

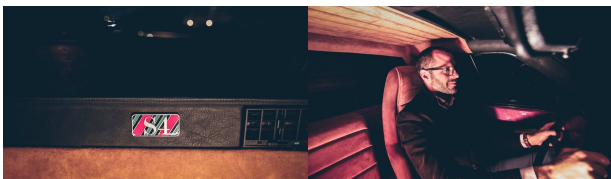
CLASSIC DRIVER

[This infernal Lancia Delta S4 Stradale will haunt your dreams](#)

Lead

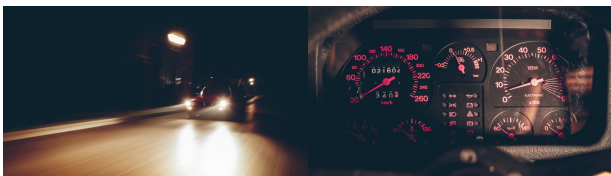
The plastic-fantastic, flame-throwing Group B beasts from the 1980s have earned a fearsome reputation that truly precedes them. But, in reality, are they far tamer than we're led to believe? We took an ultra-rare Lancia Delta S4 Stradale for a dalliance in deepest darkest Surrey to find out...

In the inky darkness of this brisk November evening, the good people of Surrey are not quite sure what to make of the Lancia Delta S4 Stradale in which we're buzzing around. To be honest, getting home is of far greater importance to them than taking a moment to witness this awkward automotive unicorn out in the wild.



Hailing from an era when rallying had arguably overtaken Formula 1 as the world's most popular and exciting motorsport, road-legal Group B homologation specials such as this were extremely important to their respective manufacturers. And for Lancia, the four-wheel-drive Delta S4 Stradale truly set new benchmarks for road-going sports cars thanks to its abundance of cutting-edge technology. In reality, it made conventional supercars from the likes of Ferrari and Lamborghini look frankly antiquated.

Of course, its primary purpose was to grant the full-fat Delta S4 competition car access to the World Rally Championship. To achieve that, Lancia was supposed to build 200 Stradales. But we all know it didn't. In fact, those in the know believe as few as 70 ever left the factory, which begs the question: how much grappa did the engineers ply the FIA reps with when it came to counting day in Turin?



With its mid-mounted 1.7-litre engine incorporating both a turbocharger *and* a supercharger, steel-and-aluminium spaceframe, and trick four-wheel-drive system utilising *three* differentials, the Delta S4 was a technological force to be reckoned with. In maximum attack mode, the S4 rally car would put hairs on the chest of even the most hardened of drivers. Remember, this is the car in which Henri Toivonen and Sergio Cresto perished – a fact that's certainly not lost on us as we climb behind the wheel of the metallic red beast for the first time.

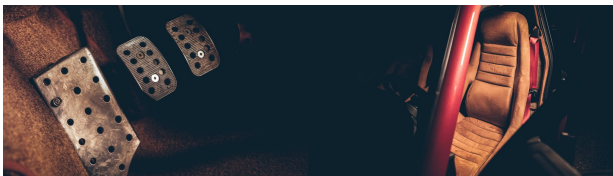
To put the Delta S4 rally car's pace into perspective, during the 1985 RAC Rally in Great Britain – its first competitive outing – Toivonen and Markku Allén not only vanquished the opposition, but also put in a lap of Brand Hatch during a special stage that would have put the car halfway up that year's Formula 1 grid!



Whether the eye-watering 100m-lire price tag of the Delta S4 Stradale deterred potential customers and thus reduced the final production numbers is not clear. But for that money, you could have bought five top-spec Delta HFs.

The first thing that strikes you when you climb into the S4 Stradale is how well resolved the interior is. Compared to the slightly haphazard and bodged nature of the exterior, the engineers clearly saw an opportunity to properly refine the S4 inside, thus broadening its real-world appeal. The distinctive Alcantara seats are a triumph and the driving position is nowhere near as comical as many other Italian sports cars from the same era. And with air-conditioning, power steering, a smaller turbo, and a clever ECU, the S4 is as intimidating as a Volkswagen Golf at low speeds.

It's the sense of urgency that strikes you most when you start properly leaning on the car – its zips from corner to corner like a scalded cat, and if you can bring yourself to push through the slightly disconcerting vibrations approaching the red line, you're rewarded with another dollop of boost that really sends the car flying. The steering is a triumph, despite its assistance, and loads up beautifully in quick corners. The pedals are also placed perfectly for heel-and-toe downshifts. Nail a quick one, and you won't be able to wipe the smile off your face.



In reality, the S4 Stradale is not the intimidating and excessive monster it appears from the outside – especially in the engulfing darkness. What it is, is a beautifully resolved sports car in which you can feel the technology beneath really working with you. Sure, it's made of resin, is hardly what you would call pretty, and is about as practical as, well, a rally car. But, even with all its quirks, it's an embodiment of all that was brilliant about Lancia. And you wonder why [Eugenio Amos drew much of his inspiration for the Delta Futurista from the S4 Stradale](#) – Make Lancia Great Again!

Photos: Alex Lawrence for Classic Driver © 2018

Gallery

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