

Motor

Masarati Merak tested

The next Mini:

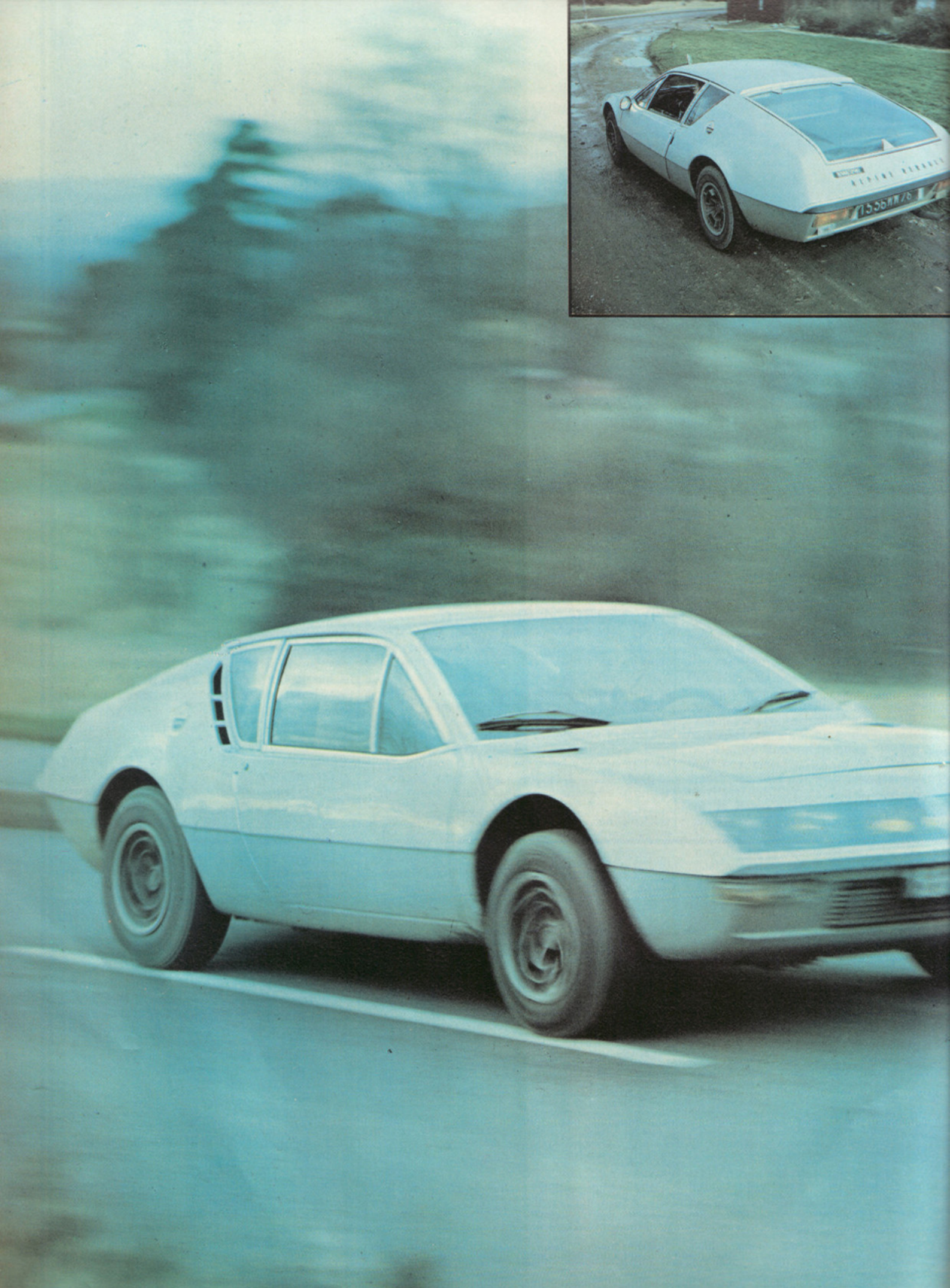
Our ideas—prizes for yours

Towards cheaper repairs

**Renault Alpine—
gents' racer**

The cars of Reid Railton







Lotus eater française?

France is the home of two fine sports cars, neither of which are sold in the UK—a great pity says Gordon Bruce after sampling the Alpine 310

For decades the British sports car enthusiast has been more than well catered for. Even now, when most of the established marques are assembled under the BLMC banner, his choice is greater than in any other country in the world, for our counties abound with small-production specialists.

The enthusiast française is not so fortunate. His home grown manufacturers number but two. The marque Matra will be familiar to you all, for though their sports cars are still unavailable in the UK, their name hit dizzy heights when Mr J. Y. Stewart took the World Driver's championship in their F1 car. Alpine is the other company. Now sponsored by Renault, it was formed by Jean Redélé in the early 1950s and has produced a variety of racing and road cars; in particular the A110 which stormed the rally world a few years ago and continues to do well today. Redélé's cars always have been Renault based, hence the useful backing from the Régie itself.

Almost exactly three years ago at the Geneva show, Alpine announced their first really new car for eight years. Striking in its design, with a 2+2 seating arrangement it was a departure in appearance but not in layout. Dubbed the A310 it has the traditional Alpine backbone chassis with a faithful Renault engine overhung at the rear and driving the rear wheels. In this case it is the 16 TS unit, further developed to give 140 bhp at 6250 rpm. This graces the car

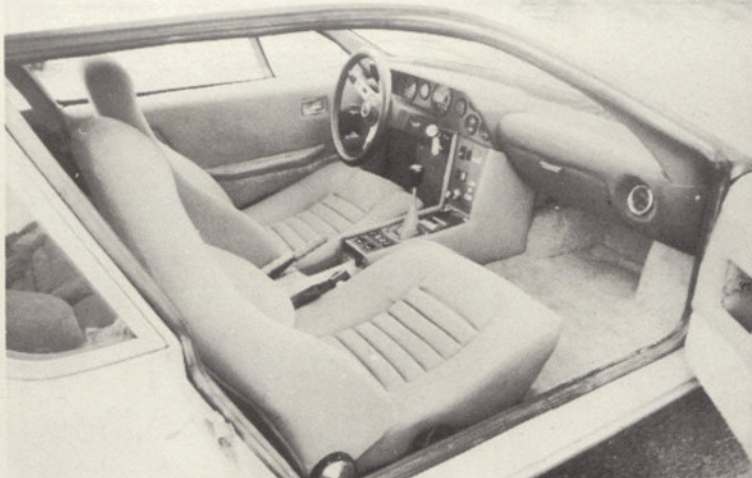
with a useful performance, though the gait is deliberately long-legged, the new Alpine being just as much grand tourer as the A110 is a sports/competition car.

Alpine are in the process of stepping up production of this Gallic answer to the Elan 130 and expect to make as many as 3000 this year. When the output is in full swing, they may well import to Britain but there are no immediate plans. We were lucky to borrow ours, one of only four in the country, from Renaultsport (see *Motoring Plus* this issue) and hence bring you a foretaste of this unique and charming French car.

Installing oneself behind the wheel calls for a little agility, for while manoeuvring round the sumptuous brushed-nylon seats it's all too easy to catch an erring temple on the shallow screen pillar. Once the gymnastics are over, you can relax in the well-finished interior. It feels homely, almost familiar in fact and well it might for the controls at least are standard Renault. A few churns on the starter sets the twin-choke Webers coughing into action. The engine has a flat sound about it and the extreme lack of low speed torque is immediately noticeable. It disdains full throttle below 3000 rpm, which is where the power is first evident. These facets coupled with the inherently high-gearing find you busy with the gearbox round town.

You can almost hear it breath a sigh, a French one of course, as you pass between the delimit signs, for on the open road it is quite *charmant*. Wind noise is





Well finished, the interior has an air of opulence. The brushed nylon seats are comfortable, but lack lumbar support

minimal, and though fussy at high-revs the sounds of the trailing engine are rarely obtrusive. The ride is exceptionally fine and there is an uncanny lack of thumps and knocks, the Achilles heel of so many potentially fine sports and GT cars. You also find that ohv "four" nestling in the tail is more willing than it led you to believe. There is power aplenty from 3000 rpm all the way to 7000 rpm and given time it will push you to a genuine 130 mph in the fifth of its five gears—a good testimony for the aerodynamics.

The faster you go, the more gentlemanly its behaviour. That steering that was so stodgy in town becomes light and precise, the car requiring little more than a flick of the wrist to guide it through an S-bend. The brakes that always did feel well-servoed, remain powerful and full of feel. The handling comes into its own. In fact you have to be travelling very fast before negotiating a bend calls for any more skill than simply turning the wheel. Nearer the limit of the Michelin XAS's excellent adhesion, understeer is followed by a predictable tail-out attitude. Drama can set-in if you decide to lift-off in mid-bend, whereupon the tail will step out rather smartly. This is hardly surprising and is a typical trait of rear-engined cars and, we stress, will only happen when cornering near the limit.

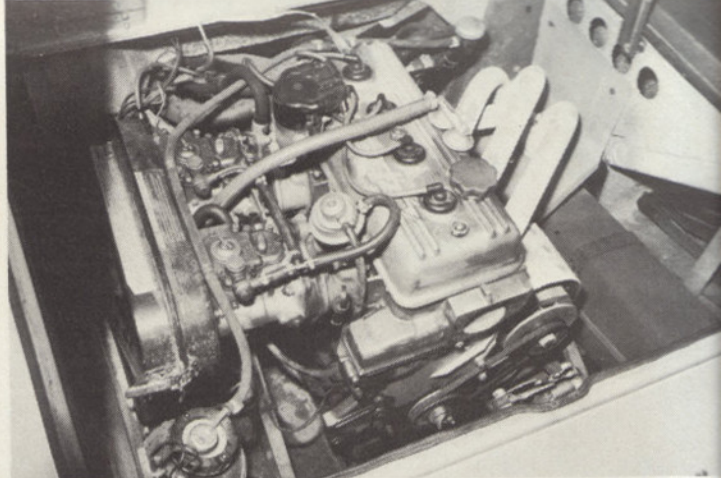
We found the gearchange a little moody. Sometimes you could flash through the box with the minimum of effort, sometimes fourth, and occasionally second were difficult to find. In the main it was trouble-free if you weren't in a hurry.

Over the rest of the car our opinions were more divided. Though sumptuous, we found the front seats lacking in lumbar support. Those stalk controls which are so excellently sited on the Renault saloons are rather vulnerable in the Alpine and it's all too easy to blast the air horns inadvertently or flash the lights with a busy left knee. Far more important though, is the lack of vision especially to the rear where the heavily canted screen allows a very poor view of the pursuing gendarmes and finds the driver

crouching in order to get maximum use of the interior mirror. An odd feature is the inclusion of heating elements in the front screen but not in the rear, one that would seem to need them more. The lights and wiper systems are beyond reproach however. That impressive array of Cibies set into the blunt nose is every bit as efficient as it looks and brings real joy to night driving. The wash/wipe is equally efficient, though the crazy wiper pattern constitutes a slow torture for driver and passenger alike. Basically, the driver's blade sweeps over to the right and clouts the incoming passenger one squarely in the midriff. The right one then retaliates by pushing it back to its own side. This mid-screen punch-up continues ad infinitum and would probably drive the sanest of us mad in time.

The Alpine's packaging is interesting too. Despite its particularly aerodynamic lines it really is a four-seater and though it calls for very considerable agility to get oneself installed in the rear, the seats are surprisingly comfortable and there is much more leg-room than one might imagine. Understandably, head-room there is limited but it is sufficient to accommodate an average-sized adult for quite a few miles. Don't imagine you can go tripping off on holiday with the kids though, for there ain't anywhere to put the luggage. A boot? —not unless you leave the spare wheel and fuel tank behind. However if you abandon the kids instead and take the removable rear seats away you can put your comb and tooth brush on the platform.

Typically French, the Alpine is unique in its design and owes little or nothing to that of any competitor. We were impressed by the standard of workmanship and thoroughly enjoyed all the miles we covered in it. The ride and high-speed cruising ability are its outstanding features, while it is above average in the handling and economy departments as well. Sadly, its tax-free price is a massive £4300 and while some of the aspects of the car may be worthy of such a tag, we wonder how many true-blue Britons will be prepared to pay nearly £3 for every cubic centimetre.



Very accessible, the uprated 16TS unit is a neat fit in the Alpine tail. Low speed torque is poor, but there's power a-plenty at top end

PERFORMANCE

MAXIMUM SPEED

Renault Alpine, 130 mph (approx) Lotus +2S 130, 121 mph

ACCELERATION FROM REST

mph		
0-30	3.0	3.2
0-40	4.9	4.3
0-50	6.3	6.1
0-60	8.6	7.7
0-70	12.2	10.7
0-80	15.4	13.6
0-90	20.3	17.6
0-100	25.9	23.0
Stand'g 1/4	17.3	15.9
Stand'g km	31.7	29.5

ACCELERATION IN TOP

20-40	15.5	9.2
30-50	14.4	8.5
40-60	14.1	7.8
50-70	13.3	8.2
60-80	14.1	8.8

70-90	16.0
90-100	—

ACCELERATION IN 4TH

10-30	—
20-40	8.9
30-50	8.5
40-60	8.5
50-70	8.3
60-80	8.5
70-90	10.3

FUEL CONSUMPTION

30	35.5
40	33.9
50	32.3
60	30.6
70	28.9
80	26.5
90	24.1
100	—
Overall	19.1
Touring	25.2

GENERAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Cylinders	4 in line
Capacity	1605 cc
Bore/stroke	78/84 mm
Cooling	Water
Block	Aluminium alloy
Head	Aluminium alloy
Valves	Ohv, cam in top of block
Compression	10.25:1
Carburettor	Twin 45DCOE
Bearings	5 main
Fuel pump	Manual
Max power	140 bhp (SAE) at 6250 rpm
Max torque	109 lb ft (SAE) at 5000 rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Type	5-speed manual
Clutch	SDP diaphragm spring
Internal ratios and mph/1000 rpm	
Top	1.03:1/20.5
4th	1.21:1/117.4
3rd	1.61:1/13.1
2nd	2.33:1/9.1
1st	3.61:1/5.8
Rev	3.08:1
Final drive	3.27:1

BODY/CHASSIS

Construction	Fibreglass body steel chassis
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SUSPENSION

Front	Independent double wishbone coil spring and roll bar
Rear	Independent double wishbone coil spring and roll bar

STEERING

Type	Rack and pinion
Assistance	None

BRAKES

Type	Disc all round
Servo	Yes
Circuit	Twin

WHEELS

Type	Aluminium alloy x 13
Tyres	165 x 13 XAS f 185 x 13 XAS re
Pressures	23F; 31R

COMPARISONS

	Capacity cc	Price £	Max mph	0-60 sec	30-50 sec	Overall mpg	Touring mpg
Renault Alpine 310	1605	4392	130	8.6	14.4	19.1	25
Lotus +2S 130	1558	3210	117.4	7.7	8.5	21.0	28
MGB V8	3528	2309	125.3	7.7	6.2	19.8	28
Jaguar E-Type 2+2	5343	3924	146	6.4	6.0	14.5	18
Alfa Romeo Montreal	2593	4999	135.2	8.1	8.8	13.8	—

*in top/5th for Montreal and Alpine