

DOCTOR ON THE ROAD: ALFA ROMEO TONALE

# Good-looker with an Achilles heel



The manufacturer says it is the 'beginning of a new Alfa Romeo era'. Our motoring correspondent

**Dr Tony Rimmer** (right) gives his view



The interior is a pleasant environment for both driver and passengers

WE COME across the influences of brand image on an almost daily basis in our medical world.

The big medical insurers work hard and spend lots of money on promoting their positive attributes to both us doctors and our general public clients.

Some have been around longer than others and they all use event sponsorship to increase general awareness and so hopefully their market share. A well recognised and respected brand has a great advantage in a competitive world.

Alfa Romeo is a car brand with a fantastic image created on the back of an impressive sporting heritage. The Alfa racing team was very successful in the 1930s and was run by a certain Enzo Ferrari before he set up his eponymous team in competition.

**Real charm**

Even the Alfa Romeo badge has real charm – the cross of the municipality of Milan and a mythical serpent swallowing a warrior.

When Alfa started building road cars in large quantities in the 1960s, they were all designed to be sporty in nature and drove really well.

I have fond memories of one of my first cars, an Alfasud, that performed better than most small saloons and was great fun to drive down a twisty 'B'-road. Unfortunately, it rusted very badly and very few survive to this day.

The brand then went through a few difficult decades producing cars that had bland styling and were not particularly special to drive.

Parent company FIAT knew that it had to do something special to rejuvenate the sporty image. In 2016, it launched the latest Giulia and this was a car that could truly compete with arch-rival BMW.

However, the Giulia and the related Stelvio SUV have not been big sellers. So, six years later, in 2022, the manufacturer announced 'the beginning of a new Alfa Romeo era' with the launch of a compact SUV: the Tonale.

It hopes to sell more of this new model in the UK than the Giulia and Stelvio sales combined. With a starting price of £38,620 – my test Veloce model is £42,520 – the Tonale competes directly with the Volvo XC40 and the Range Rover Evoque, both from alternative and well-respected brands.

**Cuts a dash**

The chassis is based on that of the Jeep Compass, which is an older FIAT platform. Fortunately, Alfa has pulled out the stops for the styling.

In a world of anonymous and anodyne small SUVs, the Tonale cuts a real dash. It looks smart and sporty with design references to Alfa sports cars of the past.

The interior continues the positive theme and it is a pleasant environment for both driver and passengers.

Rear legroom and headroom is adequate and the boot is of average size for the class.

Alfa Romeos should be all about the driving experience and, as far as the handling is concerned, the Tonale gives a pretty good account of itself.

The steering is sharp and the chassis control is better than I expected from a relatively old design base.

“In a world of anonymous and anodyne small SUVs, the Tonale cuts a real dash”

The adaptive dampers, standard on my Veloce test car, change the ride quality significantly. In Comfort mode, most bumps are smoothed out, but the Sport mode is too firm for our poor British road surfaces.

**Disappointing drivetrain**

But now we come to the Tonale's Achilles heel – the disappointing drivetrain. Powered by a four-cylinder 1.5litre mild hybrid engine that produces 158bhp, acceleration is leisurely.

It is made worse with a full complement of passengers and luggage, when it can feel quite strained at times, particularly on uphill stretches.

Compounding the problem is the automatic gearbox, which has an unnerving delay and seems to get confused as to what ratio it should select for the appropriate situation.

This is at its worst around town when stop-start motoring should be smooth and predictable. Perhaps the alternative, but £10,000 more expensive, plug-in hybrid version will be better in this respect, but I am yet to drive it.

So the Alfa Tonale is a great looking car that, in this version, is let down by its driving experience. It is a good small SUV package and the brand has great appeal, but I would recommend any medic with it on their short list goes for a good test drive first.

What I would really like Alfa Romeo to do is to produce an all-electric car that is fun to drive and would consolidate the brand's sporty image for a new generation of car buyers. ■

*Dr Tony Rimmer is a former NHS GP practising in Guildford, Surrey*

**ALFA ROMEO TONALE VELOCE**

- Body: Five-door SUV
- Engine: 1.5 litre four-cylinder turbo. Mild hybrid
- Power: 158bhp
- Torque: 440Nm
- Top speed: 131mph
- Acceleration: 0-62mph in 8.8 seconds
- Claimed fuel consumption (WLTP): 47mpg
- CO<sub>2</sub> emissions: 144g/km
- On-the-road price: £42,520