom.

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## At the Wheel

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### Driving position

The long-armed, short-legged standard Italian driver that Alfa

Romeo always used to prefer can still cope, because the wheel has reach and rake adjustment and the seats go up or down, too, besides offering good legroom. Of course, the majority of us now feel pleased with the 164 as well – only headroom is a problem. The backrest supports well, despite non-adjustable lumbar support.

### Controls and displays

Super displays convey a lot of information for those who relish that sort of feedback, but terrible confusion can result from the stylists having their way with rows of push buttons. Can you even find the glove box latch?

### Vision

Scraping, squeaking wiper blades with just one intermittent setting were as irritating as those on a 155 sampled recently; otherwise, there's a good view forward, aided by seat and wheel height adjustments. The headrests don't come out, and over-the-shoulder vision is poor for parking. Annoyingly, the door mirrors lose their adjustment by slamming, but they do fold flush with the panelwork in tight spaces. The headlamp adjusters are too fiddly and obscure under the bonnet.

### Driver satisfaction

This is what the 164 is really all about and we rate it very highly. The pin-sharp placing made possible by steering and suspension systems that work with you, with little cornering roll and firm but absorbent springing, has to be experienced to be fully appreciated. And it's all done with conventional steel springs; but then, so was the Alfasud's.

The two spark plugs per cylinder fail to make our performance figures look special and there's more straight-line performance for this price in this class. However, the rorty characteristic note and willingness to race up to the red line, make this

engine well suited to this 164 – for those who can't go all the way to the V6, that is.

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## Space & Comfort

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### Seating and ride comfort

Passengers not subjected to tearaway techniques find the 164's home comforts very amenable. It isn't particularly spacious (rear headroom can again be a problem), but the back seat gives passengers a sense of security and well-being. Admittedly, there are more soothing rides than this Alfa's around the lanes, but surprisingly little disturbance afflicts occupants out on the open road. There's more engine and exhaust noise than some might welcome, however.

### Getting in and out

We like the roof lamps that stay on a while after the front or rear doors are shut, and the sill treads that are carefully protected against mud and scratches from shoes. Finding the keyhole outside is helped by a beam in the key fob, but the central locking has no remote control.

### Luggage and oddments stowage

It's not possible casually to use the other remote controls for the boot, fuel filler or windows. It's ignition-on only for the latter, ignition-off for the other two. Of course, there's a separate key release for the boot lid. There's still reasonable space in the well-lined boot, even though both the battery and spare wheel got there first. The sill is high and the fixed back seats make the set-up rather inflexible, however.

### Heating and ventilating

On our car, there was a quiet steel sunroof, complete with a lined underside that also has an integral tilting panel; this complements a comprehensive array of facia vents. They are rather complex to control and the booster fan is noisy, too. However, the controls for the heater are much simpler than the

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## PERFORMANCE

### Acceleration time in seconds

STANDING START	0-30mph	0-60mph	1/4 mile
	3.1	10.0	17.7

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.2	4.3	6.9	10.0
IN 5TH GEAR		7.6	14.0	20.1	27.3
IN 4TH GEAR		5.0	9.4	14.2	19.3

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES		16.1/11.0		12.5/9.2	
			14.0/9.4		13.3/9.9

### Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
	6250*	6250*	6250*	5725	5725
	34	82	127	58	113
	1	3	5	2	4

\*for best acceleration

## FUEL CONSUMPTION

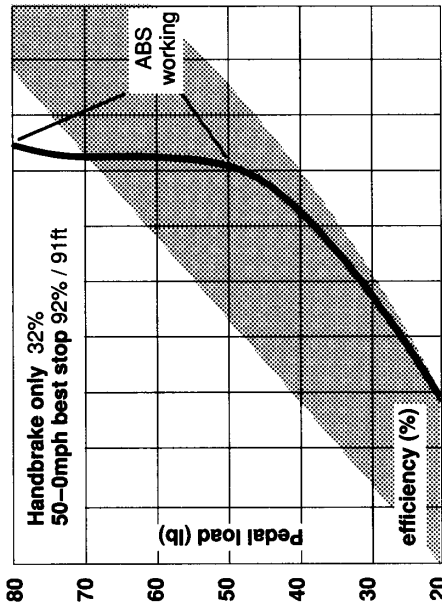
Fuel grade for tests: unleaded premium/95 octane

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	24 1/2
Gentle driving - rural roads	36
Typical mpg overall	32 1/2
Realistic tank range*	60 litres/430 miles

\*based on gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience

## SAFETY

### Brakes How pedal loads affect braking



Braking efficiency shown as a percentage of gravity (ie 100% = 1.0g). Ideally the braking curve should fall within the shaded zone of this graph. If it's above, the brakes are too heavy; if it's below, they are too light - particularly on cars without ABS. When the curve becomes broken, the wheels are skidding.

### Fade test

How hard use or water affects braking. (Ideal brakes show no change.)

### Pedal load needed for 75% stop (lb)

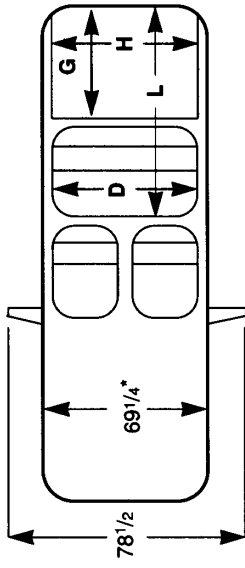
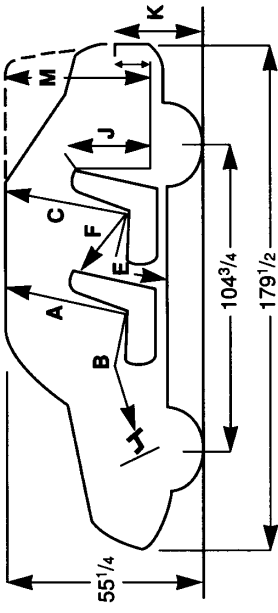
At start of test	35
After constant use	35
After severe use	52
After watersplash	35
Number of stops to recover	0

### Safety check list

Steering	true 'feel' of the road?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Brakes	powerful?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	sensible effort?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	fade resistant?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Seatbelts	front - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rears - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Head restraints	front - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rear - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Interior	thoroughly padded?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fuel	shielded filler?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	protected tank?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

## MEASUREMENTS

### Dimensions (inches)



\*with mirrors folded

### Inside (inches)

A Front headroom (with sunroof)	35-36 1/2	Kerb weight in lb (full of fuel)	3000
B Front legroom (min - max)	35 1/2-42	G Load length	39 1/2
C Rear headroom	34	H Load floor width (min - max)	37 1/2-52
D Back seat width (between armrests)	52 1/2	J Load height	17 1/2-21
E Typical rear * legroom	39	K Sill height (inner/outer)	13 1/2/31 1/2
F Typical rear * kneeroom	29 3/4	L Load length	-
		M Load height (to tailgate hinge)	-

\*"Typical" represents the mean measurement behind the driver's seat set at 39in legroom and the passenger's seat set at 41in

over-complicated set-up for air-conditioning and it works for both front and rear occupants; the vents turn warm in sympathy, too readily, however.

### Interior trim and equipment

In its standard form, this Twin Spark may appear rather drab and plasticky inside – it lacks the traditional opulence of a Rover. Underlying creature comforts are present, however – the model feels more plush than it looks.

## Safety

### Accident avoidance

Torque steer afflicted earlier V6s in pronounced fashion, ruining the car's directional certainty under strong acceleration. Two aspects have solved this on the Twin Spark – it develops less power and revised suspension and steering geometry has tackled the problem successfully. One is left, however, with steering that betrays an inferior turning circle on right lock – 3½ft worse than the way they do a U-turn back home in Italy. Of course, the car's cornering grip and stability are of a high order, though driver responsibility is needed because of its higher limits of grip.

The brakes – ABS added as an option on our car – reveal ideal effort and progression for a car not so fitted. Fade is mild under duress although ultimate emergency stopping power is nothing exceptional – the average ABS-equipped car manages in 5ft less from 50mph. In more ordinary use there's some self-servoing effect – the tendency for the brakes to come on more as the car slows down.

Its all-disc set-up handles flood water magnificently, but the handbrake feels heavy and imprecise – rear drums tend to promote better handbrakes.

### Injury prevention

The front seatbelts are very comfortable, but they can get side-tracked by the backrest adjuster and inadvertently be worn slack. The facia has some hard lumps underneath and no reinforcement pads are fitted to the front seatbacks; neither do the front headrests pull up high enough to protect tall occupants from whiplash in a rear impact.

### Security

Central locking helps in this respect, but there are sill buttons and no deadlocks. Also, boot access is easy from the interior of the 164 – even without the key. You can lock yourself in and secure the boot in a hurry, however, with no trouble.

## Money Matters

### Value for money

The Twin Spark offers reasonable value, though one must avoid the costly options that came with our car to look after depreciation – better to buy the Lusso and get some return on them. Depreciation on the Twin Spark has been much more respectable than on Alfas in the past and now compares favourably with Rover and Ford – though a 5-series BMW will still look a better investment.

### In service

The 164 will go 12,000 miles between services, but parts prices

are expensive; so is insurance, rated at Group 15, even for the Twin Spark.

### Fuel economy

In its latest catalysed form, the Twin Spark loses 5bhp and some accelerative prowess, but at 32½mpg overall, economy compares favourably with alternatives of this price and size. Of course, being able to restrain yourself sufficiently to attain the higher 30s figure that's possible in quiet touring is harder in practice than in theory. Refuelling can be slow and tedious until one learns the knack of offering the nozzle upside down into the restricted neck.

## Durability

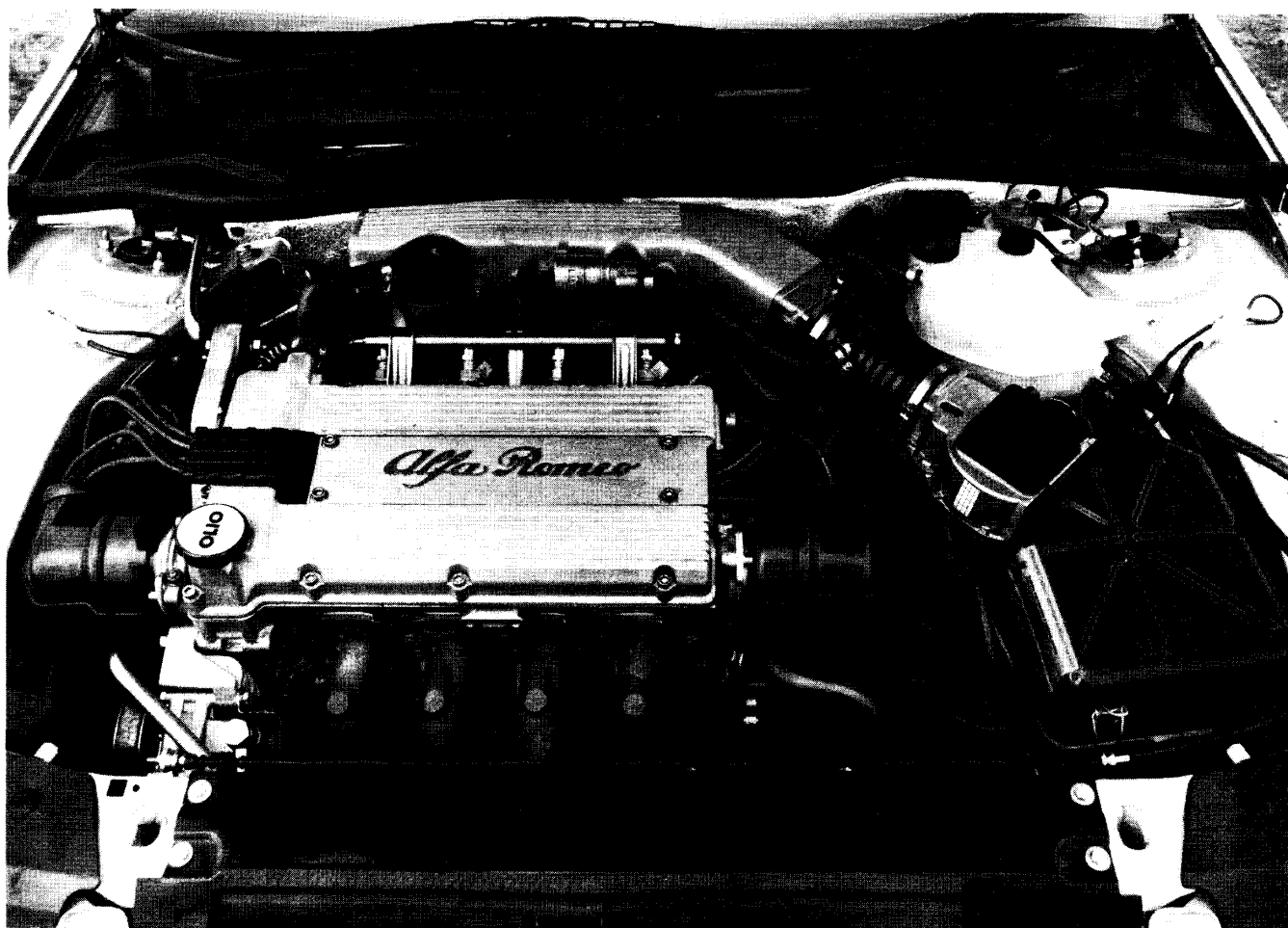
### Design and build quality

Living with an Alfa used to be a case of "a short life is a merry one". The 164 is much better in both design and build – no longer do the various controls and minor components feel poorly set up. The anti-rust measures include thoughtful cosmetic details such as sill protectors.

### Warranty terms

We anticipate that Fiat's influence will make future Alfas average for reliability, but still not up front with the best. There's a six-year anti-rust-through warranty, which, incongruously, remains less generous than the one offered on some current Fiats. There are also some small-print exclusions we don't like and there's a charge for annual checks, to keep it in force. Indeed, the wording of our car's warranty booklet was ambiguous in some paragraphs.

HOW IT COMPARES	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Max speed (mph)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (%g/lb)	Maximum legroom – front (in)	Typical leg/kneeroom – rear (in)	Steering turns/circle (ft)	Overall length (in)
Alfa Romeo Twin Spark (c)	1962/143	127	10.0	27.3/19.3	32½	95/70-80*	42	39/29¾	3.3/36½(p)	179½
Toyota Camry 2.2GL (c)	2165/134	124	9.3	22.0/15.5	32½	105/60*	43	41¼/29¼	3.1/36(p)	186
Saab 9000 CDi 2.3 Saloon (c)	2290/150	126	8.8	22.6/15.4	29	98/60*	42½	43/33	3.2/36¼(p)	188½
BMW 520i (c)	1991/150	131	9.3	25.2/18.7	30	103/40	43¼	38½/28½	3.5/35¾(p)	185¾
Rover 820Si Saloon (c)	1994/134	130	9.2	23.3/15.3	32	90/70*	43	41/31½	3.2/39(p)	192
(c) catalyser fitted						*ABS fitted			(p) power assisted	



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

### ENGINE

**Type and size** front-mounted, transverse 4 in line; water-cooled. 84mm bore x 85.5mm stroke = 1962cc. All aluminium alloy construction; 5 main bearings

**Compression ratio** 10.0:1

**Valve gear** twin overhead camshafts (chain-driven) actuating two valves per cylinder. Electro-hydraulic variation for valve timing

**Fuel system** Bosch electronic multi-point fuel injection and closed-loop three-way catalyser with lambda sensor. 70-litre (15.4-gallon) tank with low-level warning lamp. Fuel required: unleaded only, 95 octane minimum

**Ignition system** fully mapped electronic integrated with fuel system; twin coils and two spark plugs per cylinder

**Maximum power** 143bhp at 5800rpm

**Maximum torque** 139 lb ft at 4700rpm

### TRANSMISSION

**Clutch** 8½in diaphragm spring, dry plate; hydraulically operated.  
Pedal load/travel: 30 lb/5½in

**Gearbox** 5 speed (all synchromesh) and reverse. Ratios: first 3.75, second 2.23, third 1.52, fourth 1.13, top 0.92 and reverse 3.55:1

**Final drive** 3.42:1, to front wheels

**Mph per 1000rpm** 22.1 in top gear

**Rpm at 70mph** 3160 in top gear

### CHASSIS

**Suspension** front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts with integral coil springs, lower wishbones and an anti-roll bar. Rear: independent by MacPherson damper/struts with coil springs, transverse and trailing links and an anti-roll bar. Dampers: telescopic all round

**Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion with 3.2 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 36½ft (see text) between kerbs, with 58½ft circle for one turn of the wheel

**Wheels** 5½J steel standard with 185/70R14 V tyres. Optional extra 6J alloy on test car, with 195/65 R15 91V tyres (Michelin MXV)

**Brakes** ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with vacuum servo. Optional electronic ABS anti-lock control on test car