

ALPINE A310 ROAD TEST - LE MANS TEST WEEKEND

# AUTOSPORT

*Fittipaldi's JPS dominates Race of Champions*







The Alpine Renault A310, a more civilised car.

## The Alpine Renault A310: civilised sports coupé

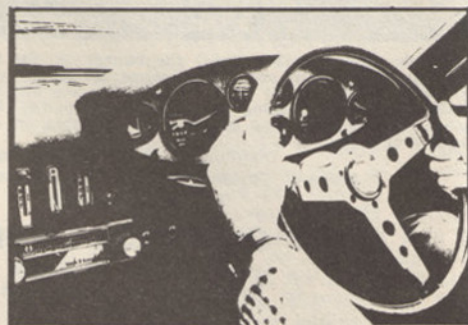
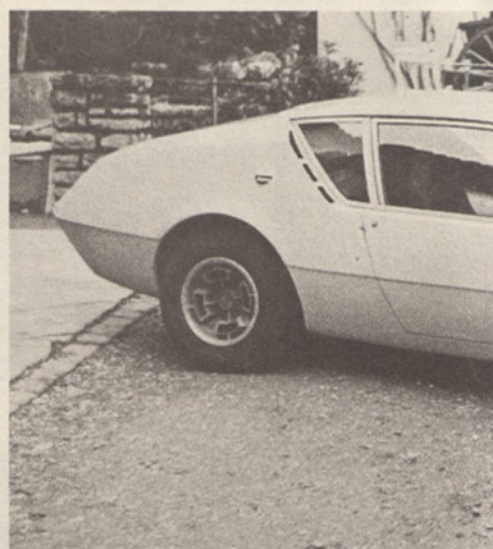
The Alpine Renault A110, otherwise known as the Berlinette, is a hairy little sports coupé with a resounding competition record. Giving room for just two people, a toothbrush, and a small bar of soap, it is as silent inside as a sheet metal factory and as luxurious as Boadicea's chariot when in competition tune. Certainly the most enjoyable super-sports car to drive that has ever been built, it perhaps lacks some of the more bourgeois virtues when regarded as everyday transport.

In his A310, Jean Rédélé has endeavoured to produce a more civilised car which can carry four people on occasion, with comfortable suspension and a low sound level, yet retaining the fantastic cornering power of the Berlinette. Incredibly, he has done just that.

Certain problems have arisen—for example, the special "blow-up" spare tyre has not materialised, which was supposed to fit in the rear wing. Consequently, the full-sized spare now hogs the luggage space in front.

For the time being, therefore, this is either a four-seater without a luggage boot or a two-seater with generous room for large suitcases, which was how I chose to regard it, though the rear seats are by no means small by 2+2 standards. New tyre developments are about to render the spare wheel and tyre an unnecessary luxury, however, and so the A310 will eventually carry some luggage as well as two extra passengers.

Rumour has it that a Renault-Peugeot V6 engine will eventually be available, but the car goes astonishingly well with only 1605 cc. The brilliant aerodynamic work of Marcel Hubert gives the A310 even less drag than the considerably smaller Berlinette, though the extra weight must affect the acceleration to some extent. The chassis is again a tubular backbone and the separate body is of glass-fibre construction. However, the swing-axle rear end of the earlier car has been replaced in the interest of riding comfort, though the engine is still at the rear. Wishbone suspension is used at both ends, with the coil



Road test/John Bolster

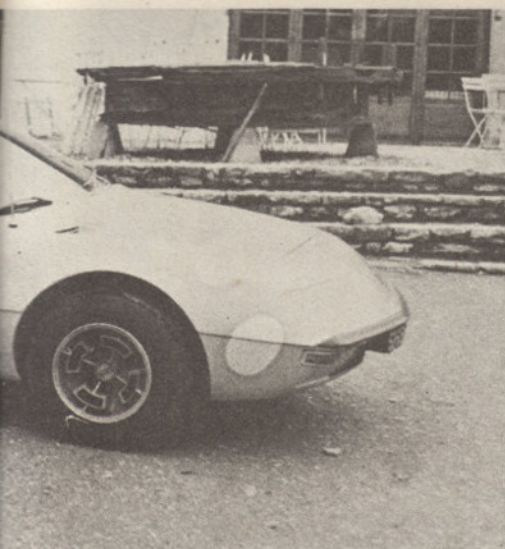
springs and dampers above the upper links, and anti-roll torsion bars are incorporated. Light-alloy wheels with wide rims carry tyres of a broader section behind than in front, as indicated in the data panel. The servo-assisted brakes have ventilated discs in front and solid ones behind. The 5-speed all-indirect gearbox is from the R12 Gordini and the engine is an Alpine development of the light-alloy Renault 16 unit.

The car is very low, but once inside the driver and passenger have an astonishing amount of room. The nylon-upholstered seats are surely the most comfortable yet, while all the controls and instruments are ideally

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Brilliant aerodynamics give the A310 even less drag than the smaller Berlinette.

placed. The view of the road ahead is splendid, but unfortunately the rear quarters are somewhat blind.

I collected the Alpine in Paris and used it to cover the Geneva Show. First impressions were good because the highly-tuned engine is phenomenally flexible, idling indefinitely in traffic blocks without overheating. The sound insulation is difficult to explain, for the body is light in relation to its size, yet the booming from which most four-cylinder steel-bodied cars suffer is totally absent. Let me say, simply; that the level of sound from the engine, transmission, tyres, and wind is amazingly low. The only surface producing road noise is the cobblestone, mercifully rare now, even in France.

The ride is also extremely comfortable, the new rear suspension absorbing the bumps while the car remains level. The cornering power is tremendously high with virtually no roll. One drives faster and faster through bends, never reaching the limit, even in the mountains, and the brakes do not fade. The sliding technique beloved of Berlinette drivers does not suit the new car, however, the characteristic remaining neutral in spite of the rear engine location. Nevertheless, the engine position makes itself felt in side winds on the Autoroute. I found it reasonable to cruise at 110 to 115 mph, even when the wind rocks in high and exposed places were straining at their moorings. An extra 10 mph, however, caused one to "make attention," as the French say. The very quick steering—2½ turns from lock to lock—rendered it easy to kill an incipient swerve, but the tendency was there when the gales of March blew.

The Alpine is really over-gearred and will not reach maximum revs in fifth speed. Changing up at 110 mph or so, the driver finds that 125 mph is quickly available almost anywhere and this might be called the everyday maximum. However, when conditions are right and the road is clear, the car will reach and hold 131 mph, or even a little more with wind or gradient assisting.

Engine accessibility is via the glass rear window and an internal bonnet.



The view of the road ahead is splendid, but the rear quarters are somewhat blind.

This high gearing also entails a high bottom gear with a close-ratio box, which spoils the acceleration figures. I will never punish the clutch and much slipping would have been necessary to achieve really representative times. The figures in the data panel were taken under touring conditions with two up and luggage. For French roads, the disadvantages of high gearing are of no consequence compared with the joy of fast cruising at low engine revs.

The compact size of the A310 is an advantage everywhere. It is a very easy car to drive fast on long journeys, very high averages being attained as a matter of course. The six headlights are immensely powerful but to use them on busy autoroutes causes furious retaliation. At present, the lighting is insufficient in the dipped position, especially on French autoroutes without cats-eyes, and as I had to cover 200 miles in the dark and the pouring rain, I know all about this problem.

Some drivers may find the very quick steering unusual, but it gives a wonderful sense of control, especially on winding mountain roads. The 5-speed gearbox is a joy to handle, though the synchromesh can be beaten, but for fast road driving it gives the right ratios for all conditions. The heating and ventilation work well, the windscreen having heating wires for extreme temperatures. The electric windows are rapid in operation, which is useful if you want to call another road-user a French three-letter

word.

The Alpine Renault A310 sets new standards for small-engined sports cars. Its fuel economy is valuable anywhere, but especially in France, and it has the vintage virtue of responding gratefully to the expert driver. Development is still going on, largely in the capable hands of Mauro Bianchi. It is a very important car of advanced design and superb appearance, which I am lucky to have driven at this early stage, and I would like to thank Claude Furiat for making this road test possible.

**SPECIFICATION AND PERFORMANCE DATA**  
 Car tested: Alpine Renault A310 2+2 coupe. Price in France 45,200 francs including tax.  
 Engine: Four-cylinders 78 mm x 84 mm (1605 cc); compression ratio, 10.25 to 1; 127 bhp (net) at 6250 rpm; pushrod-operated inclined valves; two twin-choke horizontal Weber carburettors.  
 Transmission: Single dry plate clutch; 5-speed all-synchromesh gearbox with central remote control, ratios 1.03, 1.21, 1.61, 2.33, and 3.61 to 1; spiral bevel final drive, ratio 3.27 to 1.  
 Chassis: Tubular steel backbone chassis with glassfibre body; independent front suspension by wishbones, coil springs, and anti-roll bar; rack and pinion steering; independent rear suspension by wishbones, coil springs, and anti-roll bar; telescopic dampers all round; servo-assisted disc brakes with ventilated front discs; 165-13 front and 185-13 rear radial ply tyres on 7 in light-alloy wheels.  
 Equipment: 12-volt lighting and starting; speedometer; rev counter; oil pressure, oil temperature, water temperature, and fuel gauges; voltmeter; heating, demisting, and ventilation system with electrically-heated windscreen; 2-speed windscreen wipers and washers; flashing direction indicators with hazard warning; electrically-raised windows; reversing lights; cigar lighter. Extra: Radio and stereo tape player.  
 Dimensions: Wheelbase 7 ft 5.4 in; track 4 ft 7.1 in; overall length 13 ft 8 in; width 5 ft 4.6 in; weight 17.5 cwt.  
 Performance: Maximum speed 131 mph; speeds in gears—fourth 117 mph, third 87 mph, second 60 mph, first 38 mph; acceleration—0-60 mph, 8.1 s, 0-100 mph 24.2 s.  
 Fuel consumption: 20 to 27 mpg.

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