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**2015 Alfa Romeo 4C**

*Alfa returns to the U.S. market with this gorgeous road-going race car*

by Gary Witzenburg

 Alfa Romeo -- the romantic Italian marque that propelled *The Graduate's* Benjamin Braddock to rendezvous with Mrs. Robinson's daughter -- makes its racy return to the American market with this sensuous 2015 Alfa Romeo 4C mid-engine sports car. Alfa (partnered with Maserati as a unit of Fiat-Chrysler) sees this little beauty as a statement about Italian craftsmanship and lightweight materials and calls it "The Attainable Supercar" (looks like a baby Ferrari but priced like a Chevy Corvette),
  Alfa exited this market in 1995, partly because (like other Italian marques of the time) its reputation for questionable quality had depressed its sales to near-nothingness, and partly because the enormous costs of meeting U.S. safety, damageability, emissions and fuel economy regulations outweighed any profit on those few remaining sales. Then, after parent company Fiat absorbed bankrupt U.S. automaker Chrysler, Alfa sent over a token handful of breathtaking $265-300K 8C Competizione exotics in 2008-2009. Since then, U.S. Alfa enthusiasts have eagerly awaited this car.

 The first 500 U.S. Alfa 4Cs were $68,400 specially equipped Launch Edition coupes, but those that have followed start at $53,900. Under its gorgeous mid-engine, mini-Ferrari body is a unique combo of advanced materials and technologies, many from Alfa's racing heritage, including a carbon-fiber/aluminum structure and a 1750 cc (1.75L) all-aluminum direct-injected turbocharged, intercooled 4-cylinder engine with an "Alfa DNA" drive mode selector.

**Alfa DNA**

 The 4C's name recalls the marque's great sporting tradition, since Alfa's highly respected six- and eight-cylinder road and racing cars of the 1930s and '40s were designated 6C and 8C. Its very driver-oriented cockpit integrates elements derived from modern race cars with a fat, flat-bottom steering wheel, paddle-shifters, aluminum pedals, high-bolstered carbon fiber/fiberglass-reinforced sport seats, a thermoformed dashboard and exposed carbon-fiber structure. A seven-inch color thin-film transistor (TFT) instrument cluster displays large, clear graphics of vehicle speed, tachometer, fuel and temperature gauges, trip information and a (very welcome) rear park assist.
Its lightweight carbon-fiber monocoque central tub is designed for strength and stiffness, while its front and rear cell structures, roof reinforcements and engine-mounting frame are aluminum. Its low-density, high-strength composite body is 20 percent lighter (and dimensionally more rigid) than steel, its front and rear fascias and rear spoiler are PUR-RIM (injected polyurethane), and its windshield and side windows use 10 percent thinner glass to reduce weight by 15 percent.

**Diminutive size, big performance**

 Just 157.5 inches long, 73.5 inches wide and 46.6 inches high, the 2015 Alfa Romeo 4C offers near-supercar performance. With its seemingly modest 237 hp, it can leap from 0 to 60 mph in the mid-four-second range, corner at an astounding 1.1 lateral gs and generate 1.25 gs of braking, mostly because it weighs just 2,465 pounds (a weight-to-power ratio of 10.4 lb./hp).

 The intercooled turbo four boasts direct fuel injection, dual (intake and exhaust) continuously variable-valve timing (VVT), an eight-counterweight crankshaft and intake and exhaust systems optimized for its behind-the-cockpit mid-engine location. With 258 lb.-ft. of peak torque, 80 percent of that available as low as 1,700 rpm, it delivers near-instantaneous response. A paddle-shifted 6-speed twin-clutch transmission (TCT) that can also shift itself automatically is the only available gearbox. Its EPA fuel economy ratings are respectable at 24 mpg city, 34 highway and 28 combined.
 That DNA selector lets you choose your preferred level of engine, transmission and braking response through four modes: "All-Weather" for gentler responses for slippery conditions; "Natural" for touring comfort and drivability; "Dynamic" for more aggressive responses with less intrusive electronic stability control (ESC); and "Race" for total driver control with both ESC and anti-slip regulation (ASR) deactivated. The Race mode, intended for timed lapping or racing, incorporates a no-tire-spin launch-control and lets skilled drivers control traction at the rear drive wheels through the gas pedal while the Electronic differential control system remains active for fast corner exits.

**Driving impressions**

 Plop your back end into the contoured driver's seat, swing your legs, one at a time, over the wide carbon-fiber sill, and you're greeted by a hefty flat-bottom steering wheel but no discernible shifter. Instead of a traditional shift lever, the dual-clutch transmission's gears are initially selected by a quartet of round buttons on the console labeled "1" (First), "R" (Reverse), "N" (Neutral) and "A/M" (Automatic or Manual), then by "+" and "-" paddles behind the steering wheel spokes. Or you can choose Automatic mode and let it shift itself.

 The engine starts with a *braap*, then settles into a civilized idle. Initial gear selection (1 or R) is subtle -- you have to check the dash display to know you're in gear. Low-speed maneuvering is jerky and laborious with the heavy, unassisted steering. But once underway, the shifts -- whether manual or automatic -- are clean, crisp and lightning quick. And so is the car. As it revs in each gear, the gutsy little engine sounds like a muffled chainsaw behind your head -- though always in character, never too loud or harsh -- and it breathes with buzzy braaps between shifts.

 We've driven mid-engine race cars in anger, and this is about as close as it gets on the road. The lightweight suspension and race-bred tires generate incredible cornering (and braking) grip while the manual steering dances with road irregularities as you hang on and react instinctively to keep it on your intended path. Even on rough Michigan two-lanes, it's a blast to stand on the gas and *snarl, braap, snarl, braap, snarl braap* through the gears as it shoves you back into the tight bucket seat. The stiff suspension beats you up a bit when driven hard, but the 4C can also be a civilized cruiser.

 What are the downsides of this joyous Italian toy? Mid-engine sports cars position their engines behind the cockpit primarily to achieve perfect 50/50 front-to-rear weight balance, and therefore racer-like handling. But there are disadvantages. For one, the single 3.7 cu.ft. cargo bin is behind the engine in back, so send your luggage ahead. With its low roof, narrow doors and wide sills, getting in is tough, especially with long legs, and getting out tougher. Rear-side visibility is next to nil, and the narrow tunnel of vision out the back is barely adequate to see flashing red and blue lights in pursuit. If any car needs a rear-view camera and blind-spot information sensors, this is it.

 There's also no glovebox or console box, the sole 12V plug is way back on the console, so a dashtop device's cord stretches across in your way, and its plug gets bumped out by your arm. And the 4C's incomprehensible aftermarket-like radio offers just FM radio, SD Card or Aux input sources.

 Our Rosso Alfa Red test car was loaded with an $1,800 Convenience Package, a $2,400 Track Package, a $2,750 Leather package, $1,500 Sport Seats with Microfiber, $1,200 Pirelli P-Zero "Racing" tires on $1,800 18-in. (front) and 19" (rear) wheels, a $500 Racing Exhaust system, $1,000 Bi-Xenon headlamps and even $300 red brake calipers, plus a $1,295 Destination Charge, bringing its total sticker to $69,145. If that's within your budget and a baby Ferrari is on your bucket list, you may be able to find a 2015 Alfa Romeo 4C at one of 86 (and counting) U.S. Alfa Romeo dealers.

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