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ALFA SZ Would you
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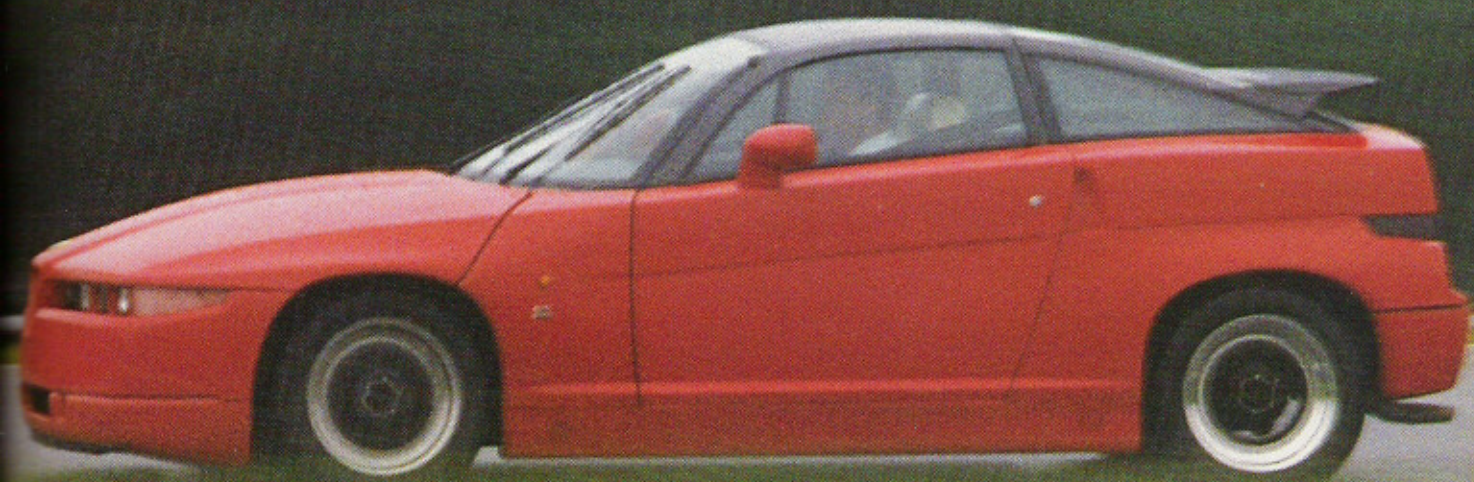


WIN a Porsche for the weekend



Nice legs, shame about the face

Underneath those controversial clothes lies a car that is fast, comfortable and, as Peter Robinson discovers, eminently driveable





Six Carello lights break large frontal area. Commendable cd is 0.3

Alfa Romeo's new ES30 sports coupe — *il mostro*, the monster — sits hunched under the portico of the farm buildings at the Balocco test track, its stocky, dramatically aggressive appearance giving a whole new meaning to the word bizarre.

Squat, tough, even savage, the ES30 (that won't be the production name though Alfa would not confirm the suggested SZ tag either) looks like a demented grasshopper that has somehow been crossed with a lizard.

Its red composite glassfibre body challenges you to scrape it off the ground, as if there's no other way it could possibly move. The flanks are so deep and the windows so shallow you assume visibility is going to be dreadful, especially since a wing of carbon-fibre splits the rear window. Six tiny Carello lights break up the incredible depth of the nose, 164 taillights introduce at least one horizontal element to the ravine that passes for a tail. Rear overhang scarcely exists. Boot? What boot. Nobody will ever call the ES30 a pretty car.

You expect, indeed you just *know*, this is going to be one hell of a brute on the road; all cammy and raucous, a thinly disguised racing car masquerading as the first of a new generation of Alfa coupes. That, surely, is why we're here at Alfa's Balocco proving ground, its corners exact replicas from the world's Formula 1 circuits, rather than out on the road.

Nothing could be more wrong, though I expect you to be positively dubious of my

claim. Appearance aside, the ES30 is a thoroughly civilised machine, perfectly capable of coping with the Kings Road crawl, yet equally at home hurtling through the fastest of autobahn sweepers.

No, it doesn't look like a car that will accept full throttle at 1000rpm in fifth gear, yet that's what the wonderful 3-litre V6 endures without protest. Noisy? Not especially. No more than any other Alfa powered by the same engine. Smooth? Undoubtedly. Comfortable? Yes, and with a proper driving position and, though it is difficult to judge on the almost level surface of Balocco, a compliant if firm ride.

Quick? Swift enough, unless your expectations raised to exalted heights purely on appearance create something of a let-down. Alfa claims a top speed of 152mph and 0-62mph time of 7secs. On the last of three official laps, in one of only five ES30s so far built, I saw 145mph down the long main straight with more to come in less hazardous conditions. On a rain-drenched track acceleration times were out of the question despite the incredible grip of the Pirelli P Zero tyres.

Three laps is hardly sufficient to form a definitive view, though later in the day, when the others had departed, I managed some additional mileage, before riding shotgun for a few more laps with test driver Giorgio Gavelli, who knows the new coupe better than anybody and has been involved in the dynamic development of all Alfas since 1966.

All 1000 ES30s will be left-hand drive only and entry isn't easy. A narrow door angle, wide sills and a seat cushion, which is only just behind the leading edge of the door, makes entry restrictive. The accepted method seems to be bottom first and then swing the legs in

'Its red composite body challenges you to scrape it off the road'



Driving position is good; production models get adjustable wheel

under the steering wheel.

Once down behind the small three-spoke leather wheel the environment immediately improves. There's room aplenty for long legs. The steering wheel, though not adjustable on the test car, (on production models it will be adjustable for rake and reach) is rather low. This is not an Italian-ape driving position. At first the high waist line creates the impression you're sitting low but then you realise the cushion is quite high off the floor and the seat back close to vertical. Most unusual is the closeness of the rather thick A-pillar, yet visibility is better than expected. The instruments are easy to read, the controls which will be familiar to Alfa 75 owners, sensibly located and easy to operate. Behind the two heavily dished bucket seats is a platform for luggage, the boot is fully occupied by the fuel tank and a space-saver spare wheel.

Starting the engine instantly contradicts the perceptions created by the Alfa's appearance. There's nothing peaky about the idle, instead the engine settles instantaneously to just below 1000rpm. Minor modifications to the timing, exhaust system and electronic fuel injection have raised the power output by 20bhp to 210bhp at 6200rpm and 332lb ft of torque at 4500rpm compared with the 3-litre V6 used in the 164 and 75.

Based on the floor pan of the 75, with the same wheelbase but wider tracks, the new car's lineage is obvious when you release the clutch. It engages only over the last couple of inches of travel. Yet, though heavier, it is smooth and has a more natural movement than the saloon, while the gear change to the revised ratios in the rear mounted gearbox is more positive, a real improvement.

The power steering is obvious the moment the front wheels deviate from the straight ahead. With 56 per cent of the 2772lb weight over 205/55ZR16 tyres (the rears are 225s) servo assistance is essential if the ES30 is to be well-mannered and not a real brute.

Accelerating through the rain there is absolutely nothing to confirm the aggression of the styling. The engine delivers its power smoothly and crisply, running quickly to the redline and beyond to the cutout at 6500rpm. It feels lively but no more.

It's left to the steering to demonstrate the true lengths to which Alfa has gone in developing its new coupe. Down the first straight the steering is sharp, the body and wheels responding instantly to even the smallest inputs as if the steering wheel was directly connected to the tyres. In a sense it is, for the ES30 inherits the racing Group A 75's suspension with nylon bushed rose-joints replacing the conventional rubber suspension mounting points. Spring and damper rates have been increased by 25 per cent and the front torsion bars of the 75 replaced by combined spring/damper units. By increasing toe-in and negative camber, Alfa's engineers have aimed for improved stability, a quality that is obvious even at relatively low speeds.

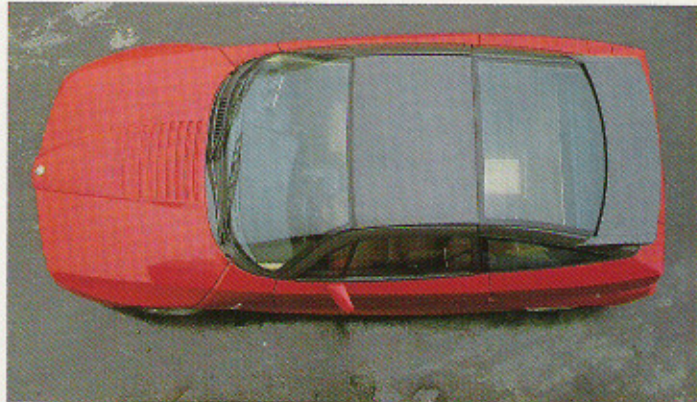
The first corner at Balocco is an almost 180deg left hander and this is not the time for boldness. In fact, the first lap is spent learning the way, experimenting with the gear change, discovering the engine's superb flexibility and savouring the marvellous precision and instant responses of the steering.

Through the incredibly fast Curva Grande —from the Monza circuit—that leads on to the long straight, the ES begins to bob up and ▶

'It's the perfect blend of extroverted styling and tame manners'



Rear lights from 164. Bruno Giancarlo – zealous project manager



down. The stiffer suspension means the car follows every undulation in the surface though not unpleasantly so. How it will be over sharp bumps remains another question. Alfa's solution to the problems created by the low slung body skirts was to develop a 1.57ins body height adjustment into the damping system. Operated by a small rocker switch on the console behind the gearlever, Alfa claims it will take a very sensitive driver to notice the difference between the two positions.

Lap two: The straight seems endless, giving time to check out maximum speeds in the close ratio gear box. First runs to 40mph at the 6300rpm redline, second 67, third 95, the glorious engine pulling quickly to the red in fourth and 123mph. Fifth merely sustains the speed to the braking point. Heel-and-toe changes come naturally, the brake pedal firming up quickly with no sign of lock-up as the powerful vented discs haul the car down in a remarkably short distance and far too early for the corner, even in the wet conditions.

Gradually building up speed, the Alfa merely drives round the many bends, turn-in is immediate and involves the entire car moving as one with not an ounce of slack in suspension, steering or body movements. Finally, the tail snaps out, the tyres at last overwhelmed by the combination of high lateral forces and slippery surface. This is not the day on which to test Alfa's claim that the ES30 will attain 1.0g lateral forces on the skidpan and 1.4g on the banked Lesmo corner, but it is obvious the car possesses enormous reserves of roadholding with near neutral handling.

Lap three: The long straight beckons. The revcounter and speedometer needles rise in unison, the Alfa slicing through the air, its

highly commendable 0.3cd figure outstanding for a sports car little more than 13ft long and helped significantly by the Kevlar rear wing. Stability is excellent, for even above 140mph it tracks a naturally straight line. Bruno Giancarlo, the zealous young ES30 road test project manager, says the body develops less than 1.9ins lift at 125mph. There is only excessive wind noise from the ill fitting doors to trouble the driver but that, according to Giancarlo, will be remedied by the time the car goes on sale in September.

The extra speed does nothing to faze the brakes, they are simply brilliant, even without the anti-lock which might have been expected in such a car. Yet it is the balance, the sheer communication to the driver of the inherent poise from the taut chassis and precise steering that leaves the greatest impression. Such intimacy between car and driver is rare, on a wet race track it means the little Alfa can be held out in a power oversteer slide at speeds many cars couldn't reach in the dry.

I was to learn later, in the hands of Gavelli, that if you push too far and get the car at even 45deg to the corner all is not lost. Simply let the steering wheel spin in your hands and it returns instantly to the straight ahead. There is no need for opposite lock in a conventional sense, for there is only one small zig-zag before the car is straight again. Yet, despite the strong negative camber and toe-in, the power steering completely disguises any build up in steering efforts.

Here is one sports car which is so manageable, so docile it may well be the perfect blend of a totally extroverted exterior and tame driving manners.

It's common knowledge that the inspiration

'ES30 looks like a demented grasshopper crossed with a lizard'



In the hands of test driver Gavelli – pushed far but not lost

ALFA ROMEO ES30

Engine

Longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive. Head/block alloy, 6 cylinders in 60deg Vee.

Bore 93mm, **stroke** 72.6mm, **capacity** 2959cc

Valve gear ohc 2 valves per cylinder

Compression ratio 10 to 1

Ignition and fuel system electronic ignition, Bosch Motronic ML41 electronic fuel injection

Max power 210bhp (152kW-ISO) at 6200rpm. **Max torque** 332lb ft (245Nm) at 4500rpm

Transmission

5-speed manual

Gear	ratio	mph/1000rpm
Top	0.780	23.6
Fourth	0.946	19.5
Third	1.226	15.0
Second	1.720	10.7
First	2.875	6.4
Final drive ratio 3.909		

Suspension

Front, independent, struts, transverse links, anti-roll bar

Rear, De Dion axle, converging rods, Watts parallel links, coil springs

Steering

Power assisted rack and pinion, 3.2 turns lock to lock

Brakes

Front 11.2ins (284mm) dia vented discs

Rear 9.8ins (250mm) vented discs

Wheels

Alloy modular, front 7J x 16, rear 8J x 16. Pirelli P Zero, front 205/55 ZR16, rear 225/50 ZR16 tyres

Dimensions

Length 159.8ins (4060mm), Width 68.1ins (1730mm), Height 51.6ins (1310mm), Wheelbase 98.9ins (2510mm), Track F/R 57.6ins (1464mm)/56.1ins (1426mm), Weight 2772lb (1260kg). Tank capacity 14.9gal (68l)

Performance (claimed)

Top speed	152mph (245km/h)
0-62mph (100km/h)	7.0secs
0-400m	15.0secs
0-1000m	27.4secs

Fuel consumption

Urban/constant 56mph/constant 75mph
21.3/39.1/30.6mpg

behind the ES30 belongs to former Fiat Auto chief, Vittorio Ghidella, who believed it was imperative for Alfa Romeo to go back to its origins and begin building new sports cars and coupes, in direct contradiction to the policy adopted by the old management.

The ES30 is the result of a crash programme, begun as recently as September 1987, to get a coupe onto the road as quickly as possible as a clear guide to both customers and rivals of Alfa's future direction. The first prototype was finished in July 1988.

By using the classic front engine/rear-drive layout based on the Group A 75 development, time was significantly reduced and most of the

testing went into the ICI 'Modar' resin and glassfibre body which is bonded to a steel frame. The bodies will be hand built by Zagato at the rate of four or five a day, starting in May. Already Alfa says it has 1600 firm orders for the 1000 which, it swears, will be the extent of the production run.

The first of 40-50 cars for the UK will arrive in early 1990 and at a price that is now expected to be closer to £35,000 than the £40,000 originally anticipated. Already the importers hold deposits for 70 cars so it may be too late to visit the bank manager. How sad. The monster, it seems, is serene and very friendly under that ferocious veneer. ■

'It's the balance and poise that leaves the greatest impression'