

# FIAT 500: FRISKY, FRUGAL, FULL OF FUN

BY JOE SAGE



You might think Chrysler is into big round numbers these days, as an updated Chrysler 300 is complemented by a new 200, and—through their marriage to Fiat—they now bring us the Fiat 500. But it's just a coincidence. The Fiat 500 has been around for decades.

First was the Fiat 500 Topolino, from 1936 to 1955—a tiny car with a sweeping hood and grille, coincidentally reminiscent of the Chrysler Airflow from the '30s.

The forebear of the new Fiat 500 came next. 4 million copies of the most familiar Cinquecento (500) were produced in Italy from 1957 to 1975, a bit belatedly helping in a big way with Italy's economic recovery.

A Fiat Cinquecento in the 1990s succeeded the Fiat 126, which had replaced the 500 after 1975. Both were grim little cars with an Iron Curtain flavor. But in the post-Soviet era, Fiat's same factory in Poland geared up to produce a new 500 for the new millennium, launching in Europe in 2007. The Fiat 500 is also built in Toluca, Mexico, birthplace of our test car. (This plant also builds the Dodge Journey and just discontinued the PT Cruiser.)

As Fiat says, "this is where history begins again."

## SO, IS THIS CAR SMALL?

The return of Fiat to our shores has met with great anticipation. We had seen the Fiat 500 at several car shows and events but hadn't been behind the wheel, so we, too, awaited our test car with great curiosity.

The first thing we said when we got in the car was, "Man, this is small!" Size, of course, is basically the car's whole *raison d'être*. Er, *ragione per essere*.

How small is it? The new Fiat 500 is about 140 inches long, 64 inches wide and 60 inches tall. It sports a 4-cylinder engine and weighs about 2400 pounds. (This makes the Fiat 500 about 100 pounds lighter and six inches shorter than a MINI Cooper.) The 1957-75 Cinquecento was considerably smaller: powered by a 2-cylinder engine, the car weighed in at just 1100 pounds, measuring about 117 inches in length (under ten feet!) and 52 inches each in width and height. Safety, performance and technological improvements—and of course updated buyer expectations and demands—have brought us a slightly larger tiny car, suitable for faster and busier roads and maybe even for the long haul of the American highway. But the new 500's style, charm and personality—and surely its position as among the smallest of the small—are completely intact. With its wheels set far at the corners, spaciousness and handling are maximized.



If you want something even smaller, there is always the Smart—its fortwo is just 98.4 inches long and weighs 1600 pounds. And it gets 36 mpg combined, but wait: the Fiat 500 gets 38 mpg highway and 33 mpg combined (with manual transmission), and this in a four-seater with a much more standard automobile format.

## MODELS AND FEATURES

The 500 comes in three trim levels. The Pop is priced at \$15,500 (plus \$500 destination charge), a well-equipped base model. Sport has enhanced suspension, steering, exhaust and aerodynamics, and adds some convenience features, at \$17,500. Both Pop and Sport come with a 5-speed manual, standard, but have a 6-speed automatic available. The Lounge is aimed at the stylish crowd, though most of its inclusions are available on the others (automatic, glass roof, Bose audio). Lounge comes only with automatic, with a base price of \$19,500. Equipped with all available options, Lounge can hit \$23,150.

Sport sounds like the best bet, with improved handling, plus creature comforts still available. And that's what we received as a test car, with 5-speed manual.

Putting some gear in the hatch area, with a couple of letters in hand, we discovered the incredible convenience of a small car that is open all the way through: we were able to just reach forward and put the mail in the front seat, from the back bumper.

The interior benefits from a continuation of the car's exterior paint—on ours a sparkly \$500 Rosso Brillante tri-coat—across the instrument panel. It has a sporty look, and including outside color helps open things up.

The car has mechanical seat adjustment (what do we expect in a \$17.5k car?), and the cabin is tight enough that we have to open the door to slide it back. A hardship? Or smart design? Why carry around enough bulk

and width to adjust your seat, all day every day, when you may only do it once? And before we sound too demeaning about what you get for \$17,500, check out the standard inclusions (sidebar): modern suspension, 4-wheel disc brakes with ABS, electronic stability control, keyless entry, power windows and locks, an audio system that might cost \$17.5k in a \$100,000 car, and much more. And, by the way, the seat track goes back farther than we needed, at six-foot-two. The rear seat is reached with easy-access front seats that fold and slide forward; space is bit tight.

Glass sunroofs are becoming common—tough in an Arizona summer. This one has a shade screen, but it allows a lot of sun.

The car is snug door-to-seat (even using the door pocket is tight), but width and legroom in general are surprisingly accommodating: there's no console and the shifter is in the center stack. Primary instruments have an efficient layout, with a concentric tach and speedometer surrounding a digital readout with fuel and engine temp, MPG, MPH, clock, odo and outside temperature, all in one handy readout. The door handle doubles as its lock mechanism, a slick detail.

We release the mechanical handbrake, note the Sport switch, grab the 5-speed shifter, and off we go.

## BEHIND THE WHEEL

We already know the 4-cylinder engine will give us just 101 hp and 98 lb-ft of torque. For our first few miles, we were unimpressed with power and handling, though that was before we used the Sport setting. We did get reac-

KEEP RIGHT >>



## SPECIFICATIONS

### Our test 2012 Fiat 500 Sport Hatchback

**ENGINE** .....1.4L inline-4: 101 hp, 98 lb-ft  
**TRANSMISSION** .....5-speed manual  
**DRIVE** .....Front-wheel drive  
**FUEL MILEAGE** .....(EPA est) 30 city/38 hwy  
**FUEL CAPACITY** .....10.5 gallons  
**TIRES/WHEELS**: 16" x 6.5" aluminum wheels, with 195/45R16XL tires, tire service kit.  
**BRAKES**: .....4-wheel disc, red brake calipers  
**SUSPENSION**: MacPherson strut and stabilizer bar front, twist-beam axle and twin-tube shocks rear, sport-tuned shocks and springs (Sport model).  
**SAFETY/SECURITY**: Airbags: multistage front, front side, front/rear side curtain, driver knee; head restraints, child anchors. 4-wheel ABS, ESC, TPM system, sentry key immobilizer.  
**COMFORT/CONVENIENCE**: Power windows w/ one-touch up/down front, power locks, keyless entry, rear defroster, variable wipers, rear wiper/washer, cruise, hill start assist, 12-volt outlet. 140 mph speedometer (Sport model). Filtered a/c, driver seat memory, BOSE® premium AM/FM/CD/MP3 audio, Blue&Me® hands-free, aux jack, leather-wrapped tilt steering wheel, wheel-mounted audio controls, vehicle info center, rear 50/50 split fold-down seat, chrome shift knob.  
**EXTERIOR**: Bi-function halogen headlamps, body-color power heated mirrors, fog lamps, chrome exhaust tips, rear spoiler.

**BASE PRICE** .....\$ 17,500  
 Rosso Brillante tri-coat paint .....500  
**PREFERRED PACKAGE 21D**: Nero/grigio (black/grey) seats; power sunroof .....850  
**TOMTOM NAVIGATION** w/Blue&Me .....400  
 Destination charge .....500  
**TOTAL** .....\$ 19,750



a larger car, much more easily grabbing a lane change. And you don't feel Smart-car vulnerable: your top-of-mind cockpit experience is like that in a much larger car.

We swung by the mall and were surprised the car turned not one teen head. Maybe they were too cool for school—the usual walking in front of cars and making them wait—but it should have been novel enough for a glance. Folks older than that did turn their heads.

Enough around town. The next evening, we drove out to Saguaro Lake, giving the car a decent tryout at speed on the Beeline Highway, and on the curves and hills of Bush Highway. The drive was smooth and easy, and 30-45 minutes of seat time each way was no hardship. Turning circle for the Fiat 500 is just 30.6 feet, so unexpected stops for photos, or tight parking lot maneuvers at the lake, were done with impressive ease. The gate attendant showed a lot of interest and asked a lot of questions. We told him the car costs \$17,500 and gets 38 mpg. That struck us as a triumphant combo, but he said "it looks like it should get more."

### SPORT AND ECONOMY

We followed the Beeline drive with a variety of city moves, including aggressive laps on roundabouts, plus some speedbumps and troughs. Most notably, we'd wanted to do a good comparison of the Sport mode, on and off, but hitting the switch didn't give us any confirmation it was engaged: no light, no depressed position.

The next night, we discovered the word "sport" illuminated in the center of the speedo. Now we'd be able to compare better, though the funny thing is, we surely were in both the night before, but any differences were clearly subtle. This time, we could verify.

We expected to recognize a different driving experience but were surprised to see a significant difference in fuel economy, at least based on the readout (not necessarily accurate). On the freeway in Sport, it was reading 20-30 mpg, depending upon the heaviness of our foot. Switched out of Sport, 30 was the norm, with climbs to 45 or even 49 mpg. You appear to pay a clear price for Sport, in fuel economy, but being able to confirm the mode made a difference in perception: the performance gain in Sport seemed absolutely noticeable, worth the fuel efficiency loss (20-30 is still pretty good). If gas climbs higher someday, we could always turn that off. The more we played with the Sport mode, the more we concluded this felt like two different cars. We wanted to recreate the Beeline-Saguaro drive but were out of time.

### OUR LITTLE RED GREEN CAR

Despite staggering advances being made in hybrid, electric and other technologies, the past couple of years have also brought a number of vehicles that—with technological advances of their own—approach or often surpass the fuel economy numbers of the newcomers, but with a gasoline combustion engine.

The front-wheel-drive Fiat 500 is powered by one of the smallest engines in a US-market car: a 1.4-liter four-cylinder with the first US application of Fiat's MultiAir® technology. MultiAir promises up to 10 percent greater power, a 10 percent improvement in fuel efficiency, and a 10 percent reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

The Fiat eco:Drive™ application collects vehicle efficiency data, which you can save to USB stick via the information system's Blue&Me port. Plug it into your computer, and you can study a detailed report on your driving from an environmental standpoint, including CO<sub>2</sub> levels for each trip. The eco:Drive™ program can even recommend ways to modify your driving style to reduce fuel consumption and emissions. Estimated fuel economy for the Fiat 500 is 30 mpg city and 38 mpg highway for the manual transmission, 27/34 for the automatic.

### A FIAT IN YOUR FUTURE?

People are in the mood for something small, and they're in the mood for something different. The Fiat brand has never really left the American buyer's consciousness, and we suspect most will largely forget it wasn't even sold here for a couple of decades. As an example of something quirky selling well, we would point to the Nissan Juke, which is not only relatively small but has bent all the rules about conventional styling—and is selling like hotcakes. Fiat's new US dealership network has been busily building all year, and California received one of the first big waves of the new 500. While we were in Monterey for the auctions, concours and other events in August, we saw them absolutely everywhere. We parked in Seaside to run an errand and found ourselves with not one, not two, but three brand-new Fiat 500s parked within 30 feet. And why not? It's almost a mantra to us by now: \$17.5 grand, 38 mpg.

Small cars notoriously don't generate the profits of big ones, but volume helps, conditions dictate, and this car is addressing a very sweet spot in the market at just the right time. We wish Chrysler and Fiat the best. The way the Fiat 500 puts a smile on everyone's face, how could you not? *Acclamazioni!* ■

tions, from the get-go, starting with an Eastern European whose first car had been the old 2-cylinder 500, which he was forbidden to use on the autobahn. That had him enthused about the new Fiat 500. And for us, it was one more lesson in relativity.

Around town, the car feels nimble but not quick, while on the freeway, performance is smooth and even. We ponder how it might be on a long road trip, whether on Interstates or mountain two-lanes. The seats offer a variety of adjustments, good on a long haul. Shifting is firm but very tight.

It's always enlightening to gauge the reactions of other drivers. Some seem deferential to this car, some seem to take it on aggressively. Either reaction speaks well to its presence. Some seem annoyed, maybe either thinking small means slow or irked by the gas they are consuming themselves at the moment. There was no reason for them to be irked. As long as you're in motion, the Fiat 500 is not lacking for power. It's perky, has great maneuverability, and its size is certainly an asset in freeway rush hour traffic. You don't get bottled in, as in

