

Alfa Romeo



Official name: Alfa Romeo Automobili S.p.A.

Owned by: Fiat Group.

Current situation: Alfa Romeo has less than 1% of the European market and virtually no market share outside of Europe. Alfa Romeo is currently losing hundreds of millions of dollars a year, with no improvement expected anytime soon. Alfa Romeo plans to relaunch in the US now that its alliance with troubled American carmaker Chrysler has gone ahead. Both brands face an uphill struggle.

Chances of survival: Poor. Alfa Romeos are good-time cars and the current economic recession means less people will buy them. However, the Alfa brand has a lot of panache and would probably be bought by another carmaker if Fiat gave up on Alfa Romeo •



A brief commentary on Alfa Romeo

Alfa Romeo was founded in 1906 by Cavaliere Ugo Stella, an Italian aristocrat. The company was initially a joint venture with the French firm Darracq. However, Stella's relationship with Darracq quickly turned to custard, so Stella brought in new investors and re-named his company *Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili*, or ALFA for short. The name sounds grand, but it simply means Lombard Motor Works.

After a promising beginning making sporty racing cars, World War I broke out and in 1916 Neapolitan entrepreneur Nicola Romeo took over Alfa. The factory was converted to war production and became known as Alfa Romeo.

After the war Alfa returned to its core business and began winning races. Initially Alfa had its own racing team but this role was gradually given over to a team led by Enzo Ferrari.

However, Alfa Romeo struggled in the depression that followed World War I and in 1928 was largely taken over by the Italian government. The dictator Mussolini used Alfa Romeo as a propaganda tool to promote fascist Italy's industrial prowess. During this time Alfa Romeo built cars for the rich and powerful.

During World War II the Allies bombed the Alfa factories and after the war Alfa Romeo struggled once more. Alfa survived by building affordable, fast sportscars. These were hugely successful, but the high costs of racing and low returns on the road cars meant that in the 1970s Alfa went broke once more. The Italian government gave up and sold Alfa to the Fiat Group.



The 1928 Alfa 6C 1500





Modern Alfas are basically stylish Fiats. They often look simply magnificent but their beauty is only skin deep. Underneath the shiny paint and stylish lines lurks an expensive and badly assembled Fiat with a doubtful future. The high initial price is not returned when the owner sells up: an Alfa Romeos' resale value doesn't so much depreciate as plummet.

The even worse losers are poorer people who buy secondhand Alfas when the cars are a few years old. The low price paid for these vehicles is generally more than made up for by the breathtaking bills at their local Alfa garage.

There's another group, consisting of Alfa addicts – *Alfisti* – who generally drive older, classic Alfas such as the early Spider. Members of this group are well aware of the pitfalls of Alfa ownership, and are quite prepared to pay the price. They generally restore cars to near-showroom condition and proudly drive their beloved ones on a semi-regular basis. If you are thinking of acquiring a classic Alfa, we suggest you get to know some members of this group first. You'll find them enthusiastic and supportive, and, very likely, short of money.

Alfa's future depends on Fiat's future. However, the Alfa Romeo brand still entrances motorists, so it could end up being sold to another car company if Fiat bites the dust.

New Alfas have always been the playground of the rich, and if you're not rich, then we'd say avoid them, because they devalue at a terrible rate, and any model out of guarantee is going to be terribly expensive to fix. And they will need fixing, we promise. Here's a direct quote from English motoring commentator Jeremy Clarkson:

“despite what we say on TopGear all the time about Alfas and how a breakdown is a sign of ‘character’, the single most important thing you need from an everyday car is reliability. And I'm not sure I'm prepared to spend the next few years driving everywhere with my fingers crossed. Not expecting to arrive, just hoping” •



Alfa Romeo 8C Competizione, 2004

