

Italian Charm

Motor
Madness

Ian Lamming considers a discerning driver's choice in the SUV market

BUYERS could be forgiven for being bewildered; I've never seen so many SUVs either.

The world has gone sports utility vehicle crazy with just about every manufacturer offering something.

What makes things worse, but, conversely, actually better, is the fact that there really isn't a bad one out there; you simply can't go wrong. You pay your money, you take your choice, whether you have £12K at the frugal end of the market or £136K and go posh.

Chances are, whatever you choose, there are going to be quite a few in the car park as the SUV knocks the humble hatchback into the annals of history.

Those discerning drivers who want more, something different, a rarer sight on the roads and driveways, might want to opt for Alfa Romeo's first foray into the SUV market, the Stelvio.

Q4 comes with a spirited 2.2 turbo diesel, 210hp, all wheel drive and Alfa's distinctive curvaceous looks.

The fact it is so light makes it distinct, particularly as the lusty motor gives it lightning quick performance. An SUV that will hit 60mph in 6.6 seconds? Now that is swift.

Lightness also does two other important things in the life of an SUV. It reduces mass which allows it to stop on a sixpence, or should that be Euro? It also minimises yaw when rounding the bends and Stelvio has the most un-SUV-like road manners of its class.

The 4x4, or 4x4 lookalike, can be a bit slow off the mark and a bit lumbering through the bends. It all comes down to weight, coupled with the forces of nature. Cut those influences and it starts to redraw the laws of physics. Brakes, performance and handling are sports car sharp, shockingly so, if you are used to the traditional characteristics of an SUV. In fact, until you get used to its unique manner, you might think 'flighty'.

Inside, it is new generation Alfa and more sports saloon than off-roader. Nicely hooded clocks, small chunky steering wheel and colour dash screen for satnav and infotainment set the sporty mood. The eight speed automatic box is attached to a stubby gearlever and large alloy paddleshifts are set less than a finger's stretch away from the wheel.

Leather sports seats are excellent, adjusted electrically and boast the glorious heat settings to keep the cold from your nethers.

It looks, it drives and it feels Italian, which is

just what it is, of course. With that comes some idiosyncrasies, that won't do a jot to dampen the enthusiasm of fans. So the back wiper is operated with a dab of the right hand stalk, which you have to hit again to turn off. Took me about 20 miles and a phone call home to work that one out.

Some of the switches are less than intuitive but you soon get the hang of them and I managed to open the electrically operated boot without trying somehow – wonder if I sat on the key or something?

I love the fact the starter button is on the steering wheel, right where you can see it – why don't all car makers follow that suit.

Stelvio is also blessed with the Alfa badge of honour. It's like a designer suit. It might serve to clothe like one from M&S but you can't help feeling special beneath its Italian charms – and that can't be said for all SUVs in the shop.

Fact File

- Alfa Romeo Stelvio 2.2 Q4 Super
- Engine: 2.2 diesel
- Power: 210HP
- 0-62mph: 6.6 secs
- Top speed: 134mph
- Combined MPG: 58.9
- Transmission: Eight-speed auto
- CO2 g/km: 127
- Price: £44,610.00 including accessories

