WEEK ENDING JUNE 3 · 1972 · 12½p

Motor

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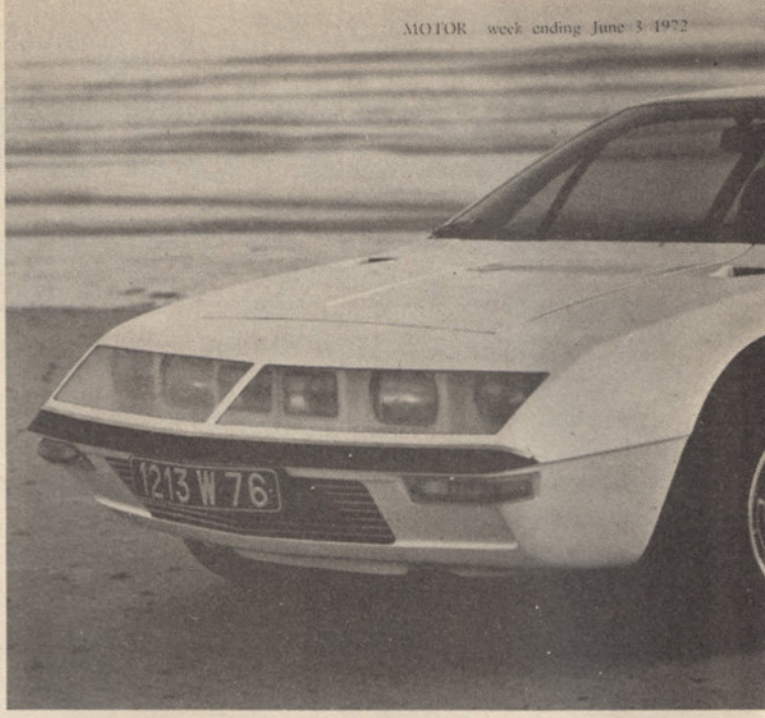
VIVA 2300 SL ESTATE— POOR MAN'S GTE ?

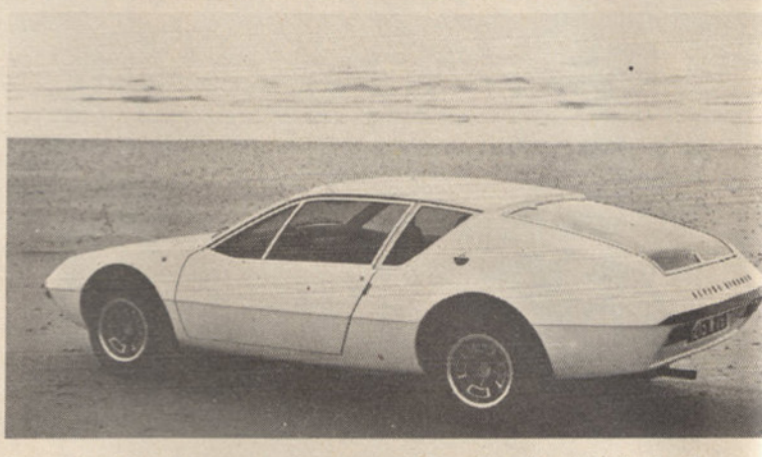
Also tested VIVA 2300 SL SALOON

Radio and tape — How do you choose?

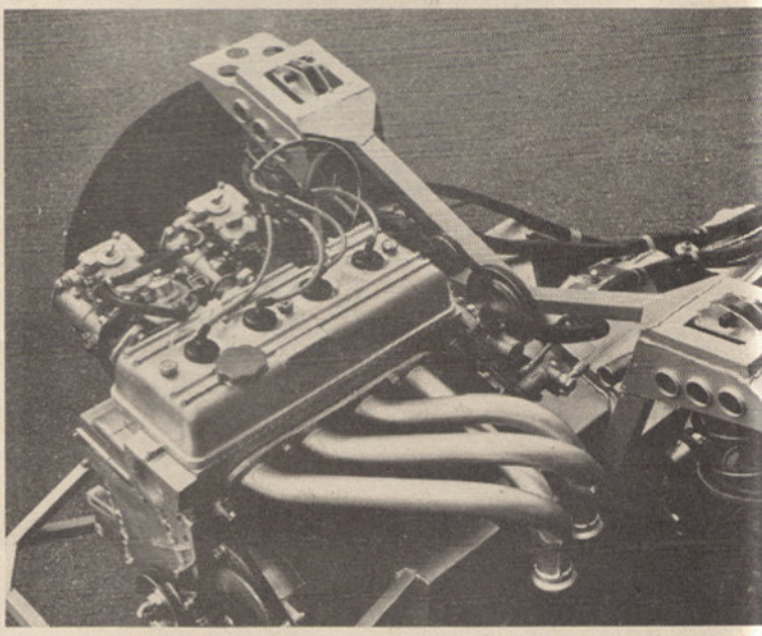
Paul Frère's Diary

Driving the fast new Alpine Renault A310 — it does 128mph





The rear window hinges up to give access to the engine, above; the brake discs and upper wishbones are Renault parts, right; the 1605cc engine is similar to the Renault 12 Gordini unit, below



Alpine is a force to reckon with in international rallies. Successes which include a 1-2-3 victory in the 'Monte' last year and the 1971 European Rally Championship have brought the small company founded by former rally driver Jean Rédelé full factory backing from Renault, to the point of full competition engines being developed by Renault for Alpine, though the latter also have their own engine development department.

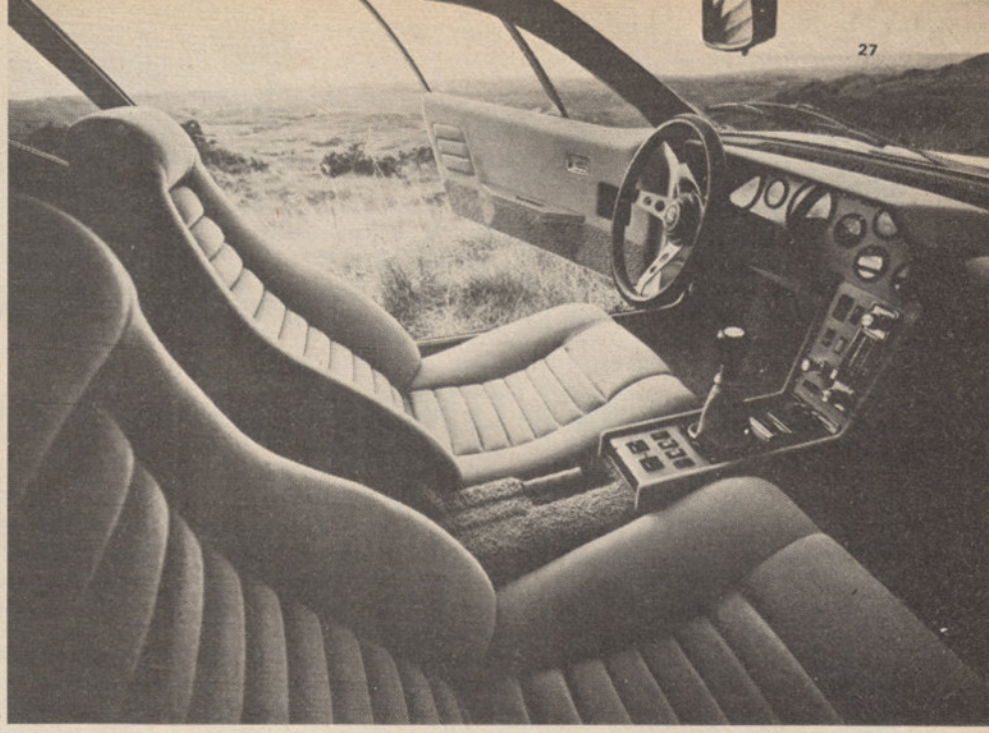
With the overwhelming Monte Carlo victory still in everybody's mind, the announcement of an entirely new Alpine model at the Geneva Show last year could not have been timed better, and this car with its strikingly modern but functional lines was the sensation of the Show. It took the men in Dieppe nearly another year however to get the model to the production line, and one of them was entrusted to me just when I intended to go on a skiing holiday. This really was a problem, for the car has no sort of luggage locker whatever, neither has it any rain gutter to which a ski rack can be attached. But somehow we managed. Much to my wife's disgust, we filled the rear seats (really quite acceptable and well shaped — but not for luggage!) with what must have been about 57 small packages and bags, and strap-type ski-carriers, plus several sandows, managed to keep the skis roof-borne, even at full speed.

The lack of luggage space is accounted for by the fact that the 13in. space-saver tyre promised by Goodrich did not materialize, so the spare wheel had to be accommodated in the car's nose, together with the fuel tank, because there is not enough room in the engine room where it was originally intended to keep it.

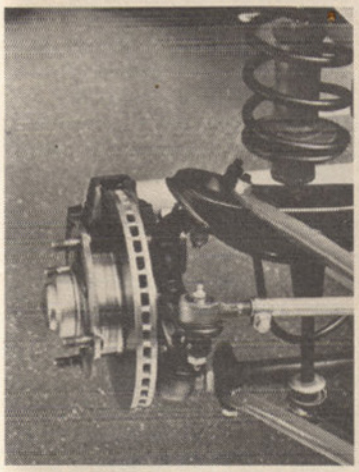
When the A310 was announced, many people were surprised that the makers had stuck to the overhung rear engine instead of the now fashionable central engine layout. The obvious reason for this choice was to find space for reasonable rear-seat accommodation within a light and compact car, and Alpine decided that with their experience of rear engines, they could solve the handling problem. For this they went to some trouble, designing their own transverse wishbone rear suspension instead of using Renault parts. In fact the only major Renault parts in the whole chassis are the upper front-suspension wishbones, the rack-and-pinion steering gear and the R12 Gordini-type ventilated disc brakes.

The chassis is a stiff tubular backbone, as before, to which the glassfibre body is bonded. The handling is helped by alloy wheels with 6½in. wide rims — very wide if related to the car's weight of less than 18cwt. They are shod with special Michelin XAS tyres using the "Formula France" rubber mix which give the car quite outstanding road clinging abilities though, as I found out, the grip afforded by this sort of rubber on snow is virtually nil.

Since the engine used is practically the same as in the Renault 12 Gordini the power available (some 120 to 125 hp net) is by no means overwhelming for a car that, even in France, sells for the price of a middle-range Porsche 911. Consequently, particular care was taken to keep the drag as low as possible, the full-size car being tested several times in a wind tunnel before the final shape was evolved. Surely the mean timed speed of 128 mph obtained is a credit to the car's aerodynamics — even though the plexiglas rear window which replaced the slats fitted to the original Geneva Show car is said to have spoilt the drag factor slightly, while the special high hysteresis tyre mix costs another 1.5 mph, according to Rédelé. The switch from slats to glass for the rear window was because the French authorities would not accept the slats to which the Germans, for instance, never

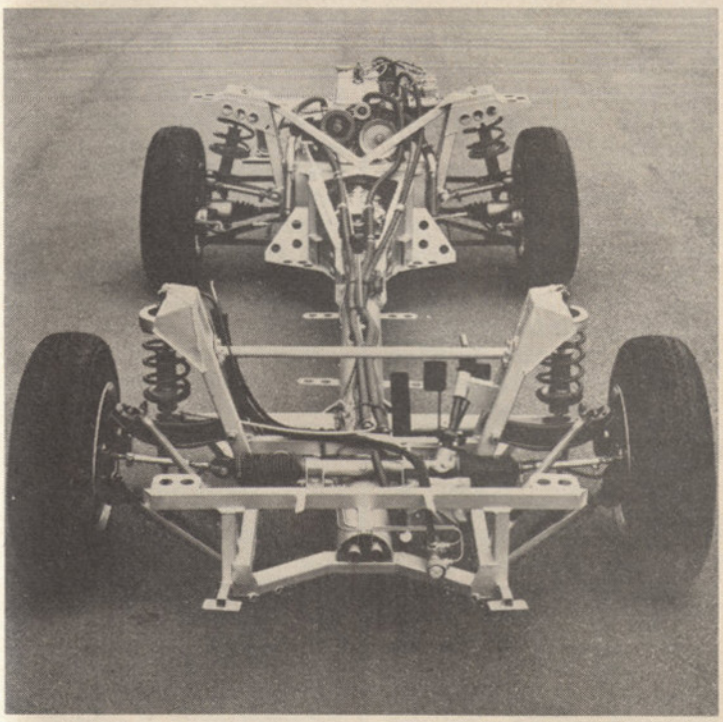


Excellent aerodynamics, fantastic lights, and a very good finish — and it looks nice, above; smart and comfortable interior, above right



objected. They may be reintroduced as an option where they are legal, as they provide better air extraction and keep the interior better sheltered from the sun, which could make the car a bit stuffy in summer.

The longer the run, the more the car endears itself to the driver, for it is really quite outstanding in many important aspects. Heading the list are certainly the handling and road holding and the makers certainly proved their point that — no doubt at the cost of a rather expensive and bulky suspension — a rear-engined car could be made to handle irreproachably, with none of that sense of tail-heaviness. The remarkable thing is that this has not been achieved at the expense of low-speed harshness or comfort. Quite the contrary, the Alpine A310 is a very comfortable long-distance car, both because of its well-damped suspension, its excellent seats and its relaxed driving position. Low wind and mechanical noises are other important assets and the steering is just about an enthusiast's dream come true, being high-geared, extremely positive and responsive with strong self-centring action. Unavoidably, there is some kick-back on rough roads, but this is not excessive, and it never becomes unduly heavy. It's the nearest thing to racing-car steering.



A310 without the skin. The chassis is entirely new, but Alpine have stuck to a tubular backbone

The A310 has about the only Renault five-speed gear-change mechanism that works properly and is almost sure to get you the gear you expect, but unfortunately the soft engine mountings induce considerable lever shake on rough roads and the transmission of a loud engine vibration through the lever on the overrun has yet to be cured. There are a few more snags such as poor threequarter rear vision, rather obtrusively thick windscreen pillars, too small a windscreen wiping area and a few other little things, but electric windows are standard and an interesting option is an electrically heated windscreen.

Acceleration is probably the least-enthralling important aspect of the car, at least when the type of car and its price class are taken into consideration. Off the mark and up to about 100 mph it has to try quite hard to stay with a BMW 2002 Tii or an Alfa 2000 Coupé, though from then on, its better shape and lower frontal area will enable it to run away from them. The engine is quite flexible however and very smooth for a four-cylinder unit. There is no limit indicated on the rev counter, but there does not seem to be much point in exceeding about 6600 rpm, 6100-6200 being indicated at the car's maximum speed. The excellent shape is reflected in its very low fuel consumption: driving flat out most of the time I got 21 mpg overall and a further run, equally fast, on German motorways produced an even more remarkable 22 mpg.

Sport followers will have noted that compared with the engines used in the small A110 Berlinetta and in the various Renault models, the bore is increased by 1 mm to bring the capacity just above the 1600 cc limit, reflecting the fact that, for sporting purposes, the engine will be bored up to as near two litres as possible. Some time will elapse, however, before the A310 can be homologated in the GT group for which 500 units must have been produced. Currently four A310s are made daily in Dieppe and there is a waiting list, but for the moment production cannot be increased as, much to Alpine's surprise, the new car has practically not cut into the market of the smaller Berlinetta which continues at the unabated rate of four units a day too.

Performance
Max. speed: 128 mph
Acceleration:

mph	sec
0- 50	6.3
0- 60	8.8
0- 70	11.3
0- 80	14.4
0- 90	18.5
0-100	25.3
0-110	37.0
1 km from s.s.	30.6

Fuel consumption: 30 to 27 mpg according to driving conditions