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Drive: Alfa Romeo Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica 5/7/9

Air Apparent: Dark, Moody, Shaped By The Wind, These Radical B.A.T. Concept Cars Leave Silent Stares In Their Wake

From the March 2006 issue of Motor Trend



Jaw-Dropping. That's the best way to describe these four-wheeled winged wonders. "Startling," "futuristic," and "mind-blowing" would work, too. But observe anyone who's seeing any one of the [Alfa Romeo](#) Bertone B.A.T. concept cars for the first time--much less all three of them standing together--and you'll see their mouths open in awe. Sometimes they utter an opinion or exclamation. Most just stare in silence, as auto-show goers have done for more than five decades. This visually arresting trio of Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnicas--B.A.T. for short--were as radical in their day as was the original Lamborghini Countach in its or the Ferrari Enzo is today. The B.A.T.

acronym is handy, for it not only initializes the name of the project, but accurately describes the look and mood of the cars. Designers and aerodynamicists have long attempted to conceive vehicles that can cheat, or at least work with, the wind. Flying animal references also have been used before. But seldom has any of it been done in such a dramatic way as with these three Alfa concept cars of the 1950s. Giuseppe "Nuccio" Bertone was a 39-year-old up-and-comer in the Italian design world when the B.A.T. 5--the first of the three--rocked the Turin Auto Show in April 1953. The only son of Carrozzeria Bertone founder Giovanni Bertone, Nuccio had literally grown up in the coachbuilding business.



Giovanni founded the family concern 41 years earlier after working for five years in the Diatto workshops where he made railroad carriage bodies. From its inception to 1921, Carrozzeria Bertone mainly built and repaired horse-drawn carriages before he graduated to automobile bodies when SPA engineer Cesare Momo recommended that Bertone design and construct the coachwork for a customer's car. Commissions from Lancia, Fiat, SCAT, and others soon followed. Nuccio began working in the firm in 1933, a fruitful period when the carrozzeria made a number of aerodynamic Fiats designed by Mario Revelli, a prolific and often overlooked stylist. Nuccio styled several cars himself, often using designers such as Revelli as sounding boards. But his real talent was management. He adeptly handled the company during the war, keeping the workshops busy by meeting the needs of the various branches of the military. Following the war, Nuccio participated in Italy's growing racing scene; some of the cars he competed in were clothed with Bertone bodies. His racing activities continued until 1952, at which time he stopped competing altogether. As much as Nuccio loved racing, his reason for withdrawing was simple. Father Giovanni was in his mid-60s, so he handed the reins of the company over to Nuccio in 1949. Two years later, when business languished, Nuccio looked outside Italy to create demand for his firm's services. The result of his casting an international net was presented at 1952's Turin show where Carrozzeria Bertone displayed a handsome but restrained coupe on an MG TD chassis. This caught the attention of American entrepreneur Stanley Arnolt, who commissioned Bertone to produce a series of them. A little more than 100 Arnolt-MGs were made, a huge number at the time. Turin 1952 also was important to Bertone for another reason. The coachbuilder had a one-off Abarth 1500 at the show, and this radical machine was the first step to the [Alfa Romeo B.A.T.s](#). It featured a low-slung nose with a large center light that supplemented the traditional headlights. Cutouts were seen over the front and rear wheels, the rear roof and trunkline were steeply raked, and small winglets appeared over the rear fenders.



B.A.T 5 Interior

The Abarth's avant-garde design was the work of Bertone's new chief stylist, Franco Scaglione. At 35, Scaglione was three years Nuccio's junior, hailed from Florence, and had studied engineering. The war interrupted Scaglione's education, but that didn't stop him from entering the automotive industry as a designer. Quiet and reserved, beneath that placid exterior was a design mind unlike any other--ask Italy's stylists who are the greatest "artists" of their craft, and Scaglione is usually one of the first names mentioned.



B.A.T 5

The unknown Scaglione's innate flamboyance and Bertone's coaching skills were announced loud and clear at Turin 1953 when the carrozzeria brought the house down with Scaglione's first true masterpiece, the B.A.T. 5, the number representing it as the fifth idea or sketch in a series of fastback aerodynamic studies. The concept behind the Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica was to make a body as free of aerodynamic drag and turbulence as possible. Only Carrozzeria Touring's two-tone one-off Pegaso Thrill matched the B.A.T. 5 for pure audacity at Turin. Under the B.A.T.'s startling skin was an Alfa 1900 Sprint chassis that featured a 98.4-inch wheelbase and had coil springs front and rear, with unequal-length transverse links up front and an upper triangular link and lower struts in back. The 100-horse, 1884cc inline-four was in unit with an all-synchro four-speed gearbox. Bertone claimed a top speed of 200 kph (125 mph), some 15 mph

greater than the standard 1900 Sprint. That Bertone used an [Alfa Romeo](#) chassis likely raised a few eyebrows. From outside the industry, it seemed Bertone had little to no prior experience with Alfa, but, behind the scenes, Nuccio had actively been working with Alfa since 1952. The company originally approached Bertone about making a 1900 model based on Touring's avant-garde Disco Volante, but this led nowhere, so talks soon turned into a role in the design, then the development and eventual production of the Giulietta Sprint. That landmark production Alfa Gran Turismo broke cover at 1954's Turin show, the same venue for Nuccio and Scaglione's next masterpiece, the B.A.T. 7. This one-off Alfa was even more over the top than the B.A.T. 5, with wings that swooped in more toward the rear glass, a small fin running the length of the split-rear-window center section, and proportions even more startling than those of its predecessor.



B.A.T 7

Up front, the nose was lower, and the protrusions where the headlights would normally be found stuck out even further. The headlights themselves were located next to the nose and swiveled down when in use. Even Fiat's experimental one-off wind-tunnel-derived Turbine car, which also made its debut at the show, seemed tame in comparison. Turin 1955 brought the introduction of the B.A.T. 9, the third and final element of the project to make it to metal. Based on a 1900 C Super Sprint chassis, this time Scaglione's exuberance for design seemed more restrained. The rear split window remained, but now the fins seemed to draw directly from Fiat's Turbine car of the previous year. The rear wheels were exposed for the first time, and the greenhouse was more conventional. Up front, the lights were traditional, inset behind clear covers in the front wings. The general design, proportions, and styling cues of the B.A.T. 9 were seen on a number of other Bertone design projects throughout the balance of the 1950s; these included a one-off Abarth 215 A coupe, Bertone's limited-production Alfa Romeo Sprint Speciale, and a one-off [Maserati](#) 3500 GT in 1959.



B.A.T 7 Interior

Never before or since has there been such audacious designs on a series of three one-offs, each appearing at the same show a year apart. But there's much more to the B.A.T. patrimony than a handful of custom coachwork specials. These unforgettable prototypes represented a turning point not only for the coachbuilder, but also the Italian design industry. Prior to Turin 1953, Bertone was widely recognized in the second and third tier of coachbuilding companies, a distance behind leaders Carrozzeria Touring and Pinin Farina. More important and on a much larger scale, the B.A.T.s were instrumental in making the world aware of Italian design creativity and capabilities. Much of the B.A.T.s' success was a reflection of Nuccio himself. Bertone had great belief in his capabilities and used his taste to anchor and guide his stylists. He also was a huge risk taker, not only in design but in business—he undertook the majority of the financial risk when Alfa finally decided to put the Giulietta Sprint into mass production. That move, along with the irrepressible legacy of the B.A.T.s, vaulted Nuccio and his firm to the front lines of global automotive design and production and made Carrozzeria Bertone the only true rival to Pininfarina throughout the early 1960s.



Go ahead. Look at the B.A.T.s one more time. See? There goes your jaw. Slipping my six-foot-three-inch frame into the B.A.T. 5 takes work. The roofline is high enough; it's the lowness of the door that causes trouble, making me kink my neck in an unusual position. Little do I realize, as my chiropractor will later remind me, it'll be the first of three such kinks requiring adjustment.



B.A.T 9

The comfortable bucket seat was advanced for the time and offers good lower back support but little side bolstering. The steering wheel is close and upright, the instruments legible through the three spokes. Headroom is good, legroom compromised. Obviously, neither Franco Scaglione nor Nuccio Bertone played forward or center on their high school basketball team. Insert the key, give it a twist, and press the starter knob. The 1884cc twin-cam four-cylinder rasps awake, the exhaust sounding like a motorboat at idle. The floor-mounted clutch has light pedal pressure, and, after a bit of modulation, the car departs smoothly. Despite a large turning circle and several turns lock to lock, the steering is heavy at a dead stop and low speed. Acceleration is leisurely at first, a good portion of this due to adjusting to the prototype's dimensions that seem to disappear off into nowhere over that otherworldly hood. The biggest surprise is the gearbox. The B.A.T. 5 uses the standard 1900 four-speed transmission, and the car is all the better for it. The throws are firm and direct, each shift notchy in a good way--think a good Borg-Warner T-10. As I start pushing the B.A.T. 5 through corners, the gearbox makes heel-and-toe downshifts a delight. Hindering the car's initial cornering prowess is the placement of the A-pillar and the lowness of the windshield. It's difficult to see a turn's apex, and, coupled with a fair amount of body roll, the B.A.T. 5 doesn't scream at you to go faster. On the plus side, the ride is compliant, and the four-cylinder powerplant sounds lovely around 4000 rpm when your foot is in it.



B.A.T 5

Equally alluring, though not entirely practical, is the view out the back window. The thick pillar splits the screen, the rake is nothing short of fabulous, the view as Jetsonesque as one could imagine. Another cool touch is the hand crank for the window, the rectangular crank you hold on to staying perpendicular when winding the window up or down. Then there's the single pushbutton for the door; depress it, give the door a light shove, and it swings open. I want to spend more time here--but two more B.A.T.s are beckoning to be driven.



B.A.T 5

The B.A.T. 7 has a similar low roofline to the B.A.T. 5, but is much roomier inside. The rear-hinged suicide door opens wide, but you still must watch the low opening when entering. Scaglione didn't experiment as much with the interior of the 7, for the seats are flatter than those in the B.A.T. 5. Legroom is nothing short of superb; the upright wheel not feeling quite as close. The 7's design is dominated by those radical fins, so it's no surprise the driving experience is all about those two "can't miss 'em" appendages. You don't sit as low as in the B.A.T. 5, so whether looking out the driver or passenger side, the fins swoop along a good portion of the doors, giving the car a sense of drama even when standing still. The rear three-quarter view is practically nonexistent, straight behind through the split window, about equal to the B.A.T. 5. At the encouragement of the cars' caretaker, Paul Osborn, I grab the 7 by the scruff of its neck and give it a good caning down the road. It responds beautifully, the four-cylinder engine relishing the work, the song becoming so much smoother as the revs increase. The four-speed gearbox is just as lovely as the 5's, and acceleration is reasonable with the pedal to the metal. Something must be loose in the engine compartment, though, for an enormous metallic racket accompanies the traditional Alfa four-cylinder song when hard on it in midrange. Once you know the noise is there and thus don't worry, the B.A.T. 7 is the most fun and rewarding to drive. Now familiar with our deserted test route, I push the B.A.T. 7 hard into turns. Its lean doesn't seem as severe as the B.A.T. 5's, and the rear end becomes loose more than once when I clip an apex. Just keep your foot in it, correct the steering wheel, and everything comes back into position as you exit the turn.



B.A.T 7

Also like the 5, the 7's ride is comfortable, soaking up imperfections in the road. Steering is not the most sensitive, particularly dead ahead, but it does the job and wouldn't beat you up on a long-distance trip. I warm up to the B.A.T. 7 as the minutes go by. After blowing by Osborn toward the end of my second run, he later quips, "I didn't think you were coming back." Hmm. The thought never crossed my mind.



B.A.T 7

The B.A.T. 9 also is exercised on the same stretch of road and given a much longer drive late that night for its return to the Pebble Beach garage where it and its two siblings reside before and after their showing at the concours. This roofline may be the lowest, but the instant you squeeze into the 9, it feels the most modern of the trio, belying its 1955 vintage. It's light and airy, thanks in great part to the superb colors. The seats don't offer much lateral support, but would be perfectly at home in any living room. The five-speed gearbox's shift lever is kinked back like a Cobra's, making for an easy reach in any gear. The engine fires quickly and at rest the steering is about on par with the B.A.T. 7--relatively light but not decidedly quick. The engine pulls with vigor but isn't a free revver; seeing this Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica has the freshest restoration, a bit of time under the hood would likely solve its restricted breathing. The five-speed is a delight. The throws are longer than the 5's and 7's four-speed, but the action is lighter, and you can shift it relatively quickly. Once you hit freeway speeds, dropping it into fifth makes the B.A.T. 9 the most relaxed cruiser of the three. And hit the freeway we do for the return to the garage. Visibility all around is good in spite of a roofline that would fit me much better with a Zagato double-bubble. The ride is compliant at highway speeds, and the expanse of glass and lack of exaggerated fins are a bonus when keeping startled SUVs at bay.



B.A.T 9

After a gas stop and a few miles on the freeway, we head down Pebble Beach's famed 17-Mile Drive. Here, I use the B.A.T. 9 the hardest, its meager headlamps doing a reasonable job of keeping the road lit. With the pedal near the metal down the straights, I typically use third and fourth gears then brake early for turns. A blip of the throttle is followed by a downshift, and you point the nose where you want because the A-pillar is considerably more friendly in its positioning. Then it's hard on the throttle through the turn, hitting the upshift as you come out.



The only letdown is the softness of the suspension and the driver's seat. Several times, my head is going up as the car is rebounding downward, once again proving that Signori Scaglione and Bertone didn't have tall people in mind when they designed and developed their remarkable B.A.T.s. Enthusiasts will forever debate which of the B.A.T.s is coolest. **B.A.T. 5** set the stage for all the outrageousness

and is the least recognizable as any sort of [Alfa Romeo B.A.T. 9](#) is the most true to the marque, as demonstrated by the grille and headlamps; **B.A.T. 7** is somewhere in between, although IT had the most radical wing treatment of the trio. Only when viewed as a family IS the difference between them clear. And you thought the 1959 Caddy's fins were over the top? These are detail-rich cars, but since they were built on a production-car chassis, THEY were all runners. Popular now, but unusual for the day. Each piece of glass was hand cut and formed.



B.A.T 5

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