



Turin luck

An atmospheric classified ad resulted in a trip to Italy, a Fulvia on the drive and a serial Lancia owner's latest – and perhaps greatest – love.

By **RICHARD WEBBER**

PHOTOGRAPHY MAX EDLESTON

The listing might not have jumped out at me if the same car had been perfectly posed on a turntable in one of those sterile-white studios favoured by the UK's more aspirational classic car dealers. But as it was, the pale blue coupé was nestled into a sunlit scene of bucolic Campanian charm, backed by wonky vine posts, verdant meadows, blossoming trees and rugged peaks beyond. To me, it was a Caravaggio among the classifieds, and I started dreaming of bringing the car back home to Scotland and transplanting a little taste of that scene to our rain-soaked shores, a sort of automotive Portmeirion.

Despite my being a lifelong botherer of Italian cars and chronic Lancia fancier, the Fulvia Coupé 2+2 didn't steamroll my consciousness like Turin's incendiary Stratos, 037 or Integrale had. But its handsome form, intriguing V4 engine and less-heralded rally triumphs (see separate story, right) turned my head, and I was surprised to discover how affordable they were – especially in Italy. This one – a 1974 1.3S – was listed at just £7900.

The car was part of the model's final iteration, the Fulvia 3, but the first Fulvia Coupé was launched in 1965, with in-house styling by Piero Castagnero inspired by Riva's exquisite mahogany speedboats. Mechanically idiosyncratic, it inherited much from Castagnero's contrastingly quadrate Fulvia saloon: a V4 chain-driven twin-cam engine with only 13deg between its banks and a shared alloy head, and then canted on its side by 45deg and mounted ahead of the front axle, with a four-speed, all-synchromesh gearbox driving the front wheels. Double wishbones and a transverse leaf spring suspended the front end, with longitudinal leaf springs and a dead axle behind, while all four corners boasted disc brakes.

The complex little engine started at 1216cc and 80bhp (it was a 100mph car even at that), growing through 1231cc and 1298cc to 1584cc. The first high-performance 'HF' version mined an extra 7bhp from the 1216cc unit via uprated camshafts, manifolds and carburettors, and it was slenderised via thinner steel with aluminium for the door skins and bonnet, shedding 125kg to tip the scales at a flyweight

825kg. This was road car engineering the Lancia way, and to hell with the bean-counters.

The hottest production model arrived in 1969 as the 1.6-litre, five-speed Rallye HF. This series of 1258 cars was known as 'Fanalone', meaning 'big headlights', due to upsized, 7in inner lights. With its engine producing 115bhp at 6200rpm, the Fanalone hit 60mph in 9.9sec, although an extra-special run known as 'variante 1016' added another 15bhp thanks to rally-bred camshafts and a higher compression ratio.

Also in 1969, a takeover by Fiat brought much-needed investment in Lancia, and a year later the second-series Fulvia Coupé appeared with changes including a five-speed gearbox for all versions, dual-circuit brakes and revised styling, with UK cars also getting raised outer headlights for compliance reasons. Engineers at the time claimed to introduce Fiat components only by choice rather than force, but ongoing downgrades to trim finishes and the deletion of aluminium panels on the HF model hinted that compromises were being decreed from on high. Still, it was better to have Lancia with a touch of Fiat than no Lancia at all.

Officially an extension to the second series, the Fulvia 3 arrived in 1973, bringing with it mainly gentle cosmetic changes both outside and in. By then the model shared a production line with the new, Fiat-engined Beta Coupé, and it was discontinued in 1976.

All of which made light reading on my flight to Naples in September 2017. From descending past Vesuvius and a couple of gelato-fuelled days spent marvelling at the Amalfi Coast to viewing the car in a hilltop farmyard with a glass of home-made limoncello served by the seller's mamma, it was the car-buying trip dreams are made of. Most importantly, the Fulvia really was as good as it looked: a 12-year-old repaint of its Bleu Agnano bodywork still looked tidy, the interior was aged but intact, there was no sign of either rust or repairs and a passenger ride didn't sound any mechanical alarm bells. Soon, it was mine, for £7500.

For another £650, a transporting firm would deliver the car to IJmuiden port, near Amsterdam, so three weeks later I met it there on a damp Dutch night to catch a ferry to the UK.

The import process was fairly straightforward: no VAT or import duty were payable, but I had ▶

How the Fulvia fostered a rallying dynasty

Lancia's heroic 037 is famed for beating the Audi Quattro to the 1983 WRC manufacturers' title despite driving only its rear wheels, but the 160bhp Fulvia Coupé 1.6 HF took the International Championship for Manufacturers (the WRC's precursor) crown with front-wheel drive back in 1972, ahead of rear-wheel-drive rivals including the Porsche 911 and Mk1 Ford Escort RS1600.

At the season opener, Venetian Sandro Munari masterfully drifted his limited-slip differential-equipped Fulvia through Monte Carlo's snow to finish first after the vast majority of the 264-strong field succumbed to the awful conditions.

Swede Harry Källström won the RAC Rally in a Fulvia in both 1969 and 1970, and a trio of lightweight, Coupé-based open-top racers, the Spider F&Ms, were also built.

Munari's third-place finish in a Fulvia at the 1974 East African Safari Rally represented a passing of the baton: he soon switched to the space-age Stratos, subsequently sealing that year's WRC title for Lancia.

Performance-oriented, road-going Fulvia Coupés were named 'HF' after the HF Squadra Corse works team, while early 1.3s and 1.6s were also badged 'Rallye'. Bumperless special editions also referenced the car's competitive exploits: Montecarlo, with matt black bonnet and bootlid, and Safari, the final variant, featuring a stripped-back interior and limited to 900 examples.



Signor Webber revels in the Fulvia's engaging drive and intoxicating Italian allure





“It is truly engaging to drive. Arms, legs and brain are continually busy”



► to tell HMRC about the car and provide the DVLA with a dating letter from FCA (Lancia's UK representative at the time), plus an MOT certificate. Post-Brexit, there is still no duty but 5% VAT would have applied, while the 40-year historic vehicle testing exemption means a V112 declaration now suffices instead of an MOT.

I would have volunteered to get the car tested anyway and still periodically take it for MOTs. Legally, classics must be kept 'roadworthy' at a minimum, but that mainly covers lights, brakes, levels and tyres.

I chose respected Lancia-whisperer – and former Fulvia rallyist – Neil Jeffrey at Car Craft Scotland for a thorough inspection and pre-test checks. To my relief, his opinion of the bodywork and chassis reinforced my own earlier starry-eyed assessment: they were excellent. There was still oily work to be done, though. Fresh fluids and plugs were joined by the likes of new engine and gearbox mounts, rear suspension bushes, CV joint gaiters and brake lines.

The fuel filter and regulator assembly was cleaned, the distributor refurbished, the timing and valve clearances set and the two double-barrel Solex carburettors adjusted for noticeably sweeter running. The ancient underseal was also wirebrushed off and replaced: having seen the husks of rust-ravaged Fulvias, I'm not taking any chances with this one.

An advisory-free MOT followed, with garage costs to that point of £3100 in labour charges and £1100 in parts. That was at the upper end of my expectations, but I was happy nonetheless. Since then, the only extraordinary mechanical expense has been to repair a leaking brake master cylinder, and that was back in 2021.

I've made other improvements. The warped vinyl door cards have been replaced with smart new recreations from Italy, and the manually adjustable front seatbelts were substituted with inertia reels for safety and comfort. Mucky old sound deadening in the footwells was binned and crusty glue residue sanded from the floor, which was then expertly prepped and repainted by GBL Motors in Edinburgh. Fitting the replacement deadening remains on the to-do list, along with



Smart replacement door cards were sourced from Italy

new headlining that's waiting on a shelf.

The Fulvia's aftermarket Melber Major alloy wheels suited it nicely but were 1.5in wider than standard and prone to rubbing tyres on the rear wheel arches. The tyres themselves were old enough to vote, so I took the chance to refinish the original steel wheels the seller had supplied and fit them with period-correct Michelin XAS tyres, which are still in production using a modernised compound. Selling the Melbers helped fund the change, the effect of which was transformational: steering weight, grip, ride and handling all improved.

And those are among the dynamic talents photographer Max Edleston and I have resolved to explore along the Scotland-England border where Dere Street – the Roman superhighway to the northern extreme of the Empire – stands in for Via Fulvia, the 179BC road leading east from Turin, after which the car was named.

There's a distinctive intake warble and slight metallic churn to the bright and free-revving engine, and even with us and our things adding 20% to the car's kerb weight, there's still surprising urgency available with revs, the sensation of which is heightened by the Fulvia's sound and smallness.

The dog-leg gearbox has a fairly long throw and needs two distinct movements into fourth but otherwise shifts sweetly, with satisfying north-south changes into third and fifth. The ratios are short and closely stacked, explaining the undistinguished 0-60mph time of 11.9sec recorded by Autocar's road testers in 1974, and fourth gear is often required when driving in town. Fifth is direct drive and no leggger than in the earlier four-speeder, sitting loudly just below 4000rpm at 70mph, which can become wearing on motorways and faster A-roads.

Thankfully, the border country is scattered with interesting minor roads. Remote, quiet and unfailingly scenic, these rally-ready capillaries suit the Fulvia perfectly.

Miki Biasion – two-time Integrale-driving WRC champion – owns a Safari edition Fulvia and says works drivers used to left-foot brake to get the best from the car, entering bends

rapidly and then braking aggressively to start the turn.

For civilian driving, however, fluidity is your friend. The pedals encourage a heel-and-toe approach, letting you engage the cornering gear of choice with a happy bark from the engine. There's scant feel from the servo-assisted brakes, but they're easily modulated and reassuringly effective. The worm-and-roller steering, although composed and delicately weighted once up to speed, isn't overly incisive, and sharp inputs upset the suspension, so set your lock early, settle in and you're rewarded with a sweet and nimble pivot.

Thanks in part to generous sidewalls, mid-corner bumps don't upset the chassis, and the understeer you might expect from that extreme front engine position and skinny, 165mm-wide tyres doesn't materialise. Once into your rhythm, it's a pleasure. But it also makes you realise what wizards those rally drivers were to put the front-drive Fulvia on a knife-edge and break rear-end grip while retaining absolute control.

It is a truly engaging classic to drive; my arms, legs and brain are continually busy, and the effort is rewarded. Watching the greenery speed by from the supple-riding Fulvia's near-pillarless glasshouse, there's not much I'd swap



Old-school 1.3-litre four could do with a new timing chain

Following fruitless calls to paint manufacturers, a visit to Halfords armed with the period paint code produced a touch-up bottle within the week.

this time and place for.

In terms of practicalities, it's a manageable car to own and run. I'm 6ft 2in and there is good space in the front, although my driving position renders the tiny rear bench unusable. The boot, with its beautifully engineered automatic prop, is spacious albeit compromised when carrying the spare wheel, and the engine bay allows good access to all of the major components.

There's an active market for spares (be they used, refurbished or recreated), a healthy number of specialists and good support from the Lancia Motor Club, which has members and groups across the country.

Real-world fuel economy averages just under 30mpg, but the tank only holds 38 litres. It's exempt from vehicle tax, and I'm paying just

£90 annually for insurance on a 2000-mile limit through a Howden Insurance multi-car policy. It's insured for £17,500, which fairly reflects the current value, so it has more than washed its face financially, including £560 for the steel-framed, inflatable Carcoo in which it lives to ward off rust, dust and accidental knocks in the garage.

There is always a to-do list, currently topped by a new timing chain and opening up the engine to investigate slightly low oil pressure and occasional oil smoke. Jeffrey has recommended an electronic distributor, costing around £300, for brighter performance, while the front leaf spring needs re-securing to stop it splaying. Some new carpets and instrument lenses would gentrify the cabin, too.

If you haven't guessed, I'm smitten by this car. I like it dynamically, aesthetically and, with its rally provenance, narratively. Somehow, it even works fiscally. Viva la Fulvia. □



LANCIA FULVIA COUPE 1.3S (1974)

Price new £2057
Price now £17,500
Engine 4 cyls, 1298cc, petrol
Power 90bhp at 6000rpm
Torque 84lb ft at 5000rpm
Gearbox 5-spd manual, FWD
Kerb weight 970kg
0-60mph 11.9sec
Top speed 104mph
Economy 26.8mpg