

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## Does anyone love the Fiat X1/9 as much as this Australian owner?

**Lead**  
While most choose a Ford Fiesta or Volkswagen Polo as their first car, content creator Andrew Coles bought a Fiat X1/9. Almost 20 years later, he still cherishes his little Fiat, so we caught up with the Aussie to learn more about his Gandini-designed classic.



**G'Day Andrew! To start, could you tell our readers a bit about yourself and where your love of cars stems from?**

I'm a freelance photographer, writer, and content creator, mostly focused on Motorsport. Historic cars are pretty much what I do - I cover all the Goodwood events, the Motor Racing Legends series, that sort of thing.

I've been obsessed with cars ever since I was a kid and my dad has been heavily into cars since he was younger, particularly Italian cars. He had Ducati motorbikes and Fiats when they were new back in the 1970s. You were definitely a bit of an outlier if you were getting around Australia in a Fiat 850 Sport back then.





**Very cool! So from what we've heard, you've had quite a long-standing relationship with your Fiat X1/9. Where did it all start and what drew you to that car?**

It was a bit of a weird one. It's my first car; I bought it in 2004 and I've had it for nearly 20 years now, but I never intended to keep it this long.

Here in the UK, I have a 986 Boxster, and it was the same thing that attracted me to it. A lot of people didn't really love the X1/9, but you look at it and think for the money, you're getting this car that was designed by Gandini and built by Bertone. There are photos of them on the production line next to the Lancia Stratos, it was built by the same people and in the same factory as these iconic cars. I hate to be that guy, but the door handles are shared with the Stratos and there are Ferrari 308 bits in the interior; all these things play on your mind when you're a teenager. I couldn't believe I could afford something like that as my first car.

**And what was it like as a first car?**

It was a bit of an oddball choice, I was that weird kid driving to school in what many people saw as an old man's car, but it probably saved me in some respects. All of the things you do as a kid in your first car you can't do in an X1/9 - there's way more grip than power. A standard X1/9 is good fun, but very slow, so there's no skids outside of parties, no drifting, no handbrake turns; none of the things 16-year-old kids usually do to destroy their first cars. That's what preserved it, to be honest.



**In your eyes, how does it compare to Gandini's other creations?**

It has that same wedgy spirit as the Countach visually and it's a really clever design. There's a tonne of space: it has a massive boot at the front and another boot in the rear, so it's quite practical.

Honestly, though, that's where the similarities end. I'm not going to sit here and say it's a baby Stratos or Countach because the mechanical package was pulled out of the Fiat 128. You can tune them up to be fun, but aside from the fact that they were built by the same people in the same place and are fun to drive, that's all they have in common.



**We're in love with that shade of green - is that the factory colour?**

The car was green from factory, but frustratingly it's not exactly the original shade. Now as 35-year-old me — who does this as a job and knows a lot more about cars — it bugs me to no end that it's not the original shade of green.

The reason was as a kid back in Australia, the body shop guys said if you use an off-the-shelf colour rather than having to manually tiny and colour match a sample, it's much easier and cheaper. So, it's close to the factory colour, but it's a little bit darker than the original green. I still kick myself for that, maybe one day I'll have to repaint it.





**What else went into your restoration?**

I wouldn't call it a restoration, it was a kid and his mates doing the best they could at the time to redo the car. When I got it, it had been painted poorly, and after driving it for a few years, there was some rust starting to come through.

So, I stripped it down and we sent it to a body shop. I was in uni at the time working a part-time job around my studies to pay for it. It was the classic situation where we found a cash-in-hand guy who went out of business just after he finished the car. It was a bit shady, but it actually worked out really well.



**I think we've all been there at some point, but it looks like you've done more than just a respray?**

The plan was just to repaint it, but the day we dropped it off, the guy was like, "Do you really want to do this properly?" And I was like, "Uh... Yeah?". So, he got a hammer, walked up to the left-hand sill, gave it a tap, and knocked a hole straight into the side of it. In hindsight, it wasn't that bad for an Italian car from the 1970s, but it needed new sills, and new bits on the front; it turned into a full bare metal repaint.

Then honestly it was a case of getting carried away. There's that beautiful time in your life when you've got your first job and you're still living at home, you're earning half okay money, but you have no commitments. I think my disposable income was like 80% of my earnings, so I looked at the car and thought, "I definitely need racing coilovers" and "I definitely need Wilwood brakes". This car is a reflection of my journey of learning more about motorsport and cars. The more I worked on it, the more I learned about Abarth and how the X1/9 Prototipo was nearly the world rally car for Fiat. It really could have been the next Stratos.





**So after all that work, what is it like to drive on the road?**

It's at the upper edge of what you can get away with on the road mechanically, but you can take it to the pub or for a coffee while still being good on track. Most importantly, it's exciting, it makes you work hard, and it's immense fun. A mate once compared it to an F40, in that it's the car you drive for half an hour a few times a year, and that's plenty to justify its existence!

My dad is pretty switched on when it comes to working on cars, but he's not a professional by any stretch, and there were a lot of lessons learned. We built two engines ourselves that blew head gaskets within the first 100 kilometres. Eventually I accepted I needed a professional, so I took it to a race engine specialist, and they built an engine that's been good for 10 years.



**Wow, you wouldn't expect that just by looking at the exterior! What kind of power are you making?**

We were trying to do custom stuff. I bought forged pistons, all the internals were lightened and hardened, and we put big Weber carbs on it. It's only been on the dyno once and it made 98 horsepower at the wheels, which works out at roughly 135-ish at the flywheel. From standard it made 74 horsepower at the flywheel, so we almost doubled it.

Now the problem is it fouls plugs after sitting too long in traffic, and it doesn't like running hard in hot ambient temperatures. It's the kind of engine you'd ideally send to the dyno for a quick tune every few months, but when you're 22 or 23 you always want the most extreme option. I would do it differently now, but it's great fun and it sounds awesome. It makes me laugh and that's the main thing.





**What advice would you give to any prospective Fiat X1/9 owners out there?**

The problem with all of these cars now is finding a good one is tough. They weren't built particularly well, and there are a lot of documented issues with the bodies. I have no idea how any survived more than a couple winters in Europe, because they even rust in Australia.

The prices have crept up, but they're still pretty cheap. If you want to fix one body-wise, they cost just as much as any other car to do properly, so most people with half a brain don't spend the money, especially as labour is so expensive these days. It just doesn't really make economic sense.

But mechanically they're great. They're simple, it's just a Fiat single-cam engine, they're pretty robust and parts are reasonably plentiful. Like a lot of these cars, there's so much potential and it doesn't take much to unlock something that's really good. The engine is in the right place, you've got unassisted brakes and steering, and they're light. Mine weighs about 970kg, which isn't super lightweight compared to something from Lotus, but they are torsionally quite strong. I'm also told they're reasonably safe in an accident, I hope that's the case.



**For such an outstanding piece of design, the X1/9 has never really taken off value-wise. Why do you think that is, and could that change?**

Bizarrely, the photos of it I posted on my socials (@agr\_andrew) are far and away the most popular post I've ever done. For quite some time, I think X1/9s have been quite uncool. However, in the past few years, for whatever reason, I think that trend seems to be flipping a bit.

Australia is now such a police state, you can't drive fast here. But when it comes to the X1/9 — being smelly, loud, bumpy, and slow — you can actually enjoy it and drive it hard, especially in the Adelaide Hills. Now that the roads are being so heavily policed, I think slower cars like the X1/9 are more relevant than ever.





**Between Mad Max and Mighty Car Mods, Australia has a pretty vibrant car scene. However, when we think of Aussie car culture, it's Holdens and JDM imports. Coming from a family of Italian classic enthusiasts, what has that experience been like in Australia?**

When my dad was younger in the 1960s and 1970s, he had 124 Coupes, 850 Coupes, and a Ducati 750 Sport, and he would drive them into the outback. He has some amazing stories of driving his 850 Sport to Darwin, back when there were no paved roads and no mobile phones. It's a journey people do today in Land Cruisers on the paved highway and think they're intrepid.

Certainly, at the time, everyone had Holdens and Fords and the V8 Falcon was the king. Back then, an 850 Sport cost almost as much as a GT Falcon, and I think his friends thought he was mad, but he just saw there was something to these little cars.

Today, there's actually a great car culture in most of the cities. I have some buddies with 911s and BMWs, but there just isn't the same density of cars as in Europe. In Sydney and Melbourne, there is some really cool stuff, but since the pandemic, the culture has really swung to 4X4s. It's all about getting off-road and camping.



**It looks like you've taken your X1/9 to some pretty spectacular roads! For our readers heading to Australia, where's the best tarmac to be found?**

I might be biased, but the Adelaide Hills are epic. I've been super lucky to take my Boxster on some amazing roads in the Alps, and the roads in the Adelaide Hills are absolutely world-class by comparison. The problem is you can't go that fast, but there are so many areas in the Hills that are tight and twisty that you can be driving quite hard and still stay close to the speed limit.

The other thing about the hills is you have three world-renowned wine regions within an hour of the city. You've got the Adelaide Hills, the McLaren Vale, and the Barossa Valley. It's not a white-knuckle driving destination, but if you've got a fun sports car and want to hop between a few wineries for lunch and get some coffee, have a good drive and end up at the beach for sunset, you can very much do that. It's all very accessible.



**Finally, what are your plans for your Fiat and the rest of your garage? Have you got your eye on any other automotive design icons?**

There are no immediate plans for the Fiat. At the moment I'm living in Europe and going back home once or twice a year. It's not perfect, but I can roll it out of the shed and take it for coffee. Eventually, I will have to restore it again. Working around historic racing cars, you get to see the standard of preparation on these 1960s GT racers. It's nothing we did wrong, but it was just me, my mates, and my dad, and now my standards have completely changed.

I'm loving my 986 Boxster S at the moment, it's just awesome, but you guys keep putting up stories about 996s, so that's probably going to be next!

*Photos by Andrew Coles*

**Gallery**























































































