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Alfa Romeo Giulia 2.0 – Road Test

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Kieron Fennelly test drives Alfa's Giulia saloon – practical but with a sporty heart beating beneath its suave exterior...

One of the most renowned and revered names in the auto industry, Alfa Romeo was founded in 1910. Its heyday came in the 1950s and 1960s when it dominated European motor racing. Aided by Italian styling houses, the company produced some of the most attractive cars of the 1950s and 60s, their sporty twin cam engines much envied when most cars had to make do with ancient, low revving overhead valve designs. During the 1970s and for years, an Alfa Romeo was the sports saloon every family man with petrol in his veins aspired to. Alas by 1986, the company, beset by strikes, poor quality control and the rise of competitors was a pale shadow of itself and a subsidiary of Fiat. Intermittently, an exciting new Alfa would appear, causing speculation that the marque was coming back, but usually it flattered to deceive. Indeed in the early 2000s Fiat boss Sergio Marchionne was said to be

pondering what to do with the brand, when Ferdinand Piëch, the man who built VW into the world's largest car maker, approached him and announced with characteristic arrogance that VW could sell four times as many Alfas as Fiat could. Apocryphal story it might be, but if it spurred Marchione to look again at Alfa, the cars have certainly enjoyed a minor renaissance in recent years.

The latest Alfa Romeo Giulia, reviewed here, is one of the fruits. First seen in 2016, the new Giulia not only brings back an old name, but like its distant predecessor, it is a traditional rear wheel drive four-door saloon, a rare species now. Stylistically Alfa has successfully pulled off this 'retro style' and most people find the Giulia nicely proportioned, its elegant 'three box' design standing apart from five-door or SUV competitors. At the front the famous four leaf clover in the Alfa Romeo shield asserts that this is *not* another BMW, Audi or otherwise unidentified middle-size aspirant.





If the external aesthetics are exceptional, the cabin is less so, but only because the standards set by Audi since the 1990s have obliged competitors to rethink everything about their cars' interiors. In terms of materials, this Giulia, admittedly a bottom of the range model, is slightly ordinary with a reliance on harder plastics for visible surfaces where competitors have found other materials softer on the eye and to the touch. That said, ergonomically the Giulia is first class with all controls falling to hand and a comfortable driving position is easy to achieve. The seats on this base model do lack lateral and lumbar support though. A leather covered steering wheel, the driver's main point of contact to some extent makes up for other tactile shortcomings. A traditional instrument binnacle puts large diameter rev counter and speedometer central to the driver's vision and like Alfas of old and pre-war sports cars, the needles begin from the vertical rather than the more usual twenty-to-eight position. Another sporty styling touch is drilled polished steel pedals. The Giulia is medium sized, its front cabin spacious, but if the seats are fully reclined, rear seat legroom, otherwise adequate, is squeezed. The boot is large and deep, but the rear seats do not fold; a saloon will never be as versatile a load carrier as a hatchback.



The Giulia fires from a pushbutton on the steering wheel and idles quietly; usually the unpopular electronic handbrake switches itself off, but frustratingly not always, likewise switching itself on unbidden when the car is placed in the park mode of its automatic transmission. Underway feelings of irritation quickly evaporate: Ride in the Giulia is remarkably refined, the rough and broken surfaces of so many of Britain's roads handled with aplomb as are the frequent potholes. If this is a very comfortable car from the passenger's point of view, the driver is equally impressed. The steering is sharp, consistently if slightly under-weighted and the Alfa responds instantly to steering inputs, though the driver has little feeling what the front wheels are doing. This is the bane of so many cars with electrically assisted steering and here is a shame because once again, standing out from the herd with its rear rather than front wheel drive, the Alfa Giulia sets expectations which are not quite met. Its stability controls intervene at disappointing low



speeds, almost as if the company is slightly afraid of what it has created. Nevertheless, the Giulia achieves a rare compromise between comfortable and refined ride and the kind of handling associated with Alfa's sporting tradition. Body control and damping are such that the Giulia is very much at home on twisting roads and the sportingly inclined quickly appreciate that this is a driver's car.

With a 2.0 litre petrol four cylinder engine, turbocharged to deliver 197 bhp, the Alfa is certainly a brisk performer, though a typical turbocharged unit, it sounds nothing like as distinguished as four-pot Alfas of yore and does not want to rev beyond 5,500 rpm.



There are six-cylinder (and rather more expensive) versions, their V6s tuned to 300 or even 500 horsepower and with optional four-wheel drive. Giulias delivered to the British Isles have Alfa's eight speed automatic instead of a six-speed manual gearbox. Ratio changes are



swift and very smooth and as 'slush boxes' go this is a well-engineered installation. There is a manual override, but generally progress is such that only when in eco mode which allows engine speed to fall as low as 1,350rpm, creating rumbles, will technically sympathetic drivers want to intervene and knock the manual selector into a lower ratio. Brakes are impressive - powerful and progressive. Turning on an indicator sets off alarms in the car if the sensors think there is a car in the driver's blind spot - a good idea, but their constant unnecessary intervention is tiring.

VERDICT

Never a utility purchase, there has been always a strong element of emotion about choosing an Alfa Romeo and few buyers are likely to be seriously disappointed by the latest Giulia. If only its makers would rein in slightly some of its safety paraphernalia and above all offer the choice of a manual gearbox, this exceptionally comfortable yet driver-orientated saloon would be a worthy finale to a hundred years of petrol-engined sporting Alfas.





Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Alfa Romeo Giulia 2.0 four door saloon

Engine: Four cylinder in line petrol; single turbocharger

Power: Max bhp: 197 @ 4,500 rpm

Max torque: 330 Nm (243 lb.ft) from 1,750 rpm

Transmission: eight speed automatic, eco, comfort and sport settings

Performance: 0 - 60 mph: 6.6 sec; 147 mph (manufacturer's figures)

Combined mpg: 36.2 (WLTP)

'On the Road' price: £