

MOTORING

The **Panda**, displayed at the Motor Show but not due to go on sale here before next spring, is Fiat's answer to the roomy runabouts like the Citroën Deux Chevaux or Renault 4. Although the back can be turned into a load-carrier comparable with a small delivery van, into a camping car or a hammock for a young baby, the Panda is a less bucolic vehicle than the Citroën or Renault. It has an admirable ride (as does the Austin Metro) and I found it as content thrusting through Rome's crazy rush hour as it was humming along the autostrada at 70-75 mph. The Panda must be one of the cheapest cars of its kind to make. All the glass and most of the panels are flat, yet the finished result does not look disagreeably slab-sided.

Car of the Year juries are no less nationalistic than the rest of the population of the countries from which they are drawn. That being so, I think the Panda will just beat the Metro into second place. The Italians will, naturally, give it their votes. So, I suspect, will the French. And the Germans, though not unsympathetic to the Metro's claims, will favour the Panda, not least because Fiat's service network in Germany is more credible than BL's.



The next most important car as a crowd-puller at the NEC is the new **Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit**, with its longer wheelbase **Silver Spur** and the **Bentley Mulsanne** variants. Mechanically, the most important change to the Silver Spirit by comparison with the Silver Shadow II it supersedes is the redesigned rear suspension. For some years people like me have been pulling Rolls-Royce's corporate leg by pointing out that buyers of a Jaguar XJ-12 spend less than half as much money on a car that is faster, handles better, is quieter and rides more comfortably. With the appearance of the Silver Spirit this is no longer true.

The Jaguar XJ-12 is still faster and costs not much more than one-third of the Silver Spirit's £50,000. It handles better, too, but is no longer any quieter or better-riding. Rolls-Royce rear

passengers now have a superlatively good ride in the Silver Spirit. The fuel consumption of around 15 mpg on a run is 20 per cent better than that of the original Silver Shadow—a matter, perhaps, of greater social than financial importance for the man who can afford to invest so breathtaking a sum in his personal transport.

The Silver Spirit corners swiftly without disturbing its passengers and is sepulchraly silent right up to its 120 mph maximum. The annoying tyre harshness that used to disturb rear seat passengers has been eliminated. I prefer a power steering set-up which gives a little more feel of the road than the Silver Spirit's. Rolls-Royce say that most customers like it as it is but I believe the next improvements to be announced to the cars in the mid 80s will include a

reduction in the blandness of the steering. A smaller, more economical V8 engine is envisaged, too, along with an overdrive for the three-speed automatic transmission.

In appearance the Rolls-Royce has changed considerably. It now looks rather like the offspring of a Silver Shadow and one of the grander Mercedes saloons. Whether the Rolls is a mechanical marvel or a magnificent anachronism is not for me to say. What is beyond doubt is that it is a glorious machine to drive or ride in.

On the remaining show stands, sensations are few and far between. All manufacturers, however, are showing awareness of the need to make their cars more economical and price-competitive at a time when competition for sales has never been tougher.



The latest **Audi**, the 80 coupé, made its début at the Paris show a few weeks ago and will not be on sale in Britain until the spring. It uses the same body shell as the Quattro, that sensational four-wheel-drive, very high performance coupé that stopped the show at Geneva last spring and is, for me, the most interesting car to appear this year. Audi use electronics in the 80 coupé to make a little yellow arrow light up to warn the driver that he is wasting petrol by over-speeding the engine in low gear.

Alfa Romeo return to the luxury car market for the first time in 15 years with the V6-engined saloon simply called "The 6". Its equipment is of almost unparalleled completeness and, for what it is, the under £12,000 price tag is not expensive. Whether the magic of the Alfa Romeo name will persuade senior businessmen to buy what is a remarkably sober looking five-seat saloon remains to be seen.

BMW have produced the ultimate "stretch" of their nearly eight-year-old 5-series saloon by fitting it with a 3.5 litre, fuel-injected engine from the large 7-series cars. This 140 mph executive express with limited slip differential has power enough to lock horns successfully with cramped and nervous supercars, yet it accommodates five people and their luggage and costs a relatively modest £13,745.