

BBC
Top Gear
M A G A Z I N E

TWIN TEST

BASIC FAMILY TRANSPORT

Photography: Jim Forrest



You need to cart your family around. Or you need to satisfy the dull old fleet manager at work. That means you need four doors and a boot. Oh dear, That must mean you need a no-fun, no-frills fifty-in-every-service-station



repmobile. But had you thought of these? Two motorsport-derived saloons, the Alfa Romeo 1.8 Twin Spark and the Subaru Impreza 2.0 Sport, will let you add some looning to your sensible salooning



As this is a test of two family saloons, we should be talking about dull things like combined fuel economy, residual values and boot capacities. We should be using terms like Medium C-Sector Sales Patterns and telling you about the fleet buyers' influence on prices.

The thing is, that's the kind of boring patter we reserve for no-fun reps' cars and, though these two cars do indisputably come equipped with four seats, four doors and a boot, and will therefore do everything that a Vauxhall Vectra or similar can, they both try and offer a little something extra too. After all, who said that life had to be boring just because you've now got 2.5 kids and a TV licence?

The first of our family funsters is Subaru's Impreza Sport. Four-door saloon it might be, but it also boasts the same bodykit (vented bonnet aside) as Colin McRae's World Rally

Championship-winning car. Like Mr McRae's machine, there's also four-wheel-drive, and under the bonnet is a new two-litre version of Subaru's tried and tested flat-four engine. Best of all, the price of looking like Scotland's own World Rally Champion is a suitably penny-pinching £14,169.

Our other contender, also offering four-door fun with a smattering of competition pedigree, is the Touring Car-influenced Alfa Romeo 155.

It wasn't much praised when it was first launched, but since then there have been a whole heap of improvements. The bulging wheel arches not only make it look more aggressive, but allow a wider track for an improved, sportier suspension set-up, including a lower ride height.

The biggest change comes under the bonnet, though, where Alfa has introduced a new 1.8-litre Twin Spark 16-valve engine which not only boasts

more power than the old one, but better fuel consumption, too. Price, though above that of the Impreza, is still a reasonable £15,441 on the road.

STYLING

You couldn't really call either of these cars all-time style classics, but they're certainly more interesting than your average bland repmobile.

The Alfa is the more striking of the two thanks to its wedge shape, bulging wheel arches and aggressive-looking headlights. The lowered ride height has also given the car a more aggressive stance and the wider track means that its wheels fill their arches a little more convincingly than on the old model. Sadly, the Touring Car-clone black alloy wheels are extra, though the standard silver ones look almost as sexy.

The Subaru, it has to be said, is something of an ugly duckling by comparison, but that's part of its appeal. In

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its base form it's about as conventional as a four-door saloon gets, but add the dinner-plate-sized spotlamps to the front, boot spoiler to the back and alloy wheels to the side, and suddenly you've got a car that looks as if it would tackle a forest stage as readily as a supermarket run.

Thanks to McRae's winning ways and the subsequent publicity around it, the Subaru badge now carries as much street cred as the Alfa's, too.

PERFORMANCE

Although the Subaru looks like it's just driven off a special stage and the Alfa apes a racetrack refugee, neither of these cars has anything approaching the power of their competition-tuned cousins. What they do have, though, is enough go to ensure you can have some fun on those weekends when you





Sadly, the interior of the Alfa doesn't live up to its bewinged and bespoilered exterior. No carbon fibre, no heavy-duty roll cage – just some rather tacky plastic



That engine, like so many Alfas, sounds fantastic, enticing you to rev it like an absolute loony. Actually, that's by far the quickest way to get anywhere. Black alloy wheels are horny too, even if optional



manage to leave the family at home, go for a long, fast drive, and not so much as see a single motorway all day.

With 140bhp the Alfa's got the most power and, as you might expect, turns in the best performance times too – but only just. The sprint from rest to 60mph takes it 9.5 seconds, while top speed is an impressive 125mph.

The engine makes a traditionally sporty Alfa noise and is as flexible as well-cooked spaghetti throughout the rev range. Whether you ask it to start work at 2,000rpm or at 5,000rpm, it never complains; if anything, it spins more sweetly the closer you get to the red line.

The fact that it's so flexible might go some way to explaining why Alfa have opted for such tall gearing. The engine can no doubt take it, but tall, lazy gearing doesn't sit well with a car that's supposed to be set up to have fun as well as provide everyday transport.

Consequently, you soon find yourself driving round the problem by consistently leaving the Alfa one gear lower than you would on most other cars. This becomes especially apparent on

the motorway, where the sky-high fifth gear forces you to drop down to fourth to gain anything resembling decent acceleration for overtaking.

The gearbox is by no means the worst we've ever come across, but it is on the notchy side and sometimes provides just crunching cogs instead of the reverse gear you're trying to select.

The Subaru is a considerable contrast to the Alfa Romeo. Where the Italian car's dulcet tones are musical, the Subaru's fluttery engine note sounds like a Volkswagen Beetle on steroids. It isn't what you'd call smooth, but its gruff nature isn't a deterrent to pushing it either.

Power is less generous than the Alfa's but that doesn't stop the Impreza almost matching it to 60mph, though it tails away higher up and a 115mph top speed is ten mph down on the Italian car's.

It might be down on power compared to the Italian, but the engine boasts more torque and is happier at low revs. Combine this with well-suited ratios and the Subaru has an instant eagerness about it that the Alfa

lacks. The in-gear times bear this out, especially fifth gear where the Subaru will get from 50mph to 70 almost two seconds quicker than the Alfa.

The gearbox is a slicker, more user-friendly device too – the Sport's 'box is even better than that on our long-term Impreza Turbo.

Both cars come with ABS as standard and they work well, the Alfa's brakes stopping it from 70mph in 50.3 metres compared to the 53.3 of the Subaru. However it's the Subaru's pedal that provides the better, more progressive feel – the Alfa's is annoyingly oversensitive and snatchy, especially when coming to a halt from slow speeds.

H A N D L I N G

When it comes to the twisty stuff, the Alfa leaves the Subaru for dead. At first its hard, sporty ride seems too uncompromising, with almost every bump and rut resounding through the body. It becomes even more noticeable on the motorway where the kind of comfortable cruise that Mondeos and the like offer seems a world away.

Get a bit rough with it, though, and



as soon as you go round a corner you'll know why you put up with it. The Alfa feels as sharp as it looks.

Sharpest of all is the ultra-quick power steering (2.2 turns lock-to-lock) which not only gives you lightning changes of direction with no more than a quarter turn of the steering wheel but feels almost alive in your hands – informative and precise.

Once you've turned in you won't be disappointed, either. The payback for that firm ride is that body roll stays firmly under control. Lob the car into a corner and not only will it stay as flat as a pancake but it refuses to run wide thanks to huge amounts of grip. The rubber doesn't even think about letting the car go until your speed reaches truly bottle-losing proportions.

The Subaru feels altogether softer and therefore that bit slower through the bends. Tip it in and body roll is far more pronounced making it feel more untidy and looser than the Alfa through corners. Things are made worse by the steering, which feels too light, slow and unresponsive.

Grip runs out sooner than it does on

the Alfa too, but fortunately for the Subaru there are four wheels scrabbling around to get it back for you. The Impreza's four-wheel drive system uses a centre differential with viscous coupling to ensure that drive is distributed to the wheels with grip and, for the most part, it works. Lift off mid-bend and, when the back goes light, the front endeavours to hang on more tightly. However, that doesn't make it that much fun.

Plus points? The ride is more pliant than the Alfa's; in fact, the worse the road gets, the more the Alfa's unforgiving ride is, literally, a pain in the bum. But, at the end of the day, we'd still take the Alfa's combination of ride and handling over the Subaru's.

INTERIOR

Given their exciting external appearance, both these cars are sadly lacking on the inside.

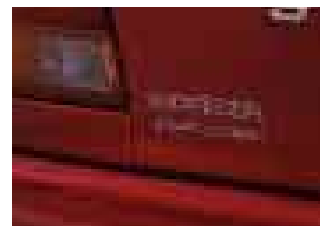
The Alfa is the better of the two, slightly, but that really isn't saying much. In fact, given the fact that Alfas are usually lacking in the comfy driver department, the 155 isn't too bad.

There's just about enough seat travel to ensure a six-footer can get far enough back and the height-adjustable steering wheel makes life easier too. Things would be better if you could sit lower but you can't, so that's about as good as the driving position gets.

For a sporty car, though, the seats are disappointing. They look fairly well-bolstered, but are far too soft, fail to keep you in place through a bend and don't provide much support for your lower back. The dash and centre console look good in an angular sort of way, but the effect is spoilt by the cheap-looking plastics and the dour shade of grey that abounds.

In fact, only one thing makes the Alfa's interior look good. The Impreza's.

Flimsy-looking grey plastic might be bad, but the Impreza's flimsy-looking black plastic is even worse. The interior looks like a leftover from the days when the Japanese turned out such automotive classics as the Nissan Cherry. Yes, the driving position is an improvement over the Alfa's, but the seats aren't. They're too soft and just as ineffective at holding you in place. The



The lack of bonnet air scoop gives away the fact that this Subaru isn't the full Colin McRae-style Impreza Turbo, but it's nippy enough – although the interior is horrid



Weird, weird. The Scooby-doo's light alloy flat-four engine sounds as peculiar as it looks: gruff and rattly, with a distinct offbeat; like a deranged Beetle. It goes well enough though, out-grunting the Alfa





Typical, innit? Just as we went to press Alfa Romeo pulled out of International Touring Cars and closed their motorsport department; Subaru redesigned the front of the Impreza Sport, too. But not much



SPORTED OUT		
	Alfa Romeo 155	Subaru Impreza
	1.8 Twin Spark	2.0 Sport
Performance		
0-30mph (secs)	3.2	3.2
0-60mph (secs)	9.5	9.7
0-70mph (secs)	12.7	13.0
0-100mph (secs)	28.6	33.4
Max speed, mph	125.3	115.7
30-50mph in 3rd (secs)	6.9	5.8
50-70mph in 5th (secs)	14.6	12.7
Braking 70-0mph (m)	50.3	53.3
Costs		
On the road price	£15,441	£14,169
Test mpg/euromix mpg	26.7/35	25.1/30.9
Insurance group	14	13
Service interval	12,000m then every 24,000	7,500m then every 15,000
Warranty	3yrs/unltd	3yrs/60,000
Equipment		
Central locking/alloy wheels	yes/yes	yes/yes
Sunroof/radio cassette	option/yes	no/yes
Electric windows front/rear	yes/no	yes/yes
Alarm/immobiliser	yes/yes	no/yes
Power steering/anti-lock brakes	yes/yes	yes/yes
Airbag driver/passenger	yes/no	yes/no
Technical		
Engine	4cyl 16v Twin Spark, 1,747cc	4cyl 16v boxer, 1,994cc
Max power (bhp @ rpm)	140 @ 6,300	116 @ 5,600
Max torque (lb/ft @ rpm)	121 @ 4,000	127 @ 4,400
Transmission	5-speed, front-wheel drive	5-speed, four-wheel drive
Brakes front/rear	disc/disc	disc/disc
Front suspension	MacP strut, coil spring	MacP strut, coil spring
Rear suspension	trailing arms, coil springs	Indpt strut, trailing arm
Wheels/tyres	6JX15, 205/50	6JX15, 195/60
Dimensions (mm)	L4440, W1730, H1430	L4350, W1690, H1400

dash and central console look conservative and dull next to the Alfa's, too, though they do seem better screwed together and therefore less likely to squeak after a few thousand miles.

Both cars have rather naff stereos, too; no pumping up the volume here.

VERDICT

If you want something practical that stands out from the crowd you won't be disappointed with either of these.

But the Subaru has to make do with second place. It certainly looks good in a chunky, stubby way, makes a sporty noise and has a decent turn of speed.

Of course the price will appeal, too, and as the Subaru team won this year's World Rally Championship, the badge should impress your drinking partners. In fact the only things that will put you off it are the drab interior and that too-soft suspension which doesn't make the best of the extra traction that its four-wheel-drive system can provide.

But for the right badge and the right fun factor look no further than the Alfa. Yes, it costs more, but it's worth the extra. It's better-looking than the Impreza, makes a better noise, has a slightly less dire interior, and, most importantly, handles a whole lot better.

A sharp chassis, high grip and ultra-quick steering, all packaged in a practical four-door saloon body, combine to give you a car that's sensible enough to cart the family about in. When you have to. But whenever you manage to leave them at home, you'll be able to have a whole lot of fun in it too □