

THIS CAR ISN'T POWERED BY an engine, it's powered by a huge Roman candle. Every time I pull back on the gearlever, there's a sharp explosion and a dizzying blast slams the Xantia forward. This is brutal power, nastily delivered. No less than 700bhp – more than some of the guys on the back of the FT grid get to play with – from a 2.0-litre turbo.

But there's nothing below 4500rpm, so hair-pins are painful. Even going down to first, the engine is way off boost and the floored throttle is a fizzing fuse paper. Nothing happens for an age and then IG-NITION – hello, new time/space dimension. The thump in the back is a lead pipe mugging, the revs rocket and the Xantia leaps forward. Jerk the lever back to up-shift, there's a cannon shot from the exhaust and the assault continues.

This is the nature of modern rallycross, a sport that livened up '70s Saturday afternoons on *Grandstand*, with foggy footage from Brands Hatch or Lydden. Wide-arched Minis and Escorts, plus the odd 911, flinging mud at each other. The slick, professional professionalism that is the British Touring Car Championship now occupies that slot, and the public knows Will Hoy, a mere top 10 BTCC finisher, better than the UK's rallycross mudmeister, Will Gollop. In France, however, top rallycross attracts BTCC-size crowds, and drivers like Jean-Luc Pailler open supermarkets.

This is the car that Jean-Luc built, not only the quickest Citroën Xantia on the planet but one of the fastest-accelerating cars, period. He reckons it'll get to 60mph in well under three seconds, so we've turned up with some very sophisticated test gear to time it. It marks the end



Turbo breathes through ventilated dustbin. Not the same dustbin that the Xantia trim went into

of an era; the FIA is introducing engine restrictors to the European championship, and replacing slicks with 25 percent treaded tyres. By the first race of the season, the Xantia and its rivals will be struggling with a piffling 500bhp...

It's a unique car, designed by the 42-year-old Frenchman with the weighty support of Citroën Sport. Pailler's competition career has been double chevron and rallycross all the way, starting with 2CV Cross back in 1976. He was 2CV champion twice, has been French rallycross champion six times (1991 to present), and was European champion in 1993 at the wheel of his BX 4x4 Turbo. The Xantia has evolved from the BX, and Citroën provides its manic motor.

Bonnet off, the first thing that strikes you is the hugeness of the turbocharger. It's almost as wide as the red-painted cylinder head and breathes through an air-filter the size of a biscuit barrel. The four-cylinder 16-valve engine is derived from that used by the Citroën Rally Raid cars, and the second thing you notice is that it's mounted north/south, not transversely. This

simplifies the packaging and the four-wheel-drive installation, a custom-built affair using a SADEV five-speed sequential gearbox and differential internals.

The turbo's intercooler hogs all the fresh air entering the front of the engine bay, and the water radiators are displaced to the boot. They're fed by ducts above the rear wheels, which is one reason why Pailler's is the widest car in European rallycross. His main rivals have pumped-up small hatches, including an Escort RS2000, Peugeot 306 and Citroën ZX, and Pailler admits to at least one unintentional wide arch/pit wall interface.

Unexpectedly, the suspension lurking beneath the steel shell and carbonfibre panels is pretty much standard Citroën hydropneumatic. Good for Citroën PR, bad for setting up the car. The fluid is sensitive to ambient temperature, which means an optimum set-up today won't be tomorrow if it's cooler or warmer. A simple temperature compensator isn't allowed because the rules call that active suspension, which is banned. That eliminates the Activa system, too.

Today, it's very cold but the concern is that the slick tyres, not the suspension, get to the right temperature. A few warm-up laps are required, and Pailler suggests I strap myself into the passenger seat to get an idea of what's waiting for me.

My second mistake is to assume there's a neat footrest sprouting from the raised aluminium floor. In fact, it's the heat shield for the exhaust downpipe, and if I brace my shoe against it, it'll melt like toffee. Sitting knees-up, one foot on the flat carbon transmission tunnel, the other braced on the roll cage, I feel like I'm in stirrups, ready for childbirth. But it's kittens I'm having.

Pailler flicks a few switches, presses a big





No flames, no drama, just pure speed



This is not your light-pressure-turbocharged engine. No. This baby runs a hefty 36psi boost in combat trim

black button and the 2.0-litre turbo motor from hell mumbles quietly into life. No roar, no gnashing or wailing, just a soft, steady idle. It sounds like it would easily pass the most stringent road-car noise regulations.

Then the world reverses past us. By the time I've thought, 'Ah, boost,' Mr Pailler has grabbed second, third and fourth, rounded a long, damp right and is lining up a hairpin. After two laps of twist and turn, punctuated by neck-snapping boost, he's happy that everything works and tries the engine out for real. Yes; so far, he's been feathering the throttle.

He plants it exiting the long right-hander in fourth, and I stop breathing. I start again three laps later, when Pailler peels off into the pit lane and shoots me a wink.

'Before you drive, we adjust the boost,' says Pailler. I grin and nod, assuming the mechanic trying not to barbeque himself on the turbo is turning the wick down a bit. Er, no. It's running well, and has been cleared for maximum boost - that's 36psi, 705bhp and 633lb ft of torque.

There's no way to ease the turbo in; even on a tickle of gas, at 4500rpm the engine goes from uninterested to full-on. The torque curve must look like a bar graph. Cross the threshold with the accelerator pinned and the Xantia doesn't so much accelerate as instantly gain 20mph. There's no slip or scrabble - the four-wheel drive system and slicks convert 100 percent of the power into forward motion, so the thing simply catapults between corners.

Progress isn't that simple on the twisty track, however. On the loose where it competes, the Xantia would be drifting, all four wheels slipping but driving. On dry tarmac it's stop-start, all but the shallowest of corners demanding a firm prod of the brake because you arrive at them so incredibly quickly. After half a dozen

'Before I've thought, "Ah, boost," Pailler has grabbed second, third and rounded a long right turn'

laps of hefting the wheel, standing on the brakes and tensing before the power slams in out of the hairpins, I'm exhausted.

It's time to put some hard figures to its performance. Our regular test gear would be fazed by the violence of a 700bhp, four-wheel-drive standing start, so we're using a remote-sensing radar system by Micromet. The Xantia carries a transponder, which Pailler's mechanics thoughtfully tie-wrap into place, and the rest of

the gear sits in another car, with me, at the end of the short straight. That's short for most cars but plenty long enough for the Xantia.

Five hundred feet away, Pailler revs up and sidesteps the clutch. The Xantia squats and there's a puff of blue tyre smoke as one pair of Avons paw the tarmac. With a violent roar from the side-exit exhaust, the red blob grows... and then flashes by. Like the most expensive fireworks in the shop, it's over in six seconds flat.

On the way, the Xantia has clocked 60mph in just 2.55sec, pulled a peak of 1.2g (few cars manage that under braking) and travelled just 112ft. If it had started at the corner flag of a football pitch, it would have hit 60mph before the halfway line. Meanwhile, 100mph has taken 5.80sec and less than 500ft.

That's what I call a blast. 🏎️



Power and grip exhausted poor old Barker

Specifications Rallycross Xantia

Engine	2040cc 16-valve turbo four, longitudinal front-mounted
Power	705bhp
Torque	633lb ft
Power-to-weight	681bhp per tonne
Transmission	Five-speed sequential manual, four-wheel drive
Brakes front/rear	Ventilated discs, four pot calipers
Tyres	Avon slicks
Length/width/wheelbase	4400/1900/2740mm
Weight	1035kg
PERFORMANCE	
0-30mph	1.25sec
0-40mph	1.75sec
0-50mph	2.13sec
0-60mph	2.55sec
0-70mph	3.23sec
0-80mph	3.87sec
0-90mph	4.72sec
0-100mph	5.80sec
Top speed	110mph